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A fisherman's heritage

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A Fisherman's Heritage

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Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

Norman Maclean

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Without the great fishermen and writers who have come before me this work would not exist. Tight lines!

For Mom who did not worry when I went fishing alone,

and Dad who first put rod and reel in my hand.

Preface

When I started this project, I planned to write a scholarly work that traced what certain authors said about the angling experience. I was going to find the elements that define angling literature and demonstrate them to an audience otherwise unfamiliar with the genre. When I started writing, however, I found that I could not write objectively about fishing. I was bringing too many of my own experiences to the project.

I then decided to write a series of personal essays that explore angling as I know it. When I started writing, I found that I could not write just about fishing. Too much of this writer's life is tied to the sport. The self is always at the center of angling literature. Fishing serves as the lens through which the angler-writer views the world. There is no removing that lens. A defining quality of the literature of angling resides in the narrator's need to evaluate and reevaluate his place in the world. Fishing offers that chance. With that idea as its focal point, I began writing these essays.

These pieces meander, as personal essays often do. When writing about fishing, one should always have the luxury of exploring subtle currents and tiny tributaries. A reader might argue that

these pieces are too nostalgic. These qualities often arise in angling literature. Fisherman, by nature, are a nostalgic bunch; all have stories to tell.

The events and people of this book are, like all other works, part fiction and part truth. This work is foremost a creative act, and many liberties have been taken to ensure its success.

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But how sweetly memories of the past come to one who has appreciated and enjoyed it from his boyhood, whose almost first penny, after he wore jacket and trousers, bought his first fish hook. . .

Thaddeus Norris

Father and Sheephead

I would not be a fisherman today, if it were not for my father. He taught me to fish, cast, tie a fisherman's knot, identify one species of fish from another. He also taught me courage. Often when we fished from one of Kelley's Island's many limestone shores, Dad stopped casting and dropped to his knees beside a rock. With a quick hand, he snatched brown water snakes as long as his arm. Holding the writhing serpent in front of my face, he would order me to touch it.

When we were not fishing together, Dad let me wander off, fish by myself, ride my bike through the woods alone, and fish from my favorite spots. Back home in Ironton, Ohio, I was not allowed to ride anywhere alone, much less to the river bank for some fishing; but for whatever reason, when we were on Kelley's Island, my dad left me to my own devices. If I had rod and reel and tackle box in hand, Dad trusted me.

On our first fishing outing on Kelley's Island, a small island just north of Marblehead, Ohio, my father and I walked through the lane that wound through the orchard behind our rented summer home. As we walked, I smelled the sweetness of apples, pears, plums, and cherries. We picked these fruits from wild trees that grew in the abandoned orchard. Each year, if not picked by hungry fishermen, the fruit ripened, fell to the ground, and rotted.

Lake Erie stretched out like a large gray slate that blew with the wind and cracked and folded into the shoreline. A perpetual rocking of moving water always filled the background of life on Kelley's Island. In this water, amid the sound and the spray, my father and I were going to fish. I trembled as I stood on a white boulder and looked out over the lake. To the east, I saw the Perry monument jutting out of the water. As Dad tied a large, Mustad hook onto the brittle line of my cane pole, he told me how Perry cut down the trees to build ships and fought the indians. I trembled more as I thought that a dead indian might be lurking about wanting to spear me as I fished from his island. The lake and the island scared and enchanted me.

When Dad put the large bamboo cane pole in my hand, it felt

awkward and heavy, too long for me to handle. The line was wrapped around the end of the pole, and Dad instructed me to put it out over the water and turn the pole so that the line could unravel into the lake. I followed his instructions and watched as the round, red and white bobber hit the water and bounced softly on the waves. "Watch it," Dad said, "pay attention to what you are doing." Following his instructions, I held the rod stiffly in my hands. The waves tossed the light bobber as an occasional water snake's head popped to the surface.

While I watched my line, Dad walked a few yards down the bank from me and removed his clothes. He had brought along a bar of Ivory soap and waded, now naked, out into the water. He splashed about, lathering himself, hair, legs, moustache, with the Ivory soap. At one point I saw him roll the wet bar into some sand and then rub it on his arms. He washed himself a long time and let out loud whoops that echoed across Lake Erie to the mainland. My dad, at 51, serious man, was frolicking about in Lake Erie.

While I watched my dad and my bobber, my bobber began to run away from me into the waves. It was then that I hollered the phrase I would holler for years to come anytime I hooked a fish, "I got one."

Dad yelled back, "He's got one," and lumbered out of the water to where I stood on the bank. He came up next to me, giving instructions, still naked, and dripping; I could smell the Ivory soap on his skin. He instructed me on how to play the fish, telling me to wind my line slowly back up around the pole but let the fish pull if he wants to pull. I followed his instructions diligently until, shaking with thrill, I dragged to the shoreline a white, thick-sided Sheephead.

The Sheephead, a member of the drum family, holds little sporting value. They pull for awhile and then finally collapse onto their sides, allowing themselves to be landed. On this day, however, I did not consider the limited sporting value of the Sheephead.

Dad removed the hook with his strong, bricklayer fingers and gripping the broad sides of the fish with his large hands, lifted the fish from the ground and brought it closer to my eyes. "Touch it," he said. When I hesitated, he repeated the statement, "Ah, touch it, " and I did as he instructed. As I ran my finger along the fish's flank a milky film stuck to it. After I pulled my hand away, I smelled the odor of fish, of ancient water, rocks, and sea weed. Later, when we got home, my mother told me to wash my hands, but I washed only

the hand that had not touched the fish. For several days I walked about repeatedly bringing the pungent reminder of my first catch to my nose.

As we stood on the shore looking at my catch, I asked, "will we eat him?" While pulling on his khaki shorts, Dad answered,"We'll put him on the garden." He put the fish on a stringer, a long piece of nylon with a metal loop at one end and a pointed metal tip at the other. While he ran the metal point through the fish's gills, I listened as the metal broke apart flesh and sent blood running down its white sides and onto my father's hands, drying there. Later that evening as I worked the garden with him, he noticed the blood and licked it from his skin.

I carried the fish home, back through the orchard. As I walked, it banged against my thigh, leaving a blotch of sticky gel on my bare leg. I dropped it in the gravel on the lane, and when I picked it up, small rocks and sand stuck to the side of the fish that hit the ground. Sand crusted over one eye. As we stopped to look at a pair of deer reaching their necks to nibble apples, the fish stiffened, curled into a crescent moon, and made the last deep flaring of its gills. I was not remorse; I felt no guilt over causing the fish's death.

The Sheephead's death made the thrill of the catch even greater.

After showing the fish to my mother, Dad placed it on a table on our back porch and used his Barlow pocket knife to remove its head. Mouth open, the one eye not crusted over by sand now wide and plastic, the fish made no movement as Dad popped his knife through the bone. "We'll use it as a trophy," he said as he held the head on two fingers and marched to the garage.

Inside the garage, Dad hung the head on a rusted nail, slipping it on the nail until the nail's head came out the fish's mouth. Every summer, that's where we put the heads off all great fish we caught. They hung there as trophies, like hunters hang the heads of swift deer. But among the heads of tremendous Smallmouth and Walleye, the thundering game fish of Lake Erie, hung the wilted head of the Sheephead, the first fish I caught, and the first death I experienced. The head of that Sheephead still hung on that nail ten years later, when we packed our belongings after our last summer on Kelley's Island.

Fishing is acting with the world around us productively and with compromise. I did not know that the first day my dad took me fishing; it was not a lesson he was out to teach me. I am not sure

what he was out to teach me that day, but I did learn something. Often when I am fishing now, I think of that day and hear my dad's words come back to me. "Let the fish pull when he wants to pull." I think of my dad often when I fish, of how he always told me he would buy us a boat, but never did. I think of how he always fished with just one lure, a silver spoon. He had no room for complications in his life; perhaps that is why he never bought a boat. The simpler one's recreation could be, the better. "The next time I fish I'm going to do it with a spear and a net." He was serious.

Dad once told me that he quit fishing seriously when he was about twelve, gave it up for other things. After all, it was the Depression; there was no money around the Cooke house for hooks and lines and replacing broken rods. So Dad played baseball and a secondhand trumpet, took a job with the local newspaper, glided through high school, and when World War II came, he went to France to fight the Krauts. This all happened thirty years before my birth. Yet I know sometimes that I am just like my father when he was twenty-five.

After hanging the Sheephead's head on a nail in the garage, Dad returned to the back porch and took the rest of the fish from the

table and walked toward our garden with it. "It's what the indians would do," he told me as I followed him along the path through the cherry trees, the headless fish dripping blood on his hands.

Dad kept the melons and the pumpkins at the north end of our garden. That garden was too big to be worked by one person, but Dad did it. Every day he stood in the sun, chopping, turning over soil; shirtless, he would let out "whoops" when he got too hot. When I worked with him, he told me, "Try it, it will make you feel better." And I would "whoop," sending my child's voice out over the tops of Elms and Oaks, down to the water and out over Lake Erie. My small voice travelled into the vastness of water and space that to a child seems endless and wonderful. In that world lived ship wrecked pirates that wanted to take my head at every turn through the woods. Back home in Ironton, there were no pirates. My head was always safe.

We lay the headless fish upon a mound where we planted watermelon seeds and covered it over with the black soil. With his heavy boot Dad packed the soil around the fish, explaining to me about fertilizer and how decaying matter makes living organisms grow better. In one day, I took life and was going to make new life.

Later in the summer, we ate the watermelons that sprang from my catch. I expected the maggots and flies that buzzed and crawled over the mounds to gush forth as we cut the melons, but they did not. The fruit held only black seeds and sweet juice.

After that day Dad took me fishing often. He took me through the woods to a place we called Cooke's Rock, and to another place we called The Shelf. They were all our places, our own fishing spots, and if we caught anyone else on them, we would declare them trespassers and run them from our land. But we never saw any trespassers; deer or an occasional fox where the only visitors. In the evenings pheasants stepped gingerly from the woods to feed in the tall grass beside the garden.

The Rocky Beach was another one of our places. It was a stretch of shore a half mile long, composed of a flat plain of limestone rocks. Twenty foot high limestone cliffs closed it in on the west side. Each time a nor'easter blew, the wind carved the white cliffs deeper and deeper into the earth. I had never seen a place so obviously changed by the forces of nature.

Fishing trips to the Rocky Beach could be treacherous. To get to the water we had to shuffle down a sloping face of limestone that

led to a ten-foot wide ledge looking out over the lake. Thirty feet below, the water pounded against the cliffs, churned back on itself, and made giant eddies that sucked and pulled anything that came into them. When I started fishing rivers, I began to understand about eddies, and now I know just how lucky I was not to have fallen into any of those eddies below the cliffs at the Rocky Beach.

My father and I fished at the Rocky Beach often. We walked it around to the extreme northeastern corner of the island and cast from large fragmented shelves and boulders into the waves. It was there that I caught my first Smallmouth and the Rock Bass that would have set a state record, had my father taken interest in breaking records. At the Rocky Beach, I first learned how much my dad expected from me as a child, as a person.

Walking down the slope above the ledge was precarious business. First, we made sure the bottom of our shoes were dry; wet soles would cause a fisherman to slip. Once we assured ourselves of our footing, we balanced rods and tackle box in our outside hands, and gripped cracks in the rock face with our free hand. Slowly, Dad and I placed one foot always in front of the other, shuffling, not stepping, down the embankment. For a seven year old boy, this was a

nightmare. For my father, it was an adventure.

