

The Wonders of the Willow

By Natalie DeGabriele
Cedar Falls High School

*Winner of the 2019 Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle Essay Contest
from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature*

The forceful push from the back of the canoe lurches me forward. Grains of sand rubbing against the metal bottom start to slip away in exchange for smooth ripples of water. My knuckles instantly turn white as I grasp the plastic oar. I sit isolated on the rusty bench at the front of the canoe and watch as the green ash trees that appeared so minuscule from the other side of the lake, start to quickly grow immensely in size. They are sentinels, standing tall and proud without making a sound. The quiet only makes it easier for the panicked thoughts in my head to become more present. I look behind me at a pale, young girl with poofy blonde hair, fidgeting with the straps of her life vest. We met for the first time back on the small sandy brink at the edge of the lake, locking eyes after raising our hands when asked who could not find a partner. Her eyes now look down at the floor of the canoe, focused on the wrinkled autumn colored leaves that gathered there together over the past seasons. She sways from side to side, following the rhythm of the wind, and I infer that she knows nothing more than I do about the task at hand. My line of sight shifts around the frizzy hair, and I spot my friends paired up in a canoe. Their synchronized motions guide the canoe with ease, and their laughter reflects the little effort it demands. I knew I would be third-wheeling their friendship when I tagged along for this week long getaway, so being the odd one out did not surprise me in the slightest. My partner, on the other hand, appeared lonely from the start. The lack of knowledge about canoeing and my shy co-pilot, generates hundreds of nervous thoughts that crowd my brain. Everyone else at camp confidently rows their boat as if it were a daily ritual since birth; they find comfort in the independence the small lake provides.

“Watch out!” announce two boys simultaneously as they power past us, managing to spray my hair with the murky water that encapsulates us all. Their voices prompt my heart to leap out of my chest and I whip around, causing the canoe to tilt over on its right side. Instantaneously, I meet eye to eye with the surface of the lake and freeze. Milliseconds before the tip of my nose grazes the water, my cat-like instincts kick in; soggy and cold are two things I do not desire for the duration of this excursion. The rusted metal sides of the boat immediately dig into my fingers that clench the sides. I gladly accept the pain in return for stability of both myself and the entire canoe. Once everything feels in balance, I submerge the curved tip of my paddle into the water for the first time and push it back forcefully, hoping the girl in the back would join in. The canoe responds like a fish out of water, jerking from one side to the next as I make choppy and uneven strokes.

My arms sting with fatigue after a minute of dodging other canoes and avoiding the curved branches of elm trees that pour over into the perimeter of the lake. I glance back at the girl again and notice her oar laying innocently at the bottom of the canoe, completely dry.

I smile at her and ask in a benevolent tone, “Do you wanna try working together?” Her wide pastel blue eyes latch onto mine, and she nods slightly with her lips pressed together in a tight line. Without saying a word, she turns her attention back to the floor where the paddle peacefully rests. Her dingy yellow life jacket is at least 2 sizes too big, making simple

movements a struggle. After rocking back and forth, her fingers stretch far enough to grasp the handle of the oar. Once I see the water, black as Bombay cat, devour the vibrant canary yellow blade, I gently turn back around. Fresh oxygen provided by the surrounding trees charge my lungs as I try to revive the muscles in my arms. I comb back the water behind my paddle, trying to accompany the rhythm that my quiet partner begins to orchestrate. Looking straight ahead, I spot a space of shaded open water that appears more inviting than the rest of the crowded lake. I guide the canoe to the middle of the unoccupied space. The restless thoughts mulling around in my brain cease, and I allow myself to get lost in the calm rustle of the maple leaves above. I carefully balance the lengthy oar on the thin, scrappy sides of the boat and let the waves created by the other canoes guide ours around. I notice the shade start to slip away as we slowly venture further away from where we began only minutes before. As I squint and hold my hand above my forehead, cupping it to try and block the blinding sun, I realize I can barely make out the other canoes.

Over songbirds and the susurrus created by the bundles of maple leaves, I hear the echo of a counselor beckoning everyone over to the opposite end of the lake. The section farthest from where we currently float. The other canoes that used to appear lengthy like Largemouth Bass, shrink to the size of Minnows as they race each other to where the counselors patiently wait together in their flashy scarlet red canoe. I seize my paddle and strive to lessen the distance between us and the swarm of other canoes, but my arms immediately scream at me to stop. When I succumb to the pain and conclude that I cannot muster up enough effort to start accelerating the canoe, I remember when our old lawn mower would refuse to start unless my dad would rip its handle with great force dozens of times. With that thought in mind, I gather as much water as I can behind the paddle and shoot it backward. While the force feels colossal, the outcome is merely insignificant, therefore I repeat the motion. We inch forward, slower than a snail's pace, and I can taste the panicked sweat that starts to form on my face. The saltiness triggers a dire thirst inside of me, and I yearn for a cool glass of ice water. Splashing noises originating from the rear of the canoe, startle me from my reverie, and I turn to see my partner shoveling back gallons of water at a time. As she continues to endeavor, my own motivation starts to rise. Together, we paddle forward at half the rate as the other groups and create twice as much noise, but the inches become feet, and the feet become yards.

"How's it going?" one of my friends gleefully calls, as she leisurely paddles up to the right side of my canoe without causing a collision.

Once I find the breath to respond, I mutter, "Fine." She chuckles after glancing behind me and continues painlessly toward the mass of other canoes that still appear miles away. Six out of the eight groups linger by the edge of the lake and even from a far distance, I can feel their impatient stares burning on my face. The sunscreen packed by my mother could not prevent my face from turning red because it only blocks me from the sun.

When we finally come to a jerky stop around the cluster of canoes, they immediately start up again and row right into what I mistakenly believed to be the edge of the lake. In sheer exhaustion, I begin to uncontrollably pant, which ignites my lungs on fire, all while both of my arms morph into jello. I cannot fathom hoisting my oar one more time. Between long deep breaths, I watch the red boat slip through the curtain of leaves falling from a weeping willow. The canoes ahead of us flow right through the wall of green like ghosts. No one questions the act and one by one slide into the mouth of the weeping willow and vanish without hesitation. I ignore my paddle until all the other canoes disappear from my line of sight, for fear of holding anyone up. The water becomes still as the back end of the last canoe slips away through the

leaves. I dip my paddle gently in the water, creating the slightest ripple, and pilot the front of our canoe right into the wall. I feel the gentle elongated leaves of the drooping branches caress my forehead. Sunlight streams through willow tree, hitting every leaf. The reflection created by hundreds of branches and leaves dance together on the water around the canoe, as we glide toward the heart of the willow tree. I spin my body around on the seat and glance at my partner. Her eyes no longer stare at the tarnished metal or saturated leaves; they glimmer in the sunlight and sparkle with life. Looking up, she reveals a glowing smile across her whole face.

“It’s beautiful.” She whispers so far underneath her breath, that I feel my ears opening wider to let her words in. The panicked voices that once crowded my head, disappear with the other canoes. The tranquility that the weeping tree produces without even trying, embodies an overwhelming and indescribable sensation. I forget all about where the other canoes ventured off to, the quiet jealousy I hide from my friends, and the embarrassment caused by my own lack of experience. Instead, I take a deep breath in and allow myself to be enthralled by the beauty of the present moment.