

# Three Letters from an Adirondack Hermitage

by Mason Smith

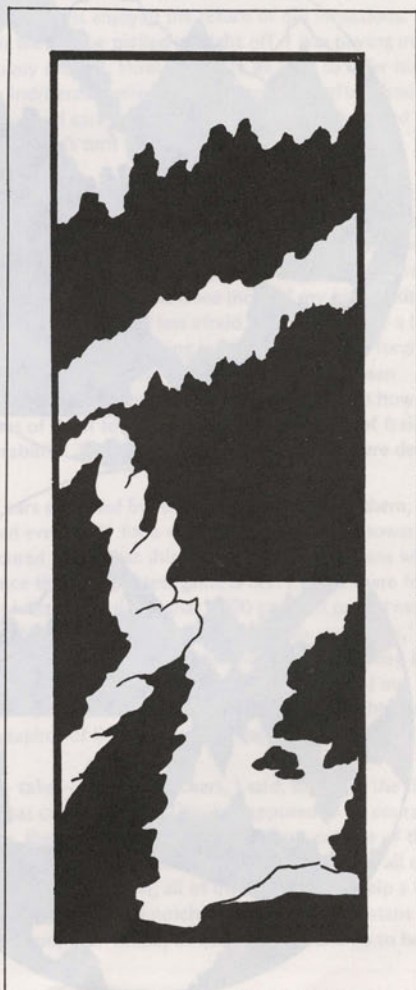
## First Letter

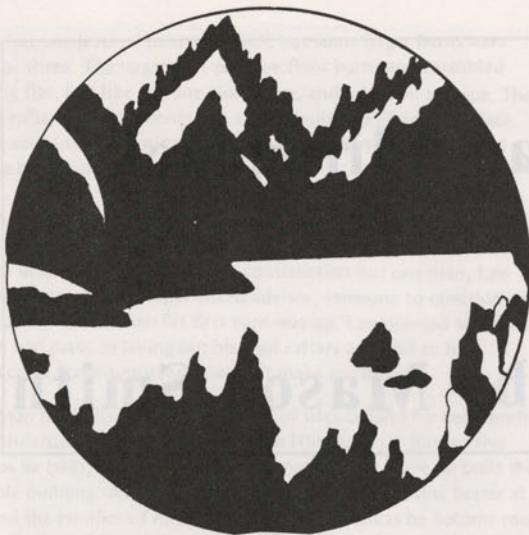
I met an old hobo-migrant farm worker this summer whose axis runs from southern Mexico to northern Washington. He tossed his Iowa farm into the Catholic Trust and hit the rails. What I know of his routine is that he mows hay in Wyoming in the late summer, then picks the Red Delicious in Washington in the fall, and bases in Laredo for the winter. He plays pool with his friends there, reads Mexican history, and makes trips all over Mexico, keeping to the small poor towns he calls the real Mexico.

I consider becoming a hobo like old Joe a perfectly good possibility in due time; conceivably a salvation. The world cannot whip you as long as you are not too good to mow hay and pick apples and read Mexican history. I call that a sporting life except that Joe did not take on women. He drank some tokillya once and tried it and decided it was trouble. For the rest, though, he was game. He still is, at seventy-five.

With the thought of Joe behind me I feel like taking chances, living on a broader continent. I have just been mechanicing on the ranch where Joe was mowing and now I am a hermit, as I was when I was eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. In those days the peacetime draft sat across my view of the future. There were not many paying jobs that I thought poetic. I had drawn in with my boyhood breath the feeling that you had to be at home in the woods or you were not quite on earth. You were an artifact and the true ghosts would laugh at you. I became I suppose, a ghost to my parents by quitting college and going out to caretake two sections of Rocky Mountain country for a winter. Ther

The next winter I was a hermit right here, where I am a hermit now, on the edge of a northern Adirondack lake. I got my water out of a hole in the ice and cooked on the top of a sheet iron stove in what used to be an ice-house. I tackled the woman issue by mail. Then I got hauled into the Navy and that was that for hermiting until recently it occurred to me that I had not had time to think for twenty years. so here I am again.





Last night I paddled down the lake and back with nothing to come back to besides myself, so in no hurry. I so a hundred trout come nose then dorsal out of water, cruising for something that appeared to be no different from a spring blackfly trapped in the surface film amidst the winged maple seeds and leaves and birch and poplar seeds. Saw a kingfisher, some ducks; heard honkers and a B52. So what? Well, nothing except that if I had not been a hermit I would have felt that I and the peaceful evening were not together on the absence of a point. I would have seen the evening out of the window in town and wished I were out of it. I would have gone out in it and wished I had something to do in it. Then I would have gone in and said to myself, unconvincingly, that I had been out in it and had not missed it.

