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Shades of Clear

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SHADES OF CLEAR

By

Daniel A. Gocella

THESIS

Submitted to
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Daniel Gocella is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate studies.

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ABSTRACT

Shades of Clear

By

Daniel Alan Gocella

In considering the options for my thesis, I found myself trying to come to grips with the term “nature writing,” a genre that seems to defy definition, morphing and reforming with and despite the changing sensibilities of society. I’ve realized, though, that it’s this very quality that fascinates me, and I enjoyed exploring this form that lacks one consistent form and this subject, so massive and ethereal, that it can transcend the limiting and confining bounds of one subject. I put my Bachelor’s degree in Environmental Conservation to use, and the majority of the essays in this body of work blend creative writing with a strong background in scientific fact.

The common bond between these essays is the need to understand mankind’s role in nature. What has caused this separation, this rift, dividing the human and nonhuman worlds? How has history influenced contemporary society’s environmental ethics? And, ultimately, does nature unaffected by man still exist?

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For Dana,
who for twenty-four years
has kept the peace even when
I seemed determined to ruin it.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Body:	
Homewaters.....	18
Respecting Our Elders.....	40
In the Ampuru Valley.....	67
Another Thing I Learned About Bears.....	88
Rifles and Greed.....	104
The Trapper.....	128
Steelie Bums.....	153
Works Cited.....	200

INTRODUCTION

When I was young, twelve years old, perhaps, I obtained a cheap, mass market copy of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. An ex-library book, it had all the signs of public servitude – the torn cover haphazardly repaired with tape, the faded black stamps of the circulation desk, and the pages with red ink bleeding through marking places where inconsiderate patrons had annotated. I read the book in bed at night, and while sitting at the water's edge waiting for Northern pike to take my bait. At that age, much of Leopold's wisdom was out of my reach, but thankfully, I understood enough to recognize that something profound was happening in that book's pages.

My first real reading experience, that point at which I truly saw language and meaning coalesce, came a few years later, during high school. It was a warm spring day, and I was sitting on the deck of my family's cabin in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, revisiting *Sand County*, when Leopold's words suddenly became quite real. As I clumsily made my way through the final few pages, a trio of cranes glided close over head, near enough that I could hear the wind hiss through their primary flight feathers, and eavesdrop on their low, cackling conversation. Tall white pines obstructed my view, but I knew where the birds

were headed, and I followed, down the long gravel driveway, through the tamarack stand, to the edge of the marsh.

As a child I routinely patrolled the fringe of this marsh, scaring ducks and catching frogs, wandering for hours, losing myself in its channels, occasionally worrying my father by missing supper time only to stumble home after sundown covered in muck and bug bites and, more than once, wasp stings. To my family and most of our neighbors, the marsh was a dangerous labyrinth of quicksand mud flats and quaking bogs connected by warrens of game trails and black water streams – nothing more than a breeding ground for mosquitoes, they thought. I knew better.

For me, it was a private museum, a curio cabinet from which I could remove pieces of the natural world, hold them in my hands, turn them over, and consider them from different angles. Here is where I learned the complex lifestyle of amphibians, the intricate architecture of beavers, the violent daily struggle of aquatic insects, and, most importantly to my burgeoning love of nature literature, the nesting characteristics of cranes.

The rookery stood at the far eastern side of the marsh, and though I had ventured deep into the watery maze, foolishly crossed the quivering carpets of floating islands, and recklessly leapt from tussock to tussock to cross stagnant pools, the cranes always remained out of reach, too far away for even the most

intrepid adolescent adventurer. Even during my most valiant attempts, I could only view the birds from a distance.

That teenage trip to the marsh, though, was different. With Leopold's guidance, I was content to observe from afar. For an hour or more, I stood among alder and swatted black flies while watching the cranes dance. I returned home in the dark and quickly retraced my steps through *A Sand County Almanac*, until I found the passage that now held a certain, identifiable truth.

A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place. Yearly since the ice age it has awakened each spring to the clangor of cranes. The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake. The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history. These peats are the compressed remains of the mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet. An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die. (102)

I read it several times that night, each time wondering how Leopold had compressed my childhood wonderland into a paragraph, while at the same time

opening it up, allowing it to unfurl through history, as far back as the ice age.

With nothing more than words, he fit my marsh into that book, revealing more in a single, yellowing page than any dozen hiking trips could have. In this way, literature and the natural world became irretrievably entangled.

The link between words and nature was strong, but perhaps stronger was a new awareness hidden in Leopold's book. In all my tramping around the north woods, I always considered nature compartmentalized. The forests and waters of my youth were not, in my mind, a complete, interconnected whole, but rather separate bodies living near each other. Frogs are here, tamarack grow there, and the cranes nest way over there. Everything was in its place, neat, orderly, and as expected.

So it was a surprise to learn of the biotic community, a massive concept that sought not to explain, but to understand the complex relationship between all wild things. For Leopold, nature was a finely tuned machine made up of small, interdependent parts, each relying on the next, each functioning in accordance with the other, and to remove a single piece, no matter how seemingly insignificant was to ruin the whole. These were the lessons in *A Sand County Almanac*, and in my teens I began to view my world in this way.

Leopold, though, was not prolific, so I hunted down others like him at the public library. The order in which I read them is lost to memory, but I do recall

the titles, the authors and, more importantly, their impact on me. A high school teacher recommended *Walden*, and upon reading it I found Thoreau self-indulgent, copious, and overly confident, and still do today. His journals, though, were humble, or humbler, and tight, the language and the philosophies within rendered down, distilled and left approachable even for a teenage boy.

I read and enjoyed the cantankerous grumblings of Edward Abbey, and felt the raw power of his motivation, his call to arms, to save wilderness at all costs. For a teenager in the upper Midwest, the Arizona desert was a bleak and sterile place, but Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and *Down the River* showed me that the web of life was no less visible there than it was in my Upper Peninsula forests. With John Muir, I traveled to the Sierras and, later, to Alaska and though the landscape there was also foreign, I began to see that the threads of life extended that far as well.

I read the deceptively simple musings of Sue Hubbell's *A Country Year*, and much of what Sigurd Olsen wrote about the canoe country of northern Minnesota, a place remarkably similar to my own. I tried to read Annie Dillard, but failed to follow what I thought at the time to be aimless wandering. It would be years before I understood the significance of what she accomplished in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

If *A Sand County Almanac* was the catalyst for my love of nature literature, then Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was a clarion call, an awakening so passionate and determined that, even though only a junior in high school, I couldn't help but to be roused by it. While Leopold introduced me to interconnectedness within and among species, Carson pushed me a few steps further and made evident the fact that we, as much as frogs, tamarack, and cranes, are dependent on the natural world.

The balance of nature is not the same today as in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise, and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored any more than the law of gravity can be defied with impunity by a man perched on the edge of a cliff. The balance of nature is not a status quo; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment. Man, too, is part of this balance. Sometimes, the balance is in his favor; sometimes – and all too often through his own activities – it is shifted to his disadvantage. (218)

Much of the book, though, was a technical quagmire of facts and statistics, mind-numbing in presentation, but undeniably important in implication.

The joy, for me, in reading *Silent Spring* was in the beauty of the opening chapter, "A Fable for Tomorrow," and in the hard driven culmination of ideas in the book's conclusion.

At seventeen I matured from a nature lover to an environmentalist, an evolution prompted by Carson's strong indictment of human arrogance. In my senior year of high school, another book prompted me to explore, in writing, my own thoughts and ideas. My own worth.

As a child, the first time I lowered a hook and nightcrawler into the murky fringe of a farm pond, I was expecting a miracle, and I was granted one: a petite little bluegill, shinningly iridescent and beautifully marked. As I grew older, bluegills led to bass, and then up the food chain, to Northern pike. In my early teens, I acquired an old fiberglass fly rod, and my interest turned to trout, and when I bought my first car, I ranged further still in search of salmon and steelhead. My journal entries from those years are full of wonderfully clichéd teenage musings, observations that bend over backward in an effort to personify rivers and fish with awkward similes and metaphors as gangly as any eighteen year old boy. In them, I also recorded the dry data of fly fishing – favorite spots, weather, successes and failures with rod and fly – but everything I entered lacked

contemplation, which I hope speaks more to my age than to my capacity for introspection.

I began to take my journaling more seriously once I learned what language was capable of, that it was more than just an exchange of information and ideas, or a record of experiences. This notion grew slowly, book by book, as my reading interests fanned out over the wider literary landscape to include Vonnegut, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Melville, and Salinger, and more, some of whom inspired the writer within.

I experimented by penning several short stories and found fiction writing a convenient way to tell magnificent lies and explore themes and subjects unavailable in nonfiction. I wrote a few poems as well, but they were terrible, embarrassingly so, and I won't speak of them further. The bulk of this early writing was composed of nonfiction, oftener than not random anecdotes plucked from life, melted together, and pounded into essay form, similar to this introduction. Most of what I wrote focused on rivers and fish, but little more. There was certainly no connection to anything beyond rivers and fish.

I was moved to write more meaningful essays after reading Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, a lovely little book that boldly confronted subjects I would never dare, namely family, loss and regret. That it was, on the surface, a fishing book made it that much more attractive.

The initial attraction of *A River Runs Through It* was the fishing, which came in vivid scenes that used the stunning topography of western Montana as a backdrop. On their own, the fishing scenes made the book a worthwhile read, but where Maclean was most successful, and where he most impressed me, was in his bravery, his willingness to face familial issues unblinking, namely the death of his brother, Paul, who throughout the narrative was inseparable from the rivers they waded. For Maclean, Paul and the Big Blackfoot were forever joined in memory, and from this I learned that a river can be more than a feature of geography separate from those who are intimate with it.

A river, though, has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us. As we were packing our tackle and fish in the car, Paul repeated, "Just give me three more years." At the time, I was surprised at the repetition, but later I realized that the river somewhere, some time, must have told me, too, that he would receive no such gift. (158)

A River Runs Through It was Maclean's lifelong conversation with flowing water, and as I entered college, I desperately wanted to join the dialogue. As I learned with Leopold, there was a way to both compress and enlarge the natural world in an essay, while at the same time making it part of the human experience. Leopold was profound, and reintroduced me to a world I thought I knew, but

Maclean showed me that just because we are bound to the truth, we do not have to sacrifice poetic beauty. On reflecting back on his life and the memories of those he's lost, Maclean writes with stunning grace:

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. (161)

By the time I finished this book, I learned that meaning is expressed as much through the rhythm of the words as in their inherent denotation. Maclean's stylistic choices, the cadence and musicality of his prose, taught me that, at times, the way we express ourselves in writing is as important as the message we're trying to convey. For a young author, this may be one of the more valuable lessons.

