

Vl.v: on leaving

I escaped into the Sierra for a few days, a frequent need for my pining soul that pines to live among the pines again. Driving force was my annual autumnal reverie with little red salmon, those beautiful little scarlet fish that flood the streams to actualize another chapter of their lives, the final chapter, in the scene of memory that breathed them into life. Originally planned to fish the Feather basin rather than my usual haunt, the Truckee - I just knew the Truckee too well, so further north seemed better for bettering the relationship by experiencing reds in a more novel setting. Assuming I caught my fish early, I'd planned a hike way up in the Middle Fork Feather, which I'd only explored by boot once. But in the back of my mind - given how labile this year has been, with Nature (fires), with society (plague, riots), with me (vertigo) - I'd reserved the Truckee in case the Feather blew. And blew the Feather did - I found the roads to the creek I pined for blocked by cops, no doubt due to a wildfire, a nascent one, since before I split my abode, I checked on the accessibility via the USFS, and my creek was open. But that ain't the cops, and that ain't firsthand info, so I threaded my way languidly to the Truckee, rolling through Quincy and Graeagle and Sierraville in a lazy autumn sun.

It became an experience of memory's myriad expressions: nostalgia, rehashing, and regeneration, and their subtle, profound differences. I'd reenact the ritual with reds in the setting of 2012 and 2018; in complement, I'd mosey down a trail high in the North Fork American drainage I'd hoofed in 2015. Nevertheless, time promised that the fish I'd touch, the birds I'd hear, they'd be different individuals, albeit still the same species. Nostalgia tinted my drive - only songs from my late teens flowed through my tape player's speakers, since that's when I stopped buying tapes. Old punk rock - so good - Angelic Upstarts, Avengers, Agent Orange, of course the Misfits - such beautiful simplicity, yet each of those bands uniquely expanded the ideal spawned by the Ramones. Exuberant, that music - it really was - is - the music of youth, gushing with pristine energy, unbounded, which curses punk bands that reform far beyond their prime with a pathetic, hollow mimicry. Then, much to my surprise, a Smashing Pumpkins tape - *Gish*. I loathed *Siamese Dream* - way too polished, way too sappy, just fuckin' way too sugary sweet - even now when I think of it, I wanna puke. Pretentious, arrogant. But *Gish*, fuck - a good hair-metal record, a good classic-rock record, in that vein, along with first-wave Jane's Addiction and the Rolling Stones' late-'60s/early-'70s shit. An intimacy pervades it, a lust, a sweet, innocent lust, and as "Rhinoceros" and "Snail" flowed out my speakers, I daydreamed of She, She of violet eyes and sunlight-yellow hair and snowy skin and carnation-pink lips, naked, in a dark room, on a dark bed, relaxed, playful, us, together, young, the evening sun pouring through the blinds painting us in gold and shadow. Something I never had, of course - I was too scary and too scared and too stony for She back then. Fuck, I essentially remain that way now.

Drifted by many people as I rolled through those rural towns to my reenactment, faces extinguished by face masks, stifling my ability to read 'em, understand 'em, communicate. Nevertheless, their bodies, either excessively bulging or needlessly winnowing, bespoke a life lived poorly - gluttonous for food, or gluttonous for drugs, signifying a dearth of meaning in life. Their business was brisk, and no doubt recurring, at the convenience stores. But as I've realized - and as so many experiences in the Wild have reminded - these people: they're not bad. Irresponsible? Sure. Self-destructive, lacking self-awareness? Absolutely. Uncritical? Without question, as revealed by the amazing number of people driving solo with fuckin' surgical masks (are they afraid they'll infect themselves?). But they're not bad, not malicious, most of 'em, just weak and unrealized and very deeply rutted.

Looking at them, I saw part of me.

I reached the trib in early afternoon, intending to hike down to the reservoir to tempt up a smallmouth or two, or maybe a trout - reds, like silvers and kings and chums, are so much more aggressive at dawn, so I planned on leaving the dance to the following morning. But the allure - I only see reds once a year, if that, while I see smalls and trout much more frequently, so on the trek down, I skirted over to the creek, telling myself that I was just gonna scout it, not fish it. My discipline failed me, however, when all the brilliant crimson swaying in the little creek flooded my eyes and fired my desire - out came the rod, on went the jig, and then followed the classic pattern with Pacific salmon - a motherfuckin' grind, with very few becoming vexed enough to strike the lure. I fished through dusk and ended with only two reds in hand - not enough, especially since they curiously measured smaller than in my previous dalliance. So in montane darkness, I picked my way along a dirt road for a nearby primitive little camp I'd found back in 2018, a perfect, quaint little camp, found it again, then grubbed and settled, the naked sky open to my eyes, the glittering, ancient stars that Diviciacus and Thoreau and poor old George Donner and poor old Captain Jack and so many others no doubt once ogled. Stuffed in tight to my bag to escape the montane chill, I slept.

