

## *II.ii: in place*

Here the fuck I am again, planted at a car camp, staging for another solo backpack trip promising danger: my third "vacation" of the year, and I give myself no rest. Feel like I'd be wasting me if I did, that I'd wither, stuck inside my little house, stuck in the right-angled confines of stolid Davis - safe, but not healthy, not actualized. Walked along the beach a bit earlier, assailed by the wild wail of the surf and wind, the gale slapping my face, the cold foamy water stinging my feet, all scaring me. So afraid to feel, a response that's become so instinctive and overgeneralized since so often opening myself up when young promised pain, disappointment, anguish. But youth's gone - time to embrace that fear, revel in and explore those sensations, let the blood flow through those phantom feelings.

In a lovely little perched spot within the gulch, view of Big Salty, trilling brook at my side, the gulch mellowing Big Salty's gale to a fluttering breeze. A welcome blue sky. Despite my affection for overcast skies, the faux clouds of the smoke - now becoming monotonous, smothering all of the Central Valley, the Cache Creek drainage, then most of the North Coast Range 'til I got here, where the ocean's westerly wind finally purified the air. I bask now in the welcome yellow sun.

Rambled up the little creek, mini-steelhead darting all around, yellow-legged frogs plopping at my approach, garter snakes lithe sine curves over land and through water. The woodsy, clean fragrance of the alders - enlivening. I stripped and wallowed in a deep pool, mini-steel a panic - so refreshing, so cleansing. Such a sweet little afternoon, another chapter in a big book, a big book about laughing, clear-water, sweet-water creeks of intimacy caressed by alders and firs and pines and lively with icy salmonids, one I've already lived and one that continues to live. My little soul-saving solace, Seeley Creek - only the creek and I when I began the descent into high school. Deep Creek with the real family, those friends of my late teenage years, plunges from towering rock, lonely little wild rainbows in hand, fuckin' Minor Threat blasting from stereo. A singing, warm summer day of solitude with the little Sweetwater River during my San Diego years. The lush Oak Grove Fork of the Clackamas above Harriet, stuffed with coastal cutthroats, when in Portland; the Santa Ana from Seven Oaks all the way up to its origin when I returned to Arrowhead, with graceful little winter stoneflies lilting off the opal snow. Then, years later, a little tributary of the Napa with a girl - we loved there. I took her to Seeley in our one foray to Arrowhead - we loved there as well. And since that relationship's inevitable death, so many more throughout the North Coast Range and Sierra and Klamaths. But Deep and Seeley and the Napa's little trib stand out for they had one dimension that in some way, sometimes, is needed to complete the portrait to perfection: human love.

The Pacific breeze resurrects hazy memories of my San Diego stint, a few years in my early 20s, urging me to resolve those desultory years. I ran scared down there from Arrowhead, scared by the slow disintegration of the friends, scared of losing my true family, two of whom moved down to that extension of the sprawling, concreted monolithic maelstrom of banality known as Los Angeles. My mother lived down there, so I figured I could snag a room in her ugly-ass tract house in an ugly-ass, faceless suburb of southern California, and attend the local state college

for a history degree and, further, try to keep my real family alive. In fact, had I any idea on how to apply for student loans - that was the only way I was gonna afford college since I barely had a hundred bucks to my name - or how to fill out the college application or when to do it or any of that administrative shit, I likely would've entered as a junior. But the process baffled me, requiring strategy when I only knew how to live and think on a day-to-day basis, and when some fucker ganked my truck within a week of my moving there, I lost my precious transportation to the college. That the first job I landed was basically a graveyard-shift garbage collector at the fucking lame-ass, faceless corporate grocery store didn't help - not a big ego booster. I boozed it a lot to escape my ignominy. But I eventually clawed my way out a bit, ditching the trashman gig, then tending bar while throwing fuckin' diapers and paper towels and canned foods in plastic bags at the same grocery store (albeit during more amenable swing shifts), then dumping both those jobs and scoring a gig at Home Depot, which, back then, was a decent workplace for an unskilled kid with only a high-school diploma.

