

## ***VI.i: lost and found***

What a terrifying premonition of a year, and it's still relatively newborn. Feels stillborn, though, a birth born from and borne by fear. Fear of the future. Fear of what I'm to do if I lose my job - don't think I can work for the government, which supplies most fisheries positions, and feel right about it. Government is the lapdog of politicians, politicians are commanded by politics, and none really gives a fuck about Nature, only adherence and the government's own survival - so I'd be working far more for the benefit of the selfish, corrupted colossus than Nature. Fear of how I'm to expand my decades-long musical library from the little confines of my mind and my tiny kitchen and into the greater world. Fear of keeping my current life together - and even more, the effort required to raise that life a good 3,000 feet in elevation. How I'm to surpass last year, which found me bursting like a phoenix from the ashes and fallen timbers of society, fallen timbers that've crushed so many others. Change and novelty, and my mind abhors few things more than change, the risk of novelty, though bundled in that risk is real growth and feeling and love and expression and the total actualization of self. So my mind dumbs me and numbs me to ironically keep me from losing what little I have.

But somehow, the little fire, the little everlasting fire I have burning in the pit of my damaged soul that always stops my hand from stabbing in the knife to hilt - it bubbles up, forth, through the numbness, the dissociation, indicating, suggesting, screaming that I gotta fuckin' find it and face it and battle and conquer or lose, but whatever - I gotta face it. The little fire's been waking me in the middle of the cold, cold night, the early AM, and it won't let me escape back into sleep's netherworld for at least an hour, while I toss and turn and try to play fantasy reels of bullshit, try to live the life I'm supposed to spill out in the world, in my head. And that only angers that little fire.

Spurred me awake in volcanic rage yesterday at 2 AM, that's for sure, despite my desperate desire for a night's sound sleep since I planned to rise just before dawn and jet off for a little wilderness to put the boot to work. Fuckin' bright-eyed in the icy night, and I just laid there, angry at myself for not allowing me to sleep. Yet unlike so many times this year already, when I had a full day of living planned that required rising before dawn but just couldn't get my ass off the bed, I threw off the sheets when the alarm rang, brewed the requisite coffee, tossed my pre-made breakfast of fruit and nuts and deviled eggs in the wagon, and in that icy darkness, I jetted. This time, at least - I was facing it.

Over and through and around and up and down I wound through the North Coast Range's fits and folds, fits and folds that hold mystery - much of 'em are clothed in that mixed-coniferous forest (albeit often the faintest expression heralded by grey pines) that I write so much about, which has such resilience and ability, a sense that it could reign in its form, its composition, forever, so long as there's a little water, though the players may change a bit (grey pines here, knobbies there, Doug fir over there). Few mammals scuttered about in the icy obsidian - the wildfires, I've little doubt, smoked out a lot of 'em. But one was rife, surprisingly, alarmingly, as I neared towns and villages - and just towns and villages, not cities - so many fucking cars and trucks and SUVs and vans, in the pre-dawn darkness like me, on the road already. Humanity. Proof again that we need no more people on this planet, but proof too that so many flow in a mainstream that I only graze - all those vehicles zipped by in the opposite direction.

So when I reached the trailhead, off a rural road with nary another car, with dawn just barely opening her eyes, I stood alone with only the frosty silence of the little farming valley I was ensconced in. Everything was so still, so quiet, the clanging machine-gun sounds of humanity

banished in the violet, crystal, newborn dawn. I layered up, donned my near-death hiking boots - seams split, stitches popped, waterproof layer long gone - and started up the muddy trailhead, already enthused by the variety of oaks: white, black, scrub, coast-live. And it didn't take long for a conie to scratch my itch, and an uncommon one - California nutmeg. As I rose toward the ridge, and as the sun rose, then the birds rose - suddenly the mountains, still clothed with skeletons of gallant trees from fires past, glowed in amber and ruby hues, glistening green sailing off the remaining live conifers' dripping dew held on resilient needles, and the birds - so perfectly matched, the elegant American Robins, tons of 'em, their chatter laughter, lifting and lilted in flocks of a dozen birds or so, all to perch at the tops of skeleton oaks, soaking up the sun, and warming me with their always sweet songs and squeaks. Some smaller birds, too - juncos and a lone, puffy Fox Sparrow likewise ascended the higher limbs to bathe in morning glory.