I watched as he shuffled down the rock. He moved gently, watching the placement of his feet. In an instant, he crossed them, threw his center of balance off, and went tumbling and crashing with tackle onto the ledge below. He rolled out to the edge of the ledge, until he finally stopped himself before going into the large eddies below.

As the tackle came to a rest, silver spoons and the blades of spinner baits shone in the morning light and looked like the booty a crow will scatter about its nest. Dad remained still, breathing deeply, and then said, "I think my leg's broken." He lay there for several minutes, breathing deeply. Eventually he stood, rubbed his left thigh, and told me that his leg was badly broken. Being the only other person around, I would have to go get the car and drive him to the hospital, or carry him back to the house. Being too young to drive and too weak to carry him, I liked neither idea. After he walked around a bit, Dad said he thought he could drive himself if I wasn't willing.

I honestly think that had he broken his leg that day, Dad would have expected me to drive the car. I might have done it because I

had to be there to help him. That's what fishing partners do for one another and what sons do for fathers, especially when they become old and pass long afternoons sitting in the sun and thinking of finding a spear, or weaving a net and going fishing on a silent morning.

It was through fishing that my dad taught me to be independent, self-reliant and confident. He taught me how to be a man. I do not know if fathers teach sons that anymore, and if they do, I do not know how they do it. Maybe it's as easy as taking someone fishing. But more importantly, Dad provided me with an environment where I could develop my imagination. Thinking of that first fishing trip, it's not the exhilaration of fishing that I recall, but the first real recognition that I could imagine worlds and entertain myself with my mind. I fish now because in angling the real and the imagined worlds become one. With each cast I am again a boy in a distant place waiting for something magical to happen.

Nothing in this world so enlivens my spirit and emotions as the rivers I know. They are necessities. In their clear, swift or slow, generous or coy waters, I regain my powers; I find again those parts of myself that have been lost in cities. Stillness. Patience. Green thoughts. Open eyes. Attachment. High Drama. Wit. The Huck Finn I once was. Gentleness.

Nick Lyons

Angling: A Divine Connection

In Oklahoma, I knew a man named Steve who claimed he noodled for catfish in a deep Oklahoma lake with a Cherokee man. The noodling consisted of Steve strapping a large hook onto his right hand and diving from a row boat into deep murky water below sandstone cliffs. Below the water were more cliffs where large catfish hid during the hot daylight hours. Steve dove down to these cliffs wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans, a large meat hook, and a plastic dive mask from Kmart.

The Cherokee man instructed Steve to swim slowly to the cliffs, watching for any shadowy movements, and seeing one, he was to find the fish's head, reach into the cat's mouth, and bury the hook deep in the meaty jaw. That was the way it should have happened. Unfortunately for Steve, he whipped the hook at the first shadowy movement and plunged the hook into the tail of a forty pound channel cat.

The cat ran, pulling the fourteen year old boy behind him. It dove deeper, far under the cliffs. Steve held on, his lungs burning for oxygen. He could not let go of the fish because the hook, strapped to Steve's wrist with leather bindings, was firmly planted in the fish's tail. Fish and boy thrashed about the murky water, but the fish tired before Steve's oxygen gave out. He swam back to the boat with the fish, and the old Cherokee lifted them both into the pirogue.

Many fishermen view angling as Steve did--a form of triumph. Fish become trophies. In the Oklahoman's case, the catch was a triumph. Most anglers keep an exaggerated sense of their own accomplishments. Tournament bass fishermen, for example, believe that the more big fish they catch, the better. Popular images of fishing do not dispute this vision. Saturday morning television bombard anglers with fishing shows with pithy titles like "In Search of Monster Marlin" or "Killer Steelhead Action." These shows teach those of us not fortunate enough to take exotic fishing trips what we are missing and how impotent we are compared to other "real" fishermen. The programs are a cock fight between the viewing angler and the professional angler. Unfortunately for the home

viewer, we always get grass kicked in our faces.

The televised fishermen wears a perpetual grin of confidence as they fire up massive outboard engines, or peer into high resolution depth finders. The more weapons they deploy, the greater their chances of winning a war against a big fish. According to television, life's greatest fishing triumph is withstanding the battle against a five-pound bass while sitting high above the water in a padded seat in the bow of a ten thousand dollar bass boat.

The writers of these fishing shows never acknowledge that some fishermen fish because angling represents the only activity that saves them from a ruined life, a dirty soul, a fracturing of self from the rest of the world. Some fishermen go to the water for balance, harmony, and a restructuring of the spirit. We do not see these anglers on television; we read of them in literature, or we are them.

Nick Adams, Hemingway's hero of short fiction, went to the river to rebuild himself after the horrors of World War I. Of the "Big Two-Hearted River" Hemingway said he wanted to write a story about the war that did not mention the war. Instead, the war and its effects linger in the background of Nick's consciousness and shape

the way he approaches fishing. The outer surface of the world echoes Nick's inner state of being, but his methodical approach to angling reorders his world. Fishing becomes the one thing he can control, and he makes certain that does not escape him.

As Nick steps from the train, fishing and camping gear in hand, he immediately sees a destroyed world. The countryside stretches out before him, scarred black by wildfire. The narrator tells us, "there was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace . . . Even the surface had been burned off the ground" (133). These images represent Nick's interior landscape. The destruction of the war has left him scarred, devastated. Like the land, he lacks vitality. However, as he examines the charred landscape further, Nick notes "the river was there" (133). He comes for the river's permanence. Nick knows that despite his war experiences, despite cynicism and a lack of hope, the river endures, perpetually eroding the rocks, continually providing life for fish and salvation for the fisherman who comes there.

In The Same River Twice, Chris Offutt quotes a poem by Richard Hugo: "The cruel things I did, I took to the river. I begged

the current: make me better" (8). Nick Adams searches for the same salvation. He pauses on a bridge to watch trout playing in the current below. The narrator says, "As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time" (133). Nick does not watch the trout for purposes of catching and conquering; he searches for a divine connection with himself and the fish below, something that will reorient him in the world and provide him with a sense of belonging. Despite the wild fires that scarred the once verdant landscape, life endures in the river. A small trickle of life still flows in Nick.

Often I go fishing with something weighty on my mind. I tell myself that it will be good to fish, to think thoroughly, quietly, and patiently. Once I begin to fish, perhaps after I catch a fish or two, I listen only to the river and the birds, the sound of wind blowing through heavy sycamore leaves. My body moves in accord with the river. I take slow, purposeful steps, well-placed, followed by well-aimed casts that become reflex rather than considered action. Thoughts of the world fall out of me and swirl in clean eddies going downstream, slipping through the willow grass and by rocks older

than death. I begin to think with the river and that world becomes the only one I know.

When I would go to fish Ohio Brush Creek in rural Adams County, Ohio, I escaped on Sunday mornings, leaving Jennifer at home. She would argue with me, asking me to take her and getting mad at me because I was not spending a bright spring Sunday with her. But her protestations increased my desire to fish alone. Frustrated, I would stomp from the house and leave for the river.

Ironically, despite my need to fish in solitude, after a few hours I always wanted Jennifer there with me. I would miss her and feel intense and profound love for her. Rushing home along a quiet country highway, I could not wait to tell her about my trip, let her smell the fish on my hands. The river allowed me to love her, because it allowed me to love myself. By thinking only of the river, thinking with the river, I came to know that I hold a place in the world, that I am connected to greater things.

Nick Adams searches for the same connection as he continues to observe the trout holding in the pool below him. We learn, "Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling again . . . He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the

need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (134). In a few moments with the river, Nick's world begins to be restructured again.

As he continues toward the river, Nick contemplates the grasshoppers that "all turned black from living in the burned-over land . . . He wondered how long they would stay that way" (136). The grasshoppers represent Nick's transformation during the war. Memories of taking easy shots at Germans as they climbed clumsily over garden walls and lay dying against the wall, yet "We shot them. They all came just like that," run loudly in his mind as he travels to the river (28).

I take similar thoughts of death and confusion to the places I fish, and hope for answers or relief from the questions. To be a successful angler of this sort, a I must understand the water I fishes. This understanding comes not from the readings of a high resolution depth finder. It comes from being in the water, feeling it move around and through me, and me moving through it, turning over rocks to see what the fish might be feeding on, or cutting open the belly of a small bass for the same reason. Occasionally, I notice things that reinforce the idea that "this land and every life-form is

a piece of god, a divine community, with the same forces of creation in plants as in people," a place where we are all connected, and if we become separated from that place, sickness and loss follow (Hogan 96).

Samuel's father died of cancer in the winter of 1994, just before Christmas. The summer before that Christmas was the last one I spent at home. I knew that summer would be my last in Ironton, so I spent much time walking to places in town. If Jennifer and I had a date, I walked to her house along the flood wall that kept the muddy backwaters of the Ohio River from flowing into grimy trailers and slanting homes. After the spring floods, trash filled the tree tops: tires, Clorox bottles, garbage bags, diapers. That summer, I did not mind the trash as much. I walked patiently along the top of the levee, taking in the details, listening to the swish of the weeds against my boot tops, watching the blackbirds swoop from wire to tree top in a giant pool of feathers.

When I reached the south end of town, the backwaters stood on my right, below me. In the hot summer, the carp and catfish wallowed in the shallow water like hogs. From the top of the flood wall, I heard and saw them splashing in their slowly evaporating

pools. I remembered the days as a boy when I fished with a dozen nightcrawlers and a red and white bobber for bream. Somehow I always caught more poison oak than fish. The thoughts of those days are as Wordsworth wrote, "long, long thoughts." The mind can hold memories more numerous than all the fish in all the rivers of the world.

I enjoyed my walking that summer, watching the housetops from the top of the flood wall, thinking to myself that Ironton is a fine place, but not the place it was when I was a child in the seventies. My father sat on the school board and Samuel's dad served as president of the town's largest bank. They held great plans for our city. But that winter, Samuel's dad lay in a bed in the house where he was born, dying a slow, gray death.

A few weeks before he died, I went to see Mr. Cox, to sit by his death bed and listen to him tell stories of Ironton in the forties and fifties, often back even further to the Depression. He asked me once if I would go fishing with him soon. I told him as soon as it was spring, I would go with him to Happy Hollow, and we would get in the boat. Mr. Cox would row as he always did, and we would catch many bass. "I do not know how you boys catch so many fish. That's sure

something," he said to me just before his wife came to get him out of bed for a doctor's appointment. I stayed until he softly sat into the car. Dressed by a home care-giver, he wore clothes I had never seen him wear while he was healthy.

That next summer, Samuel and I walked a rural highway along the Greenbrier River after dark, the cool mountain air chilling my legs, the sound of semis jaking down a mountain. I said to Samuel that he must miss his father. I missed him. He was the first person to die that I truly admired. A man other than my own father who greatly affected my life. With his death, I lost a hero, and I was passed the age when a man finds new ones.

