**Inhumanism**

Diane Raven

The 160-acre parcel of land lay 900 feet above sea level and 300 feet above Lake Superior; it is part of a diffuse headwaters. Its tannin waters course like a brown snake through the forested valley of the Elm River and empty into the largest freshwater body on Earth. This is my inheritance: this land, the natural history stories from this land, and a 300-square-foot, 100-year-old, cedar, milled-log cabin that sits secure on a bed of glacial till surrounded by old growth hemlock, oak, and white cedar. Their shallow roots cradle granite boulders from the north as though they were lost children. The land and cabin are my refuge, a place to heal and bare witness to the beauty and tragedy that occurs every moment of every day. I’ve struggled with the conflict between the two; I saw them as twins demanding their own identity, yet unable to escape their innate, mutual spirit. As a young child, tragedy won over beauty every time, but later on, around ten or so, the detailed and animated stories of wild animals and natural events shared around the fire circle, at the cabin, took on an acquired patina—protecting the beauty surrounding every tragic event.

I found the word used to describe the granite rocks of the fire circle to be transformative. I would repeat it as I lie on the soft tuffs of sweet grass growing in front of the fire circle near the pond. I breathed in the clean scent of the crushed grass, tossed the word around in my mind, and held the clicking sound of its last syllable in my throat, “*erratic, erratic, erratic*,” until my thoughts, like glacial meltwater, receded into my subconscious.

My parents and I have picked at least a ton of erratics to build the fire circle and a stone wall that encloses the yard; some dropped out of the sandy loam banks of the woods road with a firm nudge, while others needed to be pried from the reluctant roots of windfalls in the forest. When we found thick slabs of iron-red sandstone protruding from the soil, canted like old gravestones, we’d ease them out slowly, liberating them from their ancient burial ground. Their large, flat surfaces fit firmly on the granite stones of the fire circle, providing a seat or table. The original fire circle measured six feet in diameter. As the balsam trees on the east side grew, their branches reached over the fire, choking off airflow, scorching the needles, and killing the branches. A new pit needed to be dug. Everyone agreed that it should be relocated a few feet to the west and center of the forest opening. The gap is a flyway for little brown bats feeding at dusk, and as the warmth of the sun breaks the silence of dawn over the woodland beaver pond, dragonflies swarm-feed maneuvering unpredictably through the opening.

The fire circle project was delayed when we spotted a female orb-weaving spider, its abdomen the size of a nickel, in the center of its circular-grid web, wrapping a green darner dragonfly in silk, hanging it like a talisman while waiting for its death. The web was six feet above the fire circle and half its size, with long, silken strands securing it to the balsam branches, their needles now the rich, rusty color of a red fox, and two strands, like guy-wires, anchoring it to the granite stones below. After watching the spider wrap the dragonfly and feed from it, we went into the cabin to grab a bite to eat ourselves while delving into field guides for additional information about the spider and dragonfly. We continued to watch the event unfold through the window just fifteen feet from the fire circle. I looked up at the precise moment the dragonfly dropped into the center of the fire circle; the orb weaver finished its meal and cut free the remains. There it lay in its beauty—the sun glinting off the broken bundle of iridescence and specks of mica in the granite stones.