In college, I again butted heads with Annie Dillard. Her widely anthologized essays "Living Like Weasels" and "Expedition to the Pole" are university standards and difficult to avoid in the English curriculum. As before, I found Dillard's meandering, seemingly unfocused style dizzying, her connections tenuous or non-existent, and her poetic sensibilities flowery and

cliché. I felt this until reading *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a book that helped my realize what I could be doing with my own writing.

What struck me about *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was Dillard's attention to detail, her ability to extract meaning from the innocuous, the mundane. With a child-like wonder, she engaged the natural world, explored it freshly, as if for the first time, during each of her daily walks on the banks of the diminutive creek, noticing the barely perceptible changes, the easily missed. This was an epiphany for me, a lesson in slowing down, observing closely, and finding significance in what often seems, on the surface, to be trivial. But simply reporting details does little for reader engagement. The discoveries must also be presented with style.

I want to think about trees. Trees have a curious relationship to the subject of the present moment. There are many created things in the universe that outlive us, that outlive the sun, even, but I can't think about them. I live with trees. There are creatures under our feet, creatures that live over our heads, but trees live quite convincingly in the same filament of air we inhabit, and, in addition, they extend impressively in both directions, up and down, shearing rock and fanning air, doing their real business just out of reach. (86-87)

This blend of casual language and philosophical thought intrigued me, but it was Dillard's imagery that truly impressed me. In just five words – “shearing rock and fanning air” – she managed to convey both a tree's awesome power and its elegant, delicate movement in the breeze. It is this ability to not only notice and appreciate but also to articulate this juxtaposition of perspective that makes her an author worth emulating.

While her metaphors asked the reader to reconsider the world in novel ways, it was Dillard's skill in melding narrative and fact, that may have been the single greatest lesson for me.

By the time I read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, I had earned a degree in environmental conservation and was brimming with scientific knowledge, but had little to no way of applying it to my writing. My creative work had a certain cadence, a flow, but when I tried to mix solid fact into the prose, the end product became disjunctive and awkward, as if a single essay had been written by two very different authors. I doubted that my science background could find an outlet in creative work. Again, Dillard proved the malleability of the essay.

The most obvious characteristic of her style is the elegance of her language, but Dillard is also a tireless researcher who gathers odd facts about the natural world and shuffles them, effortlessly, into her often beautiful prose.

There is a muscular energy in sunlight corresponding to the spiritual energy of wind. On a sunny day, the sun's energy on a square acre of land or pond can equal 4500 horsepower. These "horses" heave in every direction, like slaves building pyramids, and fashion, from the bottom up, a new and sturdy world. (118)

It doesn't matter which came first, the musing or the fact. The end result is that the two work seamlessly together, creating a powerful and evocative image. Now I had evidence that metaphor and imagery could bind my science background with my creative endeavors into a cohesive whole.

I came to Wendell Berry's work late, in graduate school, and I'm glad that I did because I believe one has to be at a certain point in life to fully comprehend the complexity of his deceptively simple essays. At this time, my writing had reached a plateau and was stagnating, unable to ascend further. The comments I received from professors and workshop groups showed my failures. I was neglecting to connect my ideas, my exposition, and my scenes, into one continuous narrative stream. I assumed that others would intuit what I wasn't saying, which left holes, sometimes massive gaps, that alienated my readers.

Berry's essay "An Entrance to the Woods" taught me how to move, or how to imply movement, in my work.

I am afoot in the woods. I am alive in the world, this moment, without the help or the interference of any machine. I can move without reference to anything except the lay of the land and the capabilities of my own body. The necessities of foot travel in this steep country have stripped away all superfluities... As I leave the bare expanse of the rock and go under the trees again, I am aware that I move in the landscape as one of its details. (677)

Berry inspired me to explore/combine physical movement and personal musing, using the forward momentum of activity to frame an essay of ideas and beliefs about the natural world and man's role in it. "An Entrance to the Woods" influenced how I approached my writing, most notably my two essays, "Homewaters" and "In the Ampuru Valley."

"Homewaters" is about the first canoe trip of the season, and how I reacquaint myself with the Escanaba River, on which I spend so much of my time. "Ampuru Valley" centers on a short segment of a solo hiking and fishing trip to New Zealand's South Island several years ago. I attempted to write about this journey many times, but was unsatisfied with my efforts. They felt like mere travelogues. None of it conveyed how I really felt about this unique country.

“Entrance to the Woods” proved to me that an essay can function in the absence of characters or dramatic action. Upon realizing this, I found the avenue that my New Zealand piece needed.

Recently, I discovered the writings of Scott Russell Sanders, an Indiana based author who helped me reconsider the importance of a sense of place. The idea of community, of feeling responsible for a certain region, is a recurring thread throughout Sanders’ writing. He devoted entire books to the subject, most notably *Staying Put*, in which he explores his and his wife’s decision to make their home in the Midwest.

Being grounded in a personal landscape is as essential to Sanders’ identity as it is to his peace of mind.

In belonging to a landscape, one feels a rightness, at-home-ness, a knitting of self and world. This condition of clarity and focus, this being fully present, is akin to what Buddhists call mindfulness, what Christian contemplatives refer to as recollection, what Quakers call centering down. I am suspicious of any philosophy that would separate this-worldly from other-worldly commitment. There is only one world, and we participate in it here and now, in our flesh and our place. (*Staying*, 121)

I spent the free time of my childhood at my family's camp in the Eastern Upper Peninsula, and have lived in Marquette for eighteen years now. I know the rhythms of the nearby woods and the moods of my favorite rivers. I have tried to capture this sense of home in my essay "Steelie Bums," in which a friend and I circumnavigate Lake Michigan chasing steelhead and adventure, only to realize that we both just want to return to the familiar landscape of home.

As anyone who spends a lot of time in the woods or on rivers can tell you, these physical meanderings offer much time for reflection, for teasing out possible answers to life's big questions. For Sanders, and myself, writing became an important method for reasoning out these quandaries.

"For me, the writing of the personal essay is like finding my way through a forest without being quite sure what game I am chasing, what landmark I am seeking. I sniff down one path until some heady smell tugs me in a new direction, and then off I go, dodging and circling, lured on by the calls of unfamiliar birds, puzzled by the tracks of strange beasts, leaping from stone to stone across rivers, barking up one tree after another. The pleasure in writing an essay – and when the writing is any good, the pleasure in reading it

– comes from this dodging and leaping, this movement of the mind. (*Paradise*, xiii)

If nothing else, Sanders inspires readers to pay closer attention to the small moments in their lives. This seems to me to be one of the goals of essay writing: to go beyond simply relating events, to inspect them closely for meaning, and then to encourage this kind of thinking in our readers.

It was my great fortune to have been guided through my evolution as a writer by these authors. From an early age I have found inspiration in their words and still today they motivate me to explore the connection between the human and non-human worlds, and, hopefully, to show that we are not separate from nature, but a part of it.

HOMEWATERS

For the better part of twenty-five years, the pull of rivers has drawn me this way and that across time zones, borders and hemispheres. I've spent weeks on the fertile rivers of the Alaskan tundra, waded in the bright red rock canyons of Southwestern desert streams, and wandered east to the Adirondacks, where even a traveler feels comfortable, at home under the maple canopy.

But as familiar as they seem, these waters range far across time and distance and, in both directions, the space between is too great for me to have formed any true and lasting bond. Though vivid and fond, they are only memories. And memories are tough to lay your hands on. They lack physicality. True, parallels can be drawn.

In some places, the Escanaba River near my home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula slides silently through dark stands of hemlock, swirling and losing itself in tangled log jams, much like Wisconsin's Brule. Other sections are sedate and gentle, stacking gravel and sand bars at each turn, then slowing to bank-side troughs so deep and shadowed they remind me of New Zealand's Buller. Occasionally, the upper river pushes itself into high sand banks, then twists away and calmly crawls through grassy meadows in the same way that South

Dakota's Spearfish does. But these are pieces of river, not indicative of the whole, and the more I try to make familiar what is not, the closer I come to the realization that no two rivers are alike. Each is its own constantly unraveling story.

I was fortunate to have stretched my time on those rivers, long enough to hear the rhythm of the place and to be greeted by the locals with some familiarity. But even a prolonged river tenure - a month, say - isn't enough to fully experience all of its nuances. There's always one more bend to wade around, another stretch you meant to float. Those spots time won't let you reach. Real intimacy, it seems, only comes in the absence of a schedule, when you can experience a river in all of its moods, the highs and lows dictated by season, when each mile can be recalled in vivid detail and the year to year changes noted and tallied until they fan out over decades. Time enough to learn the secrets. Though I have occasionally lucked into the secrets - those holes with the largest or most trout, those roadless sections of wild country - I'm equally certain that I have missed more than I've found. Such places do not appear on maps. They are unknown to most, what cartographers call "sleeping beauties," and what fishermen and canoeists call homewaters.

I have no real business in this upper part of the Escanaba River. My interest in the river begins a few miles below Gwinn. I could have put in further downstream, avoiding the bridges and houses altogether, but this is the first trip of the year and I like to sink slowly into it, experiencing the river fully as it uncoils from town and enters wilderness. The river year starts new for me in this way.

The next set of rapids has me worried. During times of high water, this section of the Escanaba River is a roiling series of standing waves, violent columns of water called haystacks that tower over the river bank and cause a canoe to pinball between refrigerator-sized rocks. But now, in a late and uncharacteristically dry May, the river is low and this run too rocky to be manageable. Milling on the bank and watching the chaos in the rapids just downstream, I consider my options, knowing full well that there is only one. I'll have to line the boat through with rope tied fore and aft, guiding it as I walk streamside.

I've run this section more times than I can count and it's always daunting, but rarely impassable. This is the lowest I've seen the river in our twenty year relationship. As a whole, the Escanaba is a fairly sedate stream. Its tannin-stained water is the color of well-steeped tea and glides over a gravel and sand bottom throughout much of its length. Its pitch is shallow, its gradient gentle.

Occasionally, mostly miles downstream, the water tumbles over a succession of flat rock shelves, evenly spaced, which creates for the canoeist a sensation similar to a waterslide. But those are brief tantrums in an otherwise relaxing float. Here, though, the river is pinched tight by high rock walls and forced into a short defiant cataract thirty feet wide as it bisects an east-west running moraine, marking a spot where the ice age stalled for a time, allowing the glacier to pile rock rubble high enough to be called a ridge.

I had planned on making better time. Just after sunrise a little over an hour ago, my girlfriend dropped my German Shepherd, Bellabaloo, and me off where a grown-over two track ends next to the river just above the town of Gwinn. I anticipated a relaxing day on the water, a long float covering twenty-five miles of river and ending near sundown at one of my favorite spots for brown trout. Bella and I launched shortly after dawn. The sun rose hot, with no cloud cover, and I started sweating as I dragged my sixteen foot cedar canoe down a steep bank to the streamside. Right away, I noticed that the river was low. Too low for May. Several feet of dry land separated the high-water mark from the river's surface. Already the heat was working against the remaining water and a low haze hung in the valley, carrying with it an organic, musty scent. A fish and rot smell.