In A River Runs Through It Norman MacLean correctly asserts that it is those we love the most and are closest to that we cannot help. I connected with Samuel's dad in ways that Samuel was unable to. Unlike Mr. MacLean, I never tried to help those I love. I did little to make Mr. Cox's death easier. As he argued with his wife, the same way they had done for fifty years, I wanted to do something. But I only watched. And just before Christmas, he died and was buried with snow on the ground. After the funeral Samuel said he could not wait to go fishing in the spring.

We went that spring to the confluence of the New and Greenbrier Rivers at Hinton, West Virginia, where the Bluestone Dam skims water from the top of Bluestone Lake and sends it tumbling into the New River. The New flows five hundred yards before it meets with the Greenbrier that ends at Hinton after flowing from the mountain spines of eastern West Virginia. Because the water comes from the top of the lake, it carries rich nutrients and warm water, causing the Smallmouth bass action in the rivers to be fierce. The Bluestone Campground, a green meadow often saturated with rain water and a few Air Streams, sits tucked in a deep hollow next to the lake. Samuel and I camped there between two large rhododendron bushes.

We each have our tasks when camping. Samuel does much of the cooking, and I gather firewood, build the fire, and keep the lantern fueled and lit. Camp chores are good; not only do they tire you and allow for sound sleeping, but they also provide meaningful work. It is not easy to make yourself comfortable in a small tent with a limited amount of space, yet with proper planning, one can become perfectly relaxed under a few sheets of canvas. Of Nick Adams' camp we learn, "He had not been unhappy all day. This was

different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done" (139). The war began to leave Nick as he made his camp. He controls everything he does and makes a clean and sensible world, one where he can recuperate and rebuild himself. Meanwhile, the river flows next to his camp, holding the promise of trout, a successful day of fishing.

It rained as Samuel and I camped in the meadow below Bluestone Dam. We tied a tarp between the rhododendrons and slid a picnic table under it and drank Budweiser throughout the day and evening. If the river was not too high after the rain, we would fish tomorrow. "There were plenty of days coming" when we could fish the New River. We took comfort in the river and the rocks, the mountains standing solid about us, and a spring rain falling on broad rhododendron leaves, making life at the center of great eddies somewhere in the river.

I have to fish. If I am to survive in the world, I must go to the river and listen to its patient lessons. As with Nick Adams, a river stands as a place to restructure the soul. It reminds me that something is alive and ancient, that a place in the world belongs to

me. I leave the river with a spirit scrubbed raw of my shortcomings and misgivings and return to my place among human things.

I still don't know why I fish or why other men fish, except that we like it and it makes us think and feel.

Roderick Haig-Brown

A Painter Can't Fool an Angler

People often say to me, "So you like to fish. I like to fish. Fishing is so relaxing." If the conversation continues, the speaker will usually say that he would like to go fishing with me sometime. However, I never go with that person. If I press most people, they admit to fishing once or twice as a child, and the experience consisted of sitting on a muddy bank in a lawn chair, rod stuck in the crotch of a Y shaped stick, feet propped up on a Coleman cooler. In most nonangling minds, this image of the passive, reclining fisherman dominates.

Recently I visited the Huntington Museum of Art in Huntington, West Virginia, to see a traveling exhibit of African-American art. Although it was a sunny day during the first week of March, many waters still ran too cold to fish. Consequently, I needed another way to pass an afternoon. Entering the museum, I was unaware that inside I would find excellent examples of fishing's extremes: the

relaxing still water fisherman, and the virile, river fisherman.

According to the gallery guide printed for the Walter O. Evans Collection of African-American Art, Robert Scott Duncanson (1821-1872) was the first African-American artist to achieve national and international fame. Of Duncanson's work, mostly landscapes, we hear that they "are romantic and ideal, yet realistically detailed, based upon an appreciation of nature and spiritual experiences induced by nature." Although I cannot deny Duncanson's realism, a discerning viewer, especially one that knows something about the "spiritual experiences induced by nature" must conclude that Duncanson in no way captures a spiritual side to nature. Indeed, his painting "Man Fishing" does little more than perpetuate fishing cliches while showing a shallow understanding of the angling experience.

Duncanson's painting depicts a pleasant man wearing brown trousers rolled to his knees, a billowy white shirt rolled to the elbows, a red vest, and a floppy hat atop his head. The fisherman reclines on the muddy bank among vibrantly green trees next to a rustic pirogue. As he hangs one foot thoughtlessly into the water, the angler looks with wistful and bored eyes at his audience. A

picnic basket rests hooked to his Y stick as the angler dangles a line into a deep murky pool. The fisherman is the focal point of the painting. Our eyes are quickly drawn to his benign facial expression. Behind him roll gentle hills and pleasant shade trees.

Although its Romanticism is the striking, the painting captures no spiritual experience. Instead, it captures the cliche, the image of the fisherman perpetuated by those who fish without a seriousness of intent. From the painting we must question, as so often comes to mind when reading Wordsworth, if the artist ever really got his boots dirty. Did he ever carry the smell of fish on his hands? Cuss after having lost a large fish? Taking only this painting as evidence, we can only assume that Duncanson, as most people, fails to understand that angling means more than lazily dropping a line into a muddy puddle.

As I wound through the gallery, I saw a collection of paintings from other American artists of the antebellum period. In a corner of the gallery by the exit door hung a painting by George Inness. Immediately I recognized an honest work. In his painting "Morning About," Inness captures a true vision of the angler, the river angler, sternly studying the river, simultaneously attuned to but oblivious

to his surroundings, searching for something other than fish. Inness, unlike Duncanson, searches for something more profound in his vision of the fisherman in the wild. Inness portrays the angler as sturdy and determined, riveted to the water, and minute in relation to the landscape that surrounds him. Inness' fisherman is not relaxed. He works diligently, wading against the current, stumbles among the rocks, and casts as if every throw might lead to transcendence.

Upon first approaching Inness' painting, we notice not the fisherman but the water he fishes, a rolling white stream plunging through a mountain meadow. Although narrow, the stream carries a good current heavy with eddies and seams of moving. In one side of the river stands a small angler with his legs planted firmly on the river bottom, his weight slightly shifted upstream to counteract the oncoming current as if it were holding him upright. Tense facial muscles reveal his extreme concentration and effort.

Upstream of the angler, a slight dairy maid passes across a stone bridge and turns her head to watch the angler. He does not see her. With heads bowed to the road, cows lumber back into a high mountain meadow. The angler notices neither cow nor girl. Past

the dairy maid, the river flows out of a void of haze and mountains. The landscape blurs and melts into the river, and we see only the world that will come to the angler in time, the same world that will flow past him and downstream in an instant. If he does not react and study, he will miss something of the most vital significance, perhaps a lesson, a connection that will carry him through fishless days. I look at Inness' painting and know that he understands angling.

Native American poet Joy Harjo wrote of fishing that "the struggle of the universe is exemplified in the sport. Yet it's possible to find the answer to every question with the right pole, the right place on the river" ("Fishing" 61). We find Harjo's sentiment in Inness' painting but decidedly not in that by Duncanson.

Inness' fisherman comes to the river with questions, with the sins that make us human, and asks for forgiveness among the rivers and the mountains. Duncanson's fisherman goes to the water to view nature like one views Christmas lights, a treat for special occasions. Benign and void of meaning, Duncanson offers nothing to the angling experience except misconceptions and triviality, the same assumptions that a fisherman goes to the river to escape. An

angler cannot lie to a river, nor can this fisherman be taken in by a painter's fish tales.

Fish finding is done by sight; by knowing the kinds of places in which fish harbor or feed; or by the simple hammer-and-chisel process of fishing one stretch so often that eventually one learns where the fish are, without knowing or caring why.

Alfred Miller

Confluence

I spent a summer working in Somerset, a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania kept alive by the flowing of traffic along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Like most American small towns, Somerset's downtown consists of boarded up store fronts covered by rusting, drooping awnings. But at the highway exits stand the neon and plastic Burger Kings and gas stations that somehow support a town through minimum wage work. The few educated young people move to Pittsburgh and in the winter return for the skiing.

I worked for the masonry company that built the new state prison just outside of town. Sent to make repairs to poor masonry, I found myself doing very little during the day, other than waiting on guards to unlock doors and caulking cracks in mortar. At the day's end, instead of going home and sleeping off the work, I found myself searching for something to fill my time.

While in Somerset, I rented a two bedroom cabin that belonged

to a local motel. The cabin, usually only used in the winter by skiers, remained empty throughout the rest of the year. I convinced the motel owner to allow me to stay there through the week. On the weekends, I would move to a regular room if a tired family pulled off the turnpike and needed more space than just a regular size motel room. However, I rarely had to move. On most weekend nights, I sat in the motel office with Ed, the owner, and we drank Coor's Light while he checked in tired travelers. Occasionally, I delivered towels or soap to gruff men in boxer shorts. On cool evenings, of which there are many in the mountains of Pennsylvania, we sat outside talking to our patrons, drinking with them, swapping stories. In the morning they left, and by midnight we would be talking to a new group of strangers.

Just south of Somerset is Confluence, a town aptly named, for it was built on the stretches of land where the Casselman River and Laurel Hill Creek all flow into the Youghigheny River. Because of this great joining of waters, the fishing there is tremendous. Cold mountain water joins with warmer water, making it a moderate temperature, perfect for smallmouth bass. When I was not helping Ed in the evenings, I came home from work, put on shorts and an old

t-shirt, and threw my fishing rod into my 1977 Chevy Caprice Classic, put three dollars worth of gas in it, and drove toward Confluence.

The first time I fished at Confluence, I did not know what to expect. Many locals told me there were no smallmouth in the rivers because years ago a mine had broken loose, sending poison into the Cassellman and killing anything that moved in the river. I considered this story and thought that it might have an element of truth to it; but rivers recover quickly, and most people only know about rivers through hearsay. Very few people stand in them and notice the life that is there. So I decided to take my chances.

I went to Confluence not so much to fish for smallmouth, but to fish for trout. On my trips back to Ironton, I would drive through Confluence and over its two bridges, where I always saw a handful of fly-rods whipping in the air, throwing flies the weight of a bubble of spittle in the corner of a new-born baby's mouth. Having never fished for trout, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. Because I was returning to school in the fall, my trout fishing days on the Yough would be short.

When I reached Confluence on that first day, I drove to the

nearest bait store and bought some #6 Mustad hooks and a jar of trout bait, a fluorescent yellow substance the consistency of peanut butter with a smell like the bottom of a Styrofoam cup of nightcrawlers that had sat in the sun all day along side a pay lake. The package said for trout. I was sold.

To avoid other trout fishermen, I parked my car below the confluence, on the north side where Laurel Hill Creek and the Casselman join, not along the main flow of the Youghigheny. When looking at the expensive fly fishing gear used by a middle aged couple slowly wading upstream, I felt ashamed of my spin casting tackle. If fishing gear were cars, I was driving a Pacer and the fly fishing couple smirked like BMW drivers. However, the decision to park on that side of the river proved to be to my advantage.

I rigged my rod with hook and small split-shot sinkers, extracted a glob of the trout bait from the jar, stuck it on the hook, and stepped into the river. The Casselman flowed warmly against my legs, much like Ohio Brush Creek back home. As I waded, I thought that it was probably good water for smallies. I did not think, however, of fishing for them at the time. Trout were all I knew. The current flowed stronger than many rivers I had waded

before. When my legs hit the main flow of the Yough, a chill ran through my body. The water was freezing, and it was July.

