

VI.iii: resolution

Donner haunts me. In the snotty slate tombstone gloom of the autumn rainy sky just a few days ago, when I finally overcame my bitch-ass self and beached a beautiful lake trout, writhing in the rolling lake water and the ancient moraine through which the beautiful lake trout were hunting - something else was there. Even through the clear-cutting roar of the nasty, mighty freeway that never ceases and traces the once-lonely ruts of the wagon wheels of nervous pioneers - something else was there. An energy. An elegy. Felt like doom, ominous, ponderous, reflecting in part my life this year, in which much of me has eroded: my balance, my sleep, my hip, my back, my energy, my mind. Through the decay, I've held some ground, but too frequently I've fallen on my knees, genuflecting to the vicissitudes of time and age. And my yearlong floundering, it stained a seeming rectification of a despairing dusk, the overcoming of self-frustration, finally getting that lake trout to shore after losing five others, finally feeling a fish in hand at the lake that had been so generous to me until this year when I sloppily blew two full days in winter and had nothing to show. I should've felt an expansive relief - further, when I returned home, that relief should've bloomed when I found my jig had been barbless - a sound explanation for the last three lost fish, all of whom shook free of the hook.

But I didn't - a malaise still shrouded me, clung to me, the interaction of me with the energy of the place - created something fucking ugly. Before dusk, I was fishing like a motherfuckin' boss despite no fish to hand: slip float drifting good, jig swimming great, spoon bouncin' gracefully. In fact, I lost not one lure, and that through all the snaggy mess of China Cove's moraine. Only when entering the promise of dusk did I began to falter, mistaking too many bites for snags, missing fish, losing fish, and then, once again, falling into the water, soaking myself to the bone. A recurring story this year. Those two fishless days in winter, several opportunities swam my way - but I fucked them up, too. I've just not been very engaged, sensitive, aware, with my emotions or my body or my intuition, let alone the life surrounding. And I feel the lake's fuckin' mad at me, that I still haven't absolved my sins of insensitivity up there this year, feel as if I've been not appreciative enough of the fish and lessons she's given me.

It wasn't always this way - for over 10 years, Donner and I were in love. First time I went, December 2009, after studying my ass off on lake-trout biology and the prey field (signal crawdads, tui chubs, Lahontan reidsides, Paiute sculpins), after poring over the bathymetry map of the lake, I was rewarded nearly instantly, and in such a big way - a 35" lake trout came to hand after only fishing an hour or so. A beautiful smaller fish came right after, and I had a third fish stick that, had my buddy not grabbed the rod, I probably would've landed. Three weeks later, a repeat - another big ol' laker, 34 inches, plus a smaller, beautiful young adult around 22 inches. And throughout 2010, the year I really dedicated to the species, I don't recall once coming home without having landed a fish...or two...or three...or that day in mid-November when I beached an astonishing 14. Donner taught me so much about lake trout: the importance of moon phase timing the feeding episodes, with full moons equating to mid-day feeding and new moons to the shoulders of the day; temperature effects, with 46-48°F the temps of peak performance for lake trout (read: they'll hit fast-moving lures), mid-50s cool enough to lure lakers into the food-rich shallows, and how temps dropping into the 30s and freezing the water will push 'em out of those food-rich shallows into warmer, deeper waters; how much more active they are in windy, overcast

conditions; location, with pre-spawn fish being very concentrated on whatever rock they can find, lingering for a bit after the spawn, but then dispersing and concentrating on corners and point bars; and the clear difference in habitats and habits of young adult lakera and older fish, with the former being exclusively benthic and eating crawdads and bottom fishes, the latter pelagic and subsisting solely on kokanee and hatchery trout. And through the year, she taught about other species, too, with myriad rainbows and browns and, probably the most notable, reds coming to hand, Donner revealing that reds will happily spawn on windblown rocky lake shores.

Through 2011 and 2012 and even into 2013, she just reinforced those patterns, and they weren't waterway-specific - Sly Park and Union Valley behaved the same way. Come 2014 and after my first hip surgery, I pined for one more success to show I really understood lake trout, so I rolled up to Sly Park and quickly got my proof in the shape of a two-foot beauty. From then 'til 2020, I only went to Donner for those big pelagic lakera that shun anything less than six inches long. Then in 2020, thinking Donner still had much to teach beyond the majestic lakera, I shifted my focus to the commonplace rainbows. And, again, lessons taught and appreciated - discovered a new pattern of mysid-eating 'bows in wind-created seams during low light, and rediscovered another I'd experienced much in my Arrowhead days: mid-winter rainbows in non-inlet/outlet shallow coves on calm, warm days. That day, February 20, 2020, was so gratifying, when I fished the slip float with grace, when I had a fat five-fish catch with morning still in the day.