Shortly after launching, I took the opportunity to remember a few things. I paddled hard at port, allowed the boat to turn, then straightened it with a J-stroke, feeling the buoyancy, leaning far to starboard, testing the secondary stability, the tumble home, that point at which a craft informs you that it will tilt no more before capsizing. The canoe had been dry for seven months, since salmon season, and I wanted to reacquaint myself with it, reintroduce it and myself to moving water. Though that first section was beautiful - broken water tumbling through the shadows of old growth white pine - it also set the pace for the float. We began hitting bottom with the first dip of the paddle. The signs of drought are everywhere.

At this latitude, May is an indecisive month, one that often refuses to keep its promises. In most years, May doesn't spring forward so much as wobbles on icy puddles while dense cold fronts hang over Lake Superior, occasionally wheeling inland and pushing the year back toward winter. Those are times of plenty. Massive snow packs dissolve in spring rain, recharging the river and flushing it of winter's wreckage and fall's leavings. In this way, the river is reborn annually.

But this May has been hot and dry, and there is no rain in the forecast. Everything is anxious to burn. A friend, a forest fire fighter, recently lamented the dryness after having chased smoke across the Upper Peninsula from Bruce

Crossing in the west, two hundred miles east to Newberry and south to Manistique in three weeks. That was early in a month that should be cool and wet. Conditions never improved. Storm clouds promising rain gathered on the big lake, settling in for days, only to dissipate before they could lose their load. The number of major fires grew to eight by mid month, most of them started by ATVs, careless campers, and homeowners burning leaves. This May, the north woods are tinder, and everyone carries a flint.

At the head of the rapids, I tether the boat and rock hop along beside it, trying to control what I can of its descent through the rapids. Bella has occupied herself with a thirteen line ground squirrel. Nose to the ground, she follows its chirps beneath a carpet of new bracken fern. In her excitement, she charges through the green and falls face first into a rock crag, then quickly rights herself and looks to see if I'm watching. I am and I shake my head at her. My mind is mostly on the task at hand, though. The canoe wants to pull free. It strains against the rope and my hands. Now and then the current shoves the hull into stone with a dull, exasperated thud that sounds like a horse coughing. My canoe is taking a beating, but that's what canoes are for, just as dogs are for chasing squirrels. In an environment that changes so dramatically mile after mile, year to year, you have to be prepared to take your licks.

Within a hundred yards, the river leaves the high walls of the moraine and I call Bella to her spot in the bow while I take mine amidships. The boat's v-shaped floor always perplexes her and she fidgets, turning in circles before finding a comfortable sitting position. She settles, but her eyes, nose and ears remain tense and rigid, searching for squirrels. We float between the bridge pilings of a county road as a gravel truck rumbles overhead. Below the rapids, the river jogs left, east, as it collides with a solid rock peninsula. The result is disorienting, the amber water turning on itself in a massive whirlpool forty feet across, the bottom too deep to see even with the low flow. Despite the early morning sun, light penetrates only a foot. In a wet year, a normal year, the hole is large enough to swallow a bus in its elliptical swirl. Today it could hide a midsize sedan, nothing more. We enter the big eddy and the boat tries to spin upstream. I dig in with the paddle and force it to go the way I want.

We coast around the black rock peninsula, over a current break formed by a gravel bar that grates beneath our feet, and then we move downstream. To save what I can of the canoe's bottom, I steer us near the right bank as the river makes a long turn left, staying in the trough and away from the shallower leeward side. The streambed is all gravel here, the banks tangled with tag elder. We pass over another, smaller hole, this one ringed by beer cans and empty bait containers. We're still within walking distance of downtown and high school kids come here

to party and leave what they bring. I keep to the deep water near the shore, though this course forces Bella and me to dodge the occasional fallen tree hanging over the river's surface. If her attention falters, which it often does, I warn her, "Watch the sweeper, girl," and she ducks beneath the branches. Even in low water, this section is predictable. Pool follows riffle, follows pool. Houses are evenly spaced on the high banks. The upper Escanaba can be counted on for this and it will continue for a mile or more until we float out of Gwinn.

A man carrying a gas can waves to me from his yard. I wave back. "Could use some rain," he shouts. I agree. As he bends to fill his lawnmower, he says more, but Bella and I have drifted out of earshot. "We don't care what landlubbers have to say anyhow, do we girl?"

Soon the distance between houses grows and we float out of the low tag alder thicket into a dark cedar swamp, where the sun touches the water only in small splashes of color and only at midday. The land then rises; the banks climb to eye level and grow a cover of folded grass. The forest changes, mixing birch, poplar and maple together, some trees full of bright new growth, others holding their buds and waiting for rain. Where the river runs straight, the water is broken, nervously chattering on shallow gravel shoals that force Bella and I out of the canoe so I can drag it over the narrowest areas.

In this way, we float and wade further from town. The morning and miles pass. Houses disappear, replaced by sporadic hunting camps, their unkempt yards reaching to the water's edge. We pass beneath high power lines and the wide clearing below the taut cables. Here the river settles into a series of deep holes divided by riffles, reefs of stone polished black and smooth as bowling balls.

Small brook trout flit out from under the bow, frightened by our gliding shadow. Bella watches with ears perked. The fish are uniform in size, identical in form and proportion. Trout born not of the river, but in the cement races of a state owned hatchery where they are tended to like livestock and fed protein pellets before being dumped in the wild. In this section, the fingerprints of man are everywhere; on the young poplar and aspen that grow to replace an older forest felled by loggers, on the power lines ferrying electricity to household gadgets, on even the fish. Perhaps this is to be expected in a region that has made a habit of turning nature into a resource. Loggers turn our woods into pulp, and miners turn the earth for ore, so it is little wonder that our wildlife has been industrialized as well. Fishermen, after all, demand fish, and the Escanaba, like many others, is a river that can no longer produce as much as it is expected to.

We have a habit of convincing ourselves that a river always flows downstream, orderly, and behaving just as a river should. I think that there is a

better way to view moving water. Rivers also flow upstream, branching and rebranching, dividing into smaller streams, creeks, tributaries, trickles, and finally, little more than moist earth. The river channels its own valley, contorts around hills and rock, its speed and agility dictated by the lay of the land and the path of least resistance. Because of this, a river is the truest expression of the land it drains. More than that, its function is critical. Moving water is our world in action, a vehicle for erosion and deposition. Rivers shave off the earth's high spots and fill in the low in a constant search for equilibrium. All that they require is continuity. Perpetual movement. Flow.

By mankind's estimation, rivers must also earn their keep in other ways. In human terms, flow translates into kilowatts, so rivers are shackled. Four hydroelectric dams block the Escanaba's main stream, and each creates a break in the line, an obstacle not only to flow, but to all life that depends on continuity. And in the fragile niches of a river system, *all* life depends on continuity.

At first glance, this stretch looks very much like a river flowing free. It moves with volition and casual determination, tricking the eye into believing that things are as they always have been. Though in motion and constantly changing, there is permanence to it, a strong sense that we could continue our journey indefinitely, paddling fifty miles south to Lake Michigan and further to

Lake Huron, eventually finding our way to the sea. If we followed it long enough, this water could carry us anywhere.

In truth, though, we are traveling a piece of river flowing between impoundments. Everything we see and experience, all of this movement, is born of stagnation. The dams a few miles above us ration water by weiring; cool river water stacks itself behind a dam, idles there, heats up, and then topples over the structure. It is the surface water, the warmest water, which then feeds the stream. The result is something akin to thermal pollution. Plants and animals that evolved to a life in and around cold water are unable to adapt to the higher temperature and are lost. Species disappear. Because their temperature tolerance is low, native brook trout were the first to go. To appease anglers, the state now picks up what nature can no longer bear, and the Escanaba's future is delivered by hatchery truck. The farmed brook trout come annually each spring, and fishermen ply this section, yanking out the majority. A few survive from one year to the next, and after a season or two, they grow robust and wild. Most move further downstream to more remote water, where they find cool spring seeps in the riverbed that provide refuge during the heat of summer.

We float past the last of the private land, the cabins and deer camps that periodically broke the forest's continuity upstream. Iron Pine Trail and its steep,

washed out canoe launch passes river left. The boat shudders as we cut between grapefruit-sized rocks of another riffle and drop a foot into the plunge pool below, falling further from civilization. Here, the river stalls momentarily in an eddy twice as wide as the boat is long. A sheer line forms to our port and continues to the tailout where the riverbed rises, sending much of the current back upstream. The boat hesitates as the river contradicts itself. It calms as gravity succumbs to friction, and I lay the paddle crosswise on the gunnels, relinquishing control, letting the bow swing upstream, while the stern turns down. We're caught in the confusion of a river trying to find its way, slowly spinning five times, six, before the boat discovers a seam through which it can escape. I take up the paddle again, guide us over the pool's tail and we drift into the Escanaba State Forest. My homewater. What follows is wild-ness, an unbroken line of green banks that draw like a curtain around us.

Initially, it was the craft of fly fishing that drew me to this part of the river, but it is the art of seeing, of watching things unravel and then rebind, that keeps me coming back, though the route has been circuitous. Long ago, I studied rivers in college. I took courses in aquatic entomology, ichthyology, hydrology, and riparian ecology, trying in earnest to see the river from as many angles as I could. I sampled its biota, poured over taxonomic keys to inventory its insects, dissected its fish, measured its flow and erosional qualities, its cubic feet per

minute and suspended sediment load. I strained its current in order to sift out its secrets. I discussed rivers in terms of classification categories, benthic productivity, and substrate composition. In time, I realized that it was science speaking, the assertions of countless biology classes and field studies, the dry and dizzyingly complicated voice of text books, all of which were invariably silenced when confronted with the unknown. And although I had memorized the data, quantified and scrutinized the findings, rivers thwarted all of my attempts to document and summarize their nature. Much of what rivers are is still unknown to me. And I like it that way.

To the casual eye, the river is all motion. Water passing by. But if the river and its flow could be teased apart, the former may be just water; the latter, however, is what gives the water life. At heart, flow is the pull of gravity made visible, a reminder that moving water has shape and form. It takes trembling trees and waving grass to give the wind a body, but flowing water, of its own accord, is a tactile lesson in mechanical action and beauty, appealing equally to both the scientist and the poet. Though either camp may find something of worth in a river, it seems that such things are seen more clearly, and with better definition, when a middle ground is struck. That place where the diligently practical and

the purely aesthetic square off, chasing each other's tails until a complete circle forms.

The river is low enough to be unfamiliar. Crescent shaped sandbars arch away from the remaining flow, set there by the abating current, and new reeds push through dry and cracked silt flats marking places that should be flooded. The dry spring has shrunk the river and the forest is moving to reclaim the streambed. In the mid-morning heat we pass a feeder creek that crawls out of a bank-side meadow only to find itself still yards from the river. Its sparse flow gets lost in the newly exposed stones. It may only drool today, but in wetter years, it courses with confidence. On its narrow banks, saw grass sprouts out of the forest duff from last fall, showing the high water point, the height at which the creek ran when full of autumn rain.

