

V.v: eye to eye

Dawn, rouge eastern sky shot though by shades and blades of blue. She came to me in a dream again. And as so often happens, it wasn't pure, wasn't just us - she had, again, a dude. But the dude, even though I feared him, she seemed to not care about, and she focused on me, those amazing starlight eyes, she came to me, so warm, so energizing. Then another dream: I was carp-fishing, I'd caught two, and I desperately wanted that precious third, so close, but then many people surrounded me, suffocating, and I just couldn't lay out a good presentation. So close, yet again, and yet - *they* around, and they interfere, they stymie. Yeah, misanthropic I remain.

I had to sate that misanthropy as well as the commensurate surrogate need I have for Momma Earth yesterday. It was Christmas, a big holiday for most Americans (though nearly meaningless to me), and my neighbors, being so very nice, had invited me to brunch, but I demurred, saying I had plans. I didn't, though, so to not be a liar, I had to make some. It'd been Indian summer weather the last several waning autumn days: such conditions reliably find trout, mainly rainbows, roaming mountain reservoir inlets during low light on the chew. With my freezer now devoid forever the banquet from Irongate, I gotta jump on any promising conditions offered by Her to kill fish. I'd enmeshed myself this year in two of the three big Crystal Basin reservoirs - Union Valley and Loon - but had yet to visit Ice House, and, in fact, hadn't been there for nearly 20 years. It was time.

I lost my sense of direction and location when my inner ears failed three years ago, and because I've frequently gotten lost since, I researched my ass off on how to reach the waterway - measured mileage to each junction, then, if the roads were closed, how far a hike. Rigged the gear, packed the car, and then reminisced to when I connected with mountain still-water trout so, so well, so well that I'd choose my days wisely and be done with a limit in a few hours, with the remainder free. So I threw my hiking boots into my ride, too, a bit optimistic given how frequently since my ears failing I've had to throw down an all-day grind to get bit.

I rose right, well before dawn, ate a good breakfast, the holy coffee drank down, and was on the road quickly. Goddamn CEL had flickered on the day before - been flickering on and off for months now, and I can do nothing 'til that circuit fails completely - but as the car warmed, it flicked off. Some relief. As I climbed the mountain, still no hint of sun, a big shaggy animal, dark-chocolate coat, shimmied across the road and up the slope - a big black bear, always, to me, a good sign. When not dumpster bears - and I never linger where people are so many that the bears are dumpster-divers - bear presence always a welcome sign, reflecting absence of people, and therefore unadulterated communion between She and I. But when I reached the road to the inlet, or *thought* I'd reached the road to the inlet (despite my studying, I *still* took the wrong fuckin' turn), I found it blocked. If I still wanted the inlet, I'd have to hoof it about two-and-a-half miles.

Given the instability of the last three years, I had a contingency plan, in this case Union Valley again but at least a reach I'd never fished. I paused, and then felt I would've been deflated had I not completed the relationship with that trinity. So - fuck it. Parked the car, donned the pack, and in a lightening blue light, began the hike back. Once, I feared I'd erred and taken a wrong turn, was backing away from the reservoir, but then hit another trail that soothingly veered me back to the water. I hiked ever faster, ever more apprehensive since the light continued to brighten, the dawn window evaporating, the threat billowing of having to grind it out all day again until return

of low light at dusk. Too, my hands, my aging hands and aging body, no longer flowing blood as fast or strong, a little breeze froze to wax even though my core stayed warm. At least when I reached the inlet, they'd some feeling back, and a breath of dawn remained. A chance alive.

This time of year and under these weather conditions - key is before reservoir/lake temperature bottoms out - most trout are just downstream of the stream water, which is nearly always colder than the reservoir water. The trout want goodies flowing out of that stream, as well as the goodies produced in-reservoir from the nutrients and detritus poured in by that stream, but they abhor that icy water. Almost always a debris line demarcates that threshold, but here, very little sign, so the thermometer would have to be my guide. And where I first perched showed I was too high up - low 30s. I knew warmer water existed, and I had to find it quick, so I rapidly fished down-reservoir, shifting from the low 30s to the low 40s, the latter finding trout much hungrier. Light was on my side, with dawn so dragged out given the low sun and high southern ridge, and presence of Common Goldeneyes - they, along with Buffleheads, are always promising because they, like the trout, are on the hunt for invertebrate morsels - also intimated that I was close to connection. But I'd only seen a lone rise, that further downstream on my hike up, and I'd not even the whisper of a bite. The dread of another grind, or, worse, a fishless-ness, began again to well.