I've neither felt much nor thought much this year - kinda depressing, I know - but the birds, the utter absence of humanity, freed me, like they always do, and I thrilled at the sights and songs of the beautiful birds, my friends, and the joy was so overwhelming that it burst through my self-imposed numbness into my consciousness - I realized it. I need to never forget it.

The joy flourished as I pumped up the ridge, only to be interrupted shortly by the first - and only - clashing sound from mainstream humanity: the fucking barking dog. Harsh as it may seem, heartless as it may seem, I just have an innate, though misplaced, dislike for dogs. So many just seem kind of, well, tuneless, toneless, barking at all hours of the day at Christ knows what, scaring birds and mammals and fish with their incessant barking and crashing and splashing and thrashing of brush and water, they just seem to clash with Nature's harmony, as if they've lost the memory that they once were sons and daughters of Wild - in general. A small proportion of pooches, such as good hunting dogs, mesh well with Nature - they're attentive, sensitive - but too many are seemingly oblivious...no doubt reflections of their owners. And they're the real culprits - those negligent owners.

But I escaped the fuckin' barkin' bother rather quickly, reached the ridge, then dipped over and began a long descent down to my destination, which, at that point, was still a bit hazy - felt it was gonna be - as if this is a surprise - a waterway, a creek. Down I skirted, swerving along the contours of the hills, obeying the swerve of the hills, much like the glorious, glistening pack of coyotes I saw laterally along the hills, healthy rippling coats of tawny and snow white with streaks of sable running through, reflecting the ripple of well-exercised, strong muscles. They, unlike the barking bother, spoke not a word, and, as is so usual of Nature's critters - they saw me before me them. More quickly than I imagined, I reached the endpoint at, indeed, a bubbling little creek, wafts of emerald algae swinging from cobbles in the crystalline wintry flow. That I wanted more revealed itself when I forded the creek and strived to discover another trail, found one, but found one only in fragments - landslides after the wildfire had smothered most of that trail with fallen, impenetrable thickets of dead bays and oaks.

So I de-layered and sat on a rock by the trilling stream for a while, writing in an old notebook about this newborn year - much the same shit I already wrote here - pining for a unique bird to show amid the yellowed willows and skeleton alders, noting the lower-pitch hum of the smaller creek compared to the higher-pitched, more boisterous one of the mainstem. No bird forthcoming, pencil slowing, I re-forded the creek and then perched on a towering rock, its existence in a place otherwise comprised of soft, rolling hills evidence of intense uplift and erosion. Antics of Acorn Woodpeckers dancing in the air above, picking off insects now active in the warm air, drew my eye to a ridge that promised quite the panoramic view, so I got off my tush and made the push, and was rewarded as promised, an expansive view of the endless rippling hills clothed

with chaparral when facing south, knobcone pines and bay and myriad oak species when facing north.

And then - She. The serenity of the pre-dawn violet had certainly returned by then, and as I lingered on the ridge, scanning, I focused on a valley, a soft valley seemingly coated in a bed of feathers, and a feeling with no words but only visions, apparitions, flooded my being. She, once again, us, together, young, on a bed, naked, only soft natural light coming through the window, window open to allow the soft brush of a warm breeze, touching, twinkling, running fingertips slowly over smooth skin, an enveloping energy of youth, no words, just feeling, a higher feeling, a fusion of young man and young woman. Of course a total fantasy - I never had it. It hurt feeling it, that which I never had, never had the ability to have, too scared and too scary. To really look at a woman and totally lose myself in her, with her, into something more, something greater - really never did it. I thought of the one I was with the longest, and I never looked at her once with all of me - a sign that that relationship was destined to die before either of us did...and it did. Then I felt kind of silly, kind of stupid and wasteful imagining an experience I never had but desperately wanted over 20 years ago because nothing remained to be found, its chance forever lost, and chasing it and imitating it would be so hollow and obnoxious and fake - the best I could do with it was to understand it and accept it. The truth - I never had Her, then or now.

