completing the spiral

I recall somewhere my heroine Kristin Hersh stating that time spirals (yeah, physicists have, too, but Kristin's cooler) – she's right, as usual, but there's more. It not only isn't linear, but its speed isn't constant, its shape not static. A minute in intense moments can feel like a lifetime, and a day in the moody blues can feel like an instant. Time is rhythmic, reflected in the seasons – winter always returns and always ends, though of course no winters are identical - and if you stay in one place, it's like a sine wave, with crests and troughs ever changing. But lives, animals especially, don't stay in one place, they move, hence the sine wave shifts around the axis of mean time, and can extend, through blood, across generations, across continents, across oceans.

I thought a gap had existed in my annual spiral with lentic Euromerican spotted trout during spring until just a few weeks ago, when hints suggested that that segment had been present for years though mistaken as a winter pattern's vestige. To verify my mistake, I zipped up to a lovely little local reservoir on an epitome spring mountain day as an impending storm's first breath spread across the sky in high, sun-softening cirrus clouds – cool morning, calm, warblers arrived, butterflies and unfurling wildflowers – and found verification in three thick brown trout on corners and points and not picky about bait type. With those fish, the spiral achieved continuity, and so the time had come to write our story.

Of course, like so many of mine, it starts at Lake Arrowhead, ever Arrowhead. Over 30 years ago, 18 years old, all my possessions fitting into a big cardboard box – clothes, blanket and pillow, a small stereo, my precious records and cassettes and CDs, a few books, a little fishing bag and lone light-power rod. My friend's mother graciously, generously allowed me a bed in her little apartment in the village, so the lake was always near, an easy jaunt down to Burnt Mill and the trail that wound to Little Bear Creek. Just after Labor Day, vacationers vanished, an evening golden, a little autumn breath in the breeze, I was at the point where Paradise Bay turns sharply south, with the nearly ever-effective tube jig on, tossing the lure at all the usual sunfish-y haunts: dock pilings, dock shade intermingling with rock. I trespassed onto one dock – did that a lot, though never damaged or ganked anyone's stuff – and walked out over deeper water to shoot my jig back into shallows corralled by a stony storm wall buttressed by a concrete slab and shaded by the adjacent dock. I cast accurately, and then from the shade emerged a school of toddler red salmon, each fish about three inches long, and then, behind, the impetus for their emergence: a big ol' brownie, well over 18 inches, malevolent-looking, powerful, hungry. My jig was around there, too, but I'd lost its location – where was it? My line's movement answered – the brownie's mouth. I set, and the fish, as is the wont of the species, sounded and ran hard and fast, peeling drag, and he swiped so much line that it rose and dragged the bottom of the dock, and then…weightlessness. He'd broke off. I stood for a moment, shaking, punch drunk, and yearning.

So of course I returned a day later. Light this evening wasn't gold but pewter, manifestation of a late monsoon storm. The big brownies, being low-light lovers, exulted in the lavender-tinged dimness, and together, a well-drilled squadron, they corralled the little reds on the surface, their slashing through the school denoted by the leaping little reds, like a blast of hail slamming the water, but the disturbance deriving from below. I'd a fish pattern on, a Rapala Countdown, arguably the most overrated lure ever perpetrated on the masses, and the brownies, too smart for shitty imitations, shunned it. Becoming desperate, I began switching lures, trying the more-

effective Rebel Jointed Minnow, a Kastmaster, a SuperDuper, with all failing [I'd not yet accepted that the tube jig was my best chance, my perception still deceived by the lure-labeling of the tackle industry by species rather than purpose (*e.g.*, fish imitation, crawdad imitation), so the tube jig remained dominantly a crappie and smallmouth lure in my mind]. Despairing, so desirous of one of those majestic fish, and out of reasonable lures to throw, I threw seeming logic to the wind and tied on a Teeny Torpedo (a "bass lure"), and then, astonishingly – connection, a euphoric and terrifying rise, a king brown arcing out of the water to claim his right of the pretend little fish.

