

IX: evolution

With a ten-day-long respiratory infection clotting my life, coupled with a face-tearing daylong hay fever nested in that period, I was feeling pretty fuckin' wrecked. Was stumbling at a snail's pace at work. Cooking healthy, full meals at home just required energy I'd been lacking, so the eatery frequency, what with the undoubtedly higher-calorie food and unquestionably bigger pecuniary output per lunch or dinner, subsequently rose. Didn't lift weights or hike or do a goddamn fuckin' thing physically with my body since the Bug hit. Pushed forward just a nanometer amount on my slew of essays and diatribes and surreal prose, the shit that's supposed to define me. 'Bout the only thing I accomplished with even a modicum of elegance was a few hours with carp, a few hours where I rekindled an old relationship with some grace, some savvy, and that despite a cough and a wheeze and a desultory head.

But that carpy action with the rod was a week past, an eon away, and so the time came around again for me, on my self-appointed Thursday off, to exercise that skill that I've poured so much time and effort and thought and money into. I'd originally planned another, and probably final, winter steelie trek to the lower American, but with my breathing apparatus still a mess, I just felt short of the requisite juice for a brutal, day-long steelie hunt in fast-flowing water surging over algae-snotted cobbles. So my thoughts drifted higher in the watershed, up into the conifers, in part because mountain air has so often been such a bountiful salve for my valley-spring-abhorring physiology. Too, forecasted cloudy skies and intermittent showers in late winter did not bode well for lower-elevation warm-water fishes such as bass or carp but looked favorable for salmonids. Sugar Pine Reservoir, what with its accessibility, its elevation, and the time of year, seemed ripe for a mellow pre-spawn 'bow hunt in pine-filtered air.

So I went, albeit later in the morning than had I been healthy. Arriving at mid-morning, amid raven squaks and a brief photo shoot with a picturesque Sierra newt I rescued from the asphalt road, I felt promise in the cool, still air, promise of restoration. When I ambled down to the reservoir's edge and submerged my thermometer, the promise of fish rose: 48°F, and that in gin-clear water. I slowly walked to the first constriction in a big feeder stream's arm, flung out some bait, and sat down, inhaling the Sierran air as if it were a narcotic haze flowing from a glass pipe. I sat, and the thoughts flowed among the screaming stillness of a late-winter mountain day.

One was of death - my death. Imagined it from the perspective of other people, such as lost friends or ex-girlfriends, and how they'd comment on my life, my legacy. In a sense, it was a method of setting life goals given where I am now and what I've accomplished. Of course fish were a part of the scene, with respect kicked down to my vacated form for all the novel ways I skillfully caught myriad species. More than that was the recognition of my words, of *this*, and how they strived to elucidate and extrapolate and resolve the dichotomies between primitive and civilized life, between society and solitude, between professional and private, and in trying to make sense of these seemingly opposing forces, forces that always threaten to tear me apart. Allied to that was that I was an accomplished naturalist that appreciated Nature in all her forms - not just the fucking pristine untouched wilderness that serves as the ideal for so many in my profession, but also the Wild within the encroachment of civilization, such as the wild carp in the canal ensconced in a matrix of agricultural fields and managed wetlands, such as the striped bass in dirty sloughs edged and shielded by waving tules, such as the mountain reservoir with holdover and wild 'bows and glistening conifers and provocative botanical diversity. And I thought, too, and finally, of a wife, a daughter, what I could be for them - some scary shit.

The screaming mountain silence promises that - lots of scary shit to enter the mind.

After a few hours of neither seeing nor catching any trout despite good bait-fishing sets and damn pretty jig presentations (God, I really should have been shotted the marabou jigs with the 1/8-oz Adjust-a-Bubble years ago - damn near flawless turnover and subsequent lack of leader-mainline twisting), I donned my pack and headed to the other, bigger inlet. It wasn't an easy jaunt, despite the level ground - unlike previous snotty times, my throat and nose and chest were not clearing, rendering my pace sloth-like, plodding. But the stunning silence, the statuesque pines and firs, the portentous lead-colored sky, that scene combined to strike some deeper understanding and realization in me, some higher-level consciousness, but, as has happened so many times, I could never quite reach that nirvana. That scene, that scene of grey and green and glass water and emptiness of sound and absence of other people, it somehow reached back, it tapped into a thread winding back to ancient time, akin to what Rains Wallace writes about when crossing paths with fresh bear shit in *The Klamath Knot* (fittingly, I passed several piles of bear poo, albeit poo deposited well before my arrival). It almost seemed like a racial memory, a human-race memory, that electrified when certain elements, elements seen and felt and smelled and tasted through walking and viewing and touching and breathing, combined. It was like the trigger of an ancient, instinctual mental engram getting pulled by such an environment, reaching across and integrating the myriad minds that comprise the human brain. It was like one of the templates of complete sensuous experience that resides deep in the genes finally having its button pressed, sending forth an energy to fill and match and reflect all the facets of that trigger.

I didn't catch any trout over at the second trib, either, not that I was expecting much at 1 PM and in such transparent water. In fact, I didn't catch anything the entire day, and that included a few hours dragging plastic worms for bass on big, crunchy rock, and that despite my technique, especially given my illness becoming worse through the day, being exceptional: the bait rig turned over and fished well; my jiggin' was methodical and efficient, with no time wasted untangling leaders; and my wormin', while breaking off two worm rigs and bird's-nesting once, both events of which frustrated me but likely wouldn't have occurred had I felt better, was really slow and appropriate and would've garnered a bass in better conditions. It admittedly bummed me out that I didn't feel any fish flesh in the hand that day, especially since the inlet streams, the reservoir, the newt and a bullfrog and the Mountain Chickadees and Common Ravens and Buffleheads, Common Mergansers, gobblers, Doug firs, sugar pines, ponder pines, white firs, mock orange, manzanita and madrone, black oaks, alders and mountain misery and Him blackberry and incense cedar and CA bay, they all would've been complemented so completely had a 15-inch 'bows slurped my jig and posed for a picture.

While I felt like garbage on the drive home, unable to really corral my thoughts down roads that might lead to somewhere, now, as I lounge on the futon, angry raindrops bashing my windows, I've no doubt I would've felt worse had I not visited the fishless reservoir and enmeshed myself in it for a while. The reservoir, the *Nature*, reminded me of those greater things to which I aspire, and the great things that inform that aspiration.

The mountain does that sometimes.