

the land of little...california

I hiked a strenuous, glorious 10 miles yesterday, among diamond granite and glowing green conifers and the chatters and twitters of Mountain Chickadees and twinkling little subalpine creeks. As my body roamed over the wild country, my mind roamed over ideas and images and experiences with some link to the trees and the rock and the water. I thought about my relationship with fishes, how it's progressed, and about its expression in photos, the signposts of that progress, the ethics they reflect. The fish porn, however trite and twisted it may seem, serves as the map, the resume, of where I've been, what I've learned, what I've been, who I've been; similarly, it forms the ethical criteria that guides my future endeavors - who I should be. I thought, too, about the women who've shared my life, the lost opportunities, the misfired emotions, the shame, the awkwardness, the love, the lust, the kindness, the sweetness, and how I gotta accept both the good and bad of all those relationships to better my current and future ones. And I thought, finally, about *why* I really was *thinking*, and deeply, about heavy shit while stomping amid the woods and water. It was the environment's damn fault - such a montane scene has been the setting for so many joyful, life-saving experiences that these Nature walks, man, they just fucking *free* me. When suffering in the house of my old man, I could zoom over to little Lake Gregory, to its sapphire-emerald waters encircled by towering ponderosa pines and shiny incense-cedars, and feel some fucking life that wasn't dismissive, that wasn't insulting, and that also gave me a sense of accomplishment and thus meaning via a fish on the line. That coniferous setting also clothed Deep Creek, where the posse and I cliff-jumped and swam and fished during the most vibrant time in my social life, the first few years after high school, when the crew and I were all fucking really tight. Of course my first exposure to the water and trees and fishes that changed my life's direction, the South Fork Kern, its arid pinyon pines and grizzled old juniper trees and mirror waters and precious Sacramento suckers. And I'd be self-denying if I didn't admit that the solitude of these Nature walks, the absence of the oppressive mental intrusion of other people, abates my misanthropy, calms it, thereby releasing me to really think and feel.

It reminds me of another cat fired up by mingling with the spires and firs: the godfather of California environmentalism, John Muir. I first read his *Mountains of California* in my late 20s, when I was busting my ass during the day at a soul-killing job and frequently suckin' down copious suds at night to escape the soul-killing job. I was really fucking self-deluded then, fooling myself that I could be a stable middle-class guy with this fractured mental landscape and associated need for solitude. So I also read other tomes that I thought any erudite, typical bourgeois American should've perused: *Les Miserables*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Anna Karenina*, basically well-known revered classics. While all good books, well-written, engaging, zippy, they just didn't strike a very deep chord in me - I'd never felt the slightest desire to pick up any of those books and get into 'em again, so I gave 'em away. But Muir's? That one I kept, sensing that I might have some resonance with it that had yet to be realized. Since working in fisheries science, I'd felt that suspicion become stronger, that some alignment might exist between Muir's ideas and my own, that his prose might illuminate some dim notions floating in my own mind. So I read it again, and I found that there was, that it did. Seemed reasonable then to read *The Land of Little Rain* by Mary Austin, the godmother of California environmentalism, and I found some synergy and insight there, too.

The language in both books strums my soul - it's romantic, redolent with intimate, lusty portraits of glaciers, of trees, of flowers and birds and winds and storms. Muir seems like he's

sportin' a big boner while describing some aspect of Nature's countenance, such as American Dippers or Douglas squirrels or the sound of the wind through the conifers, in glittering, exuberant prose. Austin's writing is florid, too, with vibrant descriptions of Nature, for example, in the way she describes in myriad, minute detail Nature's many facets in the Owens Valley and up to the peaks of the surrounding ranges. Nature, to Mary and Muir, has personality, has emotion like people do, they see the life in Nature, relate to Her as lovers, as friends, as their own intimate society...kinda like a certain misanthropic nutcase who also finds Nature a surrogate for humanity. And their language certainly ain't that of those whose work they inform: many modern environmental workers. The dry, monochrome verbiage of a statistician explaining a mathematical model, the lifeless wordy jargon spewed out by desktop biologists (read: bureaucrats), so much different from Mary and Muir, who doth not state facts in the dull doggerel so often comprising a modern paper or report about the same subjects. To Mary and Muir, Nature ain't an inanimate factory you turn on and off according to an instruction manual, but a living being you have a relationship with, that you write a story with.

The dispassionate, "objective" (as if there is such a thing) scientist is often venerated these days as the purest source of truth. Mary and Muir, I wager, would've thought differently since their words stress the importance of emphatic, direct experience and emotion in understanding, in science. For example, Mary writes, "Never believe what you are told, that midsummer is the best time to go up the streets of the mountain - well - perhaps for the merely idle or sportsmanly or scientific; but for seeing and *understanding*, the best time is when you have the longest leave to stay" (p.72; emphasis added). Paraphrased: you wanna understand Nature, you gotta spend a lot of time with Her, and especially when She's at Her wildest. It's congruent to my own feelings, mainly about how so fucking many people in aquatic science really only know their subjects from words on paper, words on a computer screen (the more common route), or numbers on a computer screen (*i.e.*, data), and so their knowledge is limited to a two-dimensional representation of reality diluted through other people. They miss so much, locked up in the static, controlled environment of the cubicle, they can't feel the temperature changes as the clouds obscure the sun, they can't see the water muddy up as the tide starts to rip, they can't smell the fecund odor of the fermenting marsh plain, they can't hear the roar and rumble of the crashing stream, all of which affect plants and animals and almost none of which ends up in a database. Now do many aquatic scientists have insights? Absolutely - few can better discern subtle data patterns than a skilled statistician. But do they better understand the aquatic environment? A smidgen at best - they have a wealth of knowledge about numbers, but those numbers reflect only a tiny fragment of the reality, of the sensible world. Too, the simplified, sullen world of computers and endless numbers precludes eliciting any visceral *emotion*, an energy that enhances memory and subsequent comparison and understanding. As Muir writes,

