

VIII.v: still trying

I rolled down from my little mountain respite, retreat, bastion in the Sierra yesterday towards my olden one of Arrowhead, snarled in clotted traffic when in the big ugly city, too many people largely pointless, then a faster stream as I escaped and sped south. Through the Central Valley, monotonous, 'til I hit the Tehachapis, with rolling, oddly greened hills from an unseasonable rain - autumn come early - and the oaks and grey pines, the first expression, scraggly, of the mixed-coniferous forest. Then, once again, into the bleak, *Road Warrior* expanse of the Mojave Desert and the valley of my youth, the Antelope. No antelope any longer, just losing, lost, leftover people, quitters, shit-stained and piss-stained mattresses dumped all over, garbage all over, the desert morphed into a veritable trash can. I felt that if God did exist, with humanity his image and finest creation, what a fucking ugly, insulting, wasteful expression. God justifies all, but that's bullshit - to reach potential, like all relationships across life, humanity and the land require exchange, resonance, intercourse. Humanity in that wasted land has only raped. Felt only a fucking massive firebombing could cleanse the insult. But some craggy rocks, they'd dignity among such desecration, a warm tan, and in the evening light, they glowed celestially.

So wobbly - so fucking wobbly. Long drives these days after my inner-ear failure, and I feel as if I'm floating, unhinged, unreal. The sense of dislocation, of no location, persisted into the first morning, which I had to myself - Rouse had work. Remarkably given my long tenure in my ancient range, I'd never bagged a peak - too busy with the fishes, with the friends, with the fantasy. With the increased chance of eating shit real bad were I to put foot to trail, fuck it - it'd be worth it. They always are.

So I ambled up towards Big Bear, which appalled me back in 2009 when I visited with a five-letter woman. Was summer, sure, but a weekday, and weekdays when that range was my home in the 1990s and early 2000s found the mountain placid, peaceful - was only on weekends when the overpopulated mass erupted from down the hill and obstinately smothered the mountain in maladroitness, tawdry glitz. But in '09, pining for those copious pumpkinseed Big Bear harbored, my lady and McMull and I rolled up on a Tuesday, and I was shell-shocked to silence - water roiled into a mountain echo of the fucking cemented, clogged arteries of Los Angeles and her over-fecund smear. Boats galore, a floating shitter, even a fucking pirate-themed tourist ship. Hard to see how anyone would've gotten a boat onto plane come weekend, much like getting out of second gear on the ugly concrete sprawl during rush hour a rare, freeing occurrence.

But that was between Memorial and Labor days - now I was outside that span, a fresh autumn falling, and as I wove wobbly from Springs to Big Bear, quaintness had returned. Took the spur that traces the north side of the reservoir that really is a lake - the stage doesn't swing like Berryessa or New Melones or Rollins and so a plant-dominated littoral spreads luxuriantly through wide swaths of the water. Found the trailhead relatively easily - an achievement itself of late - found an outlaw parking spot (I loathe dumping dough to park my ride at a Wild spot where my boot clears the trail), donned pack and boots, and, wobbly, began the ascent.

It was lovely. No people and copious slopes and conifers, mostly pinyons with some majestic Jeffs and some whites, the pinyons blending into thick mountain-mahogany and flannelbush, within which the birds flourished, Wilson's Warblers splashing a cheery yellow

through the drab grey-green of the mid-story. Though I stubbed toe here and there, I didn't misstep so badly as to eat shit - another accomplishment. My muscles strained but didn't snap, and in late morning, the peak laid underfoot, all mine, mine alone.

The eastern San Bernardino Mountains jagged out to my south, the foreboding Mojave Desert to the north, and above, a blue-jewel sky, not even a whisper of cloud. At 8,200 feet, though, and newborn autumn, the air remained cool. And to the northwest, a meadow, smooth green sinuous swath shouldered by thick forests. Given my affinity for meadows, I marveled that, like the peaks, I'd never set foot there. I felt the meadow's evening light, the dusk violet shadow, offered the chance of transcendence. But since the friends, the family, were my main reason for being there, that time would have to wait for either another day or never.

Then - eh, people - and I instantly felt my instinctive misanthropic recoil. But they were a sweet, polite older Asian couple, and, such a rarity when on a popular trail, not cluelessly shattering the Wild's soundscape with incessant, inane, sonic-boom chatter. They melded rather than intruded - they didn't horrify the birds. And with afternoon drifting ever closer, I drifted down from the peak, footsteps a bit more confident, sense of space a bit rooted, and by the time I reached my ride, I felt some coherence - putting boot on solid ground, even with the stubbing toes, had brought me somewhat back to Momma Earth.

