

0.v.iii: there but for the grace of she and she go I

It was horrible, horrifying, it, they and me – no us. No – same locale, but different galaxies. The scene: me, the new kid, a scrubby freshman, fuckin’ fraying K-mart clothes and no-name shoes, sloppy bowl haircut, head hung down, slouching alone on a concrete square in a searing noontime sun, the dreaded lunchtime period, no warm pizza slice or burger from the high-school cafeteria, only a stale peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich on imitation WonderBread from crinkled paper bag, with a bruised banana I loathed so tossed in the trash. A working-class kid, if that, no dough for a decent lunch or quality, let alone fashionable, clothes. Bewildered, ashamed, resentful, scared, of them, of me, and not knowing why. Puberty’d lit something that’d laid dormant for many years that’d already polluted that which should’ve flowered in innocence. Damned before birth, tarnished to some degree forever – a blooming, deformed, cancerous flower. So desperate to realize the flower without the horror, but the cancerous growth was incomprehensible, inexorable, undeniable yet unacceptable, and so there I sat, staring mostly at the concrete pavement but occasionally glancing up furtively with such forlorn longing at the budding young women strolling by, swirled within this conundrum, which they felt and so avoided me.

Loner and loser, withering in a deepening dissociative haze on the concrete square in the seething sun of a psychotic torture *San Diego* of southern California – no saint for me. A prime candidate to pick up a gun and splatter those I so envied in a senseless, pointless, unjustified externalizing of hate – they didn’t deserve it, but neither did I.

But I never showered student blood onto the school square with blazing bullets, and it was because of the twin nurturing continuous streams of my life, the wild and art, manifested first in fishes and fringe music, respectively. Both saved me, *us*, from psychopathy, though I took longer to open and empathize with the fishes fully and treat ‘em as they deserved, with love and respect and restraint. Fringe music – it was the first savior in that vicariously I’d finally found my people, people who, like me, were fucked up, not of mainstream society, not like the pretty blooming ladies or muscle-burgeoning jocks carelessly strolling by, yet there they were living, creating, morphing destructive energies into beautiful art. Instead of picking up a gun and blasting away, they snatched up guitars and microphones and strummed and sang away. Siouxsie was my first and lone vicarious friend as that first high-school year aged, and she kept what little empathy I’d still had smoldering, ironically when she sang, “...and I have seen all I want to, and I have felt all I want to...” Like me, and though I felt such despair, agonized by so much that I wanted but could never have, without remaining able to feel that despair, she and I wouldn’t’ve been able to relate, and then maybe I really would’ve beaten Klebold and Harris to the punch by a decade.

And she wasn’t alone – no, an entire society of similarly disenchanted and disenfranchised people existed, and I owed my introduction to ‘em 37 years ago to my step-cousin, my one living relative (I assume – she may be dead, my last contact with her over a quarter-century ago) whom I still consider family. She was our best: gifted in learning’s three branches (intellectual, aesthetic, and athletic – she kicked my ass much), already remarkably insightful as a teenager, and funny as fuck. She’d asked me what music I liked as we sat in the back seat of a car bumbling down Lake Arrowhead roads, and I barely understood the question since I’d had such little exposure to music that I really didn’t know about different styles – I said something such as “radio stuff,” dominantly bland hair metal (I’d Poison and Def Leppard tapes I’d play the night before biking to Lake

Gregory the following dawn) as well as “I Think We’re Alone Now” Tiffany. She ridiculed my taste, which I also didn’t quite grasp – again, I’d no reference points for comparison. Later in her dungeon-like basement bedroom, seemingly to irritate me, she spun several fringe music records, but the effect was exactly opposite – Siouxsie and Bauhaus and the Specials and Crass, they seemed to strum my heart, were the tribe I’d always wanted but never had. The instant after that pivotal moment, when I had both cash for a cassette and means to reach a music store, I bought Siouxsie’s *Peepshow*, and the rescuing began.

That I took longer to really feel the life in the fishes was because they were there in front of me, breathing, spirit flowing, more intimate and intense than the plastic spinning in the cassette-player: lives with whom I’d a direct connection. I couldn’t escape the look in their eyes. Even exposing myself to empathize with those animals, subconsciously, I must’ve felt too threatened by – humanity’s betrayals had slashed very deep, much blood lost and blackened to tar. Too, I didn’t much know how. The paradox of the relationship between predator and prey further complicated, where the great predator loves his prey – can’t survive let alone live without ‘em – yet kills ‘em. And my relationship with the fishes at that point was still very young, inchoate, crude, though genuine. I absolutely felt exhilaration and elation when I caught well, a resounding success, and a success I desperately needed because of how much I was failing in the mainstream world, my grades during that first high-school year proof: many Fs. And because that success coupled with resentment and frustration and a desperate need for recognition as well as an inability to clean and preserve and cook fish well (and no one to teach me), I killed many fishes unnecessarily and even tortured some – shameful, which, thank Medb, I still feel so intensely.