As our relationship matured, Donner became more than chasing fishes. Those several trips just with the giant rod for the giant fish were more than fish hunts - I only fished crepuscular periods, leaving mid-day to hike. I often traipsed along Donner Creek, ogling the lusty antics of the brilliant-crimson red salmon doing their thang, and where they were especially anxious, discovering the giant browns in the creek, also with love on their minds, but also with enough appetite and a mouth big enough to sate that appetite with a careless red. Gazing at the trees, the lodgepoles and Jeff's pines and white firs, Mountain Chickadees and Steller's Jays still gleaning through the limbs even in the alabaster of Sierra winter - life still swinging through the swoon of frigidity. And further - the artifacts of people, of a people long gone, those famous people that gave their name to the lake and pass and summit and the vibrant little creek I often paralleled: the Donner Party.

I stood once for a while at Murphy's rock, where some of those hapless emigrants made their stand, a stand many wouldn't survive. They fucked up a lot, that Donner Party: idiotically choosing Hasting's "Cutoff"; lingering too long and too frequently when they should've kept moving; not being united in plan and purpose; not shedding unnecessary shit (money, trinkets) for survival when they were really in survival mode; and lacking many skills for mountain wilderness living. But I'd be arrogant to think that had I been with 'em, I would've lived. I can barely make a fuckin' campfire in ideal conditions, let alone in snow. My hands felt like they were gonna crack off when coated with five upper layers and five lower layers of space-age garments when exposed to the wind for a mere half-hour just this week. Those people, they survived with poorer, fewer clothes that were frequently wet - for months. I likely would've been better at utilizing the local plants and animals for food: I'd catch those cutthroats, and I'd somehow glean nutrition from pine needles. Though I'm in good physical shape compared to the average middle-aged American these days, I probably wouldn't've been able to keep pace with those who slogged through deep, ponderous snow and somehow, skin and bones, descending then ascending the precipice-like

North Fork American's canyon, survived. And my will - shit, these days, I can barely get my ass off the fucking couch, and I often need a sump of coffee to get up and go. So it is such hubris to sit here and criticize all the fuckin' mistakes those cannibals committed while I lounge on my velour futon, suck down a third cup of coffee, layered in warm, soft, dry clothes, afternoon sun pouring through my window to warm my naked feet.

So many of us, really, are shit compared to the Donner Party. Such an incredibly small proportion of today's American population would've fared as well as them - most would've bitched out at the first little hindrance, lacking the tenacity, the resilience, the resourcefulness, to survive, let alone survive well. And even less have the courage to die well, like the greatest hero of that sad tale, Tamsen Donner.

Something happened there yesterday. There - the mountains, and in those mountains, the crystal splendor, and horror, and mystery, and love of Donner. Donner Lake, the lake that for so many years, 2009 through 2020, was so good to me, a lover, so giving, so giving if I researched and prepared and stayed on point and focused. And then 2021, and such - travesty. Two days of haughty, maladroit fishing in winter, and then a much better performance in autumn 'til the Final Moment, the consummation, when I crumbled. Such dismal interactions, dances, such clumsy fuckin' dances where I felt like I was stepping all over her toes, left me feeling that I'd offended her. I'd not done her the honor she deserved, nor my potential.

I needed to get the fuck back up there and get absolution, get her forgiveness. Forecast for yesterday looked very promising, and most promising for the hardest achievement, those big pelagic lakers, those emerald beauties cruising elegantly through the water with an eye searching for those feckless little kokanee and hatchery rainbows. New moon - bite should be focused on dawn and dusk. Overcast much of the day, plus some wind, but with the latter looking manageable for these tired old bones. The latter two, signals of the front of a storm, a situation that always riles lakers up - browns, too. And with it being a Thursday, my weekday day off, I couldn't not go.

The day attained perfection. Not that everything worked exactly as designed, or that things evolved exactly as planned, but I noticed and adapted to the little wrinkles in time.