Then a mighty raven soared towards me then circled repeatedly around me, squawking his guttural croak, no doubt announcing my presence, but unlike the usual raven interaction, this one was alone - so frequently they're paired up. Then I realized, with no other raven showing during the several minutes of croaking and careening - he was talking to me. I could only surmise *he*, and that, like me, he, too, was void of love of the most expansive kind, but he still had some, and me, too - each other.

He finally zoomed off, and I felt that was the cue for me also to zoom off, so back up the trail I ascended, air still still, sun up and unalloyed by clouds. My exertion coupled with the stillness to make me sweat, so I stripped from waist up, feeling the occasional breath of soft, soft wind on my glistening body. Passed two bubbas on the way up, overweight, one huffing a cig, but as usual Out There, friendly, in good humor, and, for their sake and the world's, it's only better they were out there stomping around. I reached the ridge seemingly much too quick, and I felt that the length I'd traversed was much shorter - maybe only a few miles - than I'd pined for. And then the descent, it, too, was seemingly so short, and I ran into two others near the trailhead - elderly women, silver-haired, one spry and the other not so spry, but both getting out there in that cool, clean air and fuckin' doin' it. Good for them, too.

Despite the numbness of the year, on the return trek I felt like a connection had been established, evidenced in such a way that seemed so unlikely to be coincidence. On the way up, I'd lost a binocular cap, a piece of drab, black rubber about two inches wide. Had absolutely no clue where on the trail I might've lost it, and given its camouflaged appearance among the dark oak leaves and dank, dead branches, I considered it lost forever. No big deal, though, just a piece of rubber, a mild inconvenience. Nevertheless, on the jaunt out, I kept my eyes stuck to the ground frequently, but nothing showed, and when only a mile or so from the trailhead, figured I'd already passed it and so stopped looking. A bit further along, a whisper of the most soothing, cool breeze fluttered through me, so I paused, closed my eyes, and just stood there absorbing it for a minute, and when it passed and I opened my eyes - laying right in front of me was that two-inch piece of rubber. Could've been a subconscious remembrance coming through that I was totally unaware of, but it felt more like a little conversation had taken place.

Then back to the old wagon, where I espied a perfect little rural chocolate-brown-walled house, dull-steel smokestack proclaiming soothing fires in cool, frosted nights, and of course I longed it to be mine. Then back through those rolling hills, though this time still in sun's light, and when a slope appeared peppered with knobbies and ponderosa pines - I longed. Then back to this city, ugly, out-of-climate lawns, people stuck like Huxleyan-Orwellian androids to their telescreen smart-phones, gluttonous on the soma of social media, the blaring cars, the hooded frightened people, the lost people, and I got home, my little bastion, and I looked at the pictures I'd taken on my hike, I listened to music flooding my mind of apparitions of She, and, finally - I slept well.

Got the fuck off the valley floor yesterday, zooming west to a spur of the North Coast Range since I'd been in the Sierra on my previous trek - gotta keep my relationship tight with both mountain chains. Ranged up along a gnarly dirt road, lots of jagged rocks erupting from the dusty roadbed, rocks that morph driving from a mindless enterprise of well-worn mental monotony to one of adventure. My goal: a local peak, and one not accessed through a trailhead, one not advertised, but a remote one, an ignored one, and one where I'd have to blaze a trail myself, at least part of the way - ancient mining roads promised that I'd have a few stretches of easy striding. Given all those features, I was damn near promised to be alone with Momma, something I sorely need and needed - been a human-saturated, urban-saturated week, what with working with two other people on a boat all day, having to do domestic chores on Monday, running into more and more people as society starts peeking its horrified head outside its little womb doors, and as the neglected dog next door barks into infinity.