One such episode remains especially vivid in memory. At Chambers Pond for the first of many times, this lovely little wild pond in the sere rolling hills west of Poway, a creek flowing in and out, fringed with cattails, croaking big bullfrogs, racoons scouring the shoreline for rambling crawdads come dusk, the only shore access being a bare bank on the east side and a wooden pallet someone before me had tossed onto the cattails on the northwest side. I’d the clunky mass of gear with me – bulky tackle boxes, a medium-power baitcaster, a light spinning rod. My mother, Reta, had dumped me there in late morning on her work commute, promising to return at dusk when her shift ended. I hauled my gear over to the pallet, and perplexed on how to fish her, I mindlessly casted out a mealworm with only a split shot to sink it – that must’ve been based on my success with bluegill at Pyramid Reservoir, where I fished the same rig though with redworms or nightcrawler chunks. Surprisingly, I was rewarded uniquely and richly: I caught four big dinnerplate redear sunfish, glittering iridescent turquoise backs and canary chests, candy-apple-red crescent earrings. They were so big I even broke one off. As was my wont at that time, I didn’t even consider releasing ‘em – no one would’ve believed me if I had – so I stabbed ‘em onto a stringer. The ‘worm bite died come evening, so I lugged back over to the east bank and, killing time ‘til Reta reappeared, began literally playing around with the medium gear, tinkering with each lure in my box that I’d little experience with, Rapala minnows and spinnerbaits (both massively overrated), Hula Poppers, Jitterbugs, and, come dusk, the buzzbait – a ¼-oz white one. As the light dimmed and blued, mind wandering, the buzz skittering, a bubbling anxiety since Reta’d yet to show, the water exploded right near my bank, frightening me – at first I wasn’t sure the source, but then guessed a fish might’ve swiped at the lure. Shuddering, I recast the buzz, and, spitting and whirling, as it neared where the splash had occurred, the water erupted again, but this time the

rod buckled and confirmed my hunch. My heart throbbed violently as the rod lurched because I'd never hooked a fish this large, and I desperately wanted to land her. Seemed a lifetime in what was probably only a minute or two, and then, in near blackness, I lipped a fine biggie, at least a foot and a half, easily my largest fish by that point. I was shocked, in part because the buzzbait seemed such a silly lure, but it sure as fuck got serious here with this relatively big largemouth in hand. A great fish...and I stuck her on the stringer with the vibrant redear.

Reta called to me shortly thereafter, and I excitedly raced up with my heavy catch, pining for that approbation I never really received and still couldn't accept would never come. Didn't then – Reta loathed fish, even when they clearly sparked my ailing life. Once home, I placed my catch (they probably still had a touch of suffering life) in the garage fridge, an ancient puke-green machine dragged from Lancaster earmarked for my fish and bait – the former Reta could never envision as food to go into the kitchen fridge with the masquerade of generic cola and fuckin' Stankquet microwave “dinners” – such irony. I don't think I even bagged 'em. And there they laid for seemingly ever, dulling, drying, eyes skinning, slowly though imperceptibly rotting. When I finally scored a few friends late in that freshman year, our connections fused through fishing, and they visited my house, I proudly opened the puke fridge's door to show 'em my trophies. They didn't, however, shower me with compliments and eye me with admiration – instead, they were uneasy, equivocal, and they questioned not only why I'd killed 'em but why I hadn't preserved 'em properly or eaten 'em. I couldn't answer 'em, for not only was I unsure myself, but I was so frail inside that I couldn't admit that I didn't know how.

It was that summer when I tortured those beautiful, hapless, helpless black crappie up at [Gregory](#), and there, too, another friend certainly wasn't admiring or complimentary but horrified. Symptoms of a sick, deteriorating, deformed nascent man – fuck, like a distant, mild echo of the bona fide psychopath Ed Kemper, who said he couldn't kiss a woman unless he killed her, who brought home his victims as if trophies. Me? With the bass and redear and with trout at Gregory, I couldn't be a fisherman without killing 'em and possessing 'em as keepsakes in the fridge...or in the case of those sweet, glittering panfish, torturing to death.

I was blessed, however, because soon after, those behaviors ceased, largely because fringe music had engulfed me – I'd now far more albums than *Peepshow*, and of various forms [noir (*i.e.*, “post-punk,” “goth”), punk, industrial, ska, good rock (*i.e.*, “alternative rock”)], which served as a widening bridge across which myriad new connections with real humans formed, especially with my crew in my late high-school years, and so to my growing vicarious people were added my real people. And then my empathy rose, flowed more strongly and more broadly and beyond humanity.

During winter break of my sophomore year, I hiked over underdressed in a bone-clattering brittle cold of early morning to Catfish Cove on Gregory, Siouxsie's “Land's End” rolling on repeat in my mind's stereo. I tossed out an inflated ‘crawler on a sliding-sinker rig into the opal, calm, cold water, and come mid-morning, the line straightened, the rod bent, and I connected with a good trout. A typical wintertime sunken wrestle, and then I held in my hand a perfect 15-inch rainbow, seemingly a wild fish, arrow-straight fins, hooked on the lip, just a harmless little piercing. I stuck a stringer through the thin membrane of her lower jaw, a habit now rutted for several years, and placed her back in the water, she swimming with such vigor, such *life* against the agonizing anchor stringer. But she stayed there only shortly – she'd touched me. I removed the stringer from the bigger piercing, a greater injury than the little hook hole but much less than if I'd jabbed the

stringer through her gill, then held her gently by the tail in the icy water, my hand chilling to ice. She soon dashed away with dignity.

I'd finally realized, at least subconsciously, that it'd never come, and even if it had, I still would've been wrong to kill her. And it was ultimately because of the grace of she and she.