Woke at the right time, obsidian pre-dawn, car already loaded - just had to brew the requisite coffee and get up there and do it. Arrived at her majesty with dawn cracking, the ideal time to get the lure crackin'. The forecast was off, though - when I reached her hem, she was glass, never, ever a good situation for lakers. And the overcast: too thin. Regrettably, like the last few years, despite all the layers of kick-ass clothes I had on, including gloves, my left hand numbed to ice nearly instantly, with my right right behind. But I busted out the big rod with a big chartreuse jig and went for it, having to innovate with my frozen hand the best way for working that rod. I performed well on the first pass: good casts, bangin' 'em out there, the jig looked so good in the water, and the custom-made hook guard was proving itself so well - no snags. Then my left hand resuscitated, hurting so bad that I screamed and nearly bawled. But its agonizing reanimation allowed me to tie on a more-natural jig (green over white) when the brighter sunlight rendered the chartreuse a bit too gaudy. I swept through the fishy lake corner again, and my casts and retrieves, my focus, all smooth, tight, but the jig - wasn't right. Fucker kept twirling with only the slightest rod pop, probably scaring more than attracting - twirling jigs totally blow off black bass, for

example. But with a motionless rod, the jig at least stayed right side up if stubbornly swimming to port, and that offered a better chance in the few minutes remaining that would've certainly been lost by the cost of digging out and tying on a new jig. Then the sun hit that 9 AM angle, lake-trout new-moon time died, and I let the big rod rest. I also ditched my ancient jig bag, its zipper a defanged gaping hole that dumped more than a few jigs and interrupted my fishing far too often through the morning.

So no pelagic laker - not unexpected, since I usually only get one chance a trip, and especially not unexpected given a lake too calm and a sun too strong. But I fished well, and, having learned from last year, had both the little and medium-power stuff to fill the void before my next pelagic laker chance, dusk.

I hiked back to the wagon for the little stuff, then back down to the lake, and, despite scolding myself *don't eat shit*, I still tumbled on the slope from the snow-covered road to the lake. My balance, while better than last year - still not great. But better, and I rather deftly hopped from one ice-slimed rock to another, following the drift of my slip float. Too, I'd rigged that ever-temperamental rig perfectly, and my sweeping casts flew with grace, I just had it, was throwing so many strikes, and the fucker turned over and drifted effectively every time. Conditions kinda sucked for the main targets, rainbows and secondarily browns - for the former in such a place and time, stable weather is much better, and for browns, they like big chop and slaty skies like lakers. But then the weather synched better with the forecast, wind came, and with it, lowering of the light below and the concentration of invertebrate goodies - mainly midges and mysids - tight to the corner. Promise. At the end of the first drift after the wind'd kicked up, I took my eye off the float to look for the next rock to pop over to, stepped, looked back to where my float was, and - nothing. Drowned, and not from a snag. Unlike the one opportunity I blew that first baleful day at Donner in 2021, I waited 'til the line tightened, then set, and set with authority. The rod fuckin' bowed over deep, signaling I'd stuck a fish bigger than the typical 14-inch rainbow - and she wasn't behaving like a rainbow, either. She kept her head down, much more like a brown or laker. I coaxed her in, and as she got within glimpsing range, I could tell she was at least a foot and a half, with flashes from her flanks suggesting lake trout. Then, freaked out by the nearing shore, she bolted, ripping off yards of line, but curiously - and most definitely un-laker-like - close to the surface. Unlike a shitty performance in the surf last year, where I haughtily had the drag winched down and broke off what was probably a big redbtail (or a halibut), I'd backed off the drag, was sensitive to the pressure, with this one. So she ran, but she didn't break. When she slowed, I tightened the pressure ever so slightly and guided her in again, tailed her with grace, and with her in hand, everything made so much sense - not jumping but not staying glued to the bottom, biting just as the wind was growing, the location, very shallow - because she was a brown trout, and big ol' beautiful lady that hit the two-foot mark. Then, fuck, 'cause I'd already preordained that any brownie I caught or up to three rainbows would come back with me - but no lake trout - I pulled out the camera, ripped off a few good frames, and killed and bled her.

And I exulted because that was a dance with elegance - great drift, great hookset, great fight, great landing, and a great kill.

I drifted the slip float a few more times, but nothing bit, not unexpected since the sun now towered high and I lingered within those doldrum early-afternoon hours. So I stowed the little rod and tested several big jigs for the upcoming last attempt at the open-water roamers. Two ran

straight, two I pinned my hopes on, and with the cove blessing me with such a beautiful fish, I hoofed to the other prime spot - the inlet.

