

## ***VIII: renewal***

A pinnacle of a year the last few years has been the weeklong backpacking trip, where I've really gotten down to life's essence. This year, getting deep into the Warner Wilderness was etched on my calendar, but with my left hip screaming like a banshee after a fairly mild five-mile hike just two days before I'd planned to be off on the much more serious trek, I knew I couldn't attempt the Warners without fucking torturing myself or half-assing it, and such a wilderness as the Warners deserves complete sublimation. So with a week of now-vacant vacation time looming at me, I had to do something, I had to rise above and kick my own ass to go where I've never gone before, even if the Honda rather than the legs was the primary vehicle. Since I'd let so much of summer's potential smother under the weight of my pathetic, self-medicated bearable pain, I focused the week on trying to attain all those lost summer chances, including the absence of the Warners.

I chose Frenchman Reservoir as the surrogate for the Warners, a reservoir instead of a wilderness cirque lake, a Honda and a developed campsite instead of my legs and a self-created nook along a small brook, but with one symmetry - rainbow trout for rainbow trout. I'd longed for the Warners to rekindle a little high-elevation lentic rainbow bug-eatin', which Frenchman, though lower, potentially could also provide. It did.

On Monday in pre-dawn darkness, a billowing valley wind scalloping Frenchman Reservoir's surface, I launched my little canoe into a sharply curved, shallow, weedy cove adjacent to a jutting rocky point edging off into deep, deep water. The habitat resembled that in other summer still waters that produced lovely 'bows in my past: Castle Lake, Emerald more recently, and even those San Bernardino Mountain lakes eons ago. A water temperature of 64°F provided additional hope - cool enough for rainbows to feel at ease rolling into such a food-rich, shallow area. Unfortunately, I fished rather maladroitly. Fucking slip-float rig tangled more than it turned over. Snagged and broke off several precious, self-tied marabou jigs. Lost two good fish on the jig, one shaking loose, the other, heartbreakingly, breaking off with the jig in its jaw when I tried pulling in the trout with too much heavy-handed force. Filled a bucket with water, only to spill half of it in the canoe, soaking my gear. Fumbled away several precious dawn minutes while unraveling the snaggletoothed anchor line. Nevertheless, still, somehow, I maintained my composure enough to land two fat, wild rainbows, two I fooled into taking my bait, two I battled well, one I respected with a beautiful photograph and a clean kill and a fine dinner, and the other I tailed, unfastened the barbless hook from, then let slip back into the water with not even a second of air exposure.

Back at camp, reflective, trying to embed the morning's experiences with the numerous nodes of the past, I felt my first few Arrowhead years pulse powerfully into my mind. So many facets between Frenchman and those early Arrowhead days paralleled each other. Of course, the dawn-to-mid-morning bites at Gregory, always igniting in the young day's indigo glow and ending around 9 AM, just as it had on Frenchman. The languid afternoons, rhythmic pine trees beating to the upwelling winds, me lounging on that red deck in the summery sun in Crestline, me lounging in the chartreuse chair in the summery sun of Frenchman. Eternal recurrence. Those afternoons on the red deck - I'd sprawl all my tackle out after the morning's trout tussles, my spinners and spoons and rods and reels and flies, everything. Like a jeweler hewing a diamond for a regal wedding ring, I'd buff my metal lures to luminous luster, I'd burnish the rods slippery smooth to enhance casting distance, I'd meticulously dislodge with a toothpick any dirt or dust or grime from the tiniest nooks in my reels. All the while, I'd pretend I wasn't alone, I'd

pretend I had a rapt audience listening to me pontificate about fish and how to catch 'em. I'd pretend that I wasn't in some overdeveloped southern California mountain town where the trout are defined and defiled by the hatchery truck but was on a pristine British Columbian lake where the salmonids were wild, where wild, flame-flanked kokanee and full-finned, wild rainbows were the quarry. Those afternoons on the red deck, they were studies in a blooming misanthropy and a deepening dissociation. Lifeless chunks of metal and graphite, they assumed life, I anthropomorphisized 'em, they, not the humans I cohabitated with, they didn't grind down and disavow but gave life, provided life, revealed life. And that fantastical location, and those nonexistent listeners swirling around in my mind, they subconsciously echoed and partially appeased my desire for some recognition and a deeper connection to non-human life. The fantasy, by that stage, had become safer than the reality.