Spiral 20 years later, me entering middle age, and lure manufacturers crafting far more imitative and effective and reliable lures – man, even the Rebels and Cotton Cordells that caught well in my youth nevertheless lost their tune easily, swam rather stiffly, and cast poorly. From the San Bernardino Mountains to the majestic Sierra Nevada, and now not at a reservoir behaving as a lake but at a secluded hydropower reservoir, a brown trout bastion: cool, abundant sunken timber providing shade brownies love to lurk in, and stable winter flows that don't blow out their redds. Atmosphere was nearly identical to that 20 years previous: autumn gold glint in the light, late summer. I was there at brownie time, dawn, near a mild point, and better equipped: I'd a small Lucky Craft Pointer tied on, a reasonable imitation of both the mosquitofish close to shore and the larger toddler salmonids out in the open water. Unlike the Rapala of that long-gone day, the Pointer succeeded – three fat brownies chomped the lure and met me on the bank during blue dawn's 30 minutes. Once the sun alighted on the water, stillness ensued, and that was fine – three fish were enough.

Two years later, over the divide to the east side, at a bigger, different waterway: a water-supply reservoir. Again late summer, white light newly gilded, air freshly chilled, blue dawn. The water surface was still and silent other than the splash and spreading rings from the Pointer's entrance. I worked the water effectively down-reservoir for 15 minutes, along decently attractive shoreline (moderate slope, fairly shallow, mild undulations), but with no touches, unlike the two years previous – my anxiety grumbled as dawn winnowed. Then the mild undulations gave way to a slash of a sharp point into the water, forming a very well-defined corner – a good corral. Brown-town time was nearly extinguished for the sun's light had fallen on the far shore of the reservoir and was racing towards me. But at that corner, my anxiety morphed to anticipation, and just as I hit the Pointer after a several-second pause, the rod stopped dead – log or rock or…fish. As is so frequent with green bass and brownies, who nearly always eat on the pause, a few moments had to elapse for the line to move to signal that the stop wasn't a snag. Then the dance began, and unlike rainbows, who also eat plugs when hunting fish, the dance wasn't a ballet but rather a sunken, swirling, dark-club sweaty punk rock slam dance. I'd to be sensitive swaying the fish into shore to not break the line – and I succeeded, landing a big, beautiful brownie queen, so magnificent it'd've been a crime to not paint her portrait with the camera…besides, the sun had now stolen my shade. She was the only brownie I caught that day, but she, as an echo of two and 20 years ago, was enough.

As in Arrowhead, so on the west and east sides of the Sierra, in reservoirs of power and supply: late summer, dim light, relatively shallow, near points, and there the Euromerican spotted trout a hunter of smaller fish: toddler salmonids, mosquitofish, toddler Tahoe suckers, Lahontan redsides.

But they can't stay in the still water forever – come autumn, they gotta spawn, and they gotta enter a stream for the holy act. Once water temperature begins to fall consistently along with daylight's length, they gravitate to the inlets (or, in rarer cases, the outlets), but they don't then immediately run into the streams once the water cools to spawning range (typically the high 40s°F; Moyle 2002) – few species do without a bump in flow that eases stream entry. They wait for that rise, and the longer they have to wait, the more of 'em accumulate at the inlet waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and while waiting – they get hungry.

The fishiest pre-spawn times, then, are those autumn droughts, and 2008 was one. Many northern California waterways were still virgins to me, and only in one of the several I'd fished had I caught a brownie, a small mid-elevation water-supply reservoir. Yeah, just a lone fish, and she among a mass of rainbows, but sometimes long shots come in. I'd reasoned out the accumulation scenario described above, and I dutifully eyed the weather forecast through October, November, and then into December, and while a few spats of water fell here and there, nothing near enough to saturate the soils and swell the streams. And then, finally, big storm threatened on the horizon, and I finagled my schedule to where I could be at that reservoir the evening before the deluge.