I did not let the frigid water stop me. Casting my line, I watched the day-glow trout bait slip into the current and drift toward the river's rocky bottom. I waited for the gentle take of a trout, watching my line for any twitch or change in direction; none came. Casting again, the trout bait flew from my hook and landed 15 feet in front of me. The hook landed about thirty feet to my left. Due to my lack of knowledge about fishing for trout, I didn't know how to get the bait to stick on my hook. Undaunted, I retrieved the jar from my vest and rebaited my hook. Again I cast, and again the trout bait flew from my hook. I'm casting too hard, I told myself. A second time I rebaited and cast gently, going for accuracy rather than distance. Again I watched as my hook swirled through eddies and rips of current, waiting for a little thunk of a hit and then a desperate run and finally the leaping of a great brown trout to the surface. Never happened.

I thought the problem must be the bait. It couldn't be possible that trout would eat something that looked so unnatural and smelled so horribly. After all, trout are the Grail of fishing. Why would they

like something so aesthetically revolting? Digging through my vest, I found a Mepps in-line spinner, a classic for catching trout on spinning tackle. Determined to bring a slimy Grail into my landing net, I made great casts with the spinner, throwing it across the river and along the far bank where rocks and ledges surely housed tremendous fish. As the spinner drifted through the current, I ripped it, jerked it, let it fall, maximized the flash of the blade. I hoped to wake the trout, irritate them into striking, or maybe even accidentally snag one in the side.

The frustrating thing about all this was the fish were feeding, just not on what I offered them. How was I to know? I am a bass fisherman.

Eventually I noticed that my legs were not getting any warmer, but the day was. As my head sweated, my legs shivered as I searched for footing among the rocks. I soon became nauseated by the two extremes in temperature my body was experiencing. Unable to continue, I headed back across the river to the warmer water and my car.

I lay on the hood of the Caprice and shivered, sick, thinking my body would go into shock. I wanted no part of trout fishing. It was

stupid, trout were stupid, small and wormlike, not hearty fish like the Smallmouth, and trout fisherman, especially fly fishermen, were an elitist bunch of sportsmen more interested in appearances than in the actual grit and smell of hard fishing. They are the plastic, urban sprawl of fishing. I wanted to believe that many trout fishermen would wear their waders and vests, wicker creel, and bass wood landing nets to their jobs or public outings, maybe the movies. Anytime I speak to a trout fisherman, I expect him to smirk and shaking my hand say, "Hello, I am a thoughtful trout fishermen. Aren't I smashing?" It was two in the afternoon, hot. I wanted a beer and a break from my own bitter thoughts.

For lunch I went to a small restaurant overlooking the river and watched as a fly-fisherman took small Rainbow trout from the river. If there were that many trout in that river, there would have to be Smallmouth somewhere in the portion where the Cassellman and the Laurel Hill flow into the Yough. At other times, I experienced locals giving me misinformation regarding their "home" stream. I began to suspect, given the river's ability to sustain a healthy trout population, that on this day I had been misinformed.

Just because someone lives by a river and looks at it every day

of his life does not mean he knows anything about that river. To know something about it, he must stand in it, listen to it, watch the rocks and the water and their struggle for balance, their struggle to reach the ocean. Several years ago, I stood with hundreds of people and watched the Army Corps of Engineers blow up an old bridge that spanned the Ohio River. When the center portion hit the water, it was not completely submerged. Several people around me seriously proclaimed the iron bridge was floating in the middle of the Ohio River. They were stunned to learn that the Ohio is not hundreds of feet deep. No, most people do not understand rivers at all.

I watched the fly-fisherman take another trout from the river, then returned to my parking place, my side of the river, determined to find smallmouth.

It took me three casts.

After parking and tying on a sixteenth ounce jig and three inch pumpkin colored salty grub, I walked a quarter mile downstream and entered the river beneath large silver maples. Once in the river, the warm waters of Laurel Hill and the Cassellman flowed against my knees. I cast into the shadows and quickly felt the sudden jolt, the electric strike of a juvenile Smallmouth bass. He ran to my right,

heading into the stronger water and leaped when my line reached its full extension. He cut back to my left and leaped again, throwing water and color. Bringing fish to hand, I felt great satisfaction. This was better than any trout.

I fished patiently, making long casts in the great river, catching fish every few casts. When I stood just down river of the confluence, I threw into a great tail race, a wedge-shaped section of water where two currents, coming from opposite directions, come together. I knew I could find fish there, and I did. Making a perfect cast into the narrowest part of the wedge, I hooked a large Smallmouth and watched as it jumped into the air and then raced down river, taking line and jumping far below me. I waded down stream toward it and gained line. The fish was not going to tire soon, and the longer I fought it, the less my odds were of landing it. As my father taught me years ago, I compromised with the fish, pulling, reeling, giving it line when needed. Taking the fish from the water, I looked up to see two trout fishermen standing in the Yough who had stopped fishing to watch me fight my fish. I held it up so that they could see it, and shouted across the river.

"See, there are smallmouth in here, assholes."

Feeling extremely satisfied, I put the fish back into the water.

I caught many fish that summer at Confluence, and almost every time I went fishing, some trout fisherman would stop his delicate casting and watch me fight a smallmouth. At times, I honestly thought that the bass enjoyed it as much as I did. I'm sure that somewhere inside of them, Smallmouth hold some quiet resentment toward trout. That summer I was good at something. I could catch fish, and the Smallmouth were my fish, my pleasure. People were coming to Confluence to find trout, not bass, so often times I would be the only one on the river fishing for them. The world of the Smallmouth was mine.

Often I stood on a large boulder in the Cassellman River, just upstream of the confluence, watching fish in a stretch of water 100 yards long with a steady flat current moving through it. I could pick out the fish I wanted to catch, usually the bigger ones, often times on top water lures. Waiting for a fish to move within casting distance, I would throw a few feet from its face and quickly swim the lure passed it. My hands trembled as I waited for the strike. It was great fun to fish this way, to I watch as the fish swam and darted through the water, frantic to throw the lure from their

mouths.

One evening, two dirty boys stopped on their bikes along the railroad bed and watched from the train trestle as I fished. When I hooked a large bass just below them, they clapped when I brought it to hand. After I released the fish, I raised my head toward the bridge and they were gone. I continued fishing until I heard a splashing behind me. As I turned around, I saw the two dark-headed boys in cut-off jeans wading toward me holding their Zebco rods and reels out of the water.

"We want to fish with you," the taller one said. I could smell cigarettes on him.

Without asking their names, I agreed and guided the boys up the river. Although they had lived next to these rivers their entire lives, no one had taught them to fish for bass. We followed the river into the mountains, catching small fish and smoking cigarettes. The two stayed within arm's length of me as we waded and stopped their casting to look at every fish I caught. After three hours, they said they had to go and stepped into the woods. I watched them as they crossed a pasture, laughing, holding their rods out like swords.

Throughout the summer as I fished and watched, others

watched me. Cars honked as they passed on the river road, and I would see an upward turned thumb sticking from the driver's window. I wondered why everyone did not fish, why everyone did not see that rivers keep us alive, that they flow in us, and that we are the trees and the mountains, the dusk of a late summer day, the red heart of youth.

It was fishing at Confluence that I began to think like an adult. I learned to trust myself and my own observations, that often times people are wrong in their opinions. It is easy to fish for trout because the world accepts it, regards it as the highest form of intellectual and physical pleasure that an angler can undertake, but that view lacks wisdom. It is the opinion created by L. L. Bean catalogues and a Robert Redford directed film, not the opinion of the thousands of anglers fishing the world's waters looking for what Melville called that ungraspable phantom of life, something beyond the glossy photos, a wisdom that comes only from the earth.

I recently met a man and his son out bass fishing. The father was making superb casts with what was obiovusly a new rod.

"Is that a boron you've got there?" I asked.

The man turned and looked at his son. "Well he ain't too bright, that's for sure," he said.

Patrick McManus

Tahlequah

Today's angler has choices. Walk into any tackle shop, and you will see how many devices there are to help us catch fish. Brand names like Rapala, Berkeley, Kaylan, and Mepps, all in rich colors such as chartreuse, pumpkin seed, motor oil and tomato, entice the weekend angler. From those selections, we must choose from soft, medium, or hard; tube, stick or jig; top water, jointed, diving, or neutral buoyancy.

While standing in an aisle of a tackle shop, a serious fisherman might start to sweat and twitch. Many times I've stood fondling a lure in its plastic package and telling myself, "I just might need it." Doubt floods my mind, "What if I get on the river and the only thing the fish will hit is a chartreuse, 3-inch, jointed, floating, Rapala minnow?" Fortunately, most of the time I fight off the compulsion to buy the latest weapons in the war against empty creels.

Many fishermen, however, will go for the shiniest item, the

most colorful, the most scientifically engineered. These items will also probably be the most expensive ones. A fisherman can easily slap down six bucks for a crankbait that, two hours later, will snag on a stump, ten feet down. Pulling and cursing, the fisherman will say, "I just paid six bucks for that!" The line snaps and the neutral buoyancy-motor-oil-colored-with-vibrating-rattles-lure stays forever embedded in the stump.

I am not above spending a large sum of money on fishing equipment. I wear an Eddie Bauer fishing vest and Orvis hip waders. These well made items fit me better than some clothing I wear when I am not fishing. Somehow I convince myself that I need these costly gadgets when in reality the only thing any of us need when fishing is an open spirit, a faith that the river, rocks, and trees are part of a perfect plan started before the first tracks were left in wet sands.

A fisherman must decide if it is the plastic, commercial world of sport fishing, the things of fishing that he likes, or the ideas and understanding of the world that angling brings. As Appalachians we face the same choice: do we want the things Wal-Mart, development, and technology will bring us? Or do we want our land, the hills and

rivers we walked as children, to remain as they were in our youths?

Currently, West Virginians are being forced to choose between the economic benefits provided by the mountain top removal method of coal mining and the preservation of their homes and land. Many residents and supporters of Arch Coal in the southern coal fields claim that if mountain top removal ends, small towns will simply die. The tax base provided by the mining industry supports the school systems, emergency medical care, and many other public programs. Obviously, as rational people, we cannot deny that mining is good for the economy and quality of life.

But preserving our homes and land is not an economic issue. We cannot buy and sell the sky, clouds, and birds. Nor should we sell the shoulders of our mountains to have computers in our school systems. Given the choice, I will leave my home because of economic hardship before I will see it destroyed by a miner's drag line. We must claim West Virginia as our own and restrain King Coal. No longer will we be the bastard state of an environmental rape.

The Illinois River flows through the gentle hills of

northeastern Oklahoma. Just outside Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the Oaks grow thick and sandstone cliffs hang over the country roads, giving the land a shadowy, cool quality. It is a fresh place. Looking over into the river, one expects to find Cherokee boys in birch bark canoes fishing with willow branches and hooks fashioned from bone. Their canoe might be filled with squirrels they have shot as they drift down river. No thoughts of school, marriage, or terminal diseases enter their minds. It is enough to fish, to be on the river floating in the current beneath the sycamores, no towns or oil swirling in puddles on busy parking lots outside a vast Wal-Mart. Once only mountains and hawks littered the skyline. Tanned boys ate huckleberries with hands stained blue from the picking of the berries. My first morning on the Illinois, I wanted to find that world.