I went back to the same cove the next dawn, wanting to repeat what I accomplished the day before but with more grace. Once again in pre-dawn darkness, the canoe slid into cove water, but while yesterday's wind ruffled the surface, this day's gales boiled it into one-foot rollers, meaningless swells to an 18-foot V-hull but harrowing to a little canoe. Undaunted, I set up in the exact position as the day before, and was immediately rewarded on the first cast with a solid take and immediately blew it with a weak hook-set. Still, promising, but it was an illusive promise. For two more hours, hours in which yesterday, had I exhibited peak performance, would've yielded four thick fish to hand, I received nothing but lost - two more marabou jigs donated to the reservoir's craggy bed with not one salmonid kiss. Disheartened, I riffled through my previous experiences to explain my zero catch - the big wind had to have something to do with it. I found Frenchman thick with small minnows, either redsides or tui chubs, prime prey for trout in autumn during morning when shallow water's cool, prime prey that trout love to concentrate against rocky points, prime prey that especially love cobble-sized rock to hide in, prey like those lake trout love to feast on when giant winds and rollers shake the little fishes free of the concealing rock. I craned my neck to that rocky point sidling off into abyssal water, and I felt possibility. I ditched the bug imitations, switched spools to bigger line, tied on a fish-imitating jig, and with the second cast, felt the confirmation of my hunch, a confirmation that turned out to be a leopard-spotted 'bow about a foot-and-a-half long. Unfortunately, like the previous day, I fumbled and stumbled - in each of the next half-dozen casts, in the bashing, blasting waters, I coaxed trout to bite my lure, but I just didn't have the right sensitivity to hook 'em firmly without breaking 'em off. Still, I managed to hand another fish, a repeat of the first, and felt it worthwhile to document the reenactment, for that's what it was: damn near no difference existed between what Frenchman's rainbows were giving me and what Berryessa Reservoir and Eagle Lake trout had given me years ago. I kicked that fish back after the photo shoot, and, pining for just one more, one more, a fifth fish in hand, I observed several in very shallow water hunting methodically over those cobbles. I switched to a small jerkbait, a more effective lure in such a situation, stalked one 'bow, threw a great cast, then juked and jived the lure just enough to attract the trout but not spook it. The fish ate, the rod loaded up, and then, elated by a subconscious false assumption that this fish would hit my hand, I let the animal roam wild, let it jam with the line underneath a rock rather than keeping the rod tip high and the fish's head up, and that most painful sensation to a fish Romanticist, that dirge, that fucking black-hole vacuum that occupies the gut - I felt the line go oh-so limp, and I realized that my haughtiness had not only voided touching that fifth fish, but that fish, it was fucked, what with a two-treble-hook jerkbait anchored to its face. The water now glass, the sun now high, signaling the end of the trout's feeding activity, still, I felt I couldn't end it like that, end it with a stupid fucking

break-off, so I donned another jig and fished rather sloppily for another 15 minutes or so, ultimately losing that lure to the cobbled bottom and having the reservoir, by proxy, tell me that the interaction was complete. So I left.

I had a small audience while I tangled with the minnow-chomping trout: several trollers trailed their thoughtless lures by fruitlessly. I'm pretty sure that a few of them were stationed at my campsite, but, regardless, they all looked the same, whether on water or land. Man, these people - all of 'em looked horribly out of shape. The men: Jupiter-sized beer guts slung over unseen belt buckles. The women: flabby and diseased-looking, wrinkled, crinkled tangerine skin. Both looked pained when walking, waddling, really, waddling their lumpy forms from their opulent RVs to their opulent trolling boats. And that, all the civilized creature comforts of home brought to a developed campsite, that's their outdoor adventure. I wondered what came first: did the giant RV come after the obesity of the average American to allow such people access to areas not totally urbanized? Or did the RV come first, allowing people to lose themselves while still allowing at least the ghost of an outdoor experience? Likely neither: they developed together, a frightful synergy, a positive feedback that, if taken to its logical extension, will result in a completely sedentary, totally urbanized American, an evolutionary fragment, homogenous and vulnerable. The lamentable cause of these people's physical condition is at least threefold: lack of will, ignorance, and an unquestioning obedience to instant gratification. I'm the contrast that proves the cause: I used to be there, like them, but I learned how to eat better, I maintained a good diet as well as an exercise routine, and I subsequently experienced the precious jewels of delayed gratification (*e.g.*, the strenuous backpacking trip into Piute Canyon and the amazing golden trout I experienced). Nevertheless, as at Almanor so many years ago - not one of these ugly, fat Americans was anything less than warm and gracious and friendly to me, so shame on me.

