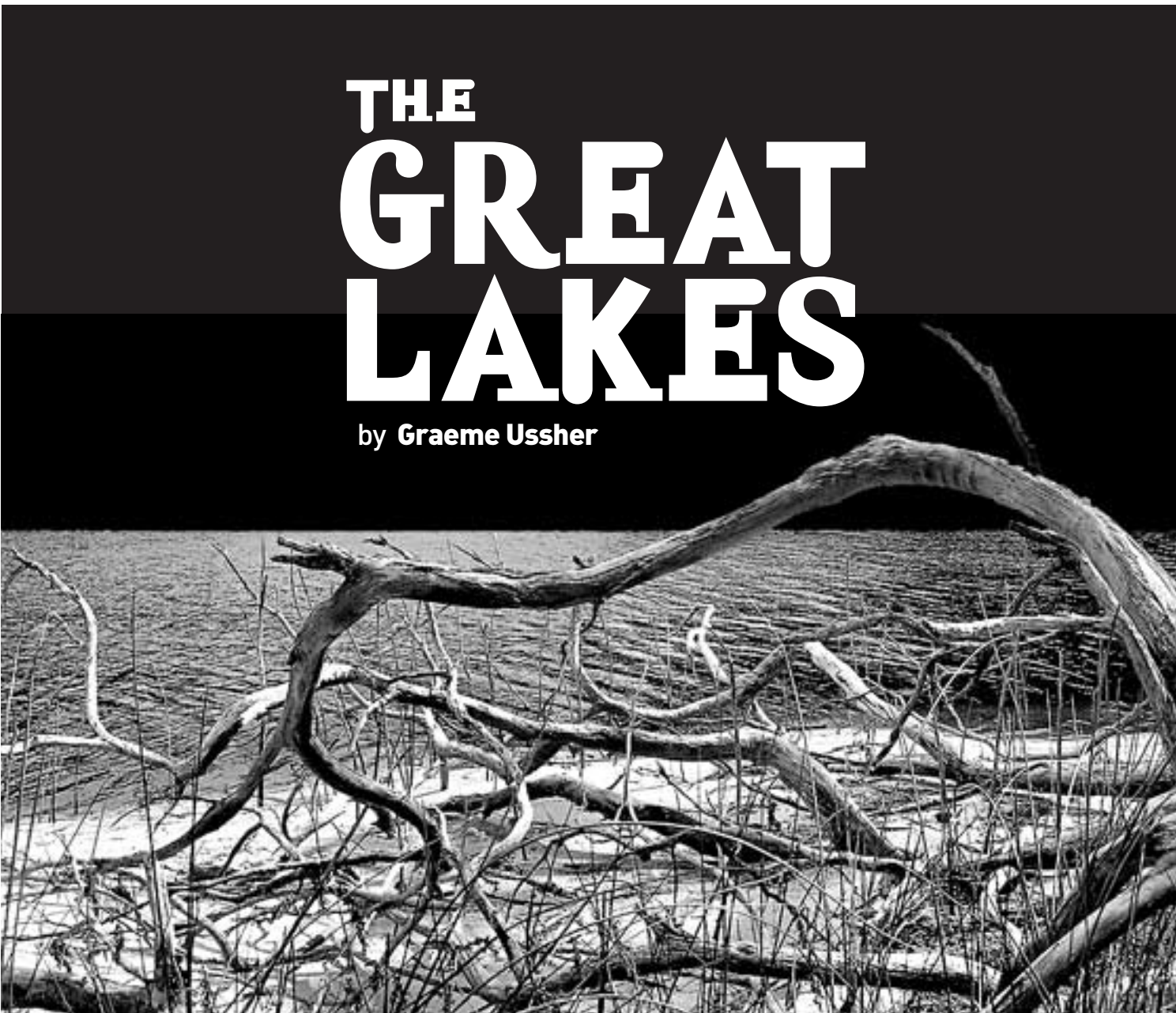
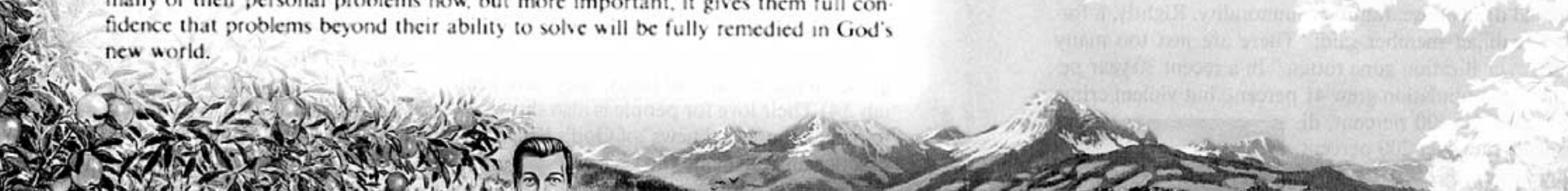


