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Toward Home

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Toward Home

Dave Schelhaas

The photo on my office calendar—"Snowy Owl in White Pine, Michigan," two gold eyes and a curved beak like a nose in the middle of a white feathered head—takes me back to the Snowy Owl we saw in Muskegon, Michigan. I stare at the calendar and see again through misting snowflakes that great white bird light in a scrub oak at lake's edge as we trudge across the ice in January's early dusk, weary with gear and the failure of fishing. We are struck dumb, frozen by the owl's stare, waiting his permission to go on. We stand, still, until the first hint of yellow in the sliver of moon and the tingling of our toes and fingers pull us toward home.

I look up from the photo and am surprised to see green leaves on the maple outside my office. How strange are memories—to hold such strong sensations.

Another time on Muskegon Lake we're perch fishing in late August when suddenly, from out of the blue, huge, speckled, hook-mouthed fish break water, leaping and leaping, all around us. "Salmon," you whisper. We fish furiously, then slowly pull in our lines, pack them away, and watch. By the thousands they leap past our anchored boat, so alive and full of purpose as they race toward the mouth of the river they will follow to their deaths. Later you wrote in a school essay, "We were part of a celebration of life; it got into our bones, made us shiver and laugh and sing."

I shiver now in my air-conditioned office, wincing as the hooked mouths, the curved beak, tear at my heart, pulling me back to the sweetness of the past. And you, my son, sit at a computer half a country away, so alive and full of purpose, struggling into the waves, racing, racing, toward the mouth of the river.