My canoe doesn't draw much water, and requires only a few inches to float, even with a sixty-five pound dog in the bow. Yet, in this low flow, I feel the boat quake beneath my feet as we scrape along shallow gravel bars, feel it bow heavily when we strike more substantial rock. Later tonight, when I lift it into my truck, I know I'll find several fresh gouges in its hull.

Bella growls when we round a sharp bend, surprising a great blue heron and rousting it from the shallows where it was hunting. The bird lifts with

exaggerated sweeps of its wings, long gray legs trailing behind. It stays to the river valley to gain momentum, then, once at a comfortable altitude, it turns over the tree line and out of sight. Bella watches. She wants to follow.

In truth, Bella isn't much of a canoeist. She spends her time on the river clamoring around her confined space in the bow, turning in tight circles and perching her forepaws on the rails whenever some forest creature stirs the bank-side grass. If a deer bolts near us, she recklessly launches herself overboard in pursuit, leaving me to still the jostled boat. When in the wild, she acts accordingly wild, and although I'm forced to yell for her more than I care to, I also have to admire her lust for the chase. But later in the day, after she has coursed and terrified the river's inhabitants, slayed her dragons, and run herself out, she'll become a very good fishing buddy, carefully choosing a shady, dry, bank-side patch of earth to lie on while I try for trout. If I catch a fish, she'll quietly and calmly wade out and gives it a lick, one timid kiss. Her signal that it's ready to be released. This is Bella at her most gentle, when she is content to simply observe, and it's when I feel closest to her.

Near midday, we stop for lunch at a place where the river presses itself against a sandy knoll, forcing the earth to slough off and slide into the water. We climb the high shore, peddling our legs frantically as the ground slips from beneath us, and sit at the precipice, a good three stories above the river. We eat,

lie in the sun for a while, watch the clouds, then run back down, carelessly, foolishly, to the boat. I warn Bella about jumping out of the canoe, and we shove off.

The Escanaba turns due south and picks up speed. The banks tighten and close fast around us with the arched trunks of cedars, and the round stones of upstream give way to square and symmetrical limestone, baked charcoal gray in the spring sun. The river begins to tilt forcefully downstream, steepening its grade and tugging the canoe in its newfound rush. I back-paddle hard, trying to slow our drop and keep us midstream, in the main channel, but we are committed, and with the low water we crash into the streambed and the boat leans far to one side, then the other. We have to lean against it to stay upright. Bella whines.

This is the flat rock section, where the river leaves the glaciated land behind and cuts deep into the Upper Peninsula's past, all the way down to bedrock. Here the river peels back the earth's history, revealing an ancient ocean floor in evenly laminated limestone shelves. Had we time, we could walk the shore and hunt for fossilized cephalopods and tube worms, but it's late in the day and the river has a solid grip on us. That, and my timing is off.

In a normal spring flow, the river dictates our speed. The current carries the boat and the paddle is used more for steering than propulsion. The paddler

has only to meet the tempo. There's a musicality to it. With so little water, though, this float has a rhythm that's tough to hear. I've had to drag the canoe through several runs and each has slowed our progress. Familiar landmarks seem further apart and I've been fooled more than once today into believing we were above or below our true location. It's not a bad thing to be occasionally lost on water you know well. In fact, it's a good reminder that no matter how close your acquaintance with a river, its behavior can and does change. It's our oldest friends, after all, that are most likely to surprise us.

We leave the swift, turbulent section behind and the river stretches out into a half mile glide of slow water, muddy bottomed and moving darkly in the low sun. The west side is so crowded with mature cedars that the light leaves the water early here. Night comes quickly to this spot, and in the half light I see Hendrickson mayflies in scattered mating pairs hovering above the river. What sun filters through the trees makes their bodies glow an opaque, peachy pink, their wings a fluttering light blue dun. Despite our delays, our timing is perfect. Soon the insects will dip low, dropping their eggs in the water, and shortly after that they will fall, spent, to the river and its waiting trout.

I paddle the length of this long run, staying to the east side while watching for rising trout on the west bank, where deep water forms a slick that

sews itself in and around downed cedar trunks. Bella has other interests. She has her snout raised high and her nose is twitching. She turns her head sideways and I see that her eyes are shut. She is exploring a world that I cannot, caught in the rapture of her own senses. After testing the breeze for a minute or two, she turns again and looks over her shoulder sadly, as if she wishes we could discuss her findings. Or like she pities my inability to experience this place as deeply as she does. But her attention is fleeting, her brain not much larger than an avocado, and her predatory instincts subject to movement more than scent, so she lifts her head skyward as a trio of mallards whirl overhead. One drake follows close behind a hen as another flanks her, forming a tight, quaking triangle that turns and weaves its way upstream. Nesting season is here and this aerial dance is a prelude to her choosing a mate. Bella watches the birds until they round a river bend, then she returns to the breeze.

I beach the canoe, pull it three quarters out of the water, and string up my fly rod. Bella disappears over the high bank on some canine errand. I know she won't range far, but for her the river is more the world that borders it than it is the moving water. The Hendricksons dip lower. A few have met their mating obligation and they writhe on the river's surface, fanning one wing in an effort to break the water's surface tension. Their death throes should summon trout from

the deep hole. I sit on a large round rock and watch. Something will happen.

Something always happens here in the spring when the mayflies hatch.

I take great pleasure in arriving at this spot the hard way. A bend or two and a short series of riffles - another mile at most - and we will be at the takeout, where I left my truck this morning before dawn. An easy walk, especially with low water. But coming here by river, by canoe, provides a slower and more complete immersion, allowing me to settle in. The canoe itself is little more than a form of transportation, one that makes it easy to get caught in the flow.

Over the next two months, for as long as the mayflies hatch and the trout rise to them, I will park at the takeout and hike to this water so frequently that it will feel more like a vocation and less like a hobby. Often I will be rushed, arriving late after being detained by other daily duties, and I'll have to nearly jog to meet the fish. The distance between here and there will be an inconvenience, something keeping me from my goal. But always after arriving here, I'll sit until my mood matches that of the calm water in front of me.

In the clearing behind me, I hear rustling. Bella returns dragging a deer leg. It's old, the hair slipping off in clumps as she tangles it in the grass and raspberry bushes. There's no meat left, probably a winter kill. But she is proud of herself nonetheless and struts up and drops the emaciated leg at my feet, then

looks up for approval. Her throat, neck and chest are crusty with something rank, her beautiful fur matted into sticky, pungent brown wads. She's been rolling in carcass. I scold her, throw the leg over the high bank, then lead her into the river to wash out what I can of the stink. "You're something else," I tell her, and she licks her lips and presses the side of her head against my thigh. "Now, go lie down." She does, folding herself into a tight ball on the new grass of the meadow. Her body is tired, but her mind is still chasing squirrels. Her brown eyes never stop moving, looking for sport. I return to my rock.

The sun has set and the west side of the river fades to black, but in the lingering dusk midstream I see the silhouettes of Hendricksons struggling on the water. They are falling steadily now. Several cling to the downed cedars, fighting the inevitable, and more bob in eddies and swirls, their lifeless bodies joining one another and forming small, light colored mats that turn circles in the current. But no fish rise to them, and for a fly fisherman, a river seems a little less like a river in the absence of trout.

Behind me, Bella rolls to her side and sighs. "Couldn't agree more," I tell her. To prove to myself that there are still trout here, I could tie a nymph or a streamer fly, a subsurface pattern, to my leader and dredge a fish or two from the deep, but with mayflies on the river it seems sacrilegious to fish with anything other than a dry fly. I tell Bella that we should probably go, that the low water

might make our final run more difficult than usual. I explain to her that there is a reason the trout aren't feeding and I theorize about barometric pressure, drought, and moon phases, but she's not interested. "Well, let's go then," I say, and she scrambles to her feet and trots toward the canoe. I begin to follow, but am distracted by a soft sipping sound on the river. I turn in time to see the rings of a rise as they dissipate in the moonlight. "Hold up," I tell Bella.

The trout rises only sporadically, coming up for every fourth or fifth mayfly that drifts over its lie. I wade as close as I dare, peel some line from my reel, and cast. My fly passes and the trout rises to a Hendrickson a foot behind the imitation. I cast again and as soon as the fly enters its zone, the fish takes it. A few short runs, a jump and it slides into my hand. It's a nice brown trout, thirteen inches and thick through the belly, with good color and pink haloed spots along the flanks. I slip the hook from its mouth and hold it in the water until it has the strength to swim away.

For several minutes I stand knee deep in the water and let the day unravel in front of me. The stalking great blue heron, the courtship flight of mallards whirling overhead, the concentric rings of a rising trout, the hushed silence of the nighttime river gliding past – surely these things appeal to us all, regardless of our purpose for being here. But just as surely there exist other, deeper appeals

for those who become truly vested in moving water. "That'll do," I say to Bella, expecting her to be near, but she's tucked herself under my seat in the canoe.

The moon has climbed over the tree line, but it is shrouded in cloud cover as we shove off to finish our float. A few strokes of the paddle and we are swept downstream, sliding silently and effortlessly now over hissing riffles and past the mouth of the Big West Branch where it tumbles into the main stream. I navigate down the parched river by what little light the moon and stars cast. Behind us, my homewater fades in blinding folds of darkness. Ahead I see the glint of chrome on the west bank. My truck.

I dig the keys from my pocket. Bella rousts and turns to face me. "Almost," I tell her and she thrusts one paw onto the thwart between us and whimpers. "Hey, now. Calm yourself." Before I can beach the canoe, she leaps over the gunnel and trots to the truck. I'm a little slower. My back is sore, my arms tired, so I leave the boat half out of the water, walk to the truck, and open the door. Bella scrambles in, leaving wet paw prints on my seat. I back down to the water's edge, tailgate close to the canoe's bow, set the parking brake, and climb out. I bend to lift the boat and feel the first drops of spring rain on the back of my neck.

RESPECTING OUR ELDERS

It's Halloween and Spiderman is telling me about a sturgeon his father caught, while a pirate and SpongeBob kneel in the grass behind him arguing over how many Kit-Kats a Snickers is worth. It's a heated negotiation.

My friends Billy and Brad want nothing to do with the trick-or-treaters. They sit on overturned buckets, staring out at the river. I'm too full of beer to deal with children, but they caught me when I was alone, in the open, so I try to listen to Spidey as, again, he says, "Yeah, my dad's one of the best fishermen I know."

"Wow."

"Yeah, one he got last year he had to cut three times to fit it in the oven."