THE GREAT LAKES

by Graeme Ussher



many of their personal problems now, but more important, it gives them full confidence that problems beyond their ability to solve will be fully remedied in God's new world.



“Well, the meaning IS out there”, a woman in a long black coat began,

visible relief as the game players disappeared in a cloud of dust.

At a stall selling coffee and doughnuts I met a man who tried to tell me that Michigan was the cleanest state in the union. Knowing that Michigan (particularly the lower peninsula) was the home to a lot of heavy industry, including the auto factories at Detroit, and remembering the pictures I'd seen in *National Geographic* of tumour-ridden fish caught in the Great Lakes, I was quietly dubious of this claim. And if the man was right then it certainly didn't say much for the other 49 states.

“So have you been to the Fabled City?”, I asked, in what I felt were mild and measured tones.

“Slow down, slow down! You're confusing me!”, he yelled in exasperation, asking me whether I was referring to the Fabled City theme park, the Fabled City food emporium, the Fabled City motor inn back on the Michigan mainland, or the Fabled City used car lot (of which his brother-in-law was the proprietor). Suddenly aware of the naivety of my question, I didn't dare tell him that I was referring to the vanished ruins of the Fabled City itself.

The local artists had their own area within the market grounds. They huddled together, drinking coffee from thermos flasks and smoking joints surreptitiously. They offered me a toke as I passed. There were several paintings trying half-heartedly to sell themselves, and a man reading poetry aloud. I sat down on a rug and talked for a while, discussing my own difficulties in finding the “real thing” in this land of appropriations. The joint was passed to me again and I began to feel very stoned.

“Well, the meaning IS out there”, a woman in a long black coat began, gesturing in the general direction of a seemingly endless body of water, “but living here in this country, ESPECIALLY here, you've really got to make it or find it for yourself, and it sure ain't easy sometimes.” I nodded, agreeing in principle at least, even if I *wasn't* able to string together the words in a sentence.

As I got up to leave the woman handed me a small paper bag, performing some kind of blessing on it with an amulet of feathers and crystal and what sounded like an indian chant. I looked inside and saw several

mushrooms. The magic variety. The woman told me that this “sacrament” had been freshly picked under “auspicious” conditions from the shores of the lake where they apparently grew in profusion. I looked at them closely, checking their authenticity. A slightly different size and shape to the mushrooms I had encountered back in Australia, they nevertheless displayed the characteristic purple-blue tinge along their stems and the edges of the caps. I tucked them away in a deep pocket, thanking the woman and assuring her that I would take them at some stage within the next few days. I wanted to try and get across the respect I had for these things, having had many beautiful *and* terrifying experiences with them in the past, but she didn't seem to care one way or the other. As if by giving me the mushrooms she'd washed herself clean of me.

