

# Ready, Set,

Cottagers can get pretty wild. Even a nap can be rebellious. Here's how some of our favourite writers relate to the wild—within them and around them. Spoiler alert: they're into it

# Let go!

*Cottage wild*  
swinging free  
from the  
day-to-day  
routine



# MEET the neighbours

BY ANDREW PYPER

I DON'T speak Squirrel, but this one was making himself perfectly clear.

It was early autumn, and I'd been cutting trees. The squirrel had been chasing another one, and his quarry ran between my legs—I was standing with a chainsaw in my hand, admiring the sky, the air cool and hard as limestone—and once I moved, he stopped the chase, climbed up onto a spruce I'd just felled, and studied me. Man and rodent, locked in a staring contest I lost when he started chittering with unmistakable rage.

I knew exactly what he was worked up about. Before last summer, the point of land on a lake two hours north of Kingston, Ont., where we both stood had been completely undeveloped. No hydro, no docks, many of the trees dating back to the early part of the previous century, when the last big wildfire came through. Then our family bought it.

The goal was modest, if particular: clear as little of the land as possible so that we could erect a small summer cabin. Off-grid, single-storey, no motorboats, no noise. Yet there were still trees that had to come down, still trucks that had to wriggle through to deliver materials, still changes to be made. This squirrel had been a witness to all of it. And he was pissed.

I saw myself as being on his side. When we put in a bid for this two-acre piece of Canadian Shield, we were looking for things that most cottage owners don't want: far from the easy reach of the city, no cute ice cream place or woody decor shop or tasting menu for miles, a lake free of growling speedboats and clear-cut landscape architecture. Our dream was to keep the woods the woods, to turn our backs for a time on

the gibbering nonsense of social media and the elevator-stuck-between-floors anxiety of living downtown, to be away.

But the squirrel was pointing out, at great length, that the human quest for silence creates echoes, no matter how tiptoed our intrusion. Isolation, privacy, quiet: these are commodities the same as a boathouse, a hot tub, or an Italian marble countertop. They come with costs to the consumer and the natural world alike. To minimize the latter requires us to ask questions. Do you really need the cottage? If you do, what's the smallest version available? What would the squirrels—and the birds, and the snakes, and the trees—think of it being dropped onto their home? What will your children make of your decision when they realize that those same birds and snakes and trees hold an irreplaceable value much higher than any motorized toy or waterproof sound system?

After I spent a full minute absorbing his squirrely abuse, the animal stopped. He didn't run off as I expected him to. His eyes remained fixed on me, his paws held out in front of his chest in a what-do-you-have-to-say-about-that? gesture. "I'm sorry," I said.

I put the chainsaw away. And the pine I'd marked with an X? The one we wanted to remove to give us a glimpse of the water? I left it standing. Now, when we look out at it, we don't see it as blocking the view, it is the view. One that reminds us how lucky we are to have that tree and others as homes for ill-tempered squirrels, and as the guardians of the quiet that came before us.

*Award-winning author Andrew Pyper's latest novel, his ninth, is The Homecoming.*

# Embrace the FEAR

BY HEATHER O'NEILL

ONE DAY, my newish boyfriend said I should come along to a cabin in the country with him. His friend was lending him her place while she was in Europe. Then he said all sorts of wonderful things about nature which made no impression on me. Because it's a new relationship, I feel compelled to try new things, as I'm still in the period of not letting him know me.

I really honestly never see any reason to leave the island of Montreal. Especially for pleasure. I don't understand that principle whatsoever. I only travel for work, which is ironic because my line of work involves staying at home in bed. A fascinating conundrum.

As soon as we were off the main highway and on a small road, I began to tell him the plots of different chainsaw massacre movies I'd watched. It's my main association with the country.

"There will probably be some psychopaths who are going to put nails on the road," I said. "And when our tires blow out, they will come and tie us up in their cabin filled with mutilated dolls."

"You're freaking me out," he said.

"We're isolated," I continued. "Any number of axe murderers will come out of the woods and there will be no one around to help us. Also, we will know right away it's an axe murderer because they'll have on a dollar store mask. Not sure why, to be honest."

My boyfriend turned from the steering wheel and complained we would never be able to enjoy a vacation together because of my horror film obsession, since a large percentage of them start with a family going on vacation to a cabin or a beach house. I shrugged. I am what I am.

When we entered the cabin, it took me a little while to adjust to the quaintness. The cushions had rabbits on them. I find quaintness startling. I don't know how to exist in it. At that moment, I no longer felt like I was in a horror film, but, much worse, a Disney film where an animated world is stylized to look obscenely pretty.

"Look at this," my boyfriend said, opening one of the drawers wherein the spices were kept in containers all exactly

the same size. The drawers were so organized, even he found it alarming.

I plopped on the couch with a paperback novel. "I need a break from all those freaky trees out there. They look like they are going to reach down and pull my hair."

My boyfriend finally got me to go outside on the porch to smoke a cigarette with him.

"The stars!" I yelled. "There are too many of them! They are making me feel insignificant!"