...it is generally supposed that complete pleasure of this kind, permeating one's very flesh and bones, unfits the student for scientific pursuits in which cool judgment and observation are required. But the effect is just the opposite. Instead of producing a dissipated condition, the mind is fertilized and stimulated and developed like sun-fed plants (p. 96).

In this age when drab, lifeless LCD screens increasingly dominate life, the importance of emotion in understanding rises in direct correlation. I mean, come on - what do you remember

better - your first fuck and its setting, or the first statistics equation you learned and the classroom it occurred in?

I'll put it another way - if you wanted to understand some aspect of the Sierra, some relationship, who'd you trust more - Mary and Muir, or some dude who sits in a fuckin' office all day? Or as Ed Abbey would say - you want science, or scientism?

And it's notable how often Muir refers to his ramblings in *Mountains of California* as "studies."

Mary and Muir sing another tune that touches me - both display awareness and appreciation of the beauty of *all* Nature, not just the pristine spires of the Sierra Nevada or White Mountains. Muir writes of the need to escape our common surroundings, to explore unknown locations and climes, not only for expanding experience and knowledge but for reinvigorating love of the sights and smells and tastes of our home plants and waters and animals. He promotes the importance of contrast (not unlike Aldo Leopold), really - discovering novel, remote Nature to reaffirm the value of common, local Nature. Of course, one premise here is that some local Nature actually exists to which an excursion to a distant landscape can reference; or, conversely, the ability exists to *recognize* the local Nature that contains inherent beauty. Mary gets it. For example, her refreshing lack of prejudice towards non-native species. Dig: "The *seegoo* establishes itself very readily in the swampy borders, and the white-blossomed spikes among the arrow-pointed leaves are quite as acceptable to the eye as any native species" (p. 88). More revealing is her description of the little field by her house, an intimate, unassuming Nature, one that recalls Muir's statement in *The Mountains of California*: "...the very abundance and completeness of the common beauty that besets our steps prevents its being absorbed and appreciated" (p. 240). Mary certainly wasn't prevented. In contrast, it reminds me of some of my well-adjusted, middle-class coworkers who are prevented, who seem to believe that Nature is only something you *go to*, such as a national park, not something you *live with*. In this overly domesticated world, discerning local Nature is exceedingly difficult given that it just exists in gossamer threads beset by encroaching expanses of uniform human development - but it is there. Many people just can't recognize it, which is why they burn big bucks and fuel jet-setting to fucking Patagonia or New Zealand and then either castigate the gilded *wild* carp in the Arboretum Waterway as invasive shit-eaters or stare starry-eyed and dumbfounded when told that "nasty" lower Putah Creek contains edible bass and sunfish. They're duped, these supposedly Nature-lovin' fools, duped by corporate marketing and upper-class ethos into thinking that Nature's only found in fucking faraway places that often cost a fortune to visit.

And what a fuckin' burly stud Muir was and what a tough fuckin' bitch Mary was, weathering the harsh, unpredictable Sierra Nevada and White Mountains and bone-baking desert with the most bare-bones possessions - they could only do that had they been molded in part by the landscapes they roamed. Mary alludes to the force that environment has on the character of people when describing her miner friend, the Pocket Hunter, who had been "...saturated with the elements..." (p. 28) to where he didn't even notice 'em anymore. In other words - he was one with the stark, convoluted desert where he pined for his motherlode. She writes of the Shoshones "...living like their trees..." (p. 35), and when describing Seyavi, comes a little closer to the point: "To understand the fashion of any life, one must know the land it is lived in and the procession of the year" (p. 64). A rugged, wild country forms rugged, resourceful people - like Muir, like Mary, like the Pocket Hunter, like the Paiutes and Shoshones. Or the flip side - homogenous, predictable environments, such as the climate-controlled, four-walled, right-angled room with the glaring computer screen, breed homogenous, predictable people. And that's an

increasingly pervasive environment, spreading, infecting, conquering more and more of the world's area and time, and it creates weaker people with restricted, faint, distorted notions of what the real world, what Nature, actually is. And some of those people direct how we act towards Nature.

I think Muir, given his need for Nature as society, and Mary, given her unvarnished love, would instantly recognize the priceless nature of attentively watching, and the beauty in, a golden-emerald Sacramento sucker sliding effortlessly alongside a golden-bronze common carp up onto stodgy Putah Creek's riffles for a periphyton snack under the dying dusk sun, despite the smoke-coughing planes whizzing overhead from the Sacramento airport, despite the endless vehicles roaring along the interstate. And they'd be disturbed by all the homogenous people walking by on the groomed trail, "loving" Nature by staring at smart-phone images of Argentina and New Zealand.

And, oh, yeah - they're good books.

REFERENCES

Austin, M. 2003. The land of little rain. United States, Modern Library.

Muir, J. 2001. The mountains of California. United States, Modern Library.