As I walked from the market grounds I noticed a man hanging over a high fence, torso straddling the crest, body limp like a wet rag. He was some distance from the market stalls, but from his clothes I could tell that he belonged to the arty crowd I had just been with. A sign beneath him read “The Captive”: he appeared to be some kind of performance artist. His arse and legs faced the inside of the market grounds, while his head and shoulders faced the lake, buffeted by the sand and spray being whipped up by the fierce onshore winds. He seemed to be unconscious. On the ground beneath his head was a pool of vomit, out of which several magic mushrooms were sprouting. I weighed up the logistics of picking them for myself (i.e. wiping the vomit of them, etc.) but decided to leave them where they were, figuring that the “captive” might one day want them for himself. I made my way back to the docks and boarded a boat for the mainland.

The next day I shopped around for a motorbike. Being fairly short on cash I didn't have too many options but ended up finding a nice, cheap 250 at a second-hand dealer. I spent the rest of the day fitting it out for the journey ahead, attaching a rack to the bike's rear for my luggage and a nice cowhide cover for the seat. I spent the night at the Fabled City tent park

gesturing in the general direction of a seemingly endless body of water

and the following morning set out for Michigan's upper peninsula.

The road took me back inland through the towns of Hillman and Atlanta and after thirty miles or so I had connected with highway 75, which took me due north through the upper reaches of the lower peninsula. By midday I was crossing the bridge traversing the Straits of Macinac, the narrow body of water connecting Lakes Huron and Michigan and separating Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas. Once on the upper peninsula I rode further northwards before turning westward into marshy, scrubby country. After a hundred miles or so I came to a town called Seney, and then turned north.

On a ridge about twenty miles from the coast I caught my first spectacular glimpse of Lake Superior. As the road peaked the crest the lake suddenly loomed in front of me, taking my breath away with its vastness. I felt amazed at the expanse of water, the sheer size and quantity, both real and imagined, stretching further (in space, time, and internal meaning) than could ever really be held in place by my powers of comprehension. Far from being a source of fear, however, the lake represented a vastness that perhaps for the first time in my life I felt myself opening to, approaching with all the solitude and resolve that such a wild and ultimately unknowable place demanded. I rode on down towards the lake, eventually arriving at a town called Grand Marais just short of the coast.

Grand Marais was situated at the eastern end of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, a national park area stretching about thirty or forty miles along the coast and ten or so inland. At the entry to the park was an information centre with a large painted map on a board outside the building. Looking at the map, I decided to continue on through the park along the shores of Lake Superior, which as one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the world had fascinated me for years. Also, the park appeared to be relatively unspoiled, with little development anywhere to be seen. I went inside the information centre for a look around.

The first thing I noticed was a sign on the walls of the foyer announcing that the information centre was

owned and managed by Heritage Industries, the same mob responsible for the wonders of the Fabled City. A bad sign, but I decided to look around anyway. A banner on the wall welcomed me to “Grand Marais by the inland sea”; next to this was an American flag. An attendant greeted me and described the various resources of the information centre. On the ground floor where we stood, she told me, were displays relating to the area's Indian heritage, as well as its geographical features and flora and fauna. Upstairs was a library and a special tribute to the nation's founding fathers.

“A unique gift to the people of the United States and the Free World, courtesy of Heritage Industries”, the attendant intoned, perhaps for the millionth time.

The Indian displays appeared neglected. A thick layer of dust covered a glass case housing stone tools, flint arrowheads and other artefacts. Labels were peeling loose from the exhibits. Stylised oil paintings showed happy Indians frolicking by the lakeshore. Overblown and grainy copies of photos showed scenes of busy ports and logging camps, and portraits of the hairy individuals responsible for the taming of this wild land. I went upstairs to the library and special tribute to the founding fathers, which I must admit had aroused my interest right from the start. I browsed through books that seemed to have been stocked purely on the basis of their faithful reiteration of American history's full canon of clichéd themes: the heavenly ordained search for truth, freedom and human decency; the resilience of the pioneer spirit; the grand populating of an empty land; the “manifest destiny” of the nation's relentless march westward.