It was a glorious, late-autumn afternoon, nearly sultry, ironic given the dying eminence in the yellowed leaves of the dozing hardwoods. And engulfing, with that unique autumn sensation of so much released spirit from senescence in the air. The signal of the nearing storm had emerged, a skein of smooth cloud shielding the sun: evening'd come early, meaning brownies would eat early because even though desperate for food to fuel the throes of the impending frenzied lovemaking, they still shun bright light. I'd a pleasant walk down a gentle logging road, reaching the reservoir about two hours before dusk, skirted the river-right side, then cocked my head to attain a glare-less look through the water, and what I saw astonished.

It was a trout convention, with tens of thick fish easily visible milling about right downstream of where the inlet entered the still water. I'd to catch myself from running to water's edge and splashing my baits immediately – the water was both very shallow and clear. So I rigged well up the bank – one sliding-sinker set with a floating worm, the other with a jerkbait – then slunk towards the shoreline, slowly, softly, and then an accurate, arcing cast, a light splash with the bait rig, and then not even time for one cast with the jerkbait since the worm rig's spool was already spinning under a fish's power. And the scene repeated several times 'til I'd killed a limit, a few stout rainbows mixed in with even stouter browns. Some light remained, and being I'd never experienced such success before – my restraint still inchoate – I wanted to feel the dance of the rod again and again, so picked up the plug rod and slung away – and my invitation was answered. I caught several more, and the last one I still recall with crystal clarity: a big, bullish buck who smacked the little fish mimic just off a short, sharp point, just as the sun disappeared over the western horizon and the remaining blue purpled. I sheathed the rods after releasing that man.

I returned to that reservoir twice the following autumn, towing along my accommodating girlfriend, and both times reinforced timing's importance. First time was in October, water cooled enough to draw in some but not all fish – I only caught a lone brownie that evening. Too early. Nearly two months later, on about the same date as the previous year, and during a snowstorm, we left without a fish: too late. Several years later at a hydropower reservoir further north, in rouge dawn light, I'd regained my timing and had three fish in hand before morning died, and I didn't

even bother with bait: the jig was enough. I followed the fishing with a refreshing hike in the afternoon, my restraint matured.

And then the shift from autumn to winter while they birth the new generation in the streams, whether inlet or outlet, and the still water remains green and white and red with lake trout and rainbows, but gold and yellow are conspicuous by their absence. I've gazed at big spawners in one of those rare outlet streams, and gazed only, for to wave a lure at 'em while they reposed in their love nests would be sacrilege. True to their temperament, they're wary, secretive, huddled by big logjams and sheltering under the shade cast by the trunks, even the queen just downstream of her redd shrouded by shadow, mimicking the adjacent log – rainbow hens, in contrast, will often sit right on top of redds even in naked daylight. But browns remain protective of their beds, reflected by the buck red salmon, also there for love, who dash upstream but quick when their cock fights kick 'em back towards the bigger redd and the woodpile, woodpiles the reds themselves would occupy but for the presence of the much larger Euromerican.

The moratorium on waving a lure at 'em expires quickly because, unlike rainbows, as soon as brownies have consummated, most bomb out of the running water and back into the still (*e.g.*, Dedual *et al.* 2000). And they're hungry, needing energy to recover from the ardor of *amor*, and since the interface between still and flowing water is so often where most food resides, they pause just on the lentic side of the creek coves. But the water temperature is near or at its nadir, often in the 30s, so they're too languid to chase a fish imitation such as a jerkbait, unlike pre-spawn. They're nearly grazers, sifting through the substrate not only for lentic bugs – midges and dragon/damselflies, for example – but also lotic bugs flushed into the still water by the same flows that drew the brownies into the streams for love. With various easily captured insects, they ain't that picky, and so the redworm or nightcrawler resembles enough the midges and stoneflies and alderflies that find their way into a brownie's maw.