*I knew exactly what they looked like from watching the first game at home, so I did not need the picture.*



These things are like forgotten options, void if not used. I find it costing me about \$20 a week for food, eggs, bacon, pancake mix, sausage, celery, potatoes, Postum, peanut butter, canned this and that, single-portion packages of meat. I scavenge firewood from the logging operations hereabouts. I think I will write a book about women, only I am going to disguise it as a book about the Atlantic salmon. My sons come out from town and stay on weekends. We hunt grouse and woodcock now; later we will hunt deer, still later cross-country ski. In the evenings we read and talk and feed the stove and play poker.



There is a car. I go to town for music: John Hammond's coming Thursday, I believe I will not miss that. I thought I would be lonesome by I average not very. The week I came here it snowed and rained and was cold. I did not know how it was going to go. I though maybe I was being foolish and could not be a hermit any more. There was a radio. I picked up the World Series. I knew exactly what they looked like from watching the first game at home, so I did not need the picture. Vin Scully and Sparky Anderson told me what was going on, and I saw it clearly. I had picked my team, the Pittsburgh Pirates, when they lost the first game only because of an absurd first inning. The World Series on radio helped me get through the transition easily. I looked forward to those late night games. I wrote all day in the knowledge that at night I could hear the game. When it came on I lay down and listened to it all. When I could guess how much more time there was left in the game I set the radio to turn itself off fed the stove and turned out the light. After the last game was over it seemed too bad, for a day or two, that you could not have the Series all the time, but of course the beauty of it is that you cannot.

This is like the beauty of being a hermit, where to see another human, or especially to see a couple, can give you a pang. Down the lake last night I met a young cousin out in his canoe the same as I, except that he was with a young woman; Vassar students spending a weekend together in my old grand-uncle's camp. God but I envied them.



## Second Letter

In my student days I used to do quite a lot of traveling by thumb. Not just because I had no car, but because hitchhiking suited me. It was a hardy, outdoorsy way to travel, not only economical but sporting. I never thought of it as begging. You put out a lot of effort doing it, you threw yourself open to ordeals of walking and shivering and waiting, and it was always a sort of gamble. You contributed to a human interchange with the people who gave you a lift. Tacitly, you undertook -- I, at least, felt that you undertook -- to set the cosmic balance right by picking up hitchhikers later on when you were driving a car.

I have been on the picker-upper side of the deal for a long time now, but recently I happened to hitchhike again. An airplane I was flying on had been delayed a long while at Kennedy, by rain and lightning, and I landed in Albany -- a slam-bang, high speed landing in a violent squall -- too late to make connections home. I stayed the night with some Albany friends. The next day was stormy and stirring. The foliage was in fall color. I didn't want to fly again -- not after that landing -- and I'd overslept the early morning bus. So, although I had with me too much duffle to carry very far -- two tubed fly-rods, a loaded backpack, and a heavy suitcase (I was returning home from a sojourn in Wyoming, where I worked on a cattle ranch and caught a three pound brown trout in the creek behind the bunkhouse, I was in no rush to finish the return trip) -- I took a cab out to a good starting place and stuck out my thumb. There were about 220 miles to go, the latter half of them sparsely settled mountains, on little traveled roads. The weather threatened rain, or, I imagined, farther north, snow. I didn't have a waterproof. It seemed a sporting proposition.

Hitchhiking always made me feel free, intense, wide-open. It made me feel my oats, made my imagination roar. I studied people going by in their cars, talked to them, reached out with my will to deflect them, tried to make something happen. Patronizingly, I suppose, I forgave the women who passed me up while seeming to search me through with gazes that under other circumstances would have been averted. It seemed too bad that they should be afraid to pick a stranger up. They looked, sometimes, as if they wanted to. Of gray-haired couples in big two-door coupes, I learned to despair. Generally, I didn't expect anything of anybody. It was always a pleasant surprise -- a little acceleration of joy swept me -- as, when anybody did stop, I ran to catch up with the car.