I found it. Only the rusty, faded memory of humanity haunted my first steps - a short old mining road with little mini-forests of canary lotus blowing up in its center, an ancient washtub fed by an ancient pipe sunk into a little spring, a few shells from shotguns blasted long ago. The climate was about as pleasant as you could get in a chaparral-dominated landscape - a cheery breeze sang a pleasant song all the day long, and though the sun was unalloyed by a cloudless sky, still, its angle hung low enough in the southern sky to not sear but merely to warm. No doubt the breeze, the sun, they eased thrashing through the seemingly impenetrable brush I entered after leaving the road, where I found myself dead-ended in several cloistered thickets of scrub oak and toyon before finding a more open landscape clothed with the far more yielding chamise, and that more widely spaced on a steeper slope. I gained another miner's road, my trek eased, I attained the little peak, then found, much to my surprise, a relatively cleared remnant of a road, though now narrowed to trail, all the way to my end point, a little overlook very close to the parched Indian Valley Reservoir. All it really required for traversing above and beyond a well-groomed trail was some maneuvering among poison-oak sprays and some swings up, down, and around where fried pines from old fires had fallen in its path. But so frequently, that's more than enough to chase away any potential competitors for space - competitors that, these days, seem to need, like in so many other aspects of life, a direction from some authority on where to put their boot to work.

Though I love the North Coast Range as I do the Sierra, more frequently does the Sierra really get down to my marrow - it's mainly the tall-conifers fault. As is the case throughout much of the coast range where I roam, they're much fewer, and they rare reach as high as the ones that really enrapture my soul - knobcones and greys just don't quite get to the majesty of sugars and ponderosas and white firs. But they get to me nonetheless, and yesterday was no exception. I'd begun retracing my path, in early afternoon, and had just arced around a bare-topped rolling hill, one baked bare and hosting only scraggly chamise and patches here and there of butterweed, when a small stand of knobbies, one I'd already swerved through and one that was rich in birds, came

into view. An azure sky, the deepest spring blue, served as the backdrop, brushed with a few strokes of streaking, heavenly high white cirrus clouds, for the little stand of knobcone pines, which, from my lower vantage, really did seem to tower high up into the sky. The soft breeze, like the rest of the day, was present, tempting song from caressing branches and leaves of the chamise and manzanita and coast live-oaks and, from the distance, the gallant conifers. Gazing at that scene, surrounded by the song, and that, that *feeling*, that transcendence - it washed over me. It really did seem to be ancient, like it was conjuring generations past through me, and I felt it so close to that environment my old ancestors evolved in in west-central Europe - cool, coniferous mountains. The sight, the sounds, they echoed, they suggested, a cooler environment where the conies towered higher, where the plants glowed an even brighter green, where just over the ridge wasn't an anemic-but-tough creek but a flowing, full river, abounded by more greenery, where the flowers didn't exist in just patches here and there amid dry, cracked volcanic rock and rusty dirt but by lush meadows of green grass and rushes. My Home: the ideal found.

That it wasn't the ideal but suggested it reinforced that its patterns, its forms, the high conifers, the rugged hills, the stream, the patches of wildflowers, though all shrunk relative to the ideal, still - the same patterns. All they'd really need to attain that ideal would be a bit more water - which they get closer to the coast in the Mayacamas Mountains or, with more elevation, in the Sierra. A reduction in the benthic habitat - those open patches of bare dirt around the manzanita and chamise - a reduction in the pelagic habitat - the open air - commensurate with a big increase in the littoral, both towering up higher in the sky, the scrubby scrub oak and mountain-mahogany superseded by the ponderosas and white firs and incense-cedars, and occupying a greater proportion of the area. The terrestrial towering littoral, represented by the knobbies, they show and hold the key to my soul. I just ain't me without one.

I escaped, once again, in black-hole pre-dawn darkness away from civilization, the tottering civilization, the self-deluded civilization, back to Nature. Once again to the North Coast Range's eastern flank I fled to, and that it doesn't align to my core quite like the Sierra and Klamaths do is mitigated some by the dearth of people. Myriad well-developed trailheads with big-ass parking lots and fuckin' urinals prostrate themselves all over the Sierra; on the east flank of the North Coast Range, lots of times, you gotta make the trail yourself, and creating things of value is just something an increasingly large proportion of the Californian population has lost the ability to do. Too, to those of limited vision, the xeric east flank appears to have little to see - stodgy creeks with snotty algae, rusty-baked land with impenetrable chaparral, rolling hills topped not with snow-capped, majestic spires, but humble little rolls and mounds, often with just a lone grey pine or two, short, popping up humbly from the briar of the chaparral - all that doesn't capture the eye of the average American like the hackneyed pictures of towering Half Dome on the cover of *National Geographic*. A reflection of the same phenomenon - takes some creativity to find the beauty and the flourishing life in a subtle landscape.