I made my camp in a corner of a field by the river. The field was empty except for a family of Cherokee that camped a hundred yards away in the opposite corner of the field. I watched as the broad-shouldered men with dark hair hanging down their backs chopped fire wood and drank beer. Their bronze children ran along the river bank tossing in rocks and hollered as they played. At night,

I watched as the family sat in lawn chairs, eating around the fire. They were strong, quiet people, descendants of the first inhabitants of the Appalachian mountains, the first race to be completely driven from their homes beneath the shadows of the Blue Ridge.

Waking at dawn, I slipped through my tent flap and felt cold dew on my feet. The light coming from behind the hills hurt my eyes. The trees chattered with bluejays; somewhere on the river a child yelled. I turned to see if my Cherokee neighbors were up, but when I looked toward their camp, they were gone. Sometime in the predawn hours they packed up and drove back to their homes, leaving me camped alone and sleeping beside the river.

After eating a bowl of Cream of Wheat, I pulled on my fishing shorts, laced up my tattered canvas Converses, grabbed rod and vest, and walked for the river. It was late summer, Labor Day weekend. Because I started my trip Thursday evening, weekend crowds had not yet come. I hoped to be gone before they arrived. I was desperate to fish because soon the air and water would be too cold for fishing. On those days when the changing seasons hang on the leaves, fishing trips become desperate attempts to hold back the winter. One fishes for long hours, going without food and water in hopes of catching

just a few more fish. On that August day, I planned to fish hard on the Illinois.

The river ran warm against my legs. Before I cast, I dipped my hand into the water and splashed the river on my hair and face, washing away the sleep. Far upstream the river turned to the west. I estimated that if I fished steadily, I could reach that bend in four hours and stop there and walk back to camp for a lunch break. Later in the evening, I planned to start at the bend and work my way farther upstream. No one else was on the river, only a few Canada geese walking about on the far bank. In the cool morning, the sun reflecting brilliant silver from the river's surface, I caught a smallmouth on my first cast. I settled in and fished quietly throughout the morning.

Two hours past, and I stood at the tail of a deep pool. To get through it, I would have to swim or get out of the river and walk around it. As I started for the bank, I saw three Hispanic men sitting on the muddy shoal and holding two-liter pop bottles. Two small boys with faces as brown and rich as blackberries ran about, throwing pebbles into the water. I paused, not wanting to interrupt them, and saw one of the men wind fishing line around a bottle's

neck until two feet of line hung down. He tied a hook and rigged a bobber on the length of line and then twirled it around his head like a lasso. When the line was going fast enough, the man let it fly out into the river.

Angling has many forms. Some people fish from the bank using dough balls and forked sticks to hold the rod while drinking beer and tending a fire. Other fishermen take out large loans to buy powerful boats and trucks to pull the boats to distant man-made lakes. Some fishermen like the finesse of the fly rod, the stream setting, the fragile trout with its colors and flaring gills. I thought I knew every technique available, until I saw the Mexicans.

The men talked softly with each other while sitting on the bank with their hands on their knees. When a bobber moved or sank abruptly, the angler pulled the line with a quick left hand and then immediately began wrapping the line around the bottle's neck and quickly brought the fish to hand. Next to them on the bank, the men kept a five gallon bucket into which they threw their catch.

As I watched the children on the bank, I wondered if they would remember this day as I remembered the fishing trips of my childhood. Will these children remember these places fondly as I do

Kelley's Island? Will these children someday have expensive fishing gear? Would any of them be seriously taken by the sport and contemplate why it is that humans fish for sport, why we have always fished, why Jesus picked fishermen as his first disciples?

Emerging from the river, I walked up on the bank, my shorts and vest dripping, and smiled at one of the boys. He looked at me briefly then said "Padre" as he ran for his father. I said "hello" to the man, and he smiled at me and asked if I were having any luck. I replied that I had, and he pointed at the five gallon bucket, which overflowed with bluegill.

"My children, they love to fish so I bring them," he said. "They do not know there are such things as rods and reels. I cannot afford them. The children like to look at the small fish and touch them. It makes them laugh. We work a great deal on the highway so I do not get to bring them often, but when I can I do, even though I am tired."

As the man spoke, I looked up river to the bend I hoped to reach by noon and saw a canoe poke its way around the turn and head downstream. Slowly it drifted toward us. A young man paddled from the back as his girlfriend reclined in the front; her feet lazily dangled along each side of the canoe.

"Are you catching anything," the shirtless man asked as he flipped a cigarette butt into the river. It went out with a quick puff.

"Yes, a few," I replied. The Mexicans wound in their bobbers so the canoe would not run into them.

"Lots more of us coming," the paddler said. "A group from a local bar got together to come down for a day of canoeing. There's about thirty canoes behind us." The paddler's girlfriend smiled at the little boys.

Again, I looked upstream toward the bend and saw another canoe make the turn and drift toward us. I heard distant voices, women shouting and deep laughter. Another canoe followed, and more voices. Eventually, the canoes drifted past us in a steady train. The canoers smiled and asked, "Are you catching anything."

"No, not right now," I replied.

Because it was a deep pool, some paddlers decided to stop and swim. They pulled their boats to the opposite bank and waded out into the water and floated on their backs. By this time, the Mexicans had pulled in their lines and walked away downstream with the children. Having already fished below the pool, there was no place for me to go but up, whence came a long line of shouts and laughter.

I waded upstream a little, stayed close to the bank, and watched.

A fat man wearing a pair of cut-off jeans ducked under the water, and as other canoes came by, he sprang from the rocky bottom and flipped the canoe, spilling its occupants, coolers, sunglasses, tennis shoes and t-shirts, into the water. The man laughed as the paddlers sprinkled epithets over the river. These people were enjoying themselves, like children on playgrounds. A teenager came running downstream, screaming and splashing, and tackled the fat man. Everybody laughed. A few people said "hello" as I half-heartedly cast my way upstream.

That was it; my morning fishing was done. I caught a dozen small bass and knew that had it not been for the canoe party, I would have caught that many more. But I was not angry with the canoeists. The river speaks in many voices and unconditionally accepts all people. It allows me to fish quietly and think thoroughly, but it can also be a fun and boisterous companion who wants to enjoy the last moments of summer.

Without a river running over rocks, under trees, along great bends beside old railroad tracks, sneaking behind cities and mountains, I know nothing. I become disconnected, alienated.

Expensive lures or quick internet access will never give me a sense of belonging. That only comes from the river. Human efforts are of small significance. They all fail and eventually come back to the river, driving onward to ocean bottoms. No matter how much we may suffer, we should protect the rivers and mountains so that our children will know that something in the world is permanent.

The desire for fishing is like some diseases, in attacking a man with great severity without notice. It can be no more resisted than falling in love can be resisted, and, like love, the best treatment is its gratification.

Charles Bradford

Long Casts

Jennifer had not fished much until she and I started dating. She told me about trips she took to Lake Cumberland with her grandfather when she was a girl, but grandfather died and Jennifer never again went fishing until that summer when I took her to Happy Hollow. I enjoyed fishing with Jennifer because she enjoyed fishing. I would buy her a dozen night crawlers, and she would stand on the bank catching bluegill while I fished for bass from the rowboat. In time, she learned to bait her own hook, tie a fisherman's knot, and did not mind taking fish from the hook when she caught one.

With Jennifer fishing by herself, I could take my time and thoroughly fish the lake for largemouth. One evening as Jennifer and I fished in the moist spring air a week before we graduated from high school, I began to realize that serious-minded fishermen should not worry about love. Selfish and passionate about life, we often misunderstand other people's desires, and somehow cannot step

beyond our own egos and recognize someone else as a complete person. The fishing experience becomes so extremely monumental in our development as people that we fail to realize others have their own way of understanding the world.

My father's only wish for me was that I might leave home and go to college before I fell into one of the many ticking traps that ambush young men in small towns. Anytime I left for an evening, Dad expressed disapproval, scowling and twitching his moustache when I would say, "I am going out with Jennifer." One evening, he stopped me as I slipped out of the garage with my rod and tackle box.

"There's a long list of high school romances gone awry," he began. "They don't work. Ask your brothers; they know."

I was eighteen and sure that I was in love. But I was also in love with the thought of life beyond the low hills of southern Ohio. Jennifer waited for me for eight years, as I went to college and traveled, moved far from home and back again. She waited while I learned what I wanted from life. In the end, however, Dad was right. While I thought I was learning, Jennifer learned she did not want me.

While our other friends were going to movies or parking by the river bank and drinking cheap beer and listening to the Eagles on

warm evenings, Jennifer and I would drive into rural Lawrence County to a pair of reclaimed strip mine lakes on a stretch of land named Happy Hollow. We climbed a small trail three hundred yards up hill until we reached the small mud-tinged upper lake. We then used our rods to lay back the cattails and followed a narrower trail to a large, clear body of water that we called simply "the lower lake."

At Happy Hollow one can always find two items: there will always be Styrofoam cups that once held night crawlers brought by poachers who sneak in at night to fish for catfish, and an old row boat stashed under a large spruce tree in the northwest edge of the bank of the lower lake.

The Glenn's, a family that bought an acre of land at Happy Hollow and built a home, owned the rowboat. At one time, the Glenn family owned the largest grocery store in Ironton. When I was in grade school, I would stop at Glenn's market after football practice and buy soda, which I charged to Dad's account. As I stood at the cash register, I would say with great pride, "My dad has an account here," and the clerk would shuffle through a large stack of long yellow ledgers where all the charge accounts were tabulated. She

would hand me the one that said "Cooke" at the top, and I would sign my name below the signature my father had left.

After the Collins strip mine company abandoned the lakes at Happy Hollow, someone had the foresight to plant maples, spruce, and sycamores along their banks. Today, these trees provide shade and ambush points for many large fish. To get to these spots, a skilled angler must skip a rubber worm or a spinner bait under the overhanging limbs and hit pockets along the bank holding largemouth. Using that technique, I threw a K and E Bass Stopper, a six inch long rubber worm with three hooks, one at the head, middle of the body, and tail. Because the worm is very light and has a short leader, it will drop slowly in the strike zone, and if twitched at just the right time, will often trigger a hit from sluggish fish.

The lure landed in the middle of a shadowy niche along the bank, and immediately the water roiled and a largemouth with a head the size of a pumpkin leaped from the water. I slammed the hook into him and pumped the rod two more times before I let him run.

I had not yet learned to use drag, so I flipped my anti-reverse off and let the fish back-spool my reel. He took line quickly, swimming hard to the far end of the lake, where Jennifer fished. He

neared her bobber and took another large leap from the surface, throwing bright water. Its large red gills flared powerfully, trying to take oxygen and provide energy to the fish's tiring body. Eventually, he rolled onto his side, and I reeled him to the boat with ease. Hoisting him over the gunwale, I noticed that Jennifer had just caught a large white crappie.

"I want to see your fish," she said as she flipped the crappie back into the lake. My bass flopped and thunked in the bottom of the boat. My hands shook with excitement. Catching this fish was the most important work I had ever done.

Before I slipped the fish onto my stringer, I held it up by my thumb and forefinger and estimated it to weigh seven pounds. Rather than tie the stringer onto the side of the boat, I rowed to the old dock that jutted out into the middle of the lake and tied the stringer to it.

