

## ***0.vi: autumn absolution***

Leisurely drove to my favorite river yesterday, drive enveloped initially with veiling thick fog, but it dissolved to blue-sky eternity as I rose in elevation. Didn't go too far - not enough time nor energy for a higher-watershed jaunt, just enough for a little hike to a little spot on the crystal stream. Hadn't been in the Sierra with the boot for nearly two months, care of my struggles with the rod to get red salmon, and I so needed it: when just the boot, my perspective broadens beyond the water and the fishes and strengthens the relationship among Wild and wild and I, fusing us into Nature. Soon as I laced up and was stepping softly on the trail, I was getting it, She enveloping me with Indian-summer autumn glory. The air, breathlessly still; sun on the exposed slopes I lateralled across unalloyed and soothingly golden, unlike the diamond piercing light that often bites you in summer; and the fallen leaves, the lifeless leaves, so vibrant even in death: black oak and maple leaves hued such a deep crimson and canary. And when I reached the river, cold, crystal water bubbled and gurgled, just a light conversation, totally fitting given the serene environment, everything so clear. I doffed my pack on an inviting rock and basked like the little frogs in the bathing light.

And then autumn thoughts.

Fishes. Been such a struggle this year, and as I lounged by the lilted, golden glint of the river's surface, pining for a nice squaw or sucker or hardhead to sidle out from the shadow of a big, mid-channel rock, I realized that I haven't had one day of truly elegant fishing this entire year - all have been marred by something. With king salmon, an inexcusable break-off when fumbling with the photography equipment. With leopard sharks, endless mainline-leader tangles. With silver surfperch and bug-eating river trout, a poor landing percentage. And those were the *good* days. I blew three whole days at ol' Truckee's lake with only one fish to hand, and that barely, at dusk on the last day; I was casting like shit, breaking fish off, and fuckin' just straight up implacably throwing 'em the wrong lure in Suisun during late winter; all my winter and early-spring surfperch trips were fucking embarrassing paragons of ineptitude, a litany dirging a disgraceful number of missed hooksets, a disgraceful number of broken-off fish, and an appalling count of shitty presentations care of more mainline-leader tangles. Thankfully, most have been explainable by my balance problems and thus shaky hold on my position in space.

Nevertheless, had most fishers experienced what I had this year, they'd consider it the best fishing year of their lives - the fishes and I, we've been tight. Reinforcement of so many solid patterns I realized this year: the voluptuous spotted bass of a xeric Feather River reservoir eating only the slow jig during winter 'bout 20 feet down on rocky juts with the light low; the post-spawn river 'bows eating big pre-emergent mayfly nymphs and then the hair's ear nymphs I drifted to 'em in imitation; the big summertime silver surfperch in a mid-day tear on my little grubs in the surf's mighty current seams up against some stacks; grand leos in that big bay of Earth's mighty rift sitting in wetland outflows during ebb tide just like in South Bay a decade ago, singing the reel's clicker then porpoising out of the water when the circle hook's point pierced; and big kings gnawing my little spinners and then bucking my big rod in the dim light of dawn and dusk in smooth runs. But even more: novelty and its corollary, growth, the fishes have given. Reservoir squaws under shad on points in late winter - man, that was an illuminating first experience, a bona fide still-water pattern with the big minnow. Kings, showing that if the water has some color, the water temp is in their comfort zone, and a bunch of bozos ain't bombing big stupid shit (*e.g.*, those ridiculous Flying C spinners) on their heads repeatedly, they will attack a small, dark lure in the apex of the day. Many stripers this autumn popping silversides on the surface in low-light

conditions being peculiarly selective, with us only catching a few. A miserable performance on the beach in March, but, man, so much learned: barred surfperch loathe turbid water, but goddamn do bat rays and leos love it, the latter very comfortable and hunting very skinny water among rocks and eelgrass under the cover of muddy surf. That's one phenomenon I'd love to experience again, but this time with a big rod suited to the task, which I didn't have. And that hammering home that it's arrogance to assume you know all that goes on in a big waterway, so if you don't bring the whole array of gear, you're so likely to miss a great opportunity.