"That's a hell of a fish," I tell him, and with his mask tipped up on top of his head, I can see his smile. He seems to like that I talk to him as if he were an adult. On the grass, the pirate is saying, "Hypocrite," a word SpongeBob would have to cut three times to fit in his little yellow head.

"Yeah, he gets big ones like that all the time," Spidey continues. "He's probably the best fisherman in Menominee." Behind him, SpongeBob is crying. He wants to go home. It turns out that a Snickers is worth at least four Kit-Kats.

“Hang on,” Spiderman says to him.

“Never barter with a pirate,” I tell SpongeBob. This makes him bawl, although I believe it to be good advice.

Spiderman shrugs.

Pointing over my shoulder toward Billy and Brad, I say, “Well, I better go. My beer’s getting cold.”

He points in the opposite direction. “Yeah, we’re going down that street next,” he says. “Bye.” Then, running away, he yells back, “I’m gonna fill this whole thing,” and with his tiny fist he shakes a white plastic Wal-Mart bag at me.

Nearby, a princess who has been hanging upside down from a tree limb, showing her underwear to the world, drops to the ground and screams, “Wait for me!”

SpongeBob stomps along after his older friends, caterwauling as he goes. For him, and for me, it’s already been a long day, one filled with great stretches of boredom punctuated only briefly by fits of excitement. But this is sturgeon fishing as I’ve come to know it.

Since dawn, Billy, Brad and I have been marinating nightcrawlers and cutbait in the cloudy waters of the Menominee River as it surges between the towns of Marinette, Wisconsin, and Menominee, Michigan. As fly fishermen more

comfortable wading in pastoral trout streams, this section of the Menominee is a strange and ugly place for us. Over the past decade, we've set aside one day out of each year for this kind of fishing. We are on the Wisconsin side of the river, watching our rods nod toward Michigan, and in front of us the brawny river heaves itself out from beneath the Hattie Street Dam in a cauldron of swirls and eddies before righting and uncoiling to flow around the cement pilings of the highway bridge a hundred yards downstream. All around us is the noise of traffic, the static hum of industry, the bustle of commerce, and this evening, the intermittent chatter of children as they run from door to door trick-or-treating in the neighborhoods behind us. This commotion has left the three of us a little out of sorts, and it's difficult to take any of it seriously. It doesn't feel like fishing.

In the past, we have fished for trout on the headwaters of the Menominee – the Paint, Net and Brule Rivers – smaller, more intimate streams that originate one hundred river miles to the north, beginning their lives by seeping out of unnamed marshes or dripping off of rocks in the hills of the Ottawa National Forest. With turbulent riffles and long, elegant glides over shadowy holes, these waters dance more than flow around the curved trunks of cedar trees and through mature maple forests, shifting and changing with the seasons. Before they converge to form the main branch of the Menominee, these trout streams offer solitude, quiet wonder, and wildness. But here, wedged between two

bustling towns and within a mile of Lake Michigan, the Menominee's terminus, there is none of that.

When the costumed kids leave, I slide down the cement rip-rap that lines the river bank and rejoin my friends, who have been watching our rods.

"Seriously," Billy is saying, "it's fine to eat." He's holding a Ziploc bag full of beef jerky towards Brad, and the meat is covered in a white, chalky film that looks a lot like mold. "Try one."

Without turning his head from the rods, Brad says, "No, thanks."

"Oh, c'mon."

"Dude."

When Billy notices me, he swings the bag in my direction, "Dan?"

"I'll pass."

"It's fine." He says this as if I've attacked his character. Billy has been eating out of his eighty quart cooler all day, breaking only when the fishing heats up. "No wonder bait fishermen are so fat," he says. "All ya do is sit here." Then, a minute later, "Hey, did ya get any candy from those kids?"

Since sunrise, we have landed a half a dozen sturgeon and fought and lost again that many, but these were all small to mid-sized fish, three feet or so in length, and ten to thirty pounds. The heavyweights haven't shown themselves, but we know they are here. The smaller fish we've hooked today are a thrill,

hard fighting and a challenge to reign in, but the chance to battle a giant is what dragged us from our trout streams.

Most sturgeon that swim the Menominee are residents. Though this section of river has been irretrievably altered by man, it is still rich in life. The sturgeon roam across the river bottom in their constant search for food, and the water below the dam, the tailwater, is something akin to an aquatic buffet line for them.

In the silty load of the reservoir just upstream, insects, algae, and small fish multiply, flourish, and are sucked into, then spit out of, the dam. The resulting organic slurry courses down the Menominee, coming to rest in any lee or slack water near shore and around the islands and gravel bars. The result is a windfall, a river full of fecundity, and the sturgeon take full advantage of this. The rocky areas are alive with scurrying crayfish, so many that an angler can hardly avoid stepping on them, and further downstream, where the water slows and sediment is laid down in thick mud flats, freshwater clams, snails, and insect larvae burrow into the soft bottom. A myriad of other species - salmon, suckers, smelt, and steelhead - migrate up the Menominee from Lake Michigan to spawn and the sturgeon feed on their eggs and on the flesh of those that don't survive the run. All of this keeps the sturgeon corpulent and content enough to stay right here. They may move downstream seasonally, milling about at the river mouth

when the mayflies hatch, but for the most part, they stay put, leisurely collecting anything the river sends their way, as they have for a very long time.

Though this portion of the Great Lakes was formed only ten thousand years ago, the creature that lured Billy, Brad and me here today traces its lineage back to the Mesozoic Era. The family *Acipenser*, the sturgeons, first appeared in the fossil record over two hundred million years ago, and while other animals have evolved to fill new niches or to adapt to a planet in flux, and while countless others have succumbed to extinction, the sturgeon endures, for it has had little reason to change. With its flat, triangular head and catfish-like whiskers, the fish look much like their prehistoric ancestors. Ancient, docile, perhaps wise, the sturgeon swam through millennia, rarely leaving their place on the bottom of the world's great rivers, lakes and seas. Like the monsters drawn on antique maps, they haunt the places we don't know.

Worldwide, there are twenty-seven species of sturgeon and though they vary greatly in size, color and distribution, they all retain the same basic physical characteristics. Their differences are subtle in form, but dynamic in function. The colossal Russian beluga sturgeon, for instance, can exceed 3000 pounds and has a slightly forward-facing mouth that allows it to pursue and consume baitfish, a trait shared with no others in their family. Conversely, the petite shovelnosed sturgeon of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers rarely grows over twelve

pounds and has a modified, spade-shaped snout, called a rostrum, that gives them the ability to root food out of muddy river bottoms. Despite these adaptations, all sturgeon look more or less alike.

The fish we are catching today, the lake sturgeon, *Acipenser fulvescens*, differs little from their ancestors, whose remains are etched in stone alongside those of the dinosaurs. Like their ancient relatives, lake sturgeon have sharp, bony plates called scutes in lieu of scales. This protective armor, most prominent in young fish, is laid out along the sturgeon's elongate, tapered body in five rows that give the fish the appearance of a medieval weapon, like something one might use to storm a castle. As further testament to its age, the sturgeon also has a cartilaginous vertebra instead of a bony spine, a distinction it shares with sharks and rays. And, like the shark's, the sturgeon's tail is extended and sickle shaped on its upper side, shorter and lobed beneath. Similarities to the shark end there.

As bottom feeders, sturgeon have a tubular, retractable, toothless mouth instead of a hinged jaw. Their round rubbery lips, ventral and set far back from the tip of the nose, siphon food from the lake or river bed, and are preceded by four sensitive barbels, similar to a short set of catfish whiskers, that aid the fish in determining what is edible and what is not. In this way, they vacuum virtually anything – insect larvae, mollusks, crustaceans, amphibians, fish eggs – from the

rock, mud, and muck. Billy, Brad and I weight our baits heavily to plum deep, right to the streambed where the fish forage. So the bait rests, stationary, amid the detritus on the river's bottom. We sit, patiently, drinking beer on uncomfortable five gallon buckets, reminiscing about past trips, and hoping a fish happens across our offerings.

As we wait, the discussion turns toward other fish we have known. The three of us don't fish together very often, once a week, perhaps, during the spring and summer. Now, sitting idle, we take the opportunity to catch up.

Brad is a full time fishing guide and, invariably, has wonderful stories of large fish and quirky clients. He tells us about casting flies to cruising carp on the sand flats of Lake Michigan, and powerful, leaping Atlantic salmon in the St. Mary's River. "Nothing better than the Atlantics," he says, "except, maybe, this."

Billy and I also have fish tales from the past year, stories that travel from Florida to British Columbia, Arizona to Quebec, from trout to tarpon, but the conversation is cyclic, always doubling back toward the reason we're here.

For anglers like us, sturgeon provide more than a glimpse of a page from the distant past. Though calm, stoic and reclusive in its daily life, the sturgeon is tenacious, purposeful, and cunning when hooked. They tax gear, and fishermen, with long, determined runs, occasionally breaching the surface and crashing back to the water at awkward angles. They weave around obstacles, shredding

line on gravel bars and submerged logs. They retain enough composure, enough forethought, to swim into shallow water and writhe against river stones in an effort to dislodge the hook from their mouth. And they get big.

The largest lake sturgeon on record was a seven and a half foot leviathan that weighed 310 pounds. It doesn't take a fish that large, though, to unnerve a fisherman. Even mid-size fish, those under sixty pounds, say, can be a handful. Thirty or more minutes of constant, unyielding pressure from an angler will sometimes turn its head, but, ultimately, a sturgeon goes where it wishes. Billy, Brad and I are here because sturgeon fight longer and harder than anything in fresh water.

Brad fixates on his rods. Each of us have two, and they are standing erect in homemade rod holders wedged into the rip-rap. We are not comfortable with this equipment – massive, stout things that hold three hundred yards of twenty-five pound line – preferring instead long, supple fly rods, but fly rods have no place in this type of fishing. Fat spinning rods, coupled with ungainly reels and thick monofilament line tethered to two ounce pyramid sinkers and 1/0 saltwater hooks – we bought this gear, hundreds of dollars worth, to use only on this annual trip, a fact that should, at least in part, speak to the allure of sturgeon fishing. Like any other obsession, a tussle with a large sturgeon is something that

we anticipate throughout the year, and by limiting it to a single day, we neither tire of it nor take it for granted. And, since so much has been made about the ancient and mutual dislike between bait fishermen and fly rodders, long ago the three of us decided that All Hollow's Eve was the perfect time to cast bait at sturgeon. Halloween is, after all, a day in which we all get to be someone else.

Billy roots through his cooler again and I'm sure he's making a soft oinking noise as he does so, but it's difficult to tell with the constant hum of the dam so near. As I take a seat on my five gallon pail, I glance at him, then over to Brad, who is still fixated on his rods. In their own way, both are intent on discovering something.

Billy asks, "Need one?"

I drain my bottle of beer, "Ya know, I think I do."

Billy hands me a fresh beer, then sits next to me with his own, plus a wet piece of cheese and a very bruised banana.