Mid-afternoon when I hit the bank where the main feeder stream pours into the lake, and the weather was damn near identical to the forecast now - good wind, overcast, and with the clouds billowing to where they nearly seemed they'd exceed the forecast and dump water. So chances for 'bows really diminishing, but improving with each second ticking to dusk for the big lakers. Still, I ran the slip-float rig out there, and quickly caught a beautiful holdover 'bow who would've fooled that she was wild had she not a slightly wonky dorsal fin. And that, too, was a clean dance, good drift and hookset - I waited and waited and waited for that fish to take, which you generally need to when the water's 39°F - and playing her well, then a good, clean kill. Promising, but as afternoon slanted to evening, I received not another bite - the growing storm, now throwing down several rain bursts, no doubt had pushed the rainbows down, off the bank a bit, and off the bite a bit. With one final peek of the setting sun through the clouds before being sunk by the rising Sierra crest, I flung the slip-float rig out one more time, let it drift for 10 minutes, then reeled her up and set her down.

Dusk now - big-rod time now. I hesitated lifting the big rod again, given it's harder work than the little rod and I'd already ground through 10 hours of focused fishing in frigid water, with the wind bashing into me much of that time, and then the rain, too - getting cold, getting tired. But a pelagic lake trout was the aspiration, and the conditions were fucking ripe - now I had the angry sky, now I had that low-light mysterious dusk time, now I had that ruffled surface that lakers love. And I thought of Her, that she'd be disappointed if I turned coward and didn't run the relationship to completion. So I hoisted the big rod and started flinging, having to wade much deeper because I needed to be close to the drop-off to get the jig over all the fuckin' snaggy wood that collects there. Getting colder. But - I had it - I just was in the zone, fishing well, cold as I was. I swept once down the bank, with nothing to show, but with the hook guard proving itself so, so well - nearly every cast the jig hit wood when it hit the slope, but not once did it hang. Returned to the start point, the point bar's tip, and gauged I'd three more casts before needing to switch to the chartreuse, and then I probably only had three casts with that ridiculous lure until dusk fell to night. So, first cast - nothing. Moved down the point 20 feet - second cast, nothing. Moved down another 20 feet, and the final cast with the natural-colored jig, and, 'bout a third of the way in - something.

Something - a very slight pop and then a fleshy weight for just an instant, and thankfully my body reacted before my mind and reared back on the rod, once, twice, three times, and the rod bowed over, and whether I was stuck to a fish or a big chunk of wood I didn't know, but I had to assume the former and keep that fuckin' line tight, a few times having to reel blazingly fast to keep up since it was jamming to shore - not the typical behavior of drowned wood. Line building on my reel, it finally ascended the slope and sped onto the point bar's thin water, and for sure I espied not a brown hunk but, instead, a glorious lake trout, a beautiful lake trout, not huge for the species - I'd guess 28 inches - but more than big enough to prove the point. I tailed her, and I had to hold tight because she was just bulldoggin', still, still after the long dance. I ripped off a few frames, unhooked her - she was hooked perfectly, right through her cheek, not in a gill arch or eye or the nose - then, because she was bulldoggin' so much in my tailing hand, let her go, and she sailed off the point back to her abyssal haunt, shaking her head once, which I thought initially was to realign her mouth after the dance - but, nah, in her own way, she was shaking her head in goodbye.

I could only stow the rod at that point - it would've been insulting, and pointless, to cast again.

That fish - a pelagic laker - I've been needing for, God, several years now. I chased 'em in autumn 2016; 2017; at least once in 2020; and in 2021. Nearly every jaunt, I had one chance, but I blew all of 'em. But this time, after the difficult year of 2021, nothing, nothing could have proven my absolution better than that most elusive of fishes, the big open-water-roamer lake trout. And the beautiful brownie. And the beautiful 'bow. And the graceful casts, and great presentations, and being in step, in perfect synchrony, with each of those fish from the first touch to the goodbye. My timing - very good. And most of all - the little struggles I had - faulty jig, eating shit, failing tackle bag, intractably frozen hand - I didn't succumb to, as I would've in 2021 - I adapted to 'em, dealt with 'em, overcame 'em. And on the drive back home, no traffic, wagon flying, I felt what seemed the breath of eternity flow through me, palpable, benevolent, soothing the endless struggles I have with myself so long as I pay my respects, work it hard, do my homework, stay on point, and open myself. I felt as if Tamsen Donner had forgiven me.