But a cove and then a point where the slope became gentler, and, likewise, the substrate finer, from sand to mucky silt, abated my dread. That's a unique feature of Ice House - much of the inlet, at least at that stage, is really too steep and deep and with substrate too coarse - Stumpy, Sly Park, the Truckee River reservoirs, of course Arrowhead, *ad infinitum* - they're all flat and shallow with a small, sinuous cut where the main flow's concentrated. That deep-steep stuff with the coarser substrate is shittier bug habitat than finer stuff, where midge burrows are stabler, and food - mucky ooze - more abundant. Then, as the sun finally peeked over the ridge, somewhat disheartening but not so much given its low angle and the ponder pines and white firs rising from the southern ridge streaking the light and throwing shadow over part of the point, the little breeze slackened to stillness, and midges began emerging. And then a rise, but - eh, on the far bank, out of casting range. But a sign.

I'd been fishing a soft plastic odonate nymph, but with the midges and the rise, and knowing how picky trout can get with midges, I reluctantly ditched the nymph for redworm rigs (redworms, though too big, are close enough in shape and movement to mimic well enough midge pupae and larvae), one on a slip float and one on a set rig. And soon after, the float began to bob, swing, twirl, not fast - so rarely ever fast in such cold water - but just enough to signal a trout had taken interest. So many times in such temperatures I'd strike when the float went down, and nearly always had missed 'em - they need forever to engulf the bait. Gotta wait 'til they tighten up and then hit 'em. But this one - she never did tighten, she got bored, and then she left my bait in peace. Just about then I saw the set-rig rod's line moving out ever so slowly - it, too, was getting some interest - and I waited and waited and waited for the line to tighten, and then I set, and then, again - nothing. 0-for-2. I was missing 'em again, like I have so much since that fateful day three years ago...even with bait.

But some activity. I quickly re-baited, threw the rigs back out there, and again the float began its slow waltz, but this time I reeled up to tightness, set, and then felt that wonderful sensation of moving weight on the end of the line - I'd hooked her. After a sluggish, sunken dance

- the typical dance in such cold water - I netted her, a big, fat holdover 'bow, and I felt such relief - my old, decaying ass had caught one. Ripped off a few frames, killed and bled her, and then the set-rig rod started jiggling, and I felt shifting weight on that rod, too, and with the net I landed that one, too. Two now in the bag, though two I still barely caught - both were hooked right on the lip. Yet my batting average'd improved.

But I'd sink that average with two more opportunities on the slip float, two more slow dances that never reached consummation - delineating the point where they'd enough of the worm in their mouths to hit was so fine, and it was a point I couldn't discern with those two, though I got close with the second since I stuck her for a moment...but a bad moment since she'd been stung and was therefore unlikely to return. Then the breeze revived, the hatch ceased, and for a good hour or so, despite such a tempting drift from the float, all was quiet. I became mildly resigned, pessimistic about catching another fish - especially that precious third, the proof of being in the pattern - but not despairing since two were nestled in my bag.

But then evening arrived in early afternoon care of a thickening cloud layer, muting the light, and the sun had hit the water enough to raise the temperature to 45°F - a meaningful difference, one that generally kicks the trout up a notch. And then the morning recurred: the breeze stopped, the midges emerged, and the trout also rose. I raced over to where one had dimpled the surface, threw a strike with the slip-float rig, and nearly instantly the float bobbed, dipped, then sank, I tightened and set, and quickly swung the fish to shore and into my net, and there, the third - I was in it. More were still rising, so I killed and bled quickly and flung the rig back out there, and I repeated the number two more times, reaching a point I'd not reached with trout all year: the limit. Still many rose, and I ached to kill a few more since the Irongate meat basket is now gone, but restraint and humility prevailed, and I put the rods down. It wasn't an all-day grind, but one that began with trepidation and ended in elegance. Attaining the ideal.

All five trout were holdover rainbows, and they all bore marks of their domesticated upbringing in some deformity, most commonly bent or missing fins. But when I cleaned 'em and checked their guts - as if their takes weren't evidence enough (wild fish behave identically) - they'd learned: they were full of midges, larvae and pupae and adults, as well as many cladocerans, a dragonfly naiad, a wasp, and one even had the guile to sniff out and chew a sculpin. An echo of wildness remained in this small percentage of trout who'd survived and persevered beyond the first few days after tumbling out of the truck. And while wild fish would've been more gratifying, when I looked into the eye of the first one I caught, a holdover from 2022, some of the energy I saw there - it *was* wild.

Though the pack weighed more heavily on my hips and back than on the hike in, it was a welcome weight, and the promise of that wild energy to become me rendered my hike back pleasant. That I wasn't hoofing back at night bloomed the hike from pleasure to euphoria - I'd the light to gaze at the cedars and white firs and ponderosa pines, the whitethorn, and the bush chinquapin, which I probably wouldn't've noticed had I been rolling back at the usual time of the last few years: low-light hiking requires me now to expend all attention on my route back. And unlike my drive in, with the boot I didn't get lost. Probably even more surprising this year, I lost no tackle, not even one hook. And the car fired right up, and I found the road I should've taken, one that would've dumped me out right at the inlet. But this error, like so many others, transformed into a blessing - the hikes strengthened my body. The experience strengthened my soul.

That was my last fishing day of the year - it had to be my last fishing day of the year.