Dreams as nightmares - typical. First - I'd inadvertently killed an animal - can't recall who. The other - that I can. Had monofilament strung from tree to tree to suspend birdfeeders, my attempt at growing life, the beautiful birds. But it backfired, and a big junco twisted up in it badly, line like noose around throat, so tight that he'd cut and bloodied. I held the poor bird in my hands, so warm, so soft, and tried untangling the line, but it remained snarled. He just looked at me, pained yet serene, dignity in his eye.

I broke off two fish yesterday surf-fishing for my first and only time in the mirage of southern California. First might've been reasonable - seemed like a shark had chomped my medium-power lure, a lure too weak for such an animal. But it could've been a halibut or big corbina, though I'll never know now. I didn't even think to loosen the drag when I should've. Second was inexcusable, breaking off an appropriately sized fish because I lazily and stubbornly wouldn't retie the leader when an ugly, horrible, murderous overhand knot appeared. They appear most in the surf's washing machine. In both cases, two fish now swimming around with hood ornaments stuck in their grills and leaders flailing from their mouths. I felt like a fucking asshole.

But those two failures occurred at and just after dawn - I'd still a fresh morning left to try to pull some dignity out of my ass. So I tied on a new leader, checked it periodically throughout the day, remarkably didn't lose another lure, and executed a decent run, a decent run with a new flame - yellowfin croaker. They, like my silver surfperch of home, really preferred mixed substrate - I only got 'em where cobbles mingled with sand. Beautiful fish, aquamarine jewels, very strong - they peeled line, and, unlike the morning failures, I loosened the drag with 'em. Beautiful, surprising fillets, too - much red muscle, like little striped bass fillets, and so even healthier than my typical saltwater catch, the surfperches.

Different kind of beach compared to mine in northern California. In late morning, all I had on was one shirt, unlike at home where I'm fuckin' bundled up as if in a snowstorm, and that in July and August. Warmer. Calmer ocean, too - sure, still the ocean, so the washing machine,

mainly from collapsing breakers, defeated me a few times, but nothing like the north. And people - people. Even in early morning, so many fucking people, lots of exercise junkies, seemingly exercise junkies for appearance only, and surfers, whom I respect and envy, and waders and bathers and swimmers. I lost focus on my presentation frequently, in part 'cause of all the pretty women strolling by, though many proved a deception when they neared and I could tell their voluptuousness was a mirage. One cheered me on when, rod deeply bowed over, I wrangled in a yellowfin - humanity still coming through the silicon sheen, but I didn't respond though wish now I had: she was kind. And upper class, or at least its ostentation - dudes who looked like they were stamped and spit out of 90210, posh button-up shirts, fuckin' yuppie hemmed shorts, hundred-buck haircut and fashionable designer cop frames, some talking loudly on their top-of-the-line smartphones, no doubt to impress the endless passersby. The north's ocean climate shuts down that look and behavior real quick.

All the while dolphins arced gracefully just beyond the breakers.

I'd left the mountain at 4 AM, the best time to drive through that insanity land, reaching the beach in 90 minutes. Was hoping for a similar duration on the way home, so, with four good fish in the bag - and that was all I needed - I started back to my car just after 1 PM. Long walk - apparently I'd struck further north than I thought I had in the dim dawn. After a while, and based on previous experience, I feared I'd become lost again - just seemed too far - and yet some sliver of memory suggested that I'd not walked south enough. The sliver proved right, I didn't have to backtrack at all, and I was rolling in my ride by 2 PM. But too late. Stop and go all the way to the base of the mountain, a doubling of travel time, mountains so frequently either blocked or obscured by the smoggy haze rising and shrouding. And endless strip malls, and endless big-box retailers and fast-food joints, more garbage, and sad, angry oleander stuck along the clogged concrete arteries of Insanity Land. Creeks and streams bashed and beaten into mirrors of the myriad freeways that over-connect the smothered land - they were quaint waterways with lush sycamore woodlands not long ago, with the resilient steelhead connecting 'em in wet times with the ocean. But the mountains to the left, the ocean behind, and, in the mountains and by the ocean, the climate so mild, so hospitable, an easy place to live in with the population proportionate to the water supply. It ain't.

