

liminal jewels

I vividly remember the first crappies I saw in the flesh - it was the first time I saw and fished Lake Gregory, that lovely little dot of San Bernardino Mountains' water that taught me so much, that served as such a salve, for those awful fucking early teenage years. I was young - 12, maybe 13 - when the old man took me there after a sojourn to Silverwood. Was late afternoon, and that cool mountain wind was blowing hard, whipping the water a deep, dark blue-black. An old man, wrinkled and withered with age, creases of his years seemingly sculpted by the wind, had a fat catch of blacks, not big fish by any means - they ranged from six to eight inches - but certainly adults, and certainly large enough to be worth killing for food. They sparkled like freckled jewels, gold and obsidian speckles, hued by a turquoise sheen from tip to tail. Previously, I'd only known crappies from a dreary fishing book, a poorly written book, one with banal black typeset on banal white paper. The real fish, the real, living, breathing and beating crappies that mesmerized me on that stark day at Gregory, Christ, they exemplified eloquently how incompletely words on paper represent the real thing.

As I delved more deeply into Centrarchidae, crappies taught another lesson through their uniqueness among the sunfish clan. Bluegills and redears and pumpkinseeds epitomize maneuverable veg-pickin' bug-eaters; smallies and spots and bigs model well the cover-haunting fish-eater; but crappies, crappies inhabit a netherworld, not quite capable of a bluegill's dexterous weed-hunting (the big ol' mouth of crappie just can't pinpoint and extract midges and mayfly/odonate naiads from pondweed like the bluegill's smaller, toothy mouth can), and not being streamlined or fast enough to dash out after a crawdad or threadfin shad like a smallie or spotted bass can. Crappies are the ghost of the centrarchid world, drifting into cover but then dissolving with ease into the open-water ether that neither the black basses nor the lepomids ever truly feel comfortable in, and thereby reveal the possibility, the beauty, in toeing the line.