Browns and 'bows often commingle during early winter at the inlets, both attracted by the creek food, and they'll both eat the worm confidently but differently. Rainbows seem more tolerant of the bitter cold, reflected in how you can catch 'em and how they eat, a lesson I often forget since I've caught far, far more 'bows. The slip-float rig nearly always performs better than the set rig for the red-band one, and just a few years ago, at a little power reservoir in January, I erred by really focusing on the drifting float rather than the sedentary rig. I knew better: at both a more-northerly power reservoir and a water-supply one, both sited in a similar lower montane in years previous, I only caught browns on set rigs, at the typical dawn time, and I'd to wait forever before I hit 'em because they ate the baits even slower than rainbows. Now, present at the right time – dawn – and, better, at the vanguard of a soft rainstorm (storm leading edges rile up browns; *e.g.*, Schulz and Berg 1992), I drifted my slip-float rig deftly, numerous smooth sweeps, and not even a breath on my baits. This continued through dawn into morning – but for the growing storm, I'd've lost all hope. I persisted, focused on the slip-float rig but still flinging out the set rig and largely ignoring it until, from the corner of my eye, the set rig's line seemed to straighten. I hoofed over to the rod, my focus now on the correct one, unsure whether the movement was from a wisp of current or the whisper of a fish. I wasn't answered quickly – I'd to stand there, staring, for several moments until the line began to lazily wander out and out of time with the mild current. Once tight, I lifted and hit, and was hit back for I'd connected with a fish, and I knew the species given the sunken shimmy: brownie. That fish alerted me to my waywardness, and thereafter the

set-rig rod was the main attraction, not the slip float, and in a short period, I'd all the brownies I wanted (four) in my bag, all just lazy grazers that nipped the worm and continued lazing along, taking eternity to chew down the worm for the hook point to find sufficient holding flesh.

As winter ages and shifts to spring, so, too, do brownies shift both locations and feeding style. It took until that last jaunt that I opened this piece with to fully resolve it, however, despite numerous intimations winding back 15 years. Donner, as she has done so much, first taught the lesson, though obviously I was asleep in class 'til just those few weeks ago. Lake trout were my quarry in those far-gone days, so I'd the medium rod, equipment too large for the average brownie though not excessive for royals of the species. One snotty, sleety day in late March, ideal laker weather, I suffered the gusts and bone-chill water in neoprene waders, launching jigs to the sides of a point at the main inlet. I'd connected with two lakers already, lovely jade fish that ate like typical lakers – *mush*. I desperately wanted that third laker, so I sharpened, tuned even more into my presentations because the difference between a laker bite and a snag is miniscule, and when they eat, they will dump after a few seconds. So I was shocked when, nearing the shoreline drop-off, my jig didn't just seem to grow heavier – the laker bite – but received a hard pop, unmistakably a fish. I struck, the hook stuck, and then movements unlike the usual laker sludgy death roll – the swings were sharper, the runs stronger. When I finally finagled her up onto the flat I was wading on, the answer to my perplexity was revealed in 22 inches of gold – a big brownie.

I considered that fish nothing special, just a very late post-spawner still lingering around the inlet, but a few weeks later, again under a clouded sky, two more fat brownies interrupted a very good laker bite on jigs, and neither were at an inlet – instead, they were close to shore on corners with copious cover (plants, rock). Over 10 years later, and the pattern recurred though I was targeting rainbows with a slip-floated worm: another big brown, spring, shallow, on a rocky corner, a grey sky. I inexplicably considered that another post-spawn fish despite absence of a nearby stream (yep, sometimes I am a stubborn dumbass). Took several years more 'til this one for me to reassess those fish's commonalities in preparation for an upcoming date with brownies at a different waterway, as determined by an incoming storm. Should that unique springtime pattern exist, I'd need only target the points and corners with some junk on 'em during low light, and I could fish 'em faster with the jig rather than having to sludge through with the post-spawn-requisite worm. And on a point during dawn, not a breath of inflow, I passed my test with three good browns in the bag on the jig and worm, then repeated the experience at the waterway I first mentioned in this piece. Pattern revealed.

