

## ***I: the whirlwind tour***

A whirlwind tour of the Delta, a story about how humanity shapes the land, how the land shapes humanity, and how humanity straitjackets humanity. Hit five spots: the giant South Delta pumps, Bethany Reservoir, then to the Big Break nature center, then to Isleton, ol' Isleton, to partake of some in-Delta grub, and finally a plaintive sunset drive through the North Delta, a sunset drive aching to pull you out of the boxed-in vehicle and into the wind-lashed land, to feel that cool, ocean-born air willowing and waving, to see the shimmering gilded sunrays slipping behind the ancient Coast Range without the diluting, distorting effect of the pockmarked windshield.

The giant intake canal at the State Water Project's giant pumping plant, a canal and pumping plant conjured and built by people with a vision of perfection, of an ideal, of a society, a Great Society that fomented in the '50s under Eisenhower and attained its paradoxical apex during Johnson's administration in the 1960s, when the old Texan strived for a lofty, unattainable Utopia free of poverty and racism on the homeland while waging the most barbaric of wars in a distant country, a war considered most successful when dead bloated bodies stacked highest. The pumps were born when America's ruling class was infatuated and enthralled by the nation's technological prowess, so enthralled that they forgot the foundation on which America was built, they buried what came before and came before successfully, they yearned to replace the seemingly backwards, unruly, unrefined Wild and Indians with the right-angled order and stamp of the technology that ushered in the end of World War II with two giant blasts. That replacement's error, of course, the Vietnam War exhibited beautifully, where an under-equipped, out-gunned people intimately familiar with their own land defeated the biggest, baddest nation in the world. The Vietnamese nationalists - nimble, flexible, maneuverable, assimilating seamlessly into the landscape, they outflanked and outran and outfoxed the overloaded, obvious, cacophonous, sluggish, poor American soldiers and their arrogant, implacable generals. And the giant intake channel of the pumping plant, the right-angled, tamed, crude Eisenhower-era ideal of a perfect river, giant and recessed between hacked hills overlooked by waving golden poppies in a soft springtime sun, massive pump house likewise sunk into a human-carved pit in the mountains, staid, entrenched, emplaced, immovable and ever so vulnerable to a far more formidable, flexible, perseverant foe: the waiting ocean.

Bethany Reservoir, the first reservoir in the manmade network receiving the gravity-defying Delta water. Riprap-faced dam backed by an earthen inverted pyramid, America's Giza-like temple garishly announcing her technological prowess, waterweed vacuumed from the Delta deposited on the shoreline, and a deep, seemingly abyssal blue, impenetrable. Close to the bank, it looked just like much of the Delta, only scarred, scarred and stained by dead bloated bodies of striped bass, the best substitute for the extinct thicketail chub and extirpated Sacramento perch, a species requiring a good river, a good estuary, and a good ocean to persist and flourish, and a species reviled - because they cull the weakest of the weak, fucking domesticated salmon - by the Endangered Species Act and by bourgeois, stiff-minded environmentalists. Dead on the banks, very likely from the senseless predator-removal program forced onto the watershed by the National Marine Fisheries Service, another ever-wise federal agency, which infects the poor people carrying out the task with a hateful eye towards their quarry, resulting in shitty fish-handling and subsequent high mortality when our best signal of successful tidal restoration - given acceptance of our warming climate - is dumped unceremoniously into little Bethany Reservoir. Gooks of the Delta. What a fucking waste of money, manpower, and energy, so

senseless, removing one of our beleaguered estuary's beacons of health: wild-spawned predators adapted to the dam-free, diversion-free watershed. What a fucking narrow viewpoint pushing this abject stupidity. What a horrible waste of the ecosystem's production, removing big, beautiful, bountiful striped bass and depriving the estuary and the estuary's people and the pulse of the estuary's fucking health of their fecundity by either killing 'em outright due to mishandling or just dumping 'em into Bethany. The dead bodies floating belly up in the little reservoir, they are the indictment of our mismanagement of the estuary, they're the indictment of our misbehavior toward Wild life, highlighting our insensitivity and crude understanding, our ignorance, of basic ecology, our appalling inability to see the interconnectedness and gradations and nuances among Wild life, native and non-native, and humanity, an echo of the static, black-and-white minds that put pen to paper and birthed the Endangered Species Act.

