



HOLLY SHELTER, PENDER COUNTY, DECEMBER 2005

In Holly Shelter

There lingers a legend:
Starfire from heavenward pelted the plain,
And there thirsty creatures find refuge and water
In low, hollowed places, uncertain terrain.

And now at the twelvemoon begin they to gather,
Tattoo of the far-off woodpecker their call;
From forest and field to the land of their fathers
Assemble the animals noble and small.

They know not what habit bestirs them to motion;
Opossum and terrapin go as ordained.
Cold coming on soon to the ancient pocosin,
Raccoon and rabbit press on through the rain.

*Come feather and fin, hearken fur, skin, and hide
Midst loosestrife and leather-leaf, hawthorn and husk
Make way to the evergreen bay and abide
In dense sanctuary and gathering dusk.*

Haſten all living things furtive and feral,
Bring beaver fresh branches to add to their lodge;
Fleet-footed fox, sly bobcat, quick squirrel
Appear one by one in the rustling sedge.

By hammock of berry and thicket of bay
Flow waters where otter and moccasin glide;
A paddling of wood ducks wend slowly their way,
With lizard and rodent and insect beside.

At edge of the pinewood two black bears emerge:
Berry-fed, heavy, they pause in their progress
Through flytrap and fetterbush, yield to their urge
To lie down a while in the bole of a cypress.

*Come feather and fin, hearken fur, skin, and hide
Midst fragrance of bayleaf and rainwater's sheen
Make way to the evergreen bay and abide
In safe sanctuary and winter unseen.*

The yearling, the roe, and the stag patriarchal
Stand patient in shadow, alert on the brink;
The eyes of the eventide glinter and sparkle:
A trio of keen-antlered bucks bow to drink.

Then quickly, above them, a great exclamation
Of air, a profusion of wings from the north:
In splendor, one bird, then a score, then a nation—
A chorus of feathers their blessing sends forth.

White swans by the hundreds, arrived from their nesting,
Flown from Orion, now Ursa they keep
Among the wild animals, dreaming and resting,
Her young to be born in the dark while she sleeps.

*Come feather and fin, hearken fur, skin, and hide
Midst holly, loblolly, the woodpecker's call
Make way to the evergreen bay and abide
In peace, sanctuary, & GOOD WILL TOWARDS ALL.*

B.A.B.

DECEMBER 2005

TRAVEL NORTH OF WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

along the Northeast Cape Fear River, and you will soon come to a vast tract of swampland described by early European explorers as the “Holly Schelter Precoson,” or *pocosin*, the Algonquin term for evergreen shrub bog. Holly Shelter comprises a series of Carolina bays, shallow elliptical depressions of mysterious geological origin that are generally oriented northwest-to-southeast. Native Americans believed that the depressions were caused by falling stars, and one modern-day theory indeed holds that they were created by the catastrophic impact of a meteor shower upon the earth.

More than 70,000 acres of the Holly Shelter swamp today are set aside as wildlife habitat and game land. Though inhospitable to humans, the tract harbors numerous species of mammals, many native and migratory birds, and diverse reptile, amphibian, insect, and aquatic life. It is home to hundreds of trees and plants that thrive in coastal-plain wetlands, such as pond cypress, loblolly bay and its fragrant cousin the swamp red bay, and cas-sena holly, with its bright red berries. The rare rough-leaf loosestrife and Venus’ flytrap are also found there.

Two endangered bird species, the red-cockaded woodpecker and the Bachman’s sparrow, live in Holly Shelter. Wood ducks and white-tailed deer thrive. Black bears, most often associated with the mountains of western North Carolina, are also abundant in the Holly Shelter Game Land. In the temperate eastern regions their hibernation season is not long, but it is during this short midwinter period of dormancy that the females give birth.