Most fishes most of the time ain't picky about what they eat, but nearly all fishes at some point in the year are, and still-water brownies are no exception. In spring, the one critter that can become so abundant so brown trout specialize is that most wonderful, and most frustrating and irritating, ubiquitous insect: the midge, *Chironomus*. I ambled up one day in 2013 to a little, secluded power reservoir who'd already gifted me myriad summertime brownies – I'd never fished her in spring – planning on fishing the same way despite the different season. When I reached water's edge at dawn, my soul exulted yet ailed: many spreading rings from rising trout, and…eh…many adult midges already flitting through the calm atmosphere. Still, the little bugs weren't thick enough to narrow the trout's eating, and on the first cast I caught a good fish on the jerkbait, but the lure sliced peacefully through the water several casts after as the air thickened with ever-more midges, and ever-more rises. They scared me because midge imitations, either

nymphs on the spinning rod (nearly always rising trout are eating pupae, not adults) or small redworms (which are close enough in size, shape, movement, and color to larvae), are more temperamental to cast and retrieve, and with the nymphs, when trout take, they usually only hold ‘em for a lone second. But if I wanted more fish – and I did – I’d to face my fear and switch the rods to bug imitations. I did and did, employing the nymph first.

I laugh and shake my head in derision when I read about the fly-and-bubble method by other writers. The rig and method they describe are nothing more than sliding-sinker rigs with a bubble for the sinker and a nymph for the hook that you just sling out and reel in. Clearly, these writers are mainly fishing for put-and-take trout (who have neither caution nor knowledge of wild foods), and the writers probably have little fishing experience because such rigs twist and tangle most casts unless the fly either is heavily weighted or is a big, burly streamer that has some inertia and so prohibits the leader from spinning around the mainline. As I increasingly fished wild trout, whether goldies or ‘bows or brooks or browns, the ineffectiveness of such a rig and method quickly emerged – most bugs don’t zip through water like a Mepps spinner, and when trout do strike, you nearly always miss ‘em because the hook-set has to unravel the leader-mainline twist before exerting force on the hook. Consequently, I had to tinker with leader type as well as casting style, finally landing on an aggressively tapered nymph leader coupled with a smooth casting arc (much like the typical fly-fishing stroke) to turn the rig over cleanly. A big advantage of the spinning rod over the fly rod is that you need less open space behind you to cast the rig; a disadvantage is that fly line disturbs the water and scares the fish considerably less than the heavy float splashing down.

At least that’s what I thought once I’d my nymph rig on and readied for my first cast, in which accuracy and precision seemingly needed to be finer: gotta get the bug close enough to the trout while not scaring ‘em. Too, an increasing feathering of the spool as the float nears the water to soften the splash. Aiming to err on the side of being too far rather than too close to the risers, I succeeded quite well at first, either missing completely or getting close but not directly on top of the spreading rings. I’d then slowly reel in, kind of like a gear-guy’s version of the Leisenring lift, but I’d not a single take. Frustration growing and needing to breathe deeply and reassess, I paused my retrieve for several moments, the nymph just dangling beneath the float, and then – a bite. A clue. Not a lick of current from stream or wind stirred the water, so the midge pupae were rising vertically, not slanted like my reeled-in presentation, and the dangling nymph better matched the orientation of the real bugs. So I fished the nymph after like a redworm, basically still-fishing it, and in the few cases where my cast was in the perimeter of the fish’s feeding circle, a few good browns answered affirmatively. The success loosening me a little too much, I fired off the rig too on target of a rise, the float splashing down on the bull’s-eye, and I cursed myself for scaring the fish, soul sinking a little. But to my astonishment, just a few seconds later, a take – the trout was unbothered by the clear float, bolstered thereafter by myriad fish that bit when I bombed the float right on ‘em. They’d taught me two things.

And they gave me time to repeat the lesson, for a dense midge hatch, should it extend into or occur during late morning through afternoon, is one of the few occasions when browns will continue eating with a high, naked sun, so long as big fish-eating birds (eagles and Ospreys) ain’t flapping around above. Should I whiff on browns in any other situation through dawn and the sky ain’t grey, I forget about ‘em once sun lights the water. But a fat midge hatch can save, which occurred just last year at a higher-elevation power reservoir closer to my home. I’d a take nearly

instantly on my first cast at dawn's break, but then all through dawn, not a breath on my redworms, whether rising up from a set rig or dangling down and drifting gently under the slip float. Despair began rising with the sun, but they were accompanied by a promise: skittering midge numbers had started also to rise. Nearly instant with the sun illuminating my water, the typical end time of brown trout catching, the opposite occurred when the line on the set rig zipped out, and I caught my first. Then another…and another…and another, yet there the sun was nearly at its zenith, and then the final fish, the limit fish, when the slip float tipped and swirled then sunk. A springtime saving complement to the more-frequent pinch-point crepuscular feeding windows.