In an insulated, air-locked cool-room was the unique tribute to the founding fathers that the attendant had told me about. I walked over to the viewing window and peered through. Inside I could make out the forms of a dozen frozen busts, set on stainless steel benches, labels beneath them announcing who it was they were meant to represent. The ice had been tinted a variety of colours; even a foreigner like myself could recognize the pink and green visages of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, as well as those of some of the more famous presidents, who, though not strictly “founding



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fathers”, had nevertheless been deemed important enough to have their features frozen in ice forever. Even as I looked, the top-hatted form of Abraham Lincoln emerged from the icy vapours that swirled throughout the room.

Suddenly, from a corner that had remained invisible to me, two men in jeans and T-shirts stepped forward, with what appeared to be ice-picks raised before them. They looked Vietnamese, though I couldn’t be sure. They advanced on the display, and in a burst of unbridled force began to destroy the busts of the founding fathers and presidents. In a chilling echo of the events of 1963 a huge splinter of ice was chipped away from the head of John F Kennedy, who promptly toppled and smashed on the floor. Eventually an alarm sounded, and a few minutes later a couple of armed security guards arrived on the scene. The two Asian fellows were led away, but not before the founding fathers had been reduced to what looked like the world’s biggest rainbow slurpie covering the floor inside the cool room.

I went back down to the ground floor. The attendant appeared to have been crying but had miraculously composed herself.

“Please don’t let the actions of a couple of malcontents ruin your stay in Michigan”, she said, apologizing for the “disturbance” upstairs. I assured her I wouldn’t and moved toward the exit, but the attendant called me back. As part of its “complete commitment to customer satisfaction”, she told me, Heritage Industries had established an exciting new range of “Eco-Discovery Tours” for budget travellers like myself, enabling us to share in the excitement of the

pioneers as they unearthed the secrets of a new land. For a small fee, she told me, I would be able to reach into the “lucky dip of discovery” and withdraw my very own treasure map. Heritage Industries not only certified the authenticity of the map but would also supply me with all the necessary equipment. I would be free to search for the treasure at my own pace. Against my better judgement I handed over the cash and let the attendant take me to the lucky dip, a large barrel with a Heritage Industries logo stencilled on the side. I reached in and withdrew an envelope.

Inside was a photocopied map with accompanying directions and a red X marking the location of the treasure. The attendant pulled from a cupboard a small bag of tools- compass, hand-held spade, a set of brushes- and issued me with a digging licence, valid for two weeks. She wished me luck.

Outside I looked at the map more closely and realized that the treasure (or the X on the map at least) was within the boundaries of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. This fitted in well with my plans. I drove back into Grand Marais and bought supplies before setting off on my journey of eco-discovery.

The map took me west from Grand Marais through a region of rugged limestone hills and forest, a mile or so back from the water. I rode along the dirt roads that traversed the national park, marvelling at the dense forests that surrounded me. A lot of it looked like re-growth but it was still pretty impressive. Eventually I came to a solitary churchyard, exposed to the cool winds coming off the lake in the distance and seemingly abandoned by a town of which no visible trace remained.

I checked with my map and began digging in the designated place, beneath the rotting eaves of a stone and one-time shingled church. After an hour of digging in rocky soil I had unearthed several old suitcases, wrapped in thick polythene and sealed with nylon webbing. From the old photos, china tea-sets, blankets, tinned fruit-cakes, transistors and other bric-a-brac that I found inside, it seemed that the suitcases had been packed by old people before their deaths, to be buried with them and used in the great hereafter. I kicked the cases back into their holes in the ground and reburied them. Suddenly spooked by the whole enterprise—this evidence of death all around me, the silence and loneliness of the mountains—I reloaded the bike and set off for the lake, just visible in the distance.