It was a shameful day. My friend, my brother, a member of my real family, perched on my roof and blasted beautiful songbirds with a pellet gun, sadism, just killing to kill, expressing an anger no doubt stimulated by other people but too scared or too lazy to either release that energy accurately or divert it to creation - a song, a drawing, muscle-building swings at the punching bag. I chastised he and my other friend who accompanied him in the sadism, but my admonition was weak, didn't deter either. After their murderous bout, I mopped up the one-sided battlefield, so many pointlessly dead all around except one - a lone elegant Steller's Jay, crippled, such pain pouring from her sable eye, so I quickly nabbed the gun and killed the suffering bird with a shot to the skull. My heart even now quails at the memory.

Shamefully, I in my childhood displayed such psychopathy, pummeling our poor cats and dogs for imagined slights such as not paying attention to me - scapegoats for the relatives, and just passing their violence along. Would have been correct had I turned around and met action with reaction, though, being just a kid, I would've caused a bigger barrage. Too - I was imitating, and

what a horrible example to follow. The sadism persisted into my early teens, for example, when I so disgustingly stomped beautiful, iridescent black crappie to hear their swimbladders pop, spewing a psycho's sadistic laugh. My fishing buddy, while also tainted with a bit of sadism, wasn't amused - he sensed, correctly, that here was some really fucking disturbing behavior.

Not surprisingly, when I found fringe art in my mid-teens and then especially when I left my relatives, the sadism ceased - the friends, my real family, they rescued and then nurtured my whittled empathy, and ironically that included those two dudes up on the roof murdering such lovely animals, animals who, like them, were ever becoming my family, too.

That was nearly 30 years ago.

Yesterday, I rolled over to my friend's abode, one sited so close to where that heinous avian crime had occurred, to help him fix his deck, us complementing each other, he sawing and affixing, me painting. Such a pleasant mountain morning, softening autumn sun liting through white firs and big ponderosas, we chatting occasionally about us, the Tribe, but often silent other than the squeaks of the numerous grey squirrels and the orchestral emanation from the myriad birds. My friend, my brother, has always had a heart of gold, but man, it's often been closed, and, when open, for just a short period and directed very narrowly. But here, at his winter-battered house, in the soft sun, with the breath of breeze, he no longer tossed death-dealing inanimate pellets at the myriad birds but, instead, sunflower seeds and peanuts. And the openness was lasting, with the Steller's Jays, the ones who so long ago suffered his presence, now relishing it, endlessly coming within arm's reach for an offered treat. The grey squirrels even more so - they trusted him so much to take the peanut from his hand. They'd saved him, too.

The deck looked fucking awesome once finished - ready for winter.

Rose yesterday morning in better shape than the previous two - I'd no mini-migraine radiating out from the right side of my head. My last southern California day, and with the abatement of my self-abuse - the mini-migraines a subconscious self-abuse - I was gifted with a light shower outside, a soothing grey ceiling perforated with falling teardrops of sky. I packed and loaded my shit quickly - I'd a long drive ahead of me - and, woozy, wobbly again, down the mountain we went to the train station, where I needed to drop off Rouse. From the lovely spires of ponderosa pines and white firs and incense-cedars, then dropping through the Coulter pines with their massive cones, then stands of little knobbies, big-cone spruce in the draws, and then that spindly, shaggy chaparral that covers much of the slopes of southern California, and then, finally, bottoming out on the smothered, the concreted floor of the fossil valley. Much to my surprise, the grey sheets persisted down to valley floor, and after I dropped off Rouse, in that seemingly endless labyrinth of southern California, Urbanity and Suburbia, they broke loose, they, so heavy, couldn't hold it anymore, and they poured down, they cried, even across the crest of the Transverse Range into the bleak expanse of the southern Mojave Desert as the Antelope Valley bunched up against the northern flank of the San Gabriels - a cleansing for all, so needed, and a message, a message that even in the seemingly endless Urbanity and Suburbia of southern California - beauty, and Wild beauty remains, remains in the vibrant, iridescent, turquoise-and-yellow croakers I coaxed from the surf, in the stillness only interrupted by a light breeze sifting through the single-leaf pinyons and junipers and gallant Jeff pines on the high part of the northeast San Bernardinos, in the playful antics of the jays and squirrels at my friend's house, and creation of perfect Nature when my friend,

once a sadistic motherfucker like me who reveled in the false power of torturing little animals, with open heart and nothing but love fed the grey squirrels by hand, and they looked so healthy, and in that instance, my friend did, too.