Hit the trailhead at the ideal time for me - dawn, violet light shading to blue, weak still, not lighting much, and a weekday, a further separation from the crowds, and therefore a closer connection to the waiting Nature, the Nature that no doubt, even in this relatively sparsely traversed part of the watershed, had to deal with some maladroit humanity over the weekend. The air was a crisp, cutting, cool freshness, a beautiful spring dawn in the low-elevation mountains, and I needed three layers to keep the chill from touching all the way to my bones. But the chill didn't last long as I charged up the trail, ascending, and feeling life, and I mean *feeling* life, which hasn't been much of me this year, expanding within me - I was opening. But of course the newly sprung

wildflowers, brilliant and bold and seemingly exuberant at finally having their one chance - they helped tease it out of me. Shiny buttercups, stately crimson Indian warriors preparing for their eternal glory, red-wine sanicle, and gaudy shooting stars, mauve and sable and blessed with a holy halo of canary yellow around their proud faces. I burned some time with the flowers and the camera. But not much time - though many species accompanied my walk, like ushers alongside the trail, their numbers seemed low - a symptom of drought.

The sun finally up, painting all in golden light, more an evening phenomenon, giving the illuminance a surreal feel. A haze was responsible, which seemed odd - the black-hole morning, the dawn, they weren't stirred by even the ghost of a wind. And up with the sun, the warmth, the birds came, and damn did they ever come - so many: six sparrow species (whities, goldies, rufies, Lincoln's, songs, and, the most abundant - Lark Sparrows), four woodpeckers, including a rare Lewis's, brainy ravens, a Red-tailed Hawk so high in the sky, rafts upon rafts of big-ass Band-tailed Pigeons, always reminders that, though not so obvious, I was in a mixed-coniferous forest, and an undeniable signal that spring had sprung - a Western Kingbird. Many ground birds, too - several coveys of quail blowing up, their whirring wings a unique melody, and wary turkeys, wary given that this was a Wild land, not like domesticated Davis, but a Wild land where man, too, gets wild.

And with the rising sun did the wind finally rise, and I saw my first - and only, really - people of the day. They were hunters, one a big dude, beer belly slung over belt holding up worn denim jeans, another clad in camo, both toting shotguns, the big dude sweating hard, working it hard, like you're supposed to. And the typical wilderness experience - they were warm, easily sharing a few words with not the warmest guy around: me. But people they were, misanthropic I am no matter what, so I quickened my pace a bit, pining to both gain some distance from the hunters and see again a few ponds I'd visited and dove into during my previous trip way back in last year's hot ol' summer.

But little was left to see - of the four ponds, two were totally dry, one was damn close to it, and only one had enough water for a swim and enough water for waterfowl - I blew a Bufflehead off of it when I approached. One that was totally dry had a pile of smallmouth bass in it the previous summer, an unusual occupant since ponds are so much more the domain of their bigger-mouthed sister. The smallies, obviously, had succumbed to the drought. But big bullfrogs, giants for the species, certainly big enough for an indulgent meat-eating feast, remained, big eyes popping up out of the shallow water. And certainly the little water remaining was absolutely precious for so much life - many tracks of deer and bear and elk were recorded in the dried mud of the lost shorelines. Further, the tough, old cattails and tules, though haunted sallow by the winter and threatened with sallow given the dry year, retained thick, intimate clumps that hid numerous secret little lairs and caverns, secret little lairs that myriad birds - Red-wings of course, but also many of the sparrow species - certainly found solace in. Memory providing grist for the mill.