"So, you probably ate a lot of stale bread while growing up?" I ask him.

"That and green meat," he says. Billy's parents own a grocery store and butcher shop in a small UP town, and throughout his life, Billy has eaten everything too old or spoiled to sell to the public. "I have a freezer full of green ribeyes if you want some."

Before I can answer, Brad interrupts our conversation, "Billy. Billy." A reaction like this from Brad can only mean one thing, so we focus on Billy's rods. For several seconds nothing happens, and Brad starts to say something, "There was just..." but trails off as the tip of one rod begins to pulse. "Fish," Brad says. He's a man of few words.

Billy drops his food and lunges for the rod, scrambling faster than I thought him capable, but before placing a hand on it, he pauses and watches closely. The tip is still moving, though just slightly. He gently, carefully, wraps his fingers around the rod's cork grip and starts to lift it from the PVC holder, making sure he keeps tension on the line while at the same time not increasing the pressure, a mistake that could spook the fish. Somewhere in the inky depths of the river, down in the rocky rubble of the hole we're fishing, a sturgeon is mouthing Billy's cutbait.

We don't know how big it is, of course, and won't have an idea until he sets the hook; then we'll be able to gauge the fish's size by the bend it puts in the rod. But standing here waiting, tense and concentrated, it's easy to fantasize, to allow our imaginations to create something so large and alien that it could never be forced from memory.

Although I have never seen a photo of the record lake sturgeon, the seven and a half foot, 310 pounder, I do know that the fish, caught in 1922, was aged at 152 years. In fact, each species of sturgeon, if left unmolested, is capable of passing the century mark. The problem is that despite the sturgeon's ability to endure the march of time, to outlive the dinosaurs even, the last century and a half has brought changes that this ancient fish was barely able to survive.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, during the early years of commercial fishing in the Great Lakes, the sturgeon was maligned for its clumsy trashing of nets set for more desirable species like lake trout and whitefish. Netting snagged on the sturgeon's huge pectoral fins and scutes, and the fish rolled and floundered, wadding the net around itself, effectively ruining the fishermen's income. The fishermen responded in the same way men often do when their livelihood is challenged: they overreacted. According to ichthyologist E.J. Crossmen, during the first half of the nineteenth century, sturgeon found in nets were mutilated and thrown back into the water or stacked on shore in massive piles and left to rot. Sometimes the piles were burned.

Adding to the prejudices against the fish was the widely held belief that sturgeon also had a negative impact on the fishermen's target species. Rumors circulated that sturgeon consumed massive amounts of fish eggs, enough to do harm to the fishery, so again the fishermen responded. Trotlines with hundreds

of large hooks suspended a few inches off the bottom were spread across river mouths to block the fish's access. During the spring spawning season, when sturgeon moved into shallow water, they were speared by the thousands and then discarded.

Throughout the early 1800s, the sturgeon was considered a worthless catch, detrimental even, but life became even more difficult for them when they were found to have value. Around the time of the Civil War, the lake sturgeon's economic importance was realized, and commercial fishing for them began. Decades of intense harvest had depleted stocks of trout and whitefish, so enterprising fishermen created a market for sturgeon. Suddenly, the fish was coveted. They were used to manufacture oil and glue; they were burned as fuel in steamship boilers, and their skin was tanned and made into leather. The fish's swim bladder yielded isinglass, a gelatin used to thicken jellies and jams, and to clarify wine and beer. Smoked sturgeon graced dining tables in Detroit and Chicago, and was exported as far away as Boston. But as profitable as the sturgeon's flesh was, its eggs were even more so.

The sturgeon survived through the millennia due, in part, to their fertility, their ability to produce copious amounts of eggs. In fact, a large female can carry in excess of a half a million eggs on her spawning migration. This attribute, however, turned into something of a disadvantage as demand for caviar grew in

the late nineteenth century. America's taste for caviar – sturgeon roe collected from a freshly killed female and cured with salt – began with European gentry and crossed the Atlantic when a new, privileged class emerged on the Eastern seaboard. The Atlantic sturgeon, which entered the rivers of New England each spring to spawn, was the first to be exploited. When that fishery was destroyed, the caviar industry focused its sights on the Great Lakes, the next most accessible sturgeon population. This new venue, though, was short lived because more than a hundred years of abuse already had pushed the lake sturgeon to the brink of extinction. Local fishermen were already lamenting the drastic drop in their harvest. By the end of the first decade of the new century, the Great Lakes' sturgeon population had been reduced by ninety percent.

For several minutes, Billy's rod tip twitches, but the fish is reluctant to commit.

We wait, but we are tense.

Suddenly, the rod flexes once, twice and then, a few seconds later, it bends deep toward the river and stays that way. Since we are using circle hooks – hooks designed to hold the outside edge of the fish's mouth, preventing damage caused by deep-hooking – Billy doesn't set the hook as he normally would. With the rod butt pressed tight against his waist, he sweeps back with both hands,

forcing the rod into a slow, steady curve. By gauging the big rod's bend, we see that this is a massive fish. "Oh, Christ," Billy says. "Here we go."

Brad and I jump to retrieve the other five rods. Billy is going to need every inch of river to fight his fish. The sturgeon is in its initial run, a persistent, dogged lunge that peels about seventy-five yards of line from the reel and forces the rod into a sharp bend. The fish is running downstream toward the lines of another fisherman, but before it tangles the man sees it coming and moves fast to clear his rods. This is a common courtesy that we would have extended to him if need arose. When we first arrived this morning, just as the sun was clearing the warehouse across the river, this man was already here, but we haven't seen him catch a thing in nearly ten hours of fishing.

Billy's fish strips line from his reel at an alarming rate, and the three of us silently wonder if its run will end before reaching the bridge pilings. It doesn't have far to go, a few yards at most. "Dude, you gotta turn that fish," Brad says, but he's a little late. Billy is already limboing, leaning back as far as he can with the rod held high. Three things can happen now – the line can stretch and snap under the heavy pressure, the rod could shatter, or the fish could turn. The fish turns.

So intent are we on Billy's fight, none of us notice the other fisherman collect his gear and join us to watch the drama up close. I introduce myself to

him, and with a thick Russian accent, he says his name is Nicholas. He drove up from Chicago last night, making the six hour trek to fish for sturgeon. "A very important feesh for da Russian people," he says. It is a bright, mild fall evening, near fifty degrees, yet Nicholas wears a heavy pair of waterproof bibs and matching coat, the type commercial fishermen wear at sea. Because of his full beard, it's difficult to tell for sure, but he looks like he is pushing toward sixty. As Billy keeps steady pressure on his fish, I quiz Nicholas.

I learn that although he is Russian, he had been living in Kiev until moving to the States in the early nineties. He is still more Soviet than Russian, so he doesn't care for questions and prefers to talk about sturgeon, and only sturgeon, on his own terms and at his own pace. "In da Volga," he says, "poachers have killed all sturgeon. Da beluga, da stellate, all gone." Nicholas is part of a growing trend on the Menominee. Over the last few years, Billy, Brad and I have noticed an influx of Russian anglers, most residents of Wisconsin and Chicago who come here to catch what Nicholas calls "dis very coveted feesh."

Unfortunately, not all of his fellow countrymen share the same reverence for sturgeon. For decades, the Caspian Sea and its main tributary, the Volga River, supplied the world's caviar needs. Sturgeon eggs were processed and canned in the fishing port of Astrakhan and sent to markets throughout the West. After the Communists came to power in 1917, the fishery fell under the

control of the state, strict quotas were set and the sturgeon of the Caspian enjoyed the privilege of governmentally sanctioned protection. This ended, though, with the fall of the Soviet Empire. In the post-communist CIS, fishing was privatized and Astrakhan and other fishing ports experienced a caviar rush. Nearly everything in Russia went on the auction block, including its natural resources. As the country scrambled toward capitalism, poachers hungry for European and American dollars descended on the sturgeon, and the killing took on a new tempo. With Russian caviar selling for five hundred dollars a pound, the lure of a quick profit attracted even organized crime, and government fishery biologists began speaking of caviar syndicates. The fishery inevitably collapsed and today the Caspian's two main sturgeon species, the beluga and the stellate, are listed as endangered and there is a moratorium on the export of their caviar. But, like most such actions, this protection came far too late. "In Russia," Nicholas says, "da sturgeon is no more."

Billy reels frantically, trying to keep pace as the fish now runs toward us. We know what's coming. "It's gonna buzz us," Brad says. "It's gonna do a drive by." He rushes to the water's edge and bends forward, hands on knees, stretching his lanky torso toward Billy's line, "Here it comes." On cue, the fish glides past us, casual and indifferent, not more than ten feet away. In the dying light, its flanks

glow an eerie gray, the color of fog. And it's huge, bigger than any of us anticipated - five and a half feet, maybe longer. "Duude," Brad says.

"Holy shit," Billy and I say.

"Da," Nicholas adds. "Is beeg."

The sturgeon was only taking a look at whatever was pulling on it, and as soon as it coasts past us, it makes two exaggerated sweeps of its tail and disappears back into the deep water. Billy can only hold on as the fish reclaims all of the line he had just gained.

"Dis feesh," Nicholas says, "you can keep."

"We won't be keeping it," Brad says.

"It is beeg enough."

"Yes, but we don't kill them," I tell Nicholas. "They're too special." This puzzles him, and he squints at me under his bushy eyebrows. "We just catch them," I add, "then let 'em go."

My explanation doesn't help Nicholas's comprehension of catch and release fishing, of conservation. "But is beeg enough."

Nicholas's ethics irritate Brad. He turns away from the river and, perhaps a little too tersely, he snaps at the Russian, "There's not that many of them left, dude."

Though the Menominee's sturgeon population is relatively dense, at least by Great Lakes standards, there are nonetheless several regulations specific to this river. Beyond the regular fishing license, the angler must also possess a state issued sturgeon tag, and the season only lasts for thirty days. There is a limit of one fish per year per fisherman, and that fish must be at least sixty inches. A stringent limit, to be sure, but as conservative as the laws are, the sturgeon is not a sustained yield resource. This is one of the reasons we return each fish to the river.

The Menominee is a river fettered by dams. Concrete and earthen structures halt its flow at Peavy Pond, Michigamme Falls, Badwater, Ford, Horse Race Rapids, Niagra, Sturgeon Falls, Quiver Falls, White Rapids, and again here at Hattie Street. Together, these dams create a series of reservoirs that hold the water still until it is rationed and released through hydroelectric turbines at the whim of power companies. And each time that the river bunches up behind a dam, its temperature rises. Though its tributaries to the north course with cool, free-flowing water, by the time the Menominee reaches Lake Michigan, it has warmed to the point where it can no longer support resident populations of cold water species, like the native brook trout. While this challenges the very

ecological composition of the river, at their worst, the dams prevent fish from reaching their spawning grounds.