Back at the campsite, slouched in my garish green camp chair, shaded by cooing pines, I cracked open my lunch and proceeded to mope about my mistakes of the last two days. Just felt I couldn't end the relationship with Frenchman's trout on such a dour, sour note. So I wondered - what would I gain by going out a third dawn to the same spot to replicate the previous days' patterns? And patterns I did garner, patterns I'd established at other waterways and in other years: eight pounds of trout the first day on bug imitations with a smaller wind had I landed all, and I probably could've beached more than 10 pounds of trout the following day under big wind with fish imitations if I'd been more in tune. I had at least one good photo of each pattern at Frenchman, so what would I have gained by torturing more fish that I wouldn't be killing since my freezer was still well-stocked, that I wouldn't be photographing since I already possessed good pictures, that wouldn't be affirming a previous pattern by being caught but in a new context? That I could do so gracefully? Hadn't I already proved that countless times with countless species in countless conditions, even with bug-eating and fish-eating lentic trout? Of course I had, so a reason for a third jaunt didn't exist. But the lesson, the lesson materialized, and it epitomized this year: though I didn't flourish gracefully, I persevered and got my fish.

Time for something new.

The little stream, Little Last Chance Creek, below the dam, sandwiched in a volcanic canyon. Thought it'd be a good candidate for gifting a few nice trout on a spinner, given late summer and copious ochre grasshoppers fluttering about in the afternoon sun. After only a half-dozen downstream swings with the metal lure, however, I realized a terrestrial bite was just not on the water - I had nary a breath of a trout on the lure. Flipping some rocks in the cold, cold riffles and finding many baetid naiads in the size-16 range, I switched the spinner for a hare's ear

nymph, hiked the terrace above the creek downstream a half-mile, then descended back down to the water and began drifting the nymph while slithering upstream. I hit pay dirt: rare was the drift that my float didn't drown from a trout's take. Among the litany of juvenile 'bows were a half-dozen fantastic small-stream ruby-streaked rainbows measuring from eight inches up to a surprising fish close to the 14-inch mark. When I maneuvered into a position marked by a big-ass rock shielding deep, shaded, viscous water, I deepened my rig and threaded it right along the boulder's edge, and just as you would've thought, two brown trout, one a stunning fish of about 13 inches, revealed themselves. My casts were gentle and accurate; my drifts were elegant; my playing and landing and releasing of the trout were correct; and man, I waded and battled through some tough water, not getting knocked over once by the powerful flows. When I climbed out of the canyon, I realized I'd absolved my sins.

I left early Wednesday morning, before the Mountain Bluebirds and White-breasted Nuthatches began their bug-huntin', complementing the dawn bug-huntin' of the water's sleek denizens. I took many things from Frenchman. I took Frenchman's life and subsumed it into my own, becoming one, when I ate that orange-fleshed trout on the reservoir's shores. I conducted freshwater-predator rites that I've been plying since I was a teenager so long ago in the baleful San Bernardino Mountains, and I took home those additional passages to add to my life's picture book. I took a little wisdom, a little humility, a little restraint, and was rewarded with baptism at Little Last Chance Creek, so perfectly named for its role in my little vacation. I reaffirmed the correctness of my life's choices when contrasted to those of my fellow transient neighbors; my neighbors, in turn, reinforced that in the context of a Wild place, no matter how domesticated it may be, what someone looks like and how they behave, they ain't consonant. If anything, I took from Frenchman that I still can *live* even when my own body and my own mind, they fight me.