Standing on the shore of this lake wrapped in early evening. The water is calm in the gentle rain. I reach up and turn off the headlamp to stand in darkness. Suddenly I am fully here with this lake and its powers. Suddenly I am susceptible to this place.

This is precisely where I wish to be. In the dark I shall tell you that I am a fugitive from civilization. It is why I canoed across ponds and lakes and beaver dams to this spot this evening. It is why I resigned my professorship and moved to this wilderness far flung from the metropolis.

I am scarred by civilization’s words. Wounded by its speech in the news and in its literature and in the press of the throng. I could tell you that I am conducting scholarly research on language, hoping to find better words within the flasks and smoking test-tubes of a laboratory, or digging an ancient tomb to uncover lost powers of speech. But that would not be the truth of it. The truth is I am a desperate man who abandoned research and dismissed the class and shook hands with colleagues, to be here tonight in a spring rain. To turn off this light and listen.

A magician who became a philosopher told me years ago that to hear is also to be heard. He said: this is the way of the universe, whether we comprehend it or not. An observation like that recasts the whole proposition of human communication. I turn off the light and believe him that my anguish over words is listened to by the lake in this rain.

There are loons out there in the darkness. I paddled by several earlier in the day, cruising the surface. Loons suddenly stab the water with their bill and vanish beneath the skin of the world. Eskimos have told me that loons will speak to you if you are troubled—they are powerful and healing.

These wise red-eyed divers are my companions tonight, on the skin of the lake and beneath it. Listening, they hear (I think) my quarrel with words and begin their conversation. From lake to lake they are speaking.

This is the kind of language I crave this evening: there was an Eskimo who set off one spring day looking for eggs. As he guided his kayak he heard two loons calling. He turned his boat toward their call and after much searching found the nest, tucked the eggs inside his parka and continued on his way.
Then he heard them behind him. "That man," they called, "that man who was going that direction in his kayak: Why has he taken our eggs? Why has he taken our eggs when we have fed him?" (For the man had just caught a muskrat.) They fell silent. Now they spoke again. "That man who is going away in his kayak: Why is he taking our eggs when we have given him a long life? We have granted him a long life!"

But he kept on going. The native woman who told me this added, "It’s a true story."

Loons call again this evening, lake to lake, in this spring rain. They hear me and see me and must know that I am looking for a true story.

For years I have told my students stories of the Native American universe. Stories of animals who are at once people. Animal-people. Like us human-people except they are moose-people or loon-people or beaver or bear-people. But the modern age tells me it is certain the stories are not true. Oh, how I wanted them to be true. Yet I was never able to prove them truthful, after all. I felt I was a fraud. I imagined that one day one of my students (I sensed it would be a young woman) would knock on the office door and ask if we might talk. I see her quietly seating herself and gazing out the window at the blue winter sky, then saying softly that the myths are wonderful. "But they can't be true, can they—" Just dreams, her eyes would say, meeting mine.

I resigned before the knock ever came. I felt like the Wizard of Oz bailing out ten minutes before Dorothy unmaskes him. Even so, I can hear her reproach as I flee the campus: "You're a bad man," she scolds him in her youthful disappointment. And I knew I would answer just as he did. "No, my dear—not a bad man. Just a bad wizard."

I stand by this lake this evening, a bad wizard. Wondering if there is any truth to these stories after all. Wondering if their seeming improbability is a result of their inherent wildness (for isn't wildness always incalculable?). Wondering if there was ever a language of wildness: a language that humans once shared with a sentient earth? And, if so, can the modern mind ever know it again?

As I write this I contemplate the loon feather that floated by my canoe earlier that day. I plucked it from the water and have cherished it ever since. The curious thing is how it has two eyes. The tip is black save for these two white circles of eye, as it were, on each side of the shaft. They are translucent; peer through the white patch and you can see through its finely spaced barbs. A loon has white spots—eyes—on its back and wings.

The loon is a vision allowing us to penetrate beyond the membrane of human perception into another realm of knowledge which only it discerns. "That man: Why has he taken our eggs when we have fed him and given him a long life?" Loon plucks us out of ourselves through its language, which I heard this evening as that
Eskimo in his kayak heard it too. Though with a difference: Eskimo hears loon in the same place of mind where language literally speaks to him, whereas I hear loon someplace else—as the call of a wild creature, yes, but as actual language, no. I doubt loon will ever speak to me as we normally imagine speech. Even so, that possibility is of no concern to me right now. The task is not to bend loon speech around so it can duplicate human speech; the goal is to bend human speech so it is harnessed, again, to the speech of the earth.

This is why I have come here this evening: to begin a conversation with wildness. To gaze through the eyes of a feather and listen through the voice of a lake diver, to begin to understand what Thoreau called the Common Sense. Hoping to learn an origin of human tongue that is not merely human after all. Something tells me this will happen not on a university campus but in a wild place like this lake. Where mankind confronts a consciousness that devours our own, incorporating us but not defining itself by us alone. This is the lesson of mythology: that we are part of a much larger consciousness than we currently know; that man was created to participate in the earth's language with itself. The sorrow—our anguish—is that in our conversation of science and modernism we have dropped out of this vast, wild discourse. An anguish born of the greatest separation of all: modern man's exile from the conversation of the earth. The Eskimo who understands loon and wears loon's masked face at his dances and sings loon songs does not suffer that pain of separation, for he is not a modern man at all. It is I who suffer the pain—I who am possessed by a voice that is mine alone.

Although it was not always so. This gives me hope. In the dark, by this lake, I close my eyes and see myself as a child. We lived in wild woods and marshes by a vast river, a place fit for a child's turn of mind. I grew my voice here in conversation with winter storms, autumnal winds, spring peepers, the flood, and summer cicadas and crickets. "Honoured among foxes and pheasants," declared Dylan Thomas, a child's voice is surely never his alone.

It was only when I became a man and "put away childish things" that I was led to speak and write of things with no cicada or cricket rasp to them, no limb-cracking wind about them. No red wings, no blue lake ice, no ruby-throat. Texts without mergansers and goldenrod; a language with no waves or curious shoreline. As a man my words died and became empty shells, impotent and void of the sea and earth and sky. For words surely die when they no longer carry the signature of hummingbird, trillium, mud, moonlight, and aspen. We are left with mere husks: symbols, metaphors, and codes.

It has taken me half a century to return here, to this lake, and regain the vast, wild discourse that filled me as a child. These essays—essays wet with the breath of mankind’s oldest consciousness—chart that journey.