And then the new summer. Yep, the water has certainly warmed, and browns will seek cooler waters, but they don't go abyssal deep or far offshore (Nettles *et al.* 1987, Dedual *et al.* 2000, Encina and Rodriguez-Ruiz 2003, Al-Chokhachy *et al.* 2009…) – most food is relatively shallow, and the juiciest morsels in summer's first half are big bugs, the sizes of the year's crop of small fishes at that point typically too small to be worth chasing. I've experienced two bugs brownies will especially key on: dragon/damselflies (*e.g.*, Cutter 1991, p 91) and the famous *Hexagenia*, the big yellow mayfly.

Most dragons and damsels emerge from late morning through afternoon, their most vulnerable time, and rainbows will brave the exposure of a big sun to chew the tubby insects (it's a popular pattern on Davis Reservoir). While certainly some browns behave similarly, I ain't seen one yet – they've all been during dim light, more dusk or morning with an overcast that persisted from the previous evening than dawn. Seems the warmer water riles the bugs up a little more in those periods, and the browns have the tenacity to bear that warmer water and chow down. They're more possessive with dragon/damsel imitations than with midge nymphs – hold that which is more valuable more tightly. On a monsoon-y evening at a little power reservoir in June 2012, I slinked up to a stretch with luxuriant weedbeds interspersed with fallen timber. I was casting my famous Teejay-created marabou jig (they're coveted by my friends) – a good approximation of DD nymphs as well as small craws – and on my cast's drop, I'd a take – and she didn't let go. I'd three other takes that evening, all very forceful, and all stuck – a pretty good ratio. I'd to exhibit a little gratitude and release the fourth.

The big yellow mays and their predators in Almanor are even more commonly known than the damsel Davis 'bows – they attract many fisherpeople. The *Hex* hatch, in contrast to the damsels, is a dusk event, coinciding with the brownie's love of low light. And the browns are clearly more at ease coming toward shore and to the surface in those warmer waters than rainbows: I've caught not a single 'bow during the *Hex* hatch, just big ol' grimacing brown trout and the errant smallmouth. Those fish have illustrated a pattern across fishes, one that Tom McGuane notes, too (1999, p 68, 268): flies tied too specifically often fail relative to simpler, looser patterns. I'd nearly photo-perfect *Hex* nymphs that neither the trout nor smalls would touch (they swam too stiffly, in part), while a glorified woolly bugger with no eyes, no wingpads, and no hackle but more fluid movement turned the fish on big time, much like my marabou jig that is close *enough* to DD nymphs. And those browns reinforced my experience with springtime midge-eaters: clear floats don't scare 'em. Frustratingly, they often attack the float rather than the big, buoyant dun imitation riding behind.

By the time the hatches of those big bugs have ceased, typically by July's end and the shift to late summer, the little fish that were too small for chasing no longer are, and the browns know,

dashing after the wakasagi in Almanor or redsides and small Tahoe suckers in Truckee waterways or the little reds of Arrowhead over 30 years ago when I was still a teenager – back where I started. And so my relationship spiral with lentic brown trout in memory completes, through all seasons and my mountain ranges of this psychotic state of California.

What I still wonder about is whether that spiral wound before me, through generations, back into the ancestral home of both brown trout and my bloodlines, in Ireland and mainland northern Europe. I have to think yes because the resonance among fishes, conifers, cold waters, and I is engulfing, a destiny realized. That potential remained dormant in my parents – father nor mother had even a sliver interest in any fishing, though both had an affinity for conifers. Traits can often skip a generation or two, and my Slavic great-grandfather was a fisherman, and I most resemble my Irish great-grandmother, so I have to conclude that in sometime in that lost time in the Old World, a likeness of me stood in the drizzle dim light at the shore of a loch and sought destiny in the bite of a brown.

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