

At Peace with Nature

Literary Arts – Short Story

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## At Peace with Nature

He parked his truck along the river's edge just as the sun had begun to sink below the horizon. Miles beyond and to the south and east, he knew lay the bay's broad and familiar expanse. Seemingly endless days of persistently heavy rains in the mountains to the west had brought additional snowmelt and quickly rising waters to communities upstream from where he now sat. Several small riverfront communities had already suffered from the onslaught of water that had flooded their streets and washed out roads.

Fields of fertile farmland now lay covered in two or more feet of water and layers of mud. Crops ready for harvest had been lost to the seemingly never-ending rain. Farmers struggled to keep their livestock safe in the face of the onslaught. In some places, small bridges had been destroyed, and houses and other structures swept away by the unrelenting waters. Grey clouds previously heavily laden with rain had given way to lighter, wisper clouds scurrying eastward after each other.

The rain had finally stopped. Viewing the scene unfolding in front of him, he watched the roiling muddy water carrying its flotsam towards the bay. In the dwindling light, he watched angry whitecaps dotting the river's surface as far as he could see. Occasionally, mature trees rushed past, their limbs stripped of foliage and reaching skyward, seemingly beseeching an end to their chaotic journey. Large pieces of Styrofoam, plastic bottles, galvanized roofing, tree debris, broken lumber, and the occasional remnants of unidentifiable wooden structures caught in the river's current swept swiftly through his field of vision. The scene mirrored the turmoil cascading through his brain.

How did he get here? What had brought him to this point of despair? Why had he come here? The drive to this vantage point along the river, although only a short journey from his home, had been agonizingly long and arduous. All the while, he had plied himself with the beer that he had brought along for the trip. He was well aware of his drunken state. An unrelenting paranoia that the local police would stop him for driving too slowly and thus confound his plan accompanied him. Whatever that plan was, he was unsure.

He reached for another beer, draining it quickly as if to squelch the pain that seemed to emanate from some unknown region deep within his body. Or, maybe it was his soul that cried for him to smother the endless despairing pain that had nearly overwhelmed him these past few days. Despite the empty cans that littered the floor behind his seat, the darkness and the pain that accompanied him had not abated.

Opening the door, he stepped from the truck to relieve himself, the mud softly squishing beneath his boots as he struggled to keep his balance and remain upright. Leaving the safety and the warmth of the vehicle, he slowly made his way down the steep, muddy path towards the sound of rushing water.

Suddenly, his feet give way beneath him. A loud, gasping grunt escaped his lungs as he fell hard on his backside, sliding swiftly and uncontrollably down the steep bank towards the arms of the waiting river. *So, this is how I'm going to die*, he thought.

An eternity passed as his arms flailed at the underbrush that lined the slope, trying to get a hold on something - anything - to slow his precipitous slide towards the river. Gasping for breath, he finally grasped and clung onto an exposed tree root. His feet hanging mere inches above the rushing river, he listened to the roiling current.

How long he lay there, he did not know. When he regained his senses, he slowly clawed his way up the bank to lay exhausted at the foot of his truck. His clothes soaked to the bone and covered in mud, he laughed softly and maniacally at his predicament. How would he explain his condition to those who surely would have noted his absence from the house that he called home? Something had snapped in his mind, and he knew with certainty that he was not yet ready to die. Not now, not this way, not this day.

Once behind the wheel, he drove slowly - careful not to attract the attention of anyone who might be on the road at this time of night. Not surprisingly, the house was silent and dark when he finally arrived. Quickly entering through a side door, he stripped off his clothes and left them on the floor where they would lay until the next day. Tomorrow was a workday.

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Several months later, he found himself hiking through a secluded, wooded park not far from his home. She had moved out that summer, taking her sons, the dog, and most of their mutual material possessions with her. He and his son were left alone in the eerie calm and quiet of the cavernous house that they had once called home.

Much to his doctor's chagrin, he had abruptly stopped taking the antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs previously prescribed to help him cope. He had felt particularly alive on the day that she left, as he wandered through the quiet sunlit garden that he could now call his own. With what he could only describe as a "rush," he felt the heavy curtain of darkness that had persistently plagued him lifted from his shoulders, and he broke into a smile.

Now, looking over the edge of the narrow bridge that crossed a stream in this part of the park, he spotted a large, washed-out tree root overhanging the brook. Slowly making his way down the bank, he seated himself on the tree's outstretched roots, his feet only inches above the water that streamed quietly beneath his boots. Looking up, he marveled at the brilliantly blue sky, barely discernible through the trees. Sunlight played through the colorful red, yellow, and orangish fall foliage, reflecting off the gently babbling brook at his feet.

He let the sunlight bathe and warm his upward lifted face, as he listened to the whispering leaves rustling in the soft breeze. He felt at peace. His only regret was that no one was here to share this solitude with him. No matter - life was good. Nature had given him a renewed lease on life.