After tying off the stringer, I rowed to Jennifer, who had her hands full battling bluegill. She was catching them almost every time she threw her line in the water. As she stepped into the boat, I noticed that the street lamps lining the road had come on, and that bats were diving about them, snagging insects. We had about forty-

five minutes before dark, the perfect time to catch fish.

"Hurry," I said to Jennifer as she positioned herself in the boat.

"I'm ready to go," she said to me, now exasperated over my concern for wanting to catch more fish, rather than my concern for her comfort.

That was the problem with taking Jennifer fishing. I always had to place her need for comfort above my need to catch fish. I have always resented that fact. My fishing had nothing to do with Jennifer, and if I ignored her for a few hours, it was not because I did not care for her. It was because I was trying to catch fish. She never did understand that. Few people do. Most people will always look at fishing as just a hobby, a sport that boys play. Those people do not understand that some people fish to understand the world's complexities, that at the end of fishing lines are thoughts, and as Louise Erdrich wrote, "some of those thoughts explain the meaning of how we got here and why we have to leave so soon" (*Love Medicine* 193). Tell an eighteen year-old girl you were thinking that thought rather than thinking about how much she means to you, and she will look at you like you're cracked. My father was right; young

relationships do not work, especially if one party devotes most of his mental and emotional powers to fishing.

Once Jennifer was comfortable in the boat, I rowed back to the far end of the lake where a creek that drained the upper lake dumped into the lower lake, bringing oxygen and nutrients. As I cast into the long shadows of a summer evening, among a pocket of cattails, Jennifer cast her line across the lake and square into a large, overhanging sycamore branch. I watched as the bobber swung around and around the branch, forever knotting the line onto the tree.

"Damnit, Jennifer," I said, with the voice of an irritated father.

"I didn't mean to," she snapped back to me, although I quietly thought she made the errant cast intentionally.

I left my line in the water, rowed to beneath the branch, and made the best halfhearted effort I could to remain calm and get Jennifer's line from the branch. After a few minutes of tugging, I pulled out my pocket knife and cut the line, sending both ends zinging into the air.

"I'll make a few more casts and we'll go," I said sternly to Jennifer.

When I grabbed my rod, it pumped, sending a quick jolt into my wrist, and instantly I knew I had hooked another large fish. The bass jumped, throwing silver water underneath the glow of the street lamps and the flickering bats. Jennifer screamed when she saw the size of the fish. I could have screamed also; I was about to catch two bass, both over five pounds, in one day. I thought myself a good fisherman.

Jennifer, on the other hand, cared little about my feat.

"Get it away from me," she screamed as I pulled the fish into the boat. She had never seen a fish that large up close. Out of haste, I had forgotten to row to the dock and show her the first large bass I caught. "Matt, Matt, why do you have to put it in the boat?" she cried.

As I was trying to take the now battered K and E bass stopper from the fish's mouth, Jennifer kicked at the fish with her canvas Keds, poor fishing foot gear. I was beginning to like Jennifer less and less. When I had the lure free from the fish's mouth, Jennifer made one large kick with both of her feet and sent the bass flying over the edge of the boat and back into the lake. My second trophy bass was gone. Jennifer never said she was sorry. Later, after I had

thought about it at length, I realized that the fish did scare Jennifer, and that she was not trying to sabotage my pleasure.

A week after catching the two large bass, I was fishing ponds on tremendous farms stretching away from Oklahoma City. Home seemed far away, nonexistent, and I didn't care.

Five years later, after countless nights on telephones and letters written from laundromats during Sunday afternoons, I returned to ask Jennifer to marry me. I was living in Louisville at the time, working as a labor foreman, building a hotel on Fort Knox. I had enough of journeymen masonry and unrealistic project manager scheduling, so I bought an engagement ring, called my boss at work, and drove across Kentucky and Ohio to Nelsonville where Jennifer was going to college.

I arrived early in the afternoon and found Jennifer's house from the address on one of her old letters that I kept stashed in the glove box of my pickup. She was not there, so I drove to the Mine Tavern. In Oklahoma, a thick-handed laborer named Richard who grew up in Nelsonville had told me stories about his adolescence, most of which was spent shooting pool in the back room of the Mine.

In the fifties, it was a hard, blue collar place. Now, the college kids mingled with the line workers from the boot factory. The two groups coexist, each looking disdainfully at the other.

As I entered the bar, I sensed the despair of a small town trying to adjust to momentous change. At the bar sat two middle aged men, each wearing Wrangler jeans and Rocky boots made at the factory across the square. They sipped bottles of Budweiser and stared silently at the television behind the bar. Had it not been for the television and the glow of light in the hallway leading to the bathrooms, the Mine would have been black. On the wall hung beer advertisements that read "Welcome Buck Hunters," and "Coors Salutes Nelsonville." Behind the bar hung a chalkboard on which someone had written with red chalk in large block letters, "Welcome Back Hocking Students."

They were the same signs that hang in the Auger Inn in Ironton. It was the same black bar with the same crooked booths and ripped vinyl seat cushions, the same smell of cigarettes and old beer. In the middle of the room was a shuffleboard table under which the bartender kept fresh cases of Bud, Miller, and Old Milwaukee. This place was the forgotten outskirts of Appalachia. Too far north to be

southern, too close to Columbus to be rural, the town languished in perpetual limbo. The faces of the men at the bar showed the complacency of settlers who ventured into the hills and got lost and decided to stop their journey. After spending two hundred years fighting the land, hills, rivers, and coal companies, everything seemed to have stopped that day in the Mine.

I sat for two hours and drank with the two men. My hands shook as I picked up the cold bottles. I had bought the ring and finally decided to do it, and Jennifer had no idea of my plans. We often talked of getting married, but never very seriously. Lately, that talk had stopped. Now, Jennifer told me that she needed time to get her life in order and decide what it was she wanted for herself. Having just spent five years trying to figure what I wanted from life, I understood Jennifer's perspective, but I also knew it was a useless endeavor. She just didn't want me. In the Mine, in the darkness, under a false ceiling of cigarette smoke, I knew that one way or another, after today, life would be different.

I left the bar and drove back past Jennifer's house to find that she was still not home. As I continued down Elm Street, I saw the squat, sandstone buildings of Hocking College's main campus.

Driving around the campus, I watched the students fill the sidewalks, but did not find Jennifer in the crowds of well-dressed young adults. Looking at their youthful faces and easy demeanor, I envied their carelessness and strength. The grinding screams of masonry saws and concrete burns had effectively worked much of the youth from my body. I no longer felt invincible and in control of the world. Buying the ring was an impulsive act, a futile attempt to gain control of my life again. But I was wading and casting through slack, stagnant water. The pool had been fished out a long time ago, and I was coming back to it because I simply did not know what else to do. I decided to drive back to Jennifer's house and wait.

I entered through the back door of the house and walked directly to her small bedroom. It held all her things: clothes, a few well-read books, pictures of aunts and cousins. Taped to the walls were flimsy vanity posters of her favorite country music singers. These decorations somehow seemed precious to me. The pictures and knickknacks kept her world recognizable when life became unbearable, which it often did for Jennifer. I sat on the foot of her bed thinking how often she would cry, and I, not understanding why she could not cope with the smallest of disappointments, would

become frustrated over my own impotence and holler at her, aggravating ancient wounds. Doctors later found that Jennifer suffers from a bipolar disorder. A lack of chemicals in her brain caused holes that could not be breached and impenetrable walls that no logic could circumvent. The diagnoses eased my frustration but convinced Jennifer of her own unconquerable shortcomings.

Over her desk she kept dozens of Monarch butterflies pinned to the wall. She made no effort to preserve them under glass or keep them alive a few days in a jar before freeing them; instead, she stuck them through the thorax right to her bedroom wall. Opposite the butterflies, she taped leaves, and under each leaf was a piece of masking tape on which she had written the name of the tree: Black Jack Oak, Pin Oak, American Beech. Next to the door hung the card I had sent her on Valentine's day, and the butterfly finger puppet I enclosed with the card hung on her door knob. Stuck in her vanity were pictures of Jennifer and her friends with their heads leaned on each other's shoulders, arms around waists, beer bottles held high. I recognized none of the faces in the pictures.

As I sat on the bed, fumbling clumsily with the ring box, I thought of all the evenings I had been gone, all the time spent with

Oklahoma wind and Kansas sun on my body. In all that time, over the course of all the evenings I had been gone, I somehow never thought of Jennifer developing into her own life and her own person. I expected to come back and find the naive hometown girl I met years ago. Looking around the room and seeing what Jennifer's life had become, it struck me that I had been gone too long. The tumultuous river of Jennifer's life had washed me far downstream and into the deep sediment pool of the past. Outside, I heard a car door shut and her voice greeting the neighbor's dog.

Before we left Happy Hollow, I rowed to the old dock, and untied my trophy largemouth. Over the course of the evening, snapping turtles had taken advantage of its confinement and nipped at the fish's tail, leaving it raw and jagged. The stringer had all but ripped the gills from its head. Blood ran and dried on its green flanks. I pulled the lifeless fish into the boat and laid it at Jennifer's feet, which she abruptly drew underneath her saying, "I don't want that. No. Why would you give it to me?" I didn't respond and rowed the boat back to the bank in complete darkness with the sounds of Interstate 52 and a C&O Railroad freight train somewhere

in the distance.

When I got the fish home, my father took a picture of me standing in our front yard under a great oak tree, holding the fish far out in front of my face to accentuate its size. As I was wrapping the fish in Reynold's wrap and placing it in the freezer to have it mounted later, my Dad asked me, "Who was the oldest Glass brother in Salinger's stories?"

I hesitated. I had read very little of the summer reading list Dad had given me, and he knew it.

"Who was it?" he asked again.

"Holden," I said, taking a chance at the only name I remembered from Salinger's work.

"No," my dad said, "you haven't read it. You've been spending too much time with that girl. I'm sure she is a nice girl, but you'll get her pregnant and you won't have . . . "

"I know," I said to Dad as I left the kitchen and went to my room to read.

I could have explained to Dad that it was not the girl that kept me from reading; fishing kept me from reading. I had so many places to fish. However, I quietly obeyed and read. Later, when I read

Hemingway's *In Our Time,* I was glad Dad made me read. In those stories were men my age who understood how important it was to lead the sporting life. Sometime later, after I read as often as I could because I wanted to be a writer, I realized that in making me read, my father was making me a better fisherman. He made me think and see that the surface is only the beginnings of reality. Underneath the surface lie worlds of uncountable depth and degree and that only through fishing, observing and casting into them, do we begin to understand each other and ourselves. He was right.

After studying the fish for several minutes, I noticed Miss Lawlor and was reminded of my youth. In my salad days when hope and judgment were equally green, I often thought of finding such a girl on a trout stream.

Nelson Bryant

First Trips

We are going fishing, taking our first trip of the year to Hinton, WV, to fish the confluence of the Greenbrier and New River. It's rainy and chilly, and stunned by a dream I was having, I'm not sure I want to leave.

"Come on," Samuel says again. He stands at my living room window smoking a cigarette, staring into the darkness down Tenth Street toward the Ohio River. I move about, pack an extra shirt and pair of socks into my backpack, and take my rod from the nails on the wall. This will be the first time I've been fishing since Jennifer spurned me. Because I'm not ready, Samuel thinks I don't want to go. He's wrong. Since the failed proposal, I've thought a great deal about fishing.

