

## ***II: out of place***

Portland, the lonely, lost year. Endless rows of 40s in the fridge, glowering like the pyrite autumn beams that steeped through my west-facing window, stacks of Top Ramen, tubs of tomato paste, and fat slabs of fat-dripping meat. Forlorn bashing of a flea-market guitar in a vacuum apartment. Slogging through the daily grind, punching buttons, thinking my punching of buttons was superior to that of everyone else, overcompensation for a black-hole insecurity. Nervous moments with the Girl whose name I can remember, and with that girl whose name I can't. And a mountain reservoir, more opaque than those I grew up with, tremulous, silent, black oil water sheeting the surface, and amid all the fishermen with steelhead gear, I foggily flung the ol' Super Duper out there and, while not catching fantastically, caught enough. A foot-plus brown trout, wild, big, straight-edged fins, anchored to my stringer for a few hours, but, perhaps a rare exposure of my heart, a rare breaching of empathy through the Bastille in which I'd begun burying myself - I let the animal go, choosing to eat instead a mystery-meat burger from some fuckin' fast-food joint.

Winter came. Confusion intensifying in a new world, a dangerous world, a world without the safety net of the friends, the true family, that buttressed and bloomed *me* back in California. Black oil nights, scepter echoes dissolving down the empty corridors at the warehouse I worked at, foggy, soggy mornings learning about bacteria and chemistry, the contents of which have been lost to weathering of mind. Baleful blasts of stuttering hardcore stumbled out of my old, frail acoustic guitar in those long nights. And the booze - it flowed. It flowed at home, but it flowed those few stilted times out with people, out with the Girl, out with my work buddy and his fucking lame friend, it flowed, it flowed to ease my anxiety, it flowed to fit me in, it flowed to crack open the door that my conjured personalities could nudge through, personalities I thought those people wanted rather than the real, damaged *me*. They didn't, they could sense the facade; I couldn't. The masquerade. And a new fish world, salmon and steelhead, and despite purchasing and reading books about the exalted fishes, I just didn't get 'em. Couldn't understand what a *springer* was. Didn't understand, didn't think through, the biology of anadromous fishes, why they'd run at different times, what would guide those runs, whether my lure was to imitate or irritate. Haughtily scoffed at the idea of very long rods. I never caught a king or steelhead or silver while there and yet, still, straight As decorated my transcript at winter's end.

Blooming spring, and booming humanity, infiltrating into the warehouse like locusts, morphing my eight-hour workday to double digits. Nighttime, nighttime found the 40s in rows in the fridge steadily decreasing. Bombed school that quarter. But I frequently escaped into the mountains, tasting the Cascades' version of high-elevation trout - four flavors, browns, 'bows, cutt's, and brooks, the latter two new to me, a mystery, bewildering. I did marginally well with the metal that'd succeeded so well in California, but an undercurrent in my mind murmured that I could do better: the shorter growing season due to the cooler climate, the absence of fish for the trout to eat, they limited the spoon's effectiveness. I cleared bookstore shelves of tomes on trout, studying voraciously, to up my game by including more bug-imitating techniques. I only marginally took the readings to heart, however. I did garner a few nice fish on nymphs, and I added marabou jigs (*i.e.*, damselfly imitations) to my toolkit, but I wouldn't admit that the short rods were a limitation, and I too frequently defaulted to the less effective metal. Didn't really absorb the knowledge about salmonids while I was up there, was subconsciously scared that accepting my ignorance - thus allowing growth - would snowball into the perception that I was a

total loser, like much of my family said I was, and that that one vital aspect of my fragile identity - that as a consummate outdoorsman - would be shattered. So I grew, but only a modicum.

The golden, syrupy summer in the city - a rare light of joy bathed me on evenings when I'd wallow down to the Willamette just a few blocks from my house, amid big ol' waving genuflecting hardwoods, and, soggy with booze, cast jigs and catch pitying jade-hued smallmouth and cute little black crappie. Old friends. The river was alive in summer. People partying on speedboats, jolly lights dangling from brightly lit houseboats, a loving, inviting warmth summer emanated, radiated, the twinkling lights in the soothing summery nights. My lazy twilight on the languid river. I don't recall hanging out with my few acquaintances much during that summer, if at all. And the booze - it flowed. And I - I began to crack.

Autumn, and the return of the black oil rain. The rain, the closure of summer, both ushered in the flow of booze rising to a flood, concomitant with the festering frustration born of failing to meet totally unrealistic expectations I'd set for myself, the suffocating insecurity, the boiling of dissociation into pathology. The slick black light that sneered in the puddles topping off the potholes, those potholes, conflicts of cleansing water and dirty oil, iridescent, cold, slitting the night sky when you splashed through 'em in your wailing car. Jaundiced streetlight beams bouncing off the Willamette's tarpit waters, and another 40 down, another 40 to drown that burgeoning, inescapable pain. Trips to the mountains - few and fishless. I recall two times with the Girl, once at some bar in the northeast section of town, another in, I believe, her friend's house - I got fucking obliterated both times, so much so that I puked all the booze up during the second installment. Shame. Increasingly missed work, stuck in bed deep in my head, the only safe world I knew - all else was fucking dangerous, destructive, a reminder of my failure to be that which I could never be. I couldn't see out of myself, however, to see that, despite my often abrasive personality, those people - they gave a shit. I remember two work supervisors showing up at my apartment, concerned. I think I received an email or phone call from that sweet, sweet man in my calculus class. A buddy, car-less, took a bevy of buses over to my apartment to check up on me, very likely at the Girl's insistence. But by that time, I'd accepted my fate to die, and I was long gone, gone on a trek of slow dissolution, of fatal implosion, gone on a trek of slowly, painfully drinking myself to fucking death.

I took a few changes of clothes, the rods and my tackle, my guitar, a few choice books, and my camping equipment - nothing else.

I pulled the max amount of cash I could off my credit cards, and the death drive began. I went first to Seattle, stagnating in a seedy part of town, and drowned myself in bottom-shelf gin for several days. Next I turned east, through the Cascades, ending up in Spokane - I ate Chinese food, drank, drowned in endless network TV. Continued east to Missoula, faded brick facade, and the scene - recurrence. Turned south and east, to Pocatello and then Green River, where the snow piled and I dwindled. West to Provo, southwest to fucking Vegas, and then, to complete the circle, ending up where the tragedy began - Lancaster, California. I called some blood relatives, subconsciously reigniting the damaged and damaging cycle that began with my birth and ended just a few years later when I finally severed all those bloody blood-family ties. I escaped.