

## First Worship

Ricky Jo Hoffman

AS A child I first experienced a deep love and respect for nature when our family spent three weeks camping in the wild woods. The rhythms of life as first seen in midnight thundershowers sweeping through the tall oaks, the satisfying warmth of the noon-day sun, delicious long evenings of peace, and the unidentified sounds of an obscure dark night made a deep and lasting impression upon my youth. Living in this natural world was a twenty-four hour joy, but the early and late times of the day were the most meaningful.

The glorious morning sun rose directly behind the tent, staging a play of shadows on the green canvas. Accompanying the pantomime, optimistic birds sang their matin prayers. Stumbling out of the tent, the family staunchly met the crisp fresh air, shivering, and plunged ankle-deep into the tall, shiny wet grass to begin the daily tasks. Breakfast announced itself with the crackling of bacon frying in the skillet. Mingled with the pungent smoke and scent of pine, the meaty odor overpowered even the chipmunks, begging around the table.

In the evening great campfires were lit in the cleared spaces, and a rushing, billowing column of luminous smoke and glowing sparks ascended toward the panorama of celestial gray. The fire gleamed across the shimmering surface of the lake. Now and then campers ventured through the woods, their flashlights swinging great arcs in the forest black. The sound of children intermittently permeated the quiet, completing the spell of perfection.

At this most beautiful time of day, I found an indelible first awakening of feeling for life. Wandering alone in the darkness, I strayed toward the lake's edge. In the midst of desertion a towering pine stood silhouetted against the heavens. Familiar constellations, the Dippers and the Bear, loomed steadfastly in their ageless positions. How many times they must have extended comfort and security through a long and lonely night. Somehow this night-filled wilderness had stretched beneath these stars for endless ages before Columbus discovered America. Ghostlike hung the haunting presence of Indians who had lived and died never having seen a white man. In these myriads of stars, sparkling like the silicon cubes of sand, I sensed infinity and, in child's ignorance, the paradox of man on earth. Here, beside a solitary pine, I experienced worship—of the night, of the earth, of God.

The leaves chatter more  
Rapidly now that autumn  
Is closing her eyes.

NANCY EHRHART