

IX.vii: living in dying

Puffy and streaking clouds, from both east and west, contoured by the sunrise sunlight, shifting the ochre western mountains to vermillion. Pelagic blue sky through the frothing clouds. The open landscape, scattered copses of aspen in the draws and depressions, limber pine here, there, and the myriad landscape shapes bend and reflect and mutate the light such that any desired color and shade and brightness can be found somewhere, from blinding diamond to blinding darkness. Other animals awake, too: a bevy of does and fawns bounding through willow thickets at lake's edge, fearful of a lone coyote crying a dirge with loss of concealing night, contrasted by joyous birds, so many singing sparrows, cries and pips of woodpeckers, nasal cranks of the nuthatches, and, of course, the warm, loving warble of the majestic robins. They'll color the soundscape with their voices throughout this mellow autumn day, flowering beyond survival to live, and they have to now, because their survival in winter depends on their living now.

Despite my own dying, I lived yesterday, too. Though I'd to struggle through many aches and creaks, I hiked quite well with the big pack on back, hips quiet after I reached my campsite, this intimate, fecund copse by a green pond. Wandered around for my bearings, gaining a good sense of my location. Then, the main objective: a hidden lake rumored to house inland cutthroat. I'd have to rely on a book's description of landmarks to find her, a daunting task given my vertigo. So I accepted and adapted - busted out my compass (which I never needed in my younger years), set declination, and looked to the northwest, where I was supposed to go. And there, centered in my sight, was a big white rock mentioned in the book. Though I'd no trail to the white rock, numerous cairns reinforced my compass that my direction was accurate. Then a trail appeared, and the remaining distance to the lake was mostly an unconcerned stroll. Could let my gaze wander a bit and not fear I'd get lost.

She was beautiful, gossamer on the shoals, azure in the depths. Sheer rock wall spiring on the west, shoreline peppered with limber pines, yet lacking the youthful feel of Sierra cirque lakes. Felt more mature, flowered, and the numerous rises throughout reflected such fecundity: cutthroat. I as fisher had to touch one.

Instead, I touched many, though, as is my flaw these last few years, gracefully it usually wasn't. My hands. My hooking ratio was poor, too late to the trigger too much, though once hooked, most stuck well. Hand-landing 'em was embarrassing - took forever with the first few fish. I cursed my decay, but the cutt's forgave me, offering themselves to me via the black spinner, the marabou jig, the tube jig. First lure was most effective, and of course given all the terrestrial bugs - grasshoppers, bees, ants - flitting around. Gut contents of my dinner fish proved that was the main fare. But that many ate the two jigs given paucity of both odonates and small fish showed that the cutt's, too, knew it was autumn.

Sun settling, I cooked my fish with pasta and cheese, my backcountry indulgence, then down the slope but in total ease - I knew where I was. Neared camp, but I wasn't ready to settle, to close the day: an eastern cliff and its expansive view beckoned. Through scattered sage, light gilding, then across snow- and windswept moonscape to the edge, and seemingly endlessly extended the arid, convoluted land, greenery from trees only present in the draws draining the mountains at my feet. But a few verdant spheres on the adjacent valley floor where the arroyos extended from the draws denoted people in the valley, sparse: hay farmers. But only a few,

reflecting the limitation of the landscape for humanity and the preciousness of the water and trees, and yet the landscape only limited by the range of human vision.

Where you've water, you've hope. Chance at living.

The American West.

Then dusk, I wandered up to a divide, streaking, deepening clouds, darkening, hinting at rain, but aside from a few lone drops, all She could tempt was virga curtains. The wind flew, playing senesced balsamroot leaves, withered and crinkled and dead yet cheerful, laughing, with their children nestled in the recessed flowers of summer. A lone limber pine drew my eye, held me, and begged to be touched, so I walked over and laid hand on the blush-colored, soft, smooth bark, and an ineffable communication occurred – I'd touched and felt something, someone, beyond me, beyond death, beyond life.

The aspens along the main drag, yes, striking, canary and crimson, but I wanted a grove of my own, so I veered down a side road, and on the valley's far side, across a sere, windswept plain cut by a cold, trilling, bony autumn river, an arc of gold shielding skeletons of cream. Parked the car, and away from the road, away from the crowds, weaving along a sinuous dry rill, tall sere grass brushing my legs. Over the spindly river, through more sere grass, and then there, the arc of aspens, and a serendipitous fallen old lodgepole pine providing the perfect perch to sit and commune with the trees. They seemed so welcoming in the bracing breeze, the leaves laughing, asking, chattering, as shadow and sunlight shifted with the stream of cotton clouds. So engaging, and I wondered if the leaves' attractive banter had some evolutionary advantage – maybe they mimicked too closely the laughing children of ancient humanity, who then spared the trees axe and saw and killed others for shelter, heat. Or maybe they seemed as ghosts of children dead too soon, ashes or bodies buried below, absorbed then resurrected as aspens, their remembrance, and chopping them down would murder their memory. But that's only a human interpretation – chance exists the bears or birds or deer hear and see similar.

As the sun fell then sunk, I drove home, the roads now sparsely traveled in the twilight, the rainbow show continuing, the fading rays of sunset shifting and thickening to blood red, tinged by tangerine and gold and then through to lime and turquoise and violet, and when I reached home, all that remained of the autumn day was its requiem of night, the obsidian sky and myriad little white fires of the endless stars in the new-moon darkness, some the memories of dead stars, like the flutter of golden aspen leaves.

I strolled among the tall, quiet, majestic firs and pines along the reservoir's edge - such clear, crystal water - I saw footlong rainbows rising gracefully to myriad midges out and about in the crystal autumn day, I saw cerulean jays and iridescent Buffleheads and tuxedo-clad woodpeckers and chickadees, and at the dead-end branch of the stream, yes, there, those brightest blooms of dying autumn, red salmon swaying like crimson ribbons with the swing and swell and ebb of the icy water, breaching and swirling with such exuberance yet in the throes of death. The light then softened by a thin sheet of mountain cloud, I ascended back to my car, the fir and pine greenery warmed by the falling mountain sun, and then She engulfed me, and I had to stop and feel and smell and listen, the cold air blushing my furrowing cheeks, the thickening vapor of pine

and fir duff flooding my lungs and intoxicating, and here, I realized, was an ideal scene for my death, living and dying with, for, the red salmon.