Still, I confess that sometimes I got mad at my fellow males. If I had been hitching to plenty of traffic, and hundreds of cars had gone by, mostly with only one man inside, and for hours none of them had stopped, I reasoned that some of the men had to have been hitchhikers in their days, and I was disgusted that they, whichever ones they were, should renege on the implicit contract that they would give others a lift when they were driving. I could think of only two basic reasons not to pick up hitchhikers if you were alone and going their way. One was fear -- of the real but small risk that the hiker was a thug -- and in the other, selfishness. Considering that men con-

ventionally presented themselves to each other as reasonably brave and generous, I wondered how they squared it with themselves that they pretended not to see a hitchhiker. Mostly, though, when I was having no luck, I would remember my father, who had always been a great sport about adversity, saying, 'Them's the chances you takes.'

And then, anyway, finally someone would pull over and redeem the whole race, and we would go on up the road having great conversations full of 'Oh yeah?' and 'No kidding?' and I would always have some stories to tell at my destination. I felt that hitchhikers were to the country as earthworms to the soil -- aerators, mixers, breakers-down of lumps. Hitching was the best way to travel, bar none. Later on I had a motorcycle, and that was good, but it didn't come up to hitchhiking, really; it was so aggressively solitary, not like the passive solitariness of hermiting.

All of this came back to me, standing out there where the Northway begins. There were, as you might expect, scads of cars. They were not moving too fast, and I'd picked a place where a ramp came on and there was an extra lane, besides the shoulder, for my ride to pull off. For about the first thousand cars, I just enjoyed the return of old sensations. I didn't even want to be picked up right off. I was paying my respects to my old self. How hopefully he used to offer himself to this indifferent universe! But eventually, after about another thousand cars, I thought I had put in my time and it was someone else's turn to do something.

I think that I expected the percentages to be about the same as ever, though, after the Sixties, there ought to have been more ex-hitchhikers driving cars, more people who believed in sharing things with strangers. I thought that women might, in the years since I had done most of my hitchhiking, have become more free and less afraid. There were sure a lot of young men and women going by. I decided not to forgive the women any more. Some of them had certainly been hitchhikers too. I began to talk to them, telling them how sexist it was of them to hide behind the stereotype of frailty and vulnerability. They were missing a treat, they were denying life.

As the cars streamed by, three and four lanes of them, I volunteered everybody for a more sporting attitude toward life. It occurred to me that this is a nation of sports fans who fail to notice that the greatest game is life. I stood there for an hour at least. I calculated that 4000 cars had passed me. I heard my father saying, 'Them's the chances you takes,' and I knew I'd taken them, but still there was something I had to say. I was far afield from hitchhiking now and my speech wasn't to my father or the traffic. It had hitchhiked on the metaphor of life as sport and was long gone.

Take -- take -- take the truckers, I said, sizing on the first example that came to mind. They're supposed to be courageous -- generous, the toughest bunch of Americans outside of the N.F.L. Sure. And just as soon as we run short of fuel, all of us, and we're hurt by inflation, all of us, and it would help a lot if all of us would take in a notch on our belts, the instant the pinch hits them, they whine, threaten, strike, and go to beating



on any of there brethren who keep on trucking. How do they square that with all that they learned on the playing fields? I went on a great while in this vein.

I happened to turn around and look up the highway behind me, and there I saw a huge tractor-trailer pulled off on the shoulder, a quarter-mile away. The driver was outside, stamping around, signalling furiously with his arm. He had been waiting for me to look around for five minutes.

He was an independent, you better believe. He was driving a rare kind of tractor called a Marmon — rare enough that other truckers passing us southbound would call him up on the CB and ask him what the dickens it was. He said he had picked me up because he knew these people down around Albany never would. He'd see a police car, and then for 30 miles or so he'd warn every other trucker that he saw about it. 'Hey there, eighteen-wheeler southbound,' he'd say, 'there be smoke at

miler one-one-seven, you best be lookin' good down thataway.' The other truckers would comeback, 'Yeah, ol' buddy, we read you and we thank you for that animal report.' They were all driving 55 mph anyway. It was just a little game they played. The trucker said that in January, if the independents didn't get their demands, whatever that might mean, they were going to go out on strike again, and this time they would shut down the whole country, by God.

There it was: one to one, we're friendly folks, good sports; collectively we're hardened, selfish, bullying gangs. Sure enough, my waits were shorter the further I got into the sticks; the less the traffic, the better the hitching. A filmmaker going up to Burlington to see a friend, a Navy recruiter looking for a women in Lake Placid, two students driving big handmedown station wagons — it took me just five rides, and the last one brought me to my very door. I beat the afternoon bus from Albany by several hours.