Big Break. A laser-leveled parking lot, trimmed and tamed blue oaks and coast live-oaks framing the linear asphalt parking spaces, concrete and gravel paths funneling visitors to the shiny, right-angled building housing human representations of the Delta in Magritte-like formats while smaller dirt trails snaked off into waving grasslands, grasslands frothing with wild grasses and vetch and embracing water-fern-coated ponds mingling with tules and thatches of willows veiling hidden worlds held close to their trunks. Our students and employees dutifully followed the concrete path right to the door of the right-angled shiny building, and, when found that the building was locked, nevertheless peered intently and excitedly at the exhibits inside, their backs facing the real thing. It was instinctive, inherent, ingrained. Slowly, some of us ambled down to the real thing, the actual Delta, today's Delta, where clear water framed by chattering avuncular cottonwoods and laughing child-like tules rolled and roiled under the exhalation of an ocean-born breeze. An Asian fisherman, cane pole in hand, no reel, standing quiet and still like a heron, plucked one sunfish after another with ease and grace from the lapping water, gracefully sinuous, filling his bucket with effortlessly given Delta gifts. It seemed so natural to him, this actualizing of an ancient rite. I've little doubt, given the skill and sophistication Asians and Eastern Europeans and Hispanics display with turning what to Americans is inedible fish into a well-hewed dinner, that the graceful man would've been just as content with hitch and splittail. I could see him, however, cast a distrustful, frustrated eye on biologists and engineers cutting into his fishing spot for native fishes, rendering the water unfishable for a fat chunk of time, only to have the clear water and sunfishes return, sunfishes he could have had the entire time the engineers and biologists - *us* - were mucking things up in a fruitless endeavor. A heavy-handed, insensitive approach framed and informed by black-and-white minds beaten by Vietnam, a failure the black-and-white minds couldn't accept, contrasted by the stately man, cane pole in hand.

Empty, aching bellies wafted us from Big Break to ol' Isleton, that old town on the river, that flood-beaten town, that tough town, where, nevertheless, the river always flows by and sometimes into, where the wind always funnels that ocean teleconnection, where old fields of generations of farms still receive the harrow and plow, where echoes of humanity that birthed the state of California remain palpable. Los Angeles and the Bay Area and Sacramento, over-developed urban worlds, they dominate what was, at California's American birth, a rural land: orange groves ruled where concrete now smothers in the shadows of the Transverse Range, expansive grasslands fed Spanish cattle in the Bay Area, and here, in the hub of the Central Valley, groves and farms bloomed as the Gold Rush's precious mineral metal grain subsided, Indians and Chinamen working their asses off to provide the vital rail and trail and river connections to transmit the fruits of the lands. In Sacramento's extension, Davis, the kids born in