Though named lake sturgeon, these fish are equally at home in large rivers. But regardless of whether they make their home in moving water or still, sturgeon are anadromous – fish that migrate up rivers from lakes, reservoirs, or the ocean to spawn. When rivers like the Menominee ran free, sturgeon often migrated upstream one hundred miles or more during the spawn in May and June. Like salmon and many other species, sturgeon imprint on their natal stream, the water from which they hatched. To spawn successfully, sturgeon require swift, well-aerated water where their adhesive eggs cling to rock or gravel substrate until they hatch after about a week. Growth comes quickly to young sturgeon, and by the fall of their first year, they typically will reach fifteen to twenty inches. This rapid growth spurt then ends, and by age twenty, the average lake sturgeon will be thirty to thirty-five inches and weigh ten pounds. By age fifty, the increase in weight rivals that of length and a fish this old may be sixty inches and weigh over fifty pounds.

Though the gauntlet of dams, coupled with intense over-fishing, has dealt the sturgeon a double deadly blow, their quirky reproductive behavior limits them further. Sturgeon are late bloomers, and the females do not reach sexual maturity until age twenty-four to thirty, and from there only spawn every four to

nine years. Only a small fraction of adult fish spawns in any given year. If they are going to survive, sturgeon need freedom of movement and time.

Some fish we've caught, those under twenty inches, have yet to reach spawning age. The larger ones may have spawned a couple of times, and the fish now bending Billy's rod may be this river's greatest ichthyologic asset, big enough and old enough to have extended the Menominee's sturgeon populations many Halloweens into the future.

Sometime during the day, sand found its way into Billy's reel, and the grit makes the turning spool groan like an old dog. The sturgeon is still taking line, though its runs are less hurried, more languid, and occasionally Billy is able to steal some back. For thirty minutes or longer, the rod has been bent nearly double, and both fish and fisherman are getting tired. "Can we stop at Taco Bell on the way home?" Billy asks.

"If you will not keep dis feesh," Nicholas asks, "may I?"

Billy rears back on the nine foot rod as if he were trying to break it. He answers, "No."

"To let it go," Nicholas adds, "you are a better man than me."

"In spades," Brad says.

"What is spades?"

“Spades. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It is insult?”

“Never mind.”

The setting sun has cast a yellowy orange glow on the river’s surface, concentrating light on Billy’s line as it follows the fish in exaggerated circles. We are hypnotized by it until, high on the bank behind us, a young voice shouts out, “C’mon, they’ve got one!” I turn to see that Spiderman, now in his civilian Peter Parker clothes, has returned with his dad in tow. They scramble down the rip-rap, Spidey sliding on his butt, his father taking it sideways an inch at a time.

“How big is it?” they ask in unison.

“It is beeg enough to keep,” Nicholas answers.

Thirty yards out on the river, the sturgeon’s tail appears, just a few inches at first, then slowly a little more until all of it is visible. “He’s about done,” Brad says.

Billy is pumping the rod now, pulling it tight to his chest, and reeling as he lowers it to waist level. He’s gaining line. “You beach this fish,” I tell him, “and we’ll take you for tacos.”

“But no bean burritos,” Brad says.

Without warning, the fish surfaces. It’s not more than ten yards away, on its side, its milky white belly facing us. Billy is now dead lifting the fish, and he

pumps the rod a few more times to close the distance. He says to me, "You'll land him, yeah?"

"Yeah."

The sun is off the water as I step out onto the round, slippery stones and crouch near the river's edge waiting for Billy to winch the fish near enough to grab. Behind me, Spiderman's dad is saying "Holy shit" in low, repetitive tones.

As it comes close, the sturgeon rights itself and sinks into the murky water, and though I cannot see it, I reach in elbow deep where I believe it to be and, luckily, I find it. I wrap my fingers around the base of its tail, then submerge my left arm just as deep and feel my way up the fish's belly to the pectoral fins. "Tell me you've got it," Billy says.

"I do."

The sturgeon is so wide that the nine inch span of my hand is barely able to cradle it. When I try to lift the fish, I find I can't. The way I'm forced to lean over the water leaves me with no leverage. After I grunt through a couple of attempts, Brad asks if I need a hand.

"Yeah."

The sturgeon is still as we lift it. I can feel my mouth hanging open dumbly, but I am so awestruck that I'm unable to compose myself. Its skin feels

like sandpaper, and its eyes are small, black and set deep in their sockets. I find myself captivated by its prehistoric ugliness. It is something from another time.

With Brad supporting the head and me the tail, we are separated by several feet, holding the fish waist high while Billy snaps pictures. From behind the camera, he says, "Grip and grin, boys." It doesn't matter to him that he won't be in the photos. This has been a team effort. We also don't want to waste time changing positions, swapping Billy for Brad or me while the fish is out of the water. Though sturgeon have been reported to live for over an hour on dry land, we want to minimize its trauma. We have taken enough from it already.

In a decade's worth of Halloweens, Billy's fish is the largest we've caught. There have been many others, some of them true giants, but nothing to compare to the heft, the upfront bulk, of today's fish. Were it a salmon, trout or steelhead, something more familiar to us, we might have been able to guess its weight. But sturgeon are shaped so differently than our usual quarry that none of us have any idea. "What is she, sixty pounds?" Billy asks.

"More like seventy," Brad says.

"I was thinking sixty-five," I add, though I'm not sure.

"It's probably a hundred pounds," says Spiderman.

"Holy shit," his father says. "It's huge."

For the few minutes that we hold it, the fish periodically tries to contort away from us, but Brad and I have a good purchase, so mostly it lays in our arms, exhausted and submissive. Everything about this fish is old. Judging by its size and what I've read about the sturgeon's growth rate, it is probably thirty years older than its captor. It has undoubtedly survived several such campaigns. Here and there along its length are scars that have healed over.

Billy breaks my trance. "Okay," he says. "Let's cut her loose."

Brad wiggles the hook and it comes free, then we step back to the river's edge, crouch and settle the fish in the water. It lies motionless for a few seconds, then begins to flex away. We let go, and the fish leisurely fades from view, back to the river bottom, a vantage from which it will watch the world above race toward the future.

"And there we go," Brad says.

"Holy shit." Spiderman's dad is still impressed by the fish. "I've lived here my whole life and I've never seen one like that. I didn't know they got that big here." This unnerves Spidey. Not the language, he seems used to that. Rather, it's the realization that perhaps his father isn't the best fisherman around. His old man's naiveté embarrasses him. His face tightens and he frowns out at the river.

Looking from the boy to his dad, I tell him, "From what I've heard, you've caught some pretty big fish out of here."

“Nothing like that,” the dad says.

“That one last fall was.” Spiderman is holding fast to that memory, and his admiration for his dad. A lot seems to depend on it.

“No, no, no,” his father says. “Not that big.”

Spidey looks down at the ground. “Yeah it was.”

“We were just lucky,” Brad says.

“That’s right,” Billy adds. “It eats this bait,” he gestures with his hands, “or that bait. It doesn’t matter to the fish.”

Billy continues to talk with the boy as Brad and I gather our tackle. The dad is ogling our reels. “Those are awesome,” he says. “Where do ya get something like that?” I don’t answer because I’m looking for Nicholas, but he must have slipped away during the photo session.

I ask the dad, “Did you see the other guy leave?”

“Yeah, and good riddance,” he answers. “Ya know? The fishing was a lot better before the Ruskies started showing up here.” I guess the reputation of Russian fishermen has spread far beyond the Caspian.

Behind him, Billy is saying, “Rumor has it there’s a Taco Bell just across the river.” He asks Spidey, “Wanna go with us?”

“We’ve already eaten,” his dad says. “And there’s homework to do.”

“We can’t,” the boy says. He’s nudging a stone with the toe of his sneaker.

“Well,” Billy says, “at least you can come back tomorrow and catch that fish again.”

This makes Spiderman smile.

IN THE AMPURU VALLEY

There's a cool fog lying in the valley as I lift my pack from the truck and sift through a week's worth of gear. A strange cooing sound comes from the forest, a bird that I haven't yet learned to identify. Another that I can, an Australian magpie, strolls across the two track, coming brazenly close, hoping for food scraps. "You'll get nothing," I tell him, and he makes a *gaaking* noise and steps closer. The woods are thick with shoulder high ferns, and an olive hued patina of moss crawls up tree trunks, across limbs. The canopy above is so dense that it blocks my view of the Southern Alps. I can hear the nearby Ampuru River in freshet, rushing with new rain.

It takes an hour to eat lunch and load my backpack, a cavernous Mountain Smith capable of holding far more equipment than my back can handle. I was overly ambitious when I bought the thing, but it has been my home for the last forty days, and we've come to an understanding: I won't overfill it, and it won't crush my spine.

In goes MREs, raingear, a water purifier, first aid kit, sleeping bag, bivvy shelter, other essentials, and still the pack yawns with open space. I lash a fly rod to the side, just in case, and run over my mental checklist, justifying every ounce

that I have to carry uphill. Nothing but what is needed to live and stay alive. I'm starting to like that idea.

I tip the pack on its end, balance it on the tailgate, turn around and crouch, wiggling my arms through the straps. I stand and let the weight settle on my shoulders, then sort through the confusion of buckles and tabs that distribute the load. I lock the truck and pause again to make sure I have everything. "Gaak," the magpie says, and looks at me sideways. "Go home," I tell him. I take one last look around, then start off toward the river.

The first one hundred yards of this hike is easy, the ground soft and level, and I wade through the greenery, keeping an eye ahead to where dim sunlight filters through a rift in the canopy, marking the river channel. It's March, fall in the southern hemisphere, but the day is warm despite the fog, maybe 60 degrees. At the river's edge I find the water coursing strong and dark and now I see the sky. Downstream, to the west, the Tasman Sea forces its wet maritime air against the coast. Clouds come in low and grey, heavy and virtually drooling with rain. They hit the shore at eye level, and soon after are pushed up by these forested foothills, lifted into the thin atmosphere of the mountains above, where pressure wrings moisture out of the clouds and dumps it on the fishing villages of Hokitika and Okarito. Further inland, where I am headed, granite peaks tear the clouds apart and send them, scattered, toward Easter Island and Chile. Some of

the weather will reform on its eastbound journey, but the majority will remain in tatters, changed by New Zealand's Southern Alps.

This is the beginning of the final third of my trip, on a winter layoff from work that allowed me to chase summer for a few more months, and I feel as though I've become fairly well acquainted with the Southern Alps and their myriad moods and incarnations. New Zealand's rivers are comfortable, similar to those of the American West, and the forests seem vaguely familiar, but it's often difficult to get a real sense of place here.

The South island is a hodge-podge of compressed and condensed environments, diverse ecological niches that flow together and blend at the seams. Within a few days' walk, one can wander through fjordlands like those in southeast Alaska, or into vineyard country similar to Napa Valley, the white sand beaches of the British West Indies, the high treeless alpine like that of the Canadian Rockies, or the green, worn and weathered round hills of the Smokies. It is an odd amalgamation, but for someone who enjoys covering ground on foot, it is a pleasing place.

