

## ***better***

To link severed threads of mind, I eddy back to a much earlier time, back to Pyramid Reservoir, an oasis of estuary water in the drab over-sprawl and scrawl of southern California, back to the mid-1980s. Dulled split-shot sinkers, small dull hooks, an old rod found in the grandparents' cluttered garage, and many bejeweled bluegills, my first, iridescent, violet and brilliant orange, tightened my lines when I laid my baits within the shade cast by an overhanging walkway leading to a massive dock. Strong little fish, spinning and shuddering against the conquering rod, and I netted 'em with difficulty. I stumbled onto 'em - wasn't a strategic decision for bluegills that led me to that locale, but a tactical one based on biggies: I caught my first largemouth by imitating some dude who bagged a nice one under a dock with a nightcrawler, and here, a similar situation, so out went the worm, and in battled not the loud-mouthed green fish but the feisty little spiky cousin of the green fish. I heartlessly stabbed a stringer through the gills of 'em, every 'gill I caught, and not because I wanted to eat 'em, but because I wanted recognition of my success, and my word wasn't enough - no one ever listened. It's agonizing, in memory's eye, seeing 'em struggling, gasping against the stringer's cruel, frayed, prickly rope. I extended death's prelude when I brought 'em home alive, dumped 'em into a big galvanized tub, then filled it with poisonous tap water. This second act was beyond seeking recognition, however - a fascination, a perplexity, forced me to ogle 'em, a domesticated cat playing quizzically with a rat it had captured - the instinct to pursue and catch was there, the mechanics for stalking and striking were there, but the reason why - gone. Staring hypnotically into the metal bucket at the frightened fish, it was a struggle between what I'd been taught by my tamed, suburban life and what that had buried, but not smothered, deep inside; too, it was the ugly, bloody afterbirth of a relationship, a relationship back then that was still in its crude infancy, a relationship with myriad nubbins that eventually branched out and flowered and overlapped and superseded those originally destined only for humanity.

Over 30 years later, and a renewal of that relationship between bluegill and I, a relationship of saltation. Haunted by the depleted stock of self-killed fish in my freezer, my limited mobility precluding a hunt on wild waters such as the surf or a big river, I had few options for redressing my freezer's anemia. Late summer at low elevations along well-defined weedlines during the day promised good chances for good bluegill, chances that didn't require an Iron Man-fit body to access. An ignored stretch of Putah Creek close to my house beckoned, a reach flanked by a lovely floodplain restoration where myriad native plants flourished amid present but not obnoxious non-natives. Harmony. With odonate nymph jigs, with bluegill the focus instead of being a bass-hunt by-catch, with a clear and conscientious fate already ordained, on a mild, gilded afternoon, I slipped heron-like into the creek, slowly working my way upstream with diligent presentations feathering the waving weedline. I got my fish. The first I venerated with a photo, a lusty photo illustrating bluegill's vibrancy, their sunshine rays of art. Documentation complete, that fish and all that followed her - four - were immediately killed with a blow to the head from a dense black pipe. I looked each fish in the eye, I felt the precious life energy, and I felt that energy evaporate to a lifeless calm as I lifted the black pipe away. I stopped fishing after killing the fifth - I no longer needed to, and neither did they. I filleted 'em, pored over their gut contents to further inform future episodes of the saltating relationship, and everything I planned not to eat - the guts, the heads, the spinal columns - went back into the creek, to inform the rebirth and renewal of that which I took from the stream, a partial mimic of

the ancient salmon that once gave their bodies for the stream's life. When I pulled the fillets out of my freezer, dressed 'em, cooked and ate 'em - completion.

So many more chapters in this recent episode compared to the initial one. It was only the pursuit that was well-developed at Pyramid - the ritualized preparation, the kill, the restraint, the rendering, the return of that unused, and the assimilation of the animal's energy into my own, they were either rudimentary or absent. Though so long ago, I can still faintly feel the exhilaration I had when catching Pyramid's brawny bluegills; more pronounced is the shame I now feel for how I treated 'em, albeit I had no teachers. But impressions from the recent foray feel inverse: the elation of capturing such sunshine, due to the length of the relationship, the familiarity, had certainly cooled, but the shame's gone, now replaced by a solemn respect and a subdued joy, both earned by feeling and then acting on the shame. I'm better because of it. So are they.