When I was a little girl, I grew up in a violent, abusive home. I didn't understand why I had been born into such a fate or how it would be possible to escape it. Even though I lived downtown, there were always one or two stars visible in the night sky. I would wish on the brightest one. For a time, I consistently wished I would grow up to be hot. But then I got older and realized there was more to life than being good looking. So I began to wish I would grow up to be a bestselling novelist.

I always thought it was magical and singular that I escaped my past and my dream came true. It seemed like a loophole in the cosmos, that one of the few flickering stars had taken time to pay attention to my desires. Underneath the country sky, I realized how numerous the stars were. All I needed was just the handful to wish on. But there are an infinite number of stars. One for every child who thinks there is a way out of hurt and insignificance. All the tiny dreamers out in the night looking up with me. And as I stood there, I realized I was looking up in wonder.

*The latest novel by Heather O'Neill, The Lonely Hearts Hotel, won the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction.*



**Cottage wild only wearing shoes for trips to town**

Our dream was to **turn our backs on** the anxiety of the city, to be away



**Cottage wild**  
staying up  
way past your  
bedtime





**Cottage wild  
spending  
time alone...  
all alone**

# Walk into the **MIDNIGHT** light

BY CLIVE THOMPSON

THE IMAGE of the moonlight on the trees still haunts me.

It was 1982, I was 13, and I was having a miserable time winter camping in the Boy Scouts. I'd been Scouting since I was six, and our troop would frequently head out for a weekend at a wooded piece of land owned by a friendly farmer near Lake Scugog, Ont. But winter camping was a dodgy affair, because our troop had wretched gear: a ragtag collection of mouldy canvas tents, a tent heater that looked like it predated the First World War. I had a foam Snoopy-branded sleeping bag that probably wasn't rated for a cool summer evening, let alone sub-zero, knee-deep snow. "It'll toughen you up!" my dad would say cheerily.

That was debatable. But we tried! We pitched the tent, and at bedtime huddled in the dark, shivering and trying to ignore our chattering teeth. After a couple of hours we realized it was delusional to believe sleep would come. "Man, we're gonna be awake until dawn," said one of my friends with a sigh. To kill time, we put our snowsuits back on and went for a midnight hike.

The moon was full, so bright we didn't need flashlights. We plunged into a thick stand of fir trees, crunching quietly along in the bed of dry needles for 10 minutes, until we reached the edge of the firs and stumbled, suddenly, into the open. We'd reached a huge field, blanketed with snow, and across from us stood a stand of hundreds of white birch trees.

That sight was supernatural, so eerie it sticks with me even today. The slender,

bare birch shone in the night like dry bones. The moon loomed low over the forest, the bed of snow a pale piece of paper, criss-crossed by the ink-black moonshadows of the birch. It was as if we'd stepped into one of Lawren Harris' luminous and unsettling paintings—the landscape aglow with a weird and radiant spirit, like the idea of cold itself, white on white on white. It is not easy to strike dumb a group of jaded teens, but we stood there, staring for so long our feet went numb, utterly silent.

These days I live in Brooklyn, N.Y., which isn't a very wild place. I spend most of my time amidst screens and steel and subways. I like it that way; I'm an urban creature, and big cities are just collections of small neighbourhood villages, a riot of society.

But whenever I get a chance to dive back into the forests of Ontario I take it, greedily, instantly. I go for long hikes, plunging into the woods, even in the freezing depths of winter. I think that, almost 40 years later, I'm still chasing the spooky, almost alien beauty of that midnight scene. I want to be dragged out of myself in the way wilderness drags you. That's why it's so important to have these encounters with the woods when you're young, even when—perhaps especially when—you're physically miserable and just trying to endure it. The forest enters you like a ghost and never leaves.

*Clive Thompson writes for Wired, the New York Times Magazine, and Smithsonian. His new book, Coders, is just out.*

PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM LEFT: LIAM MCGAN, GRANT HARDER, KAMIL BIALOUS; OPPOSITE: KAMIL BIALOUS

# CLOSE your eyes — and mean it

BY ELAMIN ABDELMAHMOUD

I QUITE often forget that the culture of work hasn't always been like it is today. That we haven't always been tethered to our phones, and therefore our work. But in a relatively new cultural moment, where productivity is encouraged at all times, the most rebellious thing you can do is revolt against your to-do list and reject the idea that you're too busy to do what is simply enjoyable.

Now, lots of these rebellious acts are really fun. You can go out for a drive, try an adventurous activity you've never tried, or cook an elaborate meal, but let it be said here and now: the greatest rebellion is, ultimately, sleep.

The wildest thing I do at the cottage is sleep. I sleep early, I sleep in late, I nap vigorously. I sleep with wild abandon. I sleep without a shred of guilt. You might even say I sleep like it's my job.

I should say here that I don't own a cottage, but I love spending summer weekends at a friend's cottage. So I may not understand the work involved in cottage ownership, but I benefit from the responsibility-free part of cottage living. Being at my friend's place feels like a magical time when the rules society has built around sleep are suspended, when no one cares when you go to bed or when you nod off in the middle of the day. This sounds insignificant to seasoned nappers, but I actually think this is a radical act, and turns the cottage into a hotbed of rebellion.