## TWO POEMS

by Marc Weber

### Letter from Gloucester

Shadows pressing the paper, it has been a long time since I have seen you

I dwell in the quiet  
the flux of energy circles there, growing  
as I focus on it and move with it in the circles  
the spirals that come and go within me  
coursing through my body

like the tide  
as I have watched the ocean surge  
it is that I loved  
at Gloucester, quiet on the benches  
beneath the statue which guides the earth into  
the wind  
the old sailor at the wheel out of Gloucester Harbor  
to Ten Pound Island he faces  
behind him the buses always unload  
on the roadway above the beach  
The head of an enormous tuna  
startled me down there  
magnificent eyes  
from another element

The town swirls in illusion  
as tourists are shown facades they wish to see  
although the town yet stinks of fish  
making it authentic

until the fishermen must leave  
as the people Olson remembered left  
but these have never taken root

'O tansy city, root city'  
cold in September  
bone-cold in winter, freezing brine  
many ships lost  
the price of one tuna now a fortune  
as rarity replaces the once common abundance

'these commodities'  
fures, sturgeon, caviare,  
black walnut-tree, and some deale boards, with such they laden are;  
some pearle, some wainscot and clapboards, with some sassafras wood,  
and iron promist, for tis true their myes are very good.'

The flights of birds often covered the sun.

### Forest Mushroom

Nothing to be know except the presence here  
that is nowhere defined  
to be reminded of  
oneself for no apparent reason  
simply to come upon oneself  
as upon  
a mushroom  
delectable, without flaw  
spread quietly miraculously open in green mist



### Third Letter

Lately I have been living alone in a tiny one room cabin on the shore of the most northerly Adirondack lake, and tonight, returning from a busy day in Lake Placid, where the organizers of the Olympics were staging a walk through of the opening ceremonies for next February, I found the outdoors too much better than the indoors, and although it was eight o'clock, I

did not begin to fix myself a supper, but instead took my paddle, turned over the canoe and dropped it in the lake, and went out on the water. Perhaps it was the moon, which was full and made the surroundings visible, through itself concealed except when the seams of a quilted cloud-cover passed between my eye and it, that kept me out. I think it was rather cool out there --- this is November after all --- but I had dressed well to watch the Olympics ceremonies, and the double underclothing I had on, the two pairs of socks, the down jacket and 60/40 parka, were perfect for the temperature. The air was almost motionless. There are two islands, one large, one small, just off the dock. I paddled out past them so that I could see way down the lake.

Once in the open I felt drawn to travel toward that apex where the hills on either side converge. I paddled leisurely, yet the canoe seemed to fly. Yes, to fly, because there was no lake, it seemed --- no surface underneath me. Above, there was one sky, so many gray puffs not crowded but contiguous, uptilted from the far horizon higher and higher toward me and over my head. That sky seemed quite tangible and ordinary. Below me was another sky, darker, deeper, clearer, more exciting --- no mere reflection, for it was far more distant and profound, wavering, elusive. The black, horizontally symmetrical shapes between the two skies were not half hills and half the reflections of hills, they were whole and single things, giant shapely spears whose points merged far down the lake ahead of me. I was upheld by some uncanny silken force. At each stroke, my paddle was silently mouthed and swum with and let go. When I stopped, and my parka ceased to murmur, the silence did not ring; it simply was. I was in the middle of the widest part of the two-and-a-half mile long lake. Sitting in the stern of the canoe which narrowed to a point inches behind me, I felt that I might suffer vertigo and tumble out as if out of an airplane, if I should take my eyes away from the far end; and I paddled, now, only if some feather-touch of air turned the lifted bow away from that symmetry.

I sat a long while out there before I was able to make these observations. I asked myself, 'What is it? Of what consists this terrible comfort and attraction?' When I had said to myself these things --- that the sky below was the real infinity, that there was no surface only equipoise, that infinite fluid smoothness upheld me, that symmetry alone saved me from capsizing --- I turned and paddled home to set them down, content with being human, a namer.

**R**

#### PARK FLORISTS

16 Park Street  
Canton, N.Y. 13617  
386-4382

M-F 9-5  
Sat. 9-12



Schermerhorn Boat Sales, Inc.  
Schermerhorn Landing  
Sales & Service

Evinrude \*Cobia \*Penn Yan \*O.M.C.  
Off Scenic Route 12, Hammond, NY  
(315) 324-5778 or 5966



## AguaHeater

**Wood-fired  
Hotwater for  
Domestic  
HotTubs/Spas  
Solar Booster  
Portable Uses**

**See  
AguaHeater  
Today At**

**D. LATELLA JR.**  
386-4997  
Oil Burners & Wood Stoves  
66 Miner St.  
Canton, N.Y.