I felt stagnant in San Diego, lost, out of place, and a few friends who were really growing - earning their degrees, working in the fields they were educated in, finding great girls - highlighted that I was fucking going nowhere. Hence my rather rash decision to move to Portland, which nearly killed me with me. Portland drew me, in part, because of its nearby landscape - rivers and mountains and conifers nourished by flourishing life-giving rain. Even at that foggy stage of my life, that environment - I resonated with it. Far too little of it existed in the San Diego area, but I still gravitated to its vestige, for example, when, drunk off my ass at a fuckin lame-ass party with coworkers, so depressed by the lame-ass drunken games and faux witticisms, so lonely, I fuckin' jumped in my jalopy Subaru, cracked another 40, and zoomed to Cuyamaca Reservoir in a blackened night, just to be there, to be in that environment, in the mountains, by the water, by the pines, even though I really didn't know why. Another lesson from San Diego that I just didn't realize - I'd an instant affection for three small rural towns - Ramona, Santa Ysabel, and Julian - but I never felt nearly such warmth for any suburban or urban area down there. Where I lived in Portland: urban. And, of course, in Portland I had no one, and I couldn't admit that I really needed someone.

Mystical sea-born fog surrounds me as I sip and savor my cold coffee and the idea and ideal of *watershed* floods my mind. Been reading House's *Totem Salmon* - seemed the right book to bring along given where I am - and he writes a lot about his watershed, the Mattole. I write a lot about my watershed, too - the California Watershed. We both want healthier, wilder watersheds - put another way, more elegantly actualized to their potential. The Mattole - *here* - is simpler, though - a relatively uniform environment (high-gradient, cold-water aquatic ecosystem, coniferous, high-gradient terrestrial), much less domesticated than the California Watershed (way less area smothered by concrete), much lower density of people, smaller. So restoration's possible, and that's how House sees resuscitating the wild in humanity, through restoration work, in addition to living more softly on the land, such as more conscientious logging. But too much of the California Watershed has been domesticated, too much concrete and too many ugly-ass tract homes and too many fuckin' strip malls and too many people stuffed into too small a space, for restoration to be feasible in many of its areas. Another difference - loss of some wild in the California Watershed (delta smelt, thicktail chub) has been replaced by a new wild, best example

of which is the warm-water, low-current littoral lorded over by largemouth. And a continuum exists from non-native wild to native wild, with the best example of the latter probably being the headwaters of the Pit in the South Warner Wilderness. Thus the California Watershed now has a different potential than before the Gold Rush, so to reintegrate humanity in its rightful place within Nature, to acknowledge and nourish that part of humanity that is wild, the value of non-native wild must be realized, the value of human-created waterways, such as reservoirs, seen for what they are - environments where wild life still flows with the swing of the sun and seasons. Such recognition opens up so much of a wider Wild humanity can engage with, be tuned by. And living more gently. We need tools to both survive and live, and those tools take a lot of Earth's energy. Better to limit the stuff you have, only get stuff that's durable and really needed, taking care of that shit, buying local as much as possible, minimizing processed, non-organic foods (cuts out the poisons industry, cuts out much of the processing industry), not being a glutton. Buying conscientiously - for so many buried in the California Watershed 's cities and suburbs, that's the best they can do.

And, of course, not having a bunch of kids.

Trying so much to run away in those baleful San Diego years, frequently running away to the shallow mirage of the Mirage on the seductive, cheap glitz of the Vegas strip. Coming to Las Vegas to Leave Myself. Absorbing into the mental, shimmering desert fog of no fog, drowning, drowning myself from myself. And a tease, a tease tempted and hooked when I first went - escaping the fragility and fear that was me during my early 20s - and left the bone-dry fog with a few extra hundred bones in my pocket. That never happened again. Soaked with booze, later, and in a baked-desert dead-moon night, a buddy and I drove out, and I got soaked at the table I so imperiously thought my one success had proved my mastery of, the dawn light finally shining through and exposing the self-delusion, the waste, the wasted. Then one of the most shameful moments of my life, traipsing out there in my jalopy Subaru, and I drowned in the booze, the tables again sucked me dry, and my dissociation from the real world, from myself, my self-numbing, spiraling down into the sallow, shallow fantasy found me in bed with my best friend's girl. And when I lived in Portland I flew down, flew down only to drown again, and while the tables were gentler this time, I still ended up blowing it all on strippers turned whores, a mirage affection.