We load our fishing and camping gear into the back seat of Samuel's brown, 1976 Chrysler Newport. It's beautiful, not well-maintained, but handsome. The inside smells like mold, cigarettes,

and old beer. But the machine smoothly carries us along Interstate 64 and across the West Virginia turnpike.

I notice the scrubby tops of the Poplar trees are turning red with swelling buds. The light had been hanging in the trees as the days slowly grew longer. We round a large bend in the highway, and the mountain drops straight down to my right. Tall maple and oak trees stand gray and glossy in the rain. I had not been outside for many weeks for any length of time, so I was surprised to find how quickly we were moving toward spring. Above me fat storm clouds pull across the horizon. It might rain all day; we might not be able to fish.

Longfellow wrote that "A boy's will is the wind's will, and the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts" ("My Lost Youth"). So it is with the fisherman in winter; the thoughts of the past year and the coming spring are long, long thoughts. I thought of my dream again and rode quietly while Samuel smoked and flipped continually through the radio's preset buttons.

"We'll hit below the dam first and then later in the afternoon we'll work upstream above Wolf Creek," Samuel said between sips of coffee.

"Fine," I responded, "I just want to fish."

Before I left home, Samuel and I spent almost every weekend zipping down to West Virginia for a day of smallmouth bass fishing on the New River. We had nothing else to do; we did nothing else productively. Fishing kept us straight enough to avoid falling into the many pitfalls that snag people in small towns: alcoholism, dead end jobs, the inability to see the world beyond your own city limits. Fishing gave us something important; it made us feel good about ourselves. Now that I was home again and driving through the thick-walled mountains of West Virginia, I felt my mind go quiet. Going fishing was the last step in my road home.

In gray rain, we reached the river at nine in the morning. Below the road, through the hawthorn bushes, we could see the brown water passing under overhanging limbs and covering the tops of sandstone boulders. It would be tough to wade in that high water. In silence, we watched the river for several minutes. With the water high and muddy, we both knew the fishing would be slow. But it was good to stand under a large beech in the rain and watch the New River, the second oldest river in the world, flowing along its rocky course.

Although I wanted to fish, I was not excited about getting in a flooded river. I would have been content to sit under the large rhododendron bushes and watch as Samuel fished. But I was now at the river and thought it strange to be so reticent about getting in. I've fished high water before, but in those times I was confident I could catch fish under any circumstances.

"Let's try. Let's try to fish it," Samuel said.

I agreed.

It had been almost two years since Jennifer joined us on a fishing trip. The last we took was in autumn, the final trip of that year. Throughout the winter, I thought of her as I saw her on that day. Her thighs tensed against the current, and the sun reflected off the river onto her golden face. She fished with skill, waded strongly and looked intensely into the current. Somehow, her skin tones matched the green of the mountains and the brown of sandstone. Jennifer was proof that we take on the qualities of the landscape in which we grow.

I've known for a long time that the mountains and rivers of Appalachia are a part of my being. I knew it when I drove home from Kansas in early autumn and saw the scrubby, second growth forest of

eastern Kentucky. I pulled off the highway and into the back parking lot of an abandoned Sunoco station just to stand in the evening air. It was the same air my brother Luke and I smelled when we played football in the fallen maple leaves in our father's front yard. During my time in Kansas, I thought very hard and long thoughts about my home and its rivers. All my life, I've thought about leaving my home. When I left it, however, and established a life some place distant, some place I never dreamed of as a restless teenager, I thought of nothing but home. Although I have been to college, earned a graduate degree, and traveled much of the country, I feel like I'll never leave this place--Appalachia. Somehow these mountains and rivers are inescapable, and their hold is inexplicable.

My decision to ask Jennifer to marry me was a mistake and a selfish act. I was afraid of losing her, losing her love, which was somehow the same as losing my youth. I know now that her decision to not marry me was sound. Serious fishermen make bad husbands because their first love will always be the river. I have fished always; it is tucked among all the memories of my childhood and my dreams on rainy mornings. If I fish, it means that one aspect of my life will always be permanent, constant, and unshakable. I cannot

return to my childhood home on Kelley's Island. I do not recognize the downtown of my hometown. The high school I attended is gone, but fishing compensates for these losses. I fished before Jennifer and with her; I would fish after her as well.

Samuel was in the water, making his way toward a small island of rocks at mid-river. I knew what he was thinking. On the other side of the river, a small stream ran down the mountain and emptied into the river just above a large over-hanging sandstone shelf. For twenty feet the water from the new stream flowed clearly until it became diluted by the muddier water from the main current. Beneath that shelf in the clear water might be a big smallie waiting to ambush careless crawdads as they scuttled about the river bottom.

Samuel waded hard, driving his legs through the heavy current, kicking up white patches of foam behind him. I stayed close to the near shore and made short casts into the nearest eddies. Samuel has a monomaniacal quality that makes him a great fisherman. For him, there will always be rivers that need to be fished; the final five minutes of daylight must be used. He can always go another hour on the river without eating. The other side of the river always looks

better and must be reached, no matter how deep or swift the current. I would be content to fish one good stretch of river for the rest of my life, but Samuel wants new water. Every time he fishes, he proves something to himself and gains an advantage over some phantom enemy. Most of the time he is correct in his assessment of rivers, weather, and fishing conditions, and I follow his plans. But in the rain on this chilly day, I stayed close to the bank and watched him.

He finally made it within casting distance of the clear stretch of water. Flipping the bail on his Shimano reel, he eyed an eddy swirling just behind a fallen sycamore branch. Putting the weight on his upstream leg, he cast just ahead of the eddy and quickly reeled in slack line. He held his rod tip perpendicular to the water and turned his body in a smooth arc keeping his shoulders square to the bouncing jig. Quickly, the muscles in his back tightened, and he abruptly raised his forearms pulling the butt-end of the rod shoulder high. He slammed the hook into the fish again. It ran quickly to his right and toward stronger current, bursting from the water when the line reached full extension. With a quick shake of its head, the bass was gone.

Samuel cussed, slapped the water, and slipped, mouth open, into the river. I made one long cast before he started pulling himself up by inching his fingers along a slippery boulder. He came from the water with his blond hair matted to his glasses that now hung at an odd angle to his face. His Ohio State baseball cap floated away downstream. I made a cast toward it, but it was too far along to snag.

"Nice work," I yelled across the river to him, "Good technique on that one."

"I knew one would be in there," he responded, ignoring my sarcasm. He didn't yet realize his hat was gone.

Samuel awkwardly waded back across the river, carefully selecting each step, balancing himself against rocks with his free hand. After several moments and abrupt falls back into the current, he reached my side of the river.

"I bet this muddy water's coming in from Wolf Creek. We could drive up above it to Fallen Island to get in there and fish upstream. The water'll be clear and warmer," Samuel said. "Shit, my hat's gone."

I did not respond. In the rain on this chilly day, I did not want

to drive further upstream. I would have been content to sit in the tent and read. But we had come to fish. We both turned and climbed the muddy path back up the river bank to the Newport. At the car we removed our wet wading shorts and replaced them with blue jeans. Samuel started the car and opened the glove box looking for cigarettes.

"We'll catch fish today. I know we will," he said while lighting a match. And again we drove along a country road, river below us, mountain above us, passed fallen-down trailers with couches on their front porches and rusting satellite dishes in weedy front yards. Around bends in the road we passed sport utility vehicles with Virginia and Maryland license plates and expensive mountain bikes strapped on their tops.

As the mountains push continually upward and the rivers drive down into the hard rock, West Virginia tears at itself, wanting to accommodate everyone, coal miners and white-water rafters, always somehow betraying its quiet children. I wondered how a country so rugged could produce some people afraid to make a stand for their land, home and heritage, a people who sometimes voiced disparaging remarks about their own state. West Virginia--a whore

for mining companies and eastern tourists, a paradise for fishermen.

"We may need to go with eighth ounce jigs because of the high water. We've got to be able to get down where the fish are," Samuel said.

I replied, "I don't like to fish with the eights because you get hung up too much. I'm sticking with the sixteens."

Samuel was right of course, but I did not want to complicate my fishing. I did not want to think about it and worry if I were going to catch fish, although I wanted to be in the water wading and casting, feeling my body move in the water. If I got tired, I might find a spot and nap.

"All right," he said, "Do what you want, but I'm catching a big smallie today. These overcast skies and the cold front are going to turn them on."

The rain stopped, and below us to the left we saw Wolf Creek flowing into the New. Samuel was right. The smaller creek was the one bringing in the stained water. Above the confluence the entire river flowed clearly. When I saw the clean river, suddenly my enthusiasm grew. I focused on fishing again. I got out of the car and stretched my back. Not waiting for Samuel to prepare his gear, I

quickly slipped my shorts on and slid down the embankment toward the river. I wanted to fish alone, at my pace, and not talk. Warm water that rolled out of the Valley and Ridge Province wrapped around my legs and made tickling noises as it rolled over cobble sized rocks. Now there was nothing else to do but fish.

Above Fallen Island, the river widened and the current slackened just enough to make the wading comfortable. Smaller rocks gave way to basketball sized boulders that provided excellent habitat for smallmouth bass. The current flowed steadily, about three feet deep. I could see down into the rocks, but could not see the fish. But I knew they were there. It was mid-day, a poor time to fish, but Samuel and I worked carefully, leaving about thirty yards of river between us as we waded upstream. I took the lead, working the many small pockets between the rocks on the right side of the bank against the railroad tracks. The boulders on that side of the river were large, ten feet around, the size that littered all the banks on Kelley's Island.

As I fished, I thought of my sister Molly and me stepping among the rocks at the Rocky Beach. She and I would go there to beach comb after large storms. Small pools in the rocks would make

them brown and slippery, but if you walked carefully, you could skip from one boulder to the other and find old fishing tackle, flotsam from boats, periwinkles and clam shells, pottery fragments. Molly told me that everything we found came from pirates or indians. The indians I did not mind because I had told myself that if I ever found some on Kelley's Island, I would try to join them, as Blue Jacket had done. The pirates, on the other hand, frightened me. One morning, Molly stopped walking and stood on a large rock and looked out across Lake Erie at a distant boat.

"See, there's a pirate ship," she said.

I looked sharply into the blue distance and saw the vague shape of a boat on the horizon. "How do you know it's a pirate ship?" I asked.

"Can't you see the sail," Molly replied.

I looked again and said that I could not.

"It's there," she said, and reached across the rock to hand me the clam shell she had just picked up.

As she reached her hand to mine, her foot slipped into a small puddle on the rock, and she fell face first onto the rock in front of her. I saw her chin hit the boulder and her head fall between the two

rocks.

"Oh shit Matt--my braces," she said.

She raised her head and I saw that her bottom teeth had pushed through the space between her lower lip and chin, making a small, bloody second mouth. Blood ran down her neck and dropped into the sand. She cried and told me to give her my shirt. Taking it from me, she held it to her chin and turned to walk toward the car. As she drove home, she cried, saying repeatedly, "I'm bleeding. I'm bleeding." Dad took her to the island doctor, where she got seven stitches without the benefit of anesthesia.

