

# To the Last Loon on Little Sand Lake

by Vern Thompson, Little Sand Lake, Park Rapids

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So here we are,  
drifting side by side on the quiet evening water,  
watching the lake turn red  
and the darkness finger out from the pines  
and spruce along the west shore.

We are an odd pair,  
you an upstart not yet in full plumage  
and I an old geezer long past his prime.

It's late. Your season here is over.  
The lakeshore has drawn in upon itself,  
boatlifts and docks piled well above the waterline.  
The laughter of children gone, the lake waits,  
almost breathless, to close over.

You are the last.  
I have watched you, alone and silent now,  
having no one to call to.  
Others of your breed left weeks ago,  
obeying their primal call to flee before the gales of winter.

So, too, it is with many of my neighbors.  
Each night I see fewer lights across the lake.  
“We’re getting out on Tuesday,” one told me.  
“We’re gonna drive straight through.”  
I can picture them, fleeing through the night  
to alight at last among their own kind,  
to sit in the sun in front of their RV and celebrate their escape.  
I wish them well.

But with you, my young friend, this is serious business.  
You have to leave or you will die.

Ice has glazed the rocks along the shore.  
Soon it will creep out after you.  
You can’t suddenly explode from the water,  
taking your cue from the mallards in the bay.  
You need a clear runway to churn and flap and pound  
before the water releases you to stagger into flight.

Are you still here because you are not fledged enough to fly?  
Or is it some perverse urge to take your chances as long as possible?  
When your parents left, did you, like some balky adolescent  
in an avian airport, insist on a later flight?  
Or did you want to see the last of the birch and maple leaves burnish the water  
or the sedges and bulrushes laced with frost each morning?  
I can understand that kind of wanting.  
The other morning when you slipped phantomlike out of the clinging fog  
toward my boat, we shared one suspended moment,  
as if we were the last waifs in a spirit world.

But aesthetics must give way to reality.  
That is the lesson to be learned here—perhaps, sadly, the only one.  
My neighbor was right when he said,  
“You gotta know when to haul-ass outta here.”

“So listen up, kid!  
Life does not give you unlimited choices!”  
I slap the water with my oar as I yell, but you don’t even flinch.  
You just cock your head and, I swear, faintly smirk.  
You have dodged too many water skiers and jet skis  
to be impressed by a flailing old codger yelling nonsense.

I am going home.  
I am going to build a fire  
and share a glass of wine with my wife  
as the night gathers in around us.  
And hope that in the morning you’ll be gone.  
Godspeed.



*Postscript: Several nights later the lake froze over. The next morning my neighbor across the lake called to say that he was watching, through binoculars, two eagles out on the ice—feeding on a dead loon. Some of the brightness went out of the day.*