Pre-dawn indigo, coffee down, some fruit, a touch of meat, then at the creek at dawn's turquoise light, and, again reflecting the classic pattern - I attained my self-imposed goal (five fish) quickly, stowing the rod and then just wandering around the little trib, a trib I've known, from both the professional and private sides, for many years. It was surprisingly tidy for being visited by so many people - almost no litter, and, yeah, a creek stuffed with fish. Wish that respect would reach beyond to other watersheds, which so frequently, and so dishearteningly, humans trash. For a hunter, of the fish or bird or mammal kind, such sign - it's fucking stupid, cluing others to productive hunting grounds and causing overexploitation. Too, of course, is the cheapening - all that garbage, it's a product of civilization, and the fucking point of getting into the Wild is to escape that civilization, not drag its detrital remains along. Anyway, the absence of such detritus lightened my load a little, though it still felt ungodly heavy - the vertigo that'd clung to me for the last month, it felt like it'd filled my boots with concrete. Nevertheless, I kept stumbling around as the sun and wind rose in collusion, admiring the birds, the ever-friendly Mountain Chickadees chattering joyfully at me, the soft, lush fringing meadow at my side - such a lovely theater for a sweet, quiet autumn afternoon with She, a lovely image that infiltrated my mind frequently, slipping in through images of what the rest of my day should be, most picturing me recoiling back home and laying on the carpet, booze in hand and then in body, my rutted default. But as I stomped maladroitly back to my car, my better self persevered, scolding me that to fall back so early to my valley home - it'd be a fuckin' coward's act.

So I popped over the divide and then down a chalky dirt road, shed my pack of all fish-catching stuff, and, like the creek I plied in past lives, struggled down a trail of a past life. The subalpine world braced me, rolling its pure autumn wind across the scoured granite and through the chiseled junipers and red firs and western white pines, a perfect, pleasant flow - not too hot, not too cold. Perfect. Fragments remained of my past life - a picturesque western white along the trail, the towering massif overlooking all with wizened, ancient eyes, the little shimmering lakes breathing their ripples in time to the wind. But freshness abounded, too: the graceful robins rising from the stony ground in perfectly smooth arcs, and the solitaires singing their warm, sweet melodies. Despite the concrete boots I started hiking with, which threatened that I wasn't gonna get more than a mile, if that - they lightened, so much so that I could've gone as far as I did back in memory's time had I not needed to get back to my little valley house at a

reasonable hour. A reminder - despite the feeling of worthlessness, of incapability, that stains my soul, so often I can get shit done beyond what I think I can do.

And not only me surprised me about what could be accomplished - my little one-dollar Japanese station wagon bore out the same phenomenon. On the drive in, I bounced the car down a hill - barely - with big gnarly crests and troughs, one that years back I didn't roll down. My caution was stronger back then, which the vertigo and associated symptoms had certainly weakened. Wasn't 'til I hit the bottom of the hill that I realized my peril - too late - and then the quandary of if I could make it back up plagued my hike, frequently splintering into my mind like jagged shards. But as my body unfurled a bit, my mood likewise improved, and I figured that if I got down it without damaging anything or getting stuck, then a way had to exist to get back up it. So in evening light, hike done, muscles stretched, into the car I got and to the base of the hill I got, and I scanned it - imposing. A rolling solid-dirt ocean of foot-and-a-half-high crests and troughs dominated the road's width, with the clearance of my cheap Japanese car much less. I first tried worming my way up slowly, but no dice - just not enough clearance, and I wisely retreated rather than just gunning it and hoping for luck, which would've required catching air across those troughs. Dicey. I espied a less traveled little spur road that arced around the bouncy ocean, so I swung the wagon onto it and found it even more impenetrable - a big pile of rocks separated it from the main drag, a big pile too big for my car. Only one option remained: zipping, somehow, up the main drag. I noticed that the flattest stretch was right against the right edge of the road, which looked possible if the wagon chewed into some manzanita - the paint risked being scratched, but I deemed that a harmless slight. So I breathed deeply, encouraged the car with a pat on the dash, then zoomed right up that edge with remarkable ease, with just a little bump and grind on the driver's side, a bump and grind the car took with aplomb.

Once clear of the hill, I immediately pulled off the road to pull off my boots - I left 'em on in case I'd gotten stuck and needed to use some leg muscle to jostle it free - so my feet could breathe, but also for a pause to relish the accomplishment - my body and my mind and my car, we fuckin' *did* it. An amplification of ability, from my mind somehow pushing my body to its limits, then my body pushing my mind, and then both transferring that energy to the inanimate horse I rode and ride all over California with.

Down down down back to my little valley home then, in a lusty golden sunset, and I pined to still be in the Wild at such time, but civilization - it, too, has its place, and I had the dawn and a streaking-cloud sky earlier in the day to stroke my soul. Back to my little abode, repository of past lives, as well as the current and future ones. The desire lingered in me to relive those teen years, plus the fantasy of those teen years, the past reality and the past fantasy. But Nina Nastasia's beautiful song "One Old Woman" rang in my ears, and I realized it applies to more than just old wrinkled women on the brink of death - applies to middle-aged dudes, too.

"I know I'm not allowed to hold on too tightly to what has gone."