Samuel and I worked upstream for two hours and came to a deep pool. The rain had completely stopped and now a bright sun burned on our backs. We were both tired and decided to stop on an island at the head of the pool. Samuel immediately dropped his rod and reel, removed his vest, and walked into the pool, then dove into the deep water. He came up floating on his back. I joined him by climbing a sycamore and crawling out to a large branch and dropping into the pool. We swam and floated for half an hour; the fishing had been slow. I repeatedly climbed the tree and jumped into the water.

We relaxed by the river until late afternoon. The sun began to

dip closer to the mountain tops and our visibility upriver became shorter. Soon it would be evening and the fishing promised to be fast. The rain had warmed the river and given it a good, steady flow. We could see insects emerging from the grass along the river and deep-throated bullfrogs began to croak. We pulled our vests on and started upstream.

I took about five paces upstream and fell into the river. My right shin banged against a rock. The skin scraped off, and a small trickle of blood ran down my leg. Remaining patient, I wiped off the blood and started upstream again. The cut stung and would probably be infected tomorrow, but I continued to fish.

We worked steadily into the evening and found that the trailers and cabins along the river gave way to forest and mountain sides. After two hours, we saw no more homes and could no longer hear cars on the road. Dusk was coming slowly downstream, like the water. The river made a large bend to the west, and the orange sun reflecting from the ripples caught my eyes. I fished with my left hand held at my brow like a sun visor.

Samuel was on the opposite side of the river in the shade casting under willow trees. Every few casts, I saw him set the hook

into a fish and quickly bring it to hand. He would study its vertical black bands and bronze colored flanks then gently let the fish back into the water. Releasing a fish, he raised his right arm and signaled at me to cross the river to his side. He made this motion often--one sweeping wave with his arm that smoothly ended in a finger pointing to a part of the river. It meant that he was fishing good water--too good, and he needed me to fish a hole on that side. I raised my chin in confirmation and reeled in a cast and started across the river.

At midstream, the river grew chest deep and the current stronger. Bouncing on the toes of my right foot, I propelled myself over and let the river take me down. Using this method, I eventually made it to the other side about fifty yards downstream of Samuel. When the water became shallow enough, I started upstream again and made short casts ahead of me. Wading quickly through a tangle of sticks, I fell again and felt my wrist sink into a silty bottom. The cut on my leg began to sting, and I again worried about infection. I imagined feces particles and unknown chemicals getting into my leg and contaminating my blood. Cussing, I stood up and walked to the bank and wiped mud and blood from my leg.

Samuel again signaled me, so I got back in the water. When I reached him, he was looking at the river and casting with great concentration.

"It's getting late. Let's fish this stretch good until dark then wade across the river, find the road and go."

I agreed but thought we should be off the river before dark. I didn't want to risk further agitating my cut.

Letting Samuel take the lead, I stayed behind and cast toward the bank. A swift current tangled around the roots of a fallen oak and looked like great habitat for a big bass. I tied on a pumpkin colored, three inch grub and cast a little upstream of a tight eddy. My lure swirled into the pocket and came to an abrupt stop. I felt the jig strike something and violently raised the rod tip to set the hook. I reeled quickly, but the fish at the other end did not respond--snag. Pulling and yanking with the rod, I broke the line to not spook the fish from the hole.

As I tied on another grub, a log, four feet long, came floating toward me. The debris coming from upstream indicated the river was rising upstream was rising from the runoff of late afternoon showers. I stepped to the right to avoid the branch and found myself

falling into the river. Sticking out my right arm to catch myself, I banged my reel and bent the handle against a submerged rock. My day of fishing was over. Spare reels were in the trunk of the car, but there was not enough daylight left to go back and get one. I waded to Samuel's spot and showed him my reel.

"Bummer," he said. "Does that mean we have to stop?"

"No," I replied, "You fish and I'll meet you at the car."

Across the river and upstream, I saw a small, white cabin at the head of a hollow. It was the first cabin we had seen in several hours. From a distance, it looked unoccupied.

"I'm going over there to look for fresh water to wash out this cut," I said.

Samuel did not reply. He turned his shoulders to me and kept casting. I knew he would keep fishing until he absolutely could not see.

Bouncing back across the river in the deep water, I eventually made it to the far bank and got out of the water and found a trail running along the bank. I followed it to the cabin. It was square with a flat roof and in need of a new white washing. The screens on the front porch were ripped and had been repaired with bailing wire

and duct tape. It appeared as if no one had been there yet that season. Dried sunflower plants and gourd vines rattled against the slat side walls as a large Norway spruce waved its green top in a slight breeze. I walked through the side yard and around the back looking for a well or hose spigot that might have potable water.

When I turned into the back yard, I saw a pregnant woman taking sheets from a clothes line. Startled, she turned toward me.

"Oh, you're a fisherman," she said.

"Yes, sorry, I was just hoping to get back to the road," I said.

"That's ok. Fishermen come through here all the time. We are the only cabin for awhile so a lot of people get out here and walk for the road." She hesitated a moment and added, "that's what the previous owner said--it's the only bad thing about the place, he reassured us."

She kept taking down her sheets as I wondered when she must have hung them there. I questioned if she had let them hang there during the morning's rain, or if she had hung them out afterward. I speculated that they could not be dry, but she did want to leave them hang over night. She dropped the wooden clothes pins into a basket next to her bare feet in the short grass. A sharp clicking noise of

wood against wood came from the basket as she dropped each pin. As she worked down the line, she pushed the basket with her feet. I realized that she must have hung the sheets out of boredom and now taking them down gave her something else to do.

She had chestnut hair that hung to the middle of her back. I watched as her fingers, long and nimble, grabbed the corners of the sheets and quickly whipped them into tight, folded squares. She wore grey, cotton pants; a white draw string hung out from the waist. A long white T-shirt with small black stains concealed her swollen belly. She was obviously dressed for yard work and solitude.

"I didn't think anyone was here," I said. "Sorry to bother you."

"No, it's fine. My husband and I just came here for the first time this morning. His father bought us this place for our one year wedding anniversary. Jeffery, my husband, is a college professor. I'll be staying here alone until he finishes this semester, and then we'll spend the summer here together."

"That's nice," I said. "Does your husband fish?"

"He said he's going to take a spotlight and shine it on the river and let the fish come to him. Then he'll catch them with nightcrawlers. That's how he fishes. I don't know where he learned

it," she said as she put the last sheet into her clothes basket.

As she spoke, it occurred to me that this woman was afraid of her new summer home in the mountains of West Virginia. She did not want to be here, but her husband loved the place and didn't see anything wrong with letting his pregnant young wife stay there alone while he went to town for food. I wondered if my father had taken the same approach with his new bride and the house on Kelley's Island.

"I see your blood on your leg; you're bleeding," she said.

"I cut myself in the river. I was looking for some clean water. Do you have a well where I might wash this out?" I asked.

She raised her chin as she lifted the clothes basket to her chest and nodded toward a handle and spigot that jutted from the grass next to her car. Ducking my head to avoid the clothes line, I started for the water. As I passed under the line, I looked down and saw a water snake, five feet long, slide from the yard down toward the rocks next to the river.

"Shit," I said softly, but the woman heard me just as she opened the screen door leading into the back of the cabin. She turned with her arms still around the basket.

"Snake," I said. "A harmless snake, but a big one."

She walked into the cabin, letting the screen door bang shut behind her. The slam echoed in the mountains and across the river loud enough so that even Samuel turned around to see what made the sound.

I walked to the well and washed out my cut. It had some silt in it, but would be fine if I used peroxide when we got to camp. The evening air had grown cool, so I stood next to the woman's car enjoying the warmth coming from its hood. She must've gone into town earlier, or just taken a drive, I thought. There wasn't much for her to do at the cabin. It was too early to plant a flower garden, and she was clearly in no shape for hiking or floating the river.

The gravel driveway led out to the road where we were parked. Before starting back, I walked back past the cabin toward the river to tell Samuel that I found an easy way to the road. As I came to the front yard, I looked through the screens on the front porch and saw that it was cluttered with tangled fishing rods and several old tackle boxes. In one corner leaned a pair of gray oars. Bamboo fly rods lay across nails in the roof beams. In an opposite corner was a basket of child's toys: a stuffed rabbit, black with dirt, match box

cars, a Tonka truck, and dozens of green army men.

As I stood examining the porch, the woman came out the front screen door and into the yard. She was enormously pregnant.

"The former owners left that stuff. They just left everything, almost as if they wanted to keep part of themselves here," she said.

I said nothing and walked toward the river. Surprisingly, she followed me to the water's edge. Samuel had waded across the river and made several long casts into the coming darkness. As the woman and I stood watching him cast, he hooked a large bass and fought it for several moments before bringing it to hand. He held it up for us to see--a nice two pounder. The woman clapped. As Samuel released the fish, he stared down into the water for several seconds. I thought he was watching the fish before it disappeared into the river and the rocks, but he quickly reached back down into the water. When he stood up, he held a white marble, a shooter, between his thumb and stubby index finger.

He turned toward the woman and I, as a few final moments of daylight hung on the river and said,

"The river has given me a gift."

We all laughed as Samuel came out of the river with water

running from his shorts and vest. As he walked, water squished out the sides of his shoes. He looked like a creature more adapted to life in the river than on land. The three of us walked up through the broad front yard in the darkness. When we got to the cabin, the pregnant woman silently walked onto the front porch, again letting the screen door slam loudly behind her. Samuel and I continued through the yard, to the road, and walked under a new moon four miles back to the car.

As I lay in the tent that night, I thought of the woman and how she must feel about the baby she was carrying. I envied her. She had a summer home and the promise of a new family. Life would be good. I thought of my parents as they spent their first uneasy nights in the house on Kelley's Island before any of my brothers and sisters were born. My mother silently prayed her rosary as she listened in the dark to the sounds coming from the woods, and far in the distance Lake Erie rocked against the shore. Anticipating the chores that needed doing in the morning, Dad slept deeply.

At dawn, I awoke to a deep burning sensation in my leg. Quickly throwing off my sleeping bag, I looked to see that the cut was surrounded by a red blotch, and red streaks ran down to my foot.

As I shook Samuel awake, he asked if it was time to start fishing again.

"No, I'm infected and should probably go to the hospital for a tetanus shot," I replied.

We dressed and walked out of the tent and into a slight drizzle. Muddy puddles lined the road; it had rained all night. On the way to Summers County Hospital, we saw the river had risen substantially. Now, we could no longer see the rocks in the river. It was all one smooth flow of thick brown water. Tree branches that only yesterday hung free of the water, now dragged in the violent current. Even if my cut had not been infected, there would be no fishing today.

After sitting in the waiting room for three hours, I finally got a shot and a large white bandage put on the cut. The doctor told me not to get it wet for two days, then take off the bandage, swab out the cut and put a band-aid on it. As Samuel and I left the hospital, I looked down a large hallway and saw the pregnant woman from the cabin sitting in a wheel chair, taking deep breaths, and looking at photographs of the river valley that hung on the walls. She was alone. I wanted to talk to her, but Samuel prodded me out the door

and into the parking lot.

We went back to the camp ground and packed our things into the Newport and started across the mountain again to Interstate 64. Even though we had only been gone two days, the sides of the mountains were no longer gray with winter trees. Instead, a light green film now covered all the mountain sides. The grass in the median had also grown. As we drove, my cut grew warm and itched. I thought I might visit my parents when I got home, and later in the spring, when the ferry boats start running, I might plan a trip to Kelley's Island.

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