And family - "family." Thanksgiving week here, and those sad, tragic, pathetic people, they enter my mind more frequently than at any other time of year. "Family" - the word implies nurturing and understanding, a safety net for when the shit hits the fan. Doesn't mean absence of conflict or misunderstandings or bad times, but, ultimately, that the rewards of the relationships outweigh the detractions. My "family," however, didn't - not because they were evil - with only a few exceptions, they weren't - but just so emotionally stunted and weak and therefore lacking the courage for unvarnished self-reflection, unable to see outside themselves and from others' perspectives, unable to admit when they were wrong, and that led - inadvertently - to them overall being more hurtful than helpful. Sadly, they worsened in those ruts of mind as they aged. I had to burn bridges with 'em many years ago to end the damage and disappointment. So - "family"? No, ultimately just relatives.

They gave me little of what I really needed, my relatives, the uncles and the aunt and grandparents (though both grandmothers were never once unkind to me) and the parents and the step-family (the lone exception: one of my step-cousins), but they gave just enough to keep me from total sociopathy and so salvageable when I met my tribe, those wonderful friends and their families, in high school. Have to thank my relatives at least for that, for keeping me on life support until Aly and Marcus and Jasen and Rob and the Scotts and Cara and Skippy came along and really saved me. My happiest holiday memory remains that lovely, soft, snowy winter day in Arrowhead at Rob's parents' home, where they were so inviting, so open and jovial, authentically jovial and warm, where I joyously helped 'em in the banal act of washing their fuckin' dishes. That Rob's parents welcomed me into their home, that Jasen's mother and Skippy's mom let me live with 'em then expressed sadness when I told them I was moving out, proved I wasn't near as bad as some of my relatives thought. And I've a photo of Aly flipping me off when I wouldn't party with her one night because I had to work at 6 the next morning. That's real family - getting sad or pissed off because you're leaving, not because you aren't.

Sun falling behind the western ridge, evening rising early, and the instant chill of the shadows forced my thoughts into the background and my body back into motion. I poked around a little up the slope, wanting to press further downstream and see Wild I hadn't seen before, but what little trail I found quickly decayed to nothingness under the cover of verdant ferns and rambling honeysuckle vines. I turned and angled back down to the river, then rock-hopped like the little yellow-legged frogs that are so the expression of this river. Autumn surrounded, the haunting, ironic beauty of death reflected in the brilliant reds and yellows of the maple and ash leaves, in the rich chocolate brown of the fallen alder leaves on the teal-colored rocks where a small spring tinkled in starlight little falls. Jewels.

Light now slivering on the eastern ridge, evening falling to dusk, and I started my climb out of the canyon. Though not steep or long - certainly much milder than so many other climbs I've achieved - still, given my state, arduous. But the heart got racing a bit, the sweat glands seeped a little, the feet kept forward progress, and despite my self-destructiveness, I attained the ridge without hurting myself, then slowed my speed to more deeply absorb the scene. Shockingly I'd

not seen a single bird - no phoebe deftly snatching the midges or mayflies emerging from the cold water, no irate jays scolding me for intruding into their forest, no bouncing little dippers to entertain with their underwater flying, no big ol' shaggy Red-tailed Hawk spinning soaring circles in the crystal sky. Left me a bit miffed, so along the ridge, I looked hard for anything that might have feathers. Eyed a bulge at the tip of a dead oak that looked suspicious, whipped up the binoc's, and saw...a Northern Pygmy Owl. I'd never seen one before. I hung with the little bird for a good quarter-hour, creeping ever closer, changing angles to get as much of her as I could. She never blew off, totally accepting of my presence. She was the only bird I saw all day - she was enough.

Back in the old wagon, muscles stretched and then calm, Rites of Spring serendipitously singing "Is there a beauty in promises broken?" through the cassette player's speakers, the clock told me the day, despite the sun's disappearance, was still young: 3:30 PM. Within a lovely mixed-coniferous forest, many Doug firs and ponderosa pines and a profusion of blooming red and yellow of massed black oaks, and on a one-lane road I'd never explored before, I delayed my drive back to the dreary roar of I-80 and instead took a little country drive to see more of those pines and firs and that brilliantly splashing oak. Lovely country - very close to my heart, my soul, the little road's shoulders awash in blankets of fallen leaves, those fallen from the black oaks but also the maples. Inchoate images from my past flooded my mind, misty, a phantom sensation of the prickly coolness of calm autumn air on my blushing cheeks, on my nose, the icicle prickle on my naked fingers, fire-crackle crush and crash of the leaves as I kicked through 'em on my walk to wherever, the odd exhalation of leaving life perfuming the autumn atmosphere with purity, like a release of energy from the decay and death in absolution.