Being a part of a generation taught to constantly hustle, to be on email in off-hours, to be non-stop curating a "personal brand," it feels like we are too often at the whims of professional demands, never out of reach of work's tentacles.

Even those with work schedules flexible enough to accommodate naps and a full night's rest would never think of allowing themselves such sleep luxuries. That's because we are surrounded by an insistent cult of busyness, fuelled in no small part by the breakneck pace of contemporary capitalism. We all know people who wear "busy" as a badge of honour—because it's the only way they can telegraph success.

So the act of sleeping at the cottage becomes an act of reimagining your life as though you had agency over it. The idea of sleeping whenever you feel like it doesn't compute in the real world. But at the cottage, it's a normal part of life.

It's why there's no mystery or worry when someone at the cottage disappears for a little while: you just know that when the high-noon sun hit, they felt the urge to take a nap and decided to give in. And why wouldn't they? Even at a friend's cottage wedding, the entire bridal party—including the bride!—took a midday nap, because, sure, a wedding can be stressful, but this is the cottage, and you sleep when you want, burdens be damned.

In this place, life slows down. You form a truce with your responsibilities, and the resulting peace is self-permission. It's this quality of the cottage that interests me most: as holy ground for the desires you have but still keep hidden away. Those wants come a-knockin' in cottage season, and your instinct, for once, is to acknowledge them. And if that isn't wild, nothing is.

*Elamin Abdelmahmoud's book of personal essays, Son of Elsewhere, arrives fall 2020.*

## Get NAKED

BY LISA MOORE

I'M EIGHT months pregnant, and we are hiking through the woods not far from the cabin and come upon a waterfall. We hear the water before we see it, at first a mild shushing and, as we get closer, a roar.

We have to go down a very steep path, and I move slowly. My balance is off because of my belly. Then we are at the edge of the pool. The trees hang over it, and their reflections ripple lime and emerald and yellowish on the surface. Hard creamy foam hammers between the black boulders above us.

When I tilt my head all the way back, the sky is a bright blue, circled by a crown of trees. The sun is hot, and I think about that famous nude Demi Moore pregnancy portrait on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

I am seized with the idea that I want a portrait with my body like this, big and round with our baby kicking away inside.

"I want a picture of this," I say to you, eyeing the camera around your neck. I'm not an exhibitionist, I swear, but being pregnant has made me wild. All my senses feel mixed up, I want to put the whole forest in my mouth and swallow it. I can almost hear texture; the rough lacy lichen doesn't just feel rough, it sounds like the hiss of a freshly poured glass of fizzing pop.

"Get the camera ready!" I shout to be heard over the falls, even though you're right beside me. One quick look towards the barrens, above the trees, a panorama scan to make sure we're totally alone.

I peel off my blouse and shorts and bathing suit. I am naked.

"I'm just going to climb on those rocks," I say. I wade through the pool until it's too deep to touch the bottom. I climb out on the rocks near the falls, and the mist that shudders down on me is full of tiny rainbows.

"Wait until I get to the top," I yell.

Demi is demure in her photo, hands strategically placed, her hair definitely blown dry by someone who knew what they were doing. She's standing straight and proud. Some strategically placed blush to make her high cheekbones even higher. Is she glancing down with some kind of special authority? Like a goddess? If I can get up high enough on these

rocks, I can glance down too! But Demi wasn't contending with slippery moss. I'm half way up the cliff and can't go any farther. I'm sort of stuck. It's really slippery, my soaking wet hair is hanging in my face, and I'm on my hands and knees, afraid to lift my hand to fix my hair.

There's only a very sharp, jagged rock on which to position myself, and I am going for the languidly-lazing-on-the-chaise-longue look, but it isn't working.

And you're yelling, "Get your face in the sun, you're in the shadows, lean out a little, into the sun, no, turn the other way, can you put your shoulder a bit forward? That's too much. Lean back, no, farther back and to the right. Your right? That's your left. Okay, hold it, no, you moved!"

I am trying to yell back, "Take the picture, just take the picture, hurry up and take it"—but I have been seized with contractions of laughter. I am laughing so hard I am crying, and my big belly is shaking, and I am as full of joy and wildness as I will ever be in my whole life. I am naked and outdoors and in love, and our baby is elbowing me in the ribs.

After, I get my clothes back on as fast as I can, which is not very fast, because I'm wet and I can't get the bathing suit back up over my belly. Just as I pull my blouse on, you say, "Look."

You point with the toe of your shoe, and there balanced perfectly on a stone is a potato chip. A single crisp potato chip. It's a ripple chip, and it's not soggy. Whoever dropped that chip must have been swimming in the pool just before we arrived and taken the path back up on the opposite side of the falls. Then I see, at the crest of the hill, a flash in the trees above, the wink of sunlight on the windshield of an SUV. You follow my look.

"They probably didn't see anything," I say. But I secretly think, And so what if they did? 🐸

*Lisa Moore is a three-time Scotiabank Giller Prize finalist.*

*Cottage wild eating—a lot (calories don't count at the lake)*