the womb of the modern technocracy, it don't matter if they're black or white or Hispanic or Chinese - they seem so homogenous, and why not when they all spend most of their time staring at a tiny right-angled LCD screen, all interacting with the same few programs spawned by Apple, by Google, the Facebook-YouTube-Instagram-Twitter slivers of warped electronic frivolity, their minds reflections of the same GUIs, their fingers all trained to swipe the same way? I see them frequently nearly walking into trees or crashing their bikes, headphones stemming from their smart-phones deeply entrenched in their ears, emplaced, totally closed off from the waiting world wailing outside. And it's pervasive, a scene recurring in LA and San Francisco and Sacramento, a Huxleyian/Orwellian eternal recurrence. But in Isleton, where the trees wave and the old schoolhouse sits shivering in fear of the raging floodwaters so frequently threatening to whisk all away, people can't just dissolve into the simplified, fractured facsimile beaming hypnotically from their little screens but have to pay attention to that sensuous world that always threatens under a glassy calm just over the levee. The people - they're unique, they have identity, and, as frequently seen in rural areas where each person's value goes up in inverse proportion to the population size, they display a heartfelt warmth that is just not often seen anymore in our urbanized, strip-mall, corporation-dominated technocracies. The lovely black couple at the authentic barbeque joint, with generational tendrils wedded to the soggy, swampy world that wind back to the Mississippi yet find resonance and belonging in our Delta, much like the largemouth bass and redear sunfish that also find the Delta a familiar, comfortable home, they spoke to us as if neighbors, kin, as if inviting us into their home. The old grizzled local white people in the beer joint a few buildings down, weathered skin formed and creased by the blows of lives lived hard under raging river waters bashing levees and blasting Delta winds tottering trembling eucalyptus and cottonwood trees, they said more, with more honesty, to each other and *us*, outsiders, than I think you could garner anywhere in Davis, where you'll see endless restaurant tables stocked with a half-dozen people all staring at their smart-phones, only acknowledging the real humans a mere few feet away with languid nods and a few stilted words not far removed from the reduced language of their texting hands, a reduced language prophesied by Orwell. I don't recall once seeing any of those Isleton cats staring hypnotically into their smart-phones - they were too busy looking at each other. A vanishing art, recalling Harmonica's line in *Once Upon a Time in West* when referring to an individual, a man, a woman: "An ancient race." A vanishing race.

We didn't leave the beer joint 'til the sun had nearly sunk behind the Coast Range, casting soft violet light on little Isleton. In our bevy of cars, a brilliant, streaking light splashing through streaking springtime clouds and gilt-tinting the sine-curve sway of rhythmic wheat, we wound our way along crumpled rural roads of the North Delta, needing to swerve a few times to avoid heat-soaking gopher and California king snakes basking on the simmering asphalt. Red-winged Blackbirds and Great-horned Owls and egrets and herons and Mallards blew up from myriad tule-fringed canals, and I wondered what swam beneath their surfaces. Expansive fields, some with wheat, some orchards, the total seemingly more diverse than the farmland outside the Delta's perimeter, flowed on and on, monolithic, striking in their magnitude. Striking, too, in their abyss, the level of the fields so far below that of the walled-in sloughs, Miner and Steamboat, pointing to an undeniable future of a deep, open-water world, and a warm one, where maybe, just maybe, young stripers and shad and hitch and blackfish may have a chance if the redear can keep the damn *Corbicula* at bay - redear may be our best ally in the fight against the clams in fresh water. I thought, too, about the maligned common carp, how loathed they are in the Midwest, where they root out aquatic weeds and muddy up the water, foreign features to

Wisconsin lakes but certainly ancestral traits of the Delta. Carp, too, they're an ally, but few in this watershed probably perceive 'em as such. Takes a shift in perspective, of seeing life not in sterile notions contrived out of place, out of time, but of seeing life in place to have such an appreciation, but I can see how difficult it can be for *us* to see life in place when we're so frequently not in that place in so many ways. And I'm losing faith that the black-and-white-mind clothing we wear has any potential to allow that evolution, an evolution we need to assimilate with, to engage with, to accept and to nurture the evolution of our Wild world.

Wasn't 'til dark that I reached my little yellow house, my little yellow house with its little patch of wild weeds blowing up in my backyard and threatening to envelope my well-attended birdfeeder. Tired, I fell onto my bed, the rustling weeds outside my backyard rustling like the wheat and the tules of the Delta, and I imagined a thicket bass staring quizzically into a vastly different future world while suffocating under the weight of actions by well-intentioned marionettes orchestrated by black-and-white minds stained and never reconciled with Vietnam.