I tried fooling myself back then that I was like a wise guy, tough, shrewd, skilled in the arts of vice, a suave motherfucker with the ladies. Of course I wasn't - I was a fuckin' shitbag retail worker, totally expendable, working class, living paycheck to paycheck, weak, weak in spirit, guile, physical strength, attractiveness, so insecure, so scared of the real me. So easily I could've gotten my ass beat, my delusion of big bucks was borrowed from credit cards with ridiculous interest rates, and I had to pay some chick to get my nut off. That place, that cheap, artificial splendor, all neon and plastic and surreal fuckin' wanna-be pirate ships booming fake cannons in a concrete pond in the middle of desolation, it certainly inflated my desire to live the fantasy, the self-lie, all the while bleeding me dry. The dirt, the grime, the blaring, bewildering fluorescent flashing lights, the floating away from myself on a foamy ocean of alcoholic suds, the stultifying heat - not my place, either.

And all the while magnificent common carp languidly, gracefully weaved in the Colorado's silt-free waters backed up by Hoover Dam, water that, though I didn't know it back then, I'd end up drinking when I returned to that ugly-ass home in the wanna-be LA sprawl of San Diego, water

that'd be mixed with San Francisco Estuary Watershed water in the reservoirs I fished, water that, had I known it, offered a sliver illumination of my place.

Fuckin' lived gloriously yesterday. Wandered around my camp for a bit after my little oatmeal breakfast replete with the sacred coffee, picking through the rock and algae of the intertidal, watching the sailing seabirds, mesmerized by the whitewater crash of the piling waves rolling rounded pebbles in a low-pitch rumble contrasted by the utter calm of the Doug fir forest on this little coastal plain. Then, unlike the Warners a month ago, I refused to let my shitty hip kill my goal of bagging a high point and fuckin' went for it. Still, I stretched like a motherfucker before I began, and I acquiesced that I'd abort if my hip really started crying. But the quivering joint surprised by remaining quiet, even as I blazed up endless switchbacks swerving up a vertiginous, steep grade. The energy of the surrounding life, the beauty of the cool forest, redolent with towering Doug firs and alders and the enrapturing perfume of California bay, no doubt flowed into my bones and helped. Attained the ridge, signified by leaving the lush forest and entering a chaparral land, quite similar to Cache Creek: manzanita, scrub-oak, poison oak, craggy, rusty outcrops. Fittingly given the stout, stubby plant assemblage, two California Thrashers greeted me, approaching me as if in congratulations. Had a hot sun on the ridge, an unalloyed sun, that I soaked in, a rare sun not veiled by fog or smoke. Stretched my weak hip, then blazed down the mountain, hip a willing, eager participant, and I strode down so quickly that I hit the canyon floor still with some sun. Had to, just had to feel the aquatic expression of the place, so I stripped and splashed and bathed in the cold, cleansing, burbling and gurgling creek, then laid about on hot rocks and let the light breeze and sun caress me dry. Now euphoric, I sailed along the canyon floor back to my camp, indulging in a rather luxuriant dinner in which I also experienced this place with another sense - I grubbed a bunch of watercress and tossed it in with my gourmet salami and mac-'n'-cheese soup. Topped off with a draft of well-earned scotch, the sun sank into the ocean, and I snuggled in my tent contented by living the day damn near the best I could.

To really engage with a place, you gotta engage all of it - *her* - with all your senses: you gotta see, taste, smell, hear, feel it, her, in all her forms and phases. I did all that yesterday. And that was what I was supposed to do.

Arrowhead truly was special - it's no surprise that Arrowhead was where I recovered from my self-implosion in Portland, even if that recovery was a veneer. With the friends again, and, in fact, tighter than in my San Diego years: the whole tribe was close, within a 90-minute drive. But - more. It was the community - the cute little independent grocery store that employed us as teenagers instantly gave me a job when I was desperate for dough. Some girl I went to high school with - never knew her name though she knew mine - gave me a ride when I was thumbn' on the main highway in a dark night - not the safest thing for a woman to do, but she did it. I'll never forget Doug Ferguson, a warm guy I sold lumber to, emphatically insisting that he pay for the malt liquor and junk food I was buying at the local convenience store where we bumped into each other. I couldn't not let him. Never got that in San Diego; never got that in Portland.