And I needed to expand on memory - too much, I've tread trails this year, habits, behaviors, even waterways with the rod, that I've run down in previous lives, seemingly losing the lessons of those past lives only to relive their mistakes, and that's just cowardly, stagnating. So I blew off the trail I knew and traipsed down one I didn't, finding myself sandwiched by expanses of leathery chaparral, then in an expanse of grassland, Western Meadowlarks flowering the air with their warm warbling like the wildflowers flowering the dull hillsides with canary yellow and brilliant red and pearly gilia white and bold larkspur and lupine blue. The wind was all up in its unbridled glory, and I realized that the wind in Wild - it's different than that in domesticity: in the Wild, it flows, it's sinuous, swaying and swirling and sifting through the canyons and pine needles and the

porousness of woodland and forest. But in the fuckin' city, it just bangs and wails, slamming into monstrous skyscrapers, slamming into right-angled tract homes, violent, a conflict, while in Wild, it's so frequently a caressing. I paused for a moment and just listened to the wind, feeling it, and I felt I heard, felt, something within it, deeper, so much deeper, ineffable, however - a whisper, an argument, a statement - something.

And to continue to expand, to get wilder, I read the landscape and decided I needed to get off the directing, confining trail - I needed to create my own. So I veered off the trail and wandered up and through the grassland, up and down the rolling hills, aiming for one of the ponds several ridges over, and coming damn close just by gauging my position by a distant ridge that I've also stomped all over. Then back up to the known trail, but only for a short stretch, for I planned to jag down an east-traversing trail, down deep in an unknown canyon, keep expanding. But at that junction, I paused - some odd shapes, two of 'em, caught my eye on the peak of a nearby hill - I took out my binoc's, focused, and saw two dudes mounted on fuckin' ATVs, hidden in shadow care of a few oaks. If hunters and not disabled - and by "disabled" I don't mean willfully unfit, like most obese Americans, but with a fucking leg deformity or something like that - they were fucking disrespectful to the spirit of the hunt, they'd lost the point of it, which is an actualization of atavism, to where it's just you, your own two feet, and the minimum amount of gear you need to survive and to kill your prey. Sure, I fish from a boat with a fancy motor, zooming from place to place, but we're terrestrial critters, not aquatic, and need a watercraft to access waters we can't by foot. Even then, I won't consider a watercraft unless I know for sure I can't get to the water by foot. And I'd never consider riding around in any motorized vehicle with a gun, gunning for terrestrial wildlife, as hunting - that's just murder.

I've little doubt the two hunters I'd ran into earlier in the morning, who hadn't lost it, had a much better chance of bagging a bird than the murderers - for sure the turkey and quail and pigeons would much more easily mistake the crunch of a boot on a stick as a bear or deer and not flee but not err were it the wheeze and crush and dinosaur stink of an ATV.

But I didn't dally long in view of the motorized, quickly dipping down and swerving along the trail, hitting the canyon floor in a warm afternoon sun, doffing a few layers. Soon the trail veered up and north, which would've taken me too far from the trailhead, so I created my own trail by following the unknown creek east, or what was left of it - the drought had withered it to bone, boulders and cobbles caked with rime from the withering of an unveiled sun. Bouncing along the creek bottom's bleached rocks and sailing over crescent little floodplains, I reached the mainstem fairly quickly, a perennial stream, much more perseverant, that would take far more baking to dewater. Nevertheless, it rumbled low for the time of year, too, flanked by many bleached bones, making my frog-like hop and jump downstream back to the trailhead and my old Japanese wagon nearly effortless. Unfortunately, running right by the road and thus easily accessible by the mass of lazy, childish, unengaged and ever-booming Americans, trash littered the bright little creek, and my pack's volume was maxed by the copious plastic bottles I'd picked up on the way. What I didn't pick up was the fucking diapers or diaper containers, such an ominous sign - not only of the stupid increase in human population, but that kids at baby stage are learning that trashing Nature is par for the course. They'd lost it, too.

But within the context of the whole day, the failures of domestication just pinpricked a smidgen, and as I lounged by the old wagon, hike complete and muscles stretched, I just dallied again for a while while the wind whispered and argued and sang its ancient, ineffable song. One day, a day relentlessly coming closer, I will be forever lost in that wind.