

## *IX.v: autumn by design*

Deepest blue, abyssal, empyreal, for only a sliver moment, like her eyes, her eyes that still gaze at me, through me, from memory, everlasting, the window into heart and soul, and then - gone. And for so long, so long now, nearly 30 years ago. Old grizzled fuck I am now, and yet those piercing, everlasting eyes, the window to heart and soul of She, they still are so, so clear in my withering, diseased mind, revelation and destination and damnation.

Since Lughnasadh 2022, my life has been total turmoil. The last third of 2022 saw decay around my entire front - bodily, financially, materially, socially. Yet somehow I survived and reached the new year, despite all the wretched blood flooding my vessels, despite suffering still, with ears and throat and shoulder faltering, insecurity remaining at work, finances winnowed down to clean my mother's sloppy death and my ailing cars and leaving very little pecuniary buffer were another catastrophe to depress - and all that in a flatland place where I rarely belonged but was too scared to escape. But then - the uncanny. I suddenly and shockingly found myself debt-free, and my mother's trailer shockingly sold just before my one reliable car was totaled. And on the eve of the annual Irongate ritual and being responsible for toting another person, I had to buy another vehicle, now had the bucks for it, and bought a 4 X 4 that could roam the snow and mountains. Then with courage buoyed by the bucks and ride, I finally searched for a home in the mountains, my place, submitting an offer on a house I felt a little wary of, having that house swooped out from underneath me, and then finding this one, perfect, cheaper yet better and owned by lovely people - been so long, too long since I've cut a rent check to a rentor who's a human being. So I was seemingly orchestrated to reach my home back in place.

Then my fucking back the last month. That shitty L4-5 disc blew on October 14 and again right in the middle of Samhain, and I've had to consciously monitor every movement thereafter because I hadn't been in a compromised position at all. The pain abates when I lay on the bed, but I can't live that way - like a Jack-'n'-the-Box burger tastes so good, with curly fries and a big-ass Dr. Pepper, how that "food" then ravages your body far exceeds the transitory savory enjoyment.

So the Wild day off yesterday, I had to get out there. I woke, dribbled bitchy doggerel in the journal, threw down a good breakfast, showered, then rolled to high lands that would be blocked for months to come from a big storm later in the week. But the spot I had in mind - the other leg of a trail I hiked earlier this year - already was inaccessible thanks to some fuck-ass government agency - probably USFS - blocking the road to trailhead. But I wasn't going home - no way - and I'd had enough surprises since Lugh '22 to have a contingency plan. Rooted around in my hiking guide and map book and found another trail only a few miles away, and, better - actually ideal - for my mending, fragile back, shorter and with less elevation change.

Fuck-ass USFS frustrated accessing that trailhead, too, by removing its sign, though somehow, even through my annihilated sense of space given my fucked inner ears, I found it. And uncannily the destination was a lake bearing the name of one of those gorgeous, ghostly young blonde women who so infatuated me, who was so warm and kind to me, in those tumultuous high-school years on the frosty mountain. Even more - on a day that was the anniversary of the joining of my longest love and I, and right there was a reservoir her grandfather, such a wonderful man,

so full of life well into his 80s, such an inspiration, loved to fish. Such peculiar alignment of times and places through 30 years.

Then the challenge - me reaching that lake without getting lost, and without reverting to my crippled state of November 1. I gingerly hoisted the light pack to my back and slowly, meticulously measured each step before letting foot fall, and damn did I need to because a fair length of trail had been blanketed with a thin snow that'd fused and solidified to ice. Needing to focus so much on my body, I couldn't really open myself, couldn't ogle and inhale and absorb the place as much as I would've liked. Still, she permeated me - how could she not? She'd been burned through, so many toppled, charcoaled red firs and lodgepole pines, with deep autumn fallen - all leaves from alders and aspens shed from skeletonized trees, laying on the sooty forest floor to melt and then be absorbed by new life. A biting wind blew, hard, cold, dry, waving the widowmakers, soggy meadows shifting ever closer to winter with many frozen solid, strong enough to walk on. Season of death. But not arrived yet, still in season of dying, which is still surviving and, if taken to potential, living. Juncos on one last high-elevation feed, little tough-ass Douglas squirrels and chipmunks bright-eyed and continually chattering, and, in the main creek, above gravels behind a big log jam, hoards of brookies, streaking white edges of lower fins swinging in synchrony just above small, foot-wide teardrop pockets - spawning time. I stopped and watched 'em, fisher desire burning, and I'd the thought to traipse back to the car and grab the rod and return, but that would've been so heartless, like sparring with some dude while he kissed his girl. I kept hiking.

And I reached the lake, around noon, back still together. So lovely, snug level campsites all along the northern edge, boulders rising vertically from the water and perfect for an exhilarating jump, and the lake small enough to warm enough for a summer swim that would be refreshing rather than shocking - you could linger in the water. Even this deep into autumn, surprisingly lush growths of aquatic plants, suggesting, if deep enough to avoid winterkill, favorable conditions for growing good trout. I carefully slid off my pack and sat for a while, gazing at the lake, through the water, aching to see a fish. I didn't initially - but then I heard one jump, and then another, and later saw several rises, proof of the lake's piscine fecundity. So very inviting and promising in the younger season, though now chilled, skeleton alders ringing the bank in this older and aging season, swirling, icicle wind whipping the lake surface to harsh clatter, but the rising trout - surviving to live still.

Afternoon aging, I hoisted the pack, again ever so gingerly, and ambled my way back to my ride. By now the wind had senesced to silence, afternoon settling and gilding the light, and on straight sections where root and rock were sparse and so I was less likely to trip and really hurt myself - I, too, in my head would quiet for a few precious moments, absorbed into the place, a place still full of life - the green-needled conifers, a bevy of maturing Western Bluebirds with their mournful chirps, and, in the water, the brookies still there, a swaying troupe, flowering in the season of dying. I reached the car surprisingly quickly.

Still some light left - 'bout 90 minutes. I felt I couldn't, with some remaining day, leave without touching the reservoir with my lure. So I drove the short distance to the inlet, and slowly, cautiously weaved my way down to the water just as the sun fell over the western rise. The wind here remained, brisk, chilling, and big ol' fault-block boulders, some ice-snotted, presented myriad threats to my back. But among the jagged jumble were several flat rocks, good casting platforms, and a rise as I was rigging up signaled promise. I'd a peck on the third cast, but it wasn't enough

to set on. I worked the inlet where the cold water came rushing in, rather gracefully given my condition - casts fluid, float rig turning over well with each cast and that with a braid mainline, presentation good enough to have tempted that one fish to sample. But she was the only one, and when I reeled up the last time, I'd caught no fish. But as dusk shifted to night, streaking clouds on the western horizon lit up in crimson glory against a lime then blue then violet sky, I felt a nod of assent from he and she and She.

I feared I'd get lost on the short hike back to my ride, what with the deepening blue of the emerging night. But enough residual light remained, and enough vestigial sense of location, that I somehow struck the right trail each time and, like the hike, reached my ride surprisingly quickly. Carefully doffed my gear, stowed it, felt relief when the car started easily, and then the contented ride back to my home in place, on small roads, caked with ice in some spots, blackened ghosts of verdant cedars and pines and firs flamed by big fires of only a few years ago, the transformed energy somehow floating, haunting, the ember of the overdeveloped valley floor where I once lived clear from the ridge, and I stopped at a Mexican joint where a beautiful, flowering young woman with sparkling obsidian eyes and sways and curves of eternity mesmerized me and sent me back through time to those amazing, abyssal eyes of empyreal blue shading to violet, to midnight, and then.