A smaller community, especially in a unique environment, as Arrowhead's mountains and conifers and snow were in the context of the urban/suburban over-sprawl of southern California, increases the value of each person, so there's more loyalty, generosity. In contrast, the city, the

big corporation, there're so many people that one becomes none, that the job one does gets ever specialized and winnowed down 'til it feels like nothing, which, regrettably, the feeling of is so often accurate. People just blast by ya because another's always ready to usurp your place. Globalization and the technocracy's homogenization of experience only accentuate that expendability, that sense of worthlessness, that lack of identity, and then people just call each other names on social media to feel like they're worth something, by which, ironically, they wither even more.

But I could never live in the San Bernardino Mountains again - it'd be regression. More - it was really just a glimmer of my place, a glimmer that became a glow when I battled against snotty cobbles in a raging, wintry river and a big buck steelhead flattened my rod when he killed my spoon, when the bashing waves of an angry icy lake bashed in rhythm and orange-flecked lake trout killed my spoon as it fluttered helplessly among the remains of moraine, when I found Heaven in the cold, clear pond formed by a gushing stream from a mighty mountain, surrounded by the brilliant corsage of a mountain meadow's wildflower love, when I stabbed my paddle hard into the malevolent suck-hole of a whitewater river, when I wandered among towering Douglas firs and incense-cedars and ponderosa pines along a majestic river with pure rainbows and I evaporated to transcendence, when I loved with a woman in a sweet-water creek's icy-pure water in tune with the loving of the newts and the swing of the firs.

My last full day in this wilderness - tomorrow I march back to my station wagon, then drive back to domestication, and I fear what I'll find: more overgeneralized, Draconian laws stamped on humanity by the faceless government in the sinister guise of "public safety," another stepping stone toward the nearing reality of totalitarianism and the stagnation and murdering of the health of humanity; more inane, meaningless administrative work with the main goal ultimately to protect Big Brother; more people ever dissolving themselves by losing more of their only time to the frivolity of little electronic screens, their minds subsumed by the soma of social media. But here, right now, feels so close to Heaven. A warm afternoon, a glowing golden sun, by the trilling brook again after stripping again and drifting and bathing in the cool water, then slipping out and lounging on a warm rock while the water slowly wafted off my naked body. Felt so right. Reverie, which even a bunch of guided backpackers stumbling their way up the creek couldn't shatter (given a circus at the campsites at the brook's mouth, I did feel I'd not be left alone so at least threw my drawers on to cover my junk). They quickly came back downstream, however - they, all polite people, seemed tentative, as if traversing an alien landscape, and feared lingering. And now, here, alone with only wild in the Wild. I feel so open right now, the most open I've felt this entire trip, here with the sweet water and sea-run rainbow babies and musical rustling of firs and alders.

I desperately held onto those friends, my family, my tribe, for so long - they were precious, and my living or even surviving without 'em was nearly impossible. But after leaving Arrowhead for the last time, I lost almost all of 'em, lost 'em because I once again imploded in Davis, and I felt so ashamed of imploding again, I was too scared of having to explain why I imploded again, and also because of my fear that we'd just grown too different to find common ground again. Of course that was ludicrous - we all shared so much precious time, life together, so much connection, that some common ground would always exist, that we'd always be a part of each other to at least

some extent. But thinking we could retain the same strength and quality of the connections of those late teenage years as we aged - incompatible with each person's growth and attempted actualization of their potential, their finding of their place. Each could and should remain a part of everyone else's life, but that part becomes smaller as we find our loves, have children, as we grow in our professions, as we weave through life's failures and successes, as we find and become one with our place. My friend who grew the most, who really flowed and flowered, he found that love, his place, while his connections with the tribe thinned but never died. His love, his place, compensated for the weathering of the tribe. I, however, never really opened myself up enough to compensate for losing them.

Each person, each people, every single one is unique, and each has his or her or their own unique place. But because all people, all peoples, are the expression of a history of being part of the Wild for eons, I can only conclude that the proportion of people, of peoples, whose place consists of no Wild is miniscule. As long as the clock ticks and people and peoples are born and mingle and then die, they and thus their places will change, though absolutely will they be linked to history, built on history. And a requisite part of being in place - being among your own human love.

Although I am so open among these trees, this water, these mountains, these fish and frogs and snakes, although this landscape and these plants and animals are so right for me, the portrait just feels a little incomplete. I'm not alone.