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Spirit of the Place (Genius Loci)

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Spirit of the Place (Genius Loci)

A place is just a figment of the imagination.
—Jan Morris

I. The Upland

A wind-bitten place, nearly the county's highest spot—excepting some dunes along Lake Michigan's shore, not counting the golf course riding the ridge in Marne.

A place of hardwoods and the deciduous lush green foliage makes, newly unwrapped in the heat of May. Woodpeckers flicker tree to tree, that looping flight.

a path in air taking them over the deep cuts, the ravines that are the secret here, how earth gave way to water and ice, how we all give way.

II. Below Clay Banks

The wide spot in the river made a place to land, to haul canoes ashore, scraping their prows on rock and sand, a place to shelter for the afternoon.

to cook rabbit and wild yams over a smoky fire, then to sleep. Figures and shapes moved between the fire and the trees, darkness swirling up past dogtooth violets, past

trillium, blackberry vines tangled and weighted with dark berries, wild mustard nearly waist-high and catching at the ankles of ghosts, pulling them tumbling down.

III. Boltwood and Blendon Landing

Sawmill, rafts of floating pine, white oak in stacks, tree upon tree—and mounds, too, of limbs, bark, scrap wood, debris to fuel the stoking fires that push the steam engines.

Keeping the furnaces fueled and hot, that head of pressure to run pulleys, belts, wheels, working the meshing gears. Twenty-five hundred acres of good white pine and, on the fringe,
a few stands of taller white oak. Measured: one tree seven feet across.
Giants of the earth fallen—for industry and appetite.
Blendon’s mill burning, 1864, the place left silent then.

IV. Lakes and Rivers

From blueprints, a foundation laid, from fieldstone boulders heaped up in piles, with the backhoe coughing nearby.
the cement truck spinning its load, sending down the chute

its gray concrete mix—color of the gunmetal sky—to fill a hole.
And names are etched on the building signs—Lake Michigan,
Lake Huron, Au Sable, Mackinac, with Lake Ontario the last.

Half-asleep in summer when the fields of corn drowse, wilting,
in heat, then the contrasting pace of fall, the sudden cool air rushing like a rivulet, a stream, faces of students on a bough.

V. Secret of the Ravines

There’s no denying nature or the force of water on the move.
No denying the desire to know, to dig deep, the bright faces changing year to year, leaves on the trees, faces like leaves.

Some natural dam formation, some erosion, and still the plunge pools, rip rap, runoff, the waters racing back to the same old source.
And the whitetail returning to step through the hardwood shade.

winding their way downward to water through the deepening dusk.
Bringing us back and back, to unearth what made this place,
and the trees quivering in the quickening air, moving.

Patricia Clark is Poet-in-Residence at GVSU and also Professor in the Writing Dept. She is completing a two-year term as Grand Rapids Poet Laureate. This poem was written for the 45 year celebration of GVSU in 2005 and was performed at the dedication of Lake Ontario Hall.