

IV: affirmation

I'm alive, the ticker's still ticking, the breaths ebb and flow, but I feel pretty fucking dead. Two weeks of just...nothing. Illness grading into dissociation, dissociation born of lost potential. No cooking, no exercising, very little work, no rhythm, no pecuniary control, destroyed house and mind and structure. Have shunned human contact, have drunk deeply from the well of booze to abate the fucking fathomless pain that erodes any moral fiber or hope I have left in my battered, fragmented soul. These goddamn recurring anchors of physical and mental debasements, whether a ground-down hip, a stabbing back, shin splints, vertigo, respiratory infections, suicidal depression, paralyzing anxiety, they all just fucking compound my avalanching life tasks, so much so that I just can't see out of the depthless black ice of my self-built tomb. During the one sliver of spring before my allergen-abhorring body punishes me for the crime of living in the Central Valley.

At least I can catch fish.

Late yesterday morning, I somehow managed to throw the rods together, throw my gear together, hop into the Honda, and blast off to a reservoir that wasn't Berryessa for pre-spawn spotted bass - Camp Far West. I sped out there in a serotonin-sapped haze, under soft, quilted, cloud-filtered rays, through verdant agricultural fields on old country roads stippled with slapped-on tar absolving asphalt cracks and crevices. The air that sifted through my cracked window was that wonderfully novel spring warmth interspersed with breezy breaths of prickly coolness.

I reached the reservoir around 2 PM - yeah, not exactly the best time for a fish hunt - and found it remarkably full given the desert-dry year, the crystal, still water cradled gently by blue-oak-adorned, emerald rolling hills. Not a whisper of wind disturbed the glassy liquid. I plodded down to the water's edge, through emerging poison-oak shoots, stately *Dichelostemma*, and several other wildflowers I just didn't care to absorb - I needed to catch a fucking fish, and real bad, real bad so as to fight off the dissociation that miraculously hadn't swung the ol' Honda's steering wheel hard into one the blooming, booming valley oaks gracing the road's edge, magnificent, sagacious trees that could serve so well as a headstone if slammed into at 70 MPH.

So I started flipping the jig at some isolated, flooded willows along a straight bank, running a plug through the spaces as I worked my way down-reservoir. After about the fourth tree giving up nary a smooch, I accelerated my walk along the shore, pining for a point or corner with some jumbled, craggy rock on it - ideal pre-spawn spottie habitat. It didn't take long - maybe only 100 yards or so - before I hit a cove with cobble-sized stones littering the up-reservoir point's bed, coupled with a slight increase in bed slope. Too, a fat fluffy patch of willow was growing smack-dab in the middle of the old flooded ephemeral-creek channel. Possibility. Here I slowed down, covered the habitat with my casts more finely, and thought, sensed, surmised that *maybe* I had a...tap. One. But that one equivocation wasn't enough to keep me on the up-reservoir side of the cove, so I snaked around to the lower side and began threading the jig through the cluttered landscape of the cove's lower point.

And within a few casts, 'bout eight feet deep, was *for sure* a piscine kiss on the jig - just a thump, but a very spottie-like thump that, admittedly, is far more common in the freezing waters of winter than the balmy 61°F springtime gin of the Bear River's dammed waters. So I lathered up the jig real good in some shad-flavored gel, bombed the goopy lure back out into the still, clear water again, and this time got a strong enough of a slurp to sink a hook into some fucking flesh, flesh that happened to belong to a fat, gettin'-horny spotted bass running around 15 inches.

Carefully, and remarkably with some fucking grace given the travesty of frustration that'd been my life the last two weeks, I set the camera on the tripod, got the desired framing, then ran off two quick series of that fine spotted bass before cutting the curvaceous lady loose.

That first fish is always so important - it just so, so frequently eases the pressure a bit, it actually relaxes, it loosens, it paradoxically tightens the hunt by letting your emotions, your body, your muscles, *breathe*, especially when it comes from exactly where it should've given the conditions.

The third fish, at least according to my own mythology, is nearly important since it signifies the *pattern*, it signifies the understanding of the prey, it rises the predator above mere luck into skill.

And, well fuck me, it's real goddamn uncommon for spotted bass to be loners during pre-spawn on a point with cover on it just outside a spawning bay. So what'd I do? I ran the jig back out to the same fuckin' place where I got that first fish. Sure enough, it did yield a few more fish, but they were a bit short, and shorts don't count - in the case of spots, they gotta be at least 12 inches. Normally, presence of shorts at that stage in spottie life history is enough to make me move, but that I'd coaxed one good fish out of that habitat screamed to me that there were more. Thinking I might've burned 'em out on the jig, I slapped on the ol' drop-shot rig, flung it out there, slowed down the retrieve even more, and then really achingly tantalized 'em.

And it worked. Number two came within a few casts, and number three - a big bitch around 17 inches - came to my hand quickly after the second and blew luck out of the fucking water. Three in the hand, a pattern reaffirmed but at a new reservoir (I'd hit pre-spawn spotties lots of times at Berry and once at Oroville), so I packed my shit up and kept waddling down-reservoir to see and smell water and woods I'd never seen before.

I probably hiked down another quarter-mile or so of bank - not much - and basically found a damn near identical habitat series. A straight bank with lone, flooded willows gave way to a steeper-sloped cove replete with rock - and spotties - on the two points. Found a few lush California buckeyes, a larder of miner's lettuce that I just lacked the drive to grub, big elderly digger pines holding court over the smaller hardwoods, and some big, nasty mosquitoes - gotta take the bad with the good for a holistic picture.

But despite elegant casts, despite dexterous jiggin' and wormin' and spookin' (I put the Sammy to work once the sun left the water and got some action), despite a solid half-dozen slobby spotted bass to hand, despite no break-offs (thank you, Maxima), despite only one lost lure, despite smooth and sweet and tender predator-prey interactions, I still never really emerged from the depths of my damaged soul. I slammed a Downtown Brown at the reservoir just before Sammy-in', but that didn't fucking help. Neither did some bullshit citation from the fucking reservoir caretakers I found on the Honda at the completion of the hunt. Drove back in a cerebral fog pretty similar to the one I drove in under, culminating in getting lost twice and splattering a desert cottontail all over the lonely, broken pavement. Ended up dining at Red Robin, another lame entry in the litany of fucking Denny's knockoffs, where I chugged brews, ate lard-infested food, and watched the fat, tasteless, smart-phone-addicted patrons with a poisonous mixture of disgust, of condescension, of envy. Came home, downloaded the pictures (thank the fuck Christ that two of the eight shots of the first fish came out, in addition to a few others of later fish), drank more beer, read a book I'd already flipped through a million times, then fell into the waiting arms of that temporary death, Sleep.

At least I fucking *did* something through the straitjacket of dissociation and the decaying respiratory illness - I crossed lentic spotted bass off the list, moving ever closer to the

lake/reservoir/pond finish line, to achieving all I've ever wanted in still waters. Unfortunately, I crossed off no work tasks, no housework tasks, no health tasks (diet or exercise), no society tasks, none of that shit - only fish with a rod.

I stink and need to shower. My face is unduly hot, and my hair's too long. And I think the fucking cat's sick.

And, but, still - I caught fish.