The coastline of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore was a spectacular place: high cliffs and strangely eroded rockforms, the minerals locked inside glowing with a wide range of hues.

After arriving at the lake I rode back eastward, along a track that skirted the cliffs at the water’s edge. The view was incredible, the lake stretching further than the eye could see, the blurred horizon curving with the roll of the planet. The sun flashed through the pines to my right; it felt good to be on the motorbike with the lake-scented breeze blowing around me.

I encountered scattered groups of campers as I rode, continuing eastward until I had left them all behind. I came to a grassy meadow high above the water, sheltered by pines and rocks to the left, right and rear, the view over the water unobstructed. I set up camp for the night ahead.

By the time I’d collected firewood the day had drawn to a close. I lit the fire, put some pasta on to boil, and laid back to watch the sun as it set over the lake’s western reaches. As the night progressed a near full-moon rose in the southern skies. Having decided to eat the mushrooms at daybreak I spent a couple of hours drinking coffee and catching up on my diary. Every now and then I gazed out onto the waters of Superior, where in faint patches a mist was gathering. Then I fell into a deep sleep.

The morning sun reflected off the mist down on the lake and set ablaze the rocks up and down the coast. I rose to the sound of an owl hooting and immediately threw more wood onto the embers of the fire. Once the flames had caught I boiled the mushrooms briefly, letting them sit for ten minutes before drinking the juice with strong coffee. I sat cross-legged near the fire as the ‘shrooms came on, watching the sun burning away the mists to reveal the calm yet pulsing waters of the lake. For the first hour or so I stayed put, letting the trip’s turbulent initial waves wash over me. Then I grabbed my camera and went for a walk.

A rocky track led me along the coast to a forested peninsula, high above the surrounding country and jutting several hundred metres out into the water. I climbed to the crest and picked my way out through rocks and scrub to a large overhanging slab of stone, serving as a kind of natural lookout. I gazed back down the shoreline where I had just walked and out onto the expanses of the lake. A ship passed on the horizon. A bit further up the coast was some kind of estuary—

a calm stretch of water indenting the sheer cliffs hanging over the lake and narrowing back toward a creek feeding into the lake. On the far side of the estuary was a narrow beach, behind which and growing up and over were a multitude of strange, plastic looking trees in full bloom, white flowers as large and round as dinner plates fluttering in the breeze. The scenery was spectacular, but more than anything the historical depth of this place—and indeed, of *every* place—enthralled me. Who in the distant past lived here, who first discovered this place, and with who, if anyone, did I share the sensibilities that “made” this place for me?

I laid down on my stomach and pushed myself out until I could look down over the sheer drop at the edge of the lookout. Without warning loose rocks began to fall away from beneath me. I scrambled back to safety. In the confusion and panic my camera fell from my hand and slid over the edge, clattering down the cliff face to the lake below.

In the few seconds I’d spent looking down into the looming depths of space I had seen something incredible. A small island seemed to hover below the cliffs and just above the water, its surface features (rocks, trees, flowers)blazing with colours of preternatural brilliance. It almost looked like a computer image imposed onto the natural background, contrasting sharply with the grey of the water below.

Was the island real, or a place of Indian myth, existing only in the world of dream and spirit, a realm that the mushrooms had given me access to? Or were they making me see things that weren’t really there? Or was it an intangible merging of all these things and more? Who could say? I somehow knew that the “reality” and indeed the meaning of what I’d seen was something I could only determine for myself, and in any case the photo I’d snapped was now at the bottom of the lake...

I walked back to the campsite as the mushrooms began to fade and spent the rest of the day sitting near the fire, slowly re-entering the “ordinary” world that I’d left behind at daybreak. I pulled out my maps and gazed upon the spread of states separating Michigan from the distant Pacific, plotting with a pen a route through to the West Coast. It may have been my imagination, but maybe everything seemed just a little bit different. ■