And, if I walk with it long enough, the Ampuru will take me east and north through the permanently verdant low forest, land steeped in west coast precipitation. A mile or two from where I am starting, the valley will climb into the mature forests of the foothills, where lone standing medusa-like monkey

puzzle trees spread their tentacles in the southern sky, and where the canopy breaks just enough to catch fleeting glimpses of the mountains. Soon after, the grade will steepen and the high country will close in around the river, forcing the water into a narrower and more violent tumbling rill. This is what my topographic maps have promised at least, and they've yet to lie to me.

The Ampuru uses its entire streambed. Recent rains have brought the river up, and its water is flirting with bank-side vegetation. To follow it, I'll have to stay atop the high bank, zig-zagging in and out of the woods in order to keep my feet dry. I'll have to pick my way along, occasionally backtracking and, ultimately, I'll have to hike longer and over more uneven ground than if following a trail. But river walking has become, part an appreciation of pure aesthetics and part a function of laziness and avoidance. Rivers invariably bisect the most beautiful real estate, and it is virtually impossible to get lost while tracing their course. Sometimes a valley may pile boulders or log jams in my way, or it may create steep canyons that take hours to circumvent, but, in the end, the river will always take the path of least resistance, a model on which I have based much of my life.

The first few hundred yards are easy enough. I keep to the high bank, walking leisurely, slowly, through knee high grass while watching the water five or six feet below. The river is grey with silt, too cloudy to see fish, and I consider,

for a moment, hiking back to the truck and leaving the rod behind. I don't need the extra weight. But every river that I've spent time with here has proven a willingness to clear quickly after a rain. I'll keep the rod.

The morning is still, wet, and silent, save the intermittent trill of cicadas buzzing and, now and again, that same cooing bird in the thick forest. Those, and my boots rustling through the grass are the only sounds.

Already I'm climbing, though only subtly. It's barely perceptible, but I can feel the ground tilting up toward the mountains hidden in mist ahead of me. To the north, a few feet from my high bank, the woods unfold toward the river, a solid wall of foliage. Broad, waxy leaves jut near me, crawling to the sunlight in the opening cut by the Ampuru. In most places I can't see more than a yard into the tree line. This country is thick and wild and impossibly green.

I come to a narrow little feeder creek, a tributary that may be only a foot or two wide in drier times, but today has grown to five feet in width. There's only one way across. I back up, get a running start and leap across the channel, landing in deep mud on the opposite side. The maps show several of these creeks ahead, and if any are larger than this one, I'll be wading. But that is in a future that I cannot yet worry about. For now, I stomp the mud from my boots and continue.

Later, the sun has burned holes in the fog. Clouds break apart and rejoin, only to break apart again. I walk through shafts of bright light, into fog, mist, and back into the sun. Near noon, or what I believe to be noon, I come to my first real obstacle. The Ampuru jogs hard to the north, cutting deep into a steep hillside, carrying away the earth and leaving me no option but to dive into the forest to find another way around the cliff.

I weave into the brush, crawling at times under downed trees or high stepping and balancing on others, backing up when my big pack snags on low limbs. A little way in and the ground cover disappears, the walking becomes easier and I follow the ridge north for some time until it slopes down gently where I can scramble up its face. At the precipice the ground levels and I stand in the shadows of the thick canopy and catch my breath. Coming from the Midwest, I am a flatlander with a flatlander's lungs, and it takes a few minutes for my chest to stop heaving. The woods here are open, with wide spacing between massive, old growth tree trunks. I am no botanist, nor am I from this hemisphere, so most of them I can't identify. Back home I know my trees, can tell one from the next by leaf or needle, bark or branching. But this southernmost forest renders me ignorant. I've learned the monkey puzzle tree, an easy one since it looks more like a sea creature than a tree with its long, winding and spiny limbs. Other trees look a lot like cottonwoods or mulberry or maple, except

that their canopy is impossibly thick and doesn't allow sunlight to reach the forest floor. For now, I know just enough to understand that I am a foreigner. A creature out of place.

The ridge turns out to be a plateau, one of many terraces that rise from the coast and step up, one atop the next, higher and higher, to the mountains. I parallel my route through the woods, following it back to the river, then continue east.

I'm high above the Ampuru now, twenty feet or better. The river is pinched tight by steep canyon walls. Once lethargic and casual, the water here is compressed and tumbling over itself. There are no more long, elegant glides or perky, playful riffles, only whitewater that plunges from pool to pool in endless cascades. There's a sense of urgency to the river, and as I climb I begin to feel rushed, caught up in the tempo.

By late afternoon, the sky has cleared and the river is already dropping. I look for a place to set up camp, but before finding level sleeping ground I come to another cliff that blocks my way. The woods are now more open, with less underbrush, and after walking a ways, I find a game trail that is moving north along the rock wall and roughly in the direction I want to go. In places, the ground has been trampled by hooves, churned into a muddy trough. Now and then I pass wallows, holes excavated by wild boar, and, crouching next to a

wallow, I'm overcome by a strong urine and musk smell. The sun is leaving the forest quickly and shadows grow in length as I kneel by the wallow, studying tracks, but not thinking about anything in particular. I have to make camp, eat something, rest my legs, and tend to some blisters. All, ideally, before dark. And dark is close.

I hear rustling in the thicket, a soft grunting noise and muted footsteps, scuffling in the forest duff. It's coming my way and I stay still. Ferns part and a large black form appears ten feet from me. It stops and stares at me. Stout and squarish and very unlike its domesticated kin, the wild pig stands tall at the shoulder, its wide back stepping down, bison-like, to the hind quarters, its coat coarse and dark and bristling with wiry hair just visible in the failing light. Its pig nose twitches in my direction. A good sized animal, perhaps two-hundred fifty pounds, it could do its share of damage, could cut me deep with those stained, yellow tusks. Neither of us move. The pig keeps watching me, trying to put me into context. The light breeze is in my face, so it can't smell me and its tiny eyes cannot separate me from my surroundings. It needs to see motion in order to detect danger.

For a long time the boar stays statue still, occasionally grunting quietly and nervously. After a while, I sway, just a little, the slightest shift from right to left foot for comfort's sake, and this startles the pig. It squeals, tries to turn tail,

but the trail is too narrow and it panics. An ungraceful act, really, like a large truck turning in tight quarters. It squeals again and disappears into the ferns and, as it runs, others nearby but unseen in the carpet of foliage, follow. The ferns quake as the herd moves away.

I have read about the malignant temper of wild boar, seen the colorful, action packed pictures on the covers of sporting magazines, paintings that show man and beast engaged in close quarters battle, the pig always charging, snarling, with long hanks of saliva streaming from ivory white tusks as the hunter scrambles to ready his rifle or bowie knife. And though a wild boar is more than capable of dealing a brutish thrashing, every one that I have encountered, both in the States and in the South Pacific, has been more prone to flight than fight, as reclusive and skittish as any deer. The real danger from these animals is not in their demeanor, but in their impact on the land. Once one is tuned to see it, the impact is everywhere.

I continue walking. In the dying light it is an easy thing to imagine the primeval wilderness, a place of newly born jungles and ancient, snow covered peaks. A place separate from and unaffected by mankind's tinkering. Intact and pristine. But there have been others. As the sun leaves the forest and is replaced by chilly night air, one can envision the long parade of people who have been here before;

the Maori, the island's first inhabitants, who used the river valleys to move from village to village, to trade with friends and to raid enemies; the first white men, sealers and whalers and explorers; the hunters and timbermen who followed and, sentimental for home, carved from the wilderness something that resembled their native Europe; then the settlers, the farmers and ranchers who saw New Zealand for its unbound fecundity and set to work taming what was wild, and organizing what they saw as chaotic. Though the valley is remote and uninhabited, it still bears the burden of mankind's tinkering.

There are no cabins or campgrounds, no well-groomed trails in the Ampuru valley. Rather, the signs of human presence are more subtle, once or twice removed from the act, and they are seen not in old foundations, fallow pastures, or rusted hunks of metal, the remnants of humanity's march toward civilization, but in the animals left behind. New Zealand has been on its own for some time, separated from the continents for the better part of seventy million years. It evolved without mammals, save a couple of species of bats. For most of its life, the only creatures that lived here were those that could fly or swim to the islands. There were, of course, insects, a few freshwater fish, and many and diverse bird species, including several which had lost the ability to fly. The only quadrupeds, though, were small reptiles and amphibians. The forests and

grasslands and alpine meadows had never seen grazers, and most of the wildlife hadn't known predation.

It was man who introduced these things. First, from island chains in the north, the Maori in their long wooden sailing canoes brought half-wild dogs to use for hunting, but the dogs never went feral, remaining instead close to villages in a symbiotic relationship with their masters. In the eighteenth century, white men came, most notably and catastrophically James Cook, who, on his second trip to New Zealand, released pigs on the island. Only a few at first, just enough to kill for food in an emergency. But pigs, like man, are not known for doing anything in moderation. Suddenly relieved of natural controls, they multiplied, overgrazed their habitat and ushered many native species toward a dubious future. They raided the nests of Kiwi and Weka, awkward, portly and flightless little ground birds that had no defense against the new intruders. Indigenous wildlife began to disappear, a drama repeated wherever and whenever alien animals are introduced into an established ecosystem.

In complete darkness now, guided only by the narrow beam of my headlamp and what little moonlight filters through overhead, I continue north and east, gaining some elevation. I've found the end of the ridge. Soon the ground steepens, and I have to lean forward, crawling with my hands as my boots peddle for a purchase in the leaf litter and fallen limbs of the slope. Here

and there around me, the boar have rooted deep into the soil, searching for something – grubs, mushrooms, nuts – and it looks as though someone has Roto-tilled the forest floor, leaving the ground excavated and raw.

Once at the top, I head south again, checking and rechecking my compass and listening for the river. There's a profound silence in the woods as I walk, no breeze to rustle leaves and no animal noise to accompany my footsteps. When I find the Ampuru, I'm lucky to also find a good spot to camp, level with no rock or brush. I drop my pack, carelessly allowing it to fall to the ground while I force my shoulders into an exaggerated shrug. With the confining weight gone, they audibly pop. It takes only minutes to set up my shelter, a few more to eat. Within half an hour I am asleep.

I wake early, with the sun just beginning to glow in the east. A few cicadas are rousting as well and at intervals their trill fills the morning. Something scuttles through the leaves near my bivvy and there are birds close by singing songs I don't know, all of this fading in and out of the Ampuru's constant babble.

I've learned, through repetition, how to set up camp quickly and efficiently, even in the dark with only a scant, artificial light to work with. Tearing down always takes longer. I eat a cup of oatmeal boiled in river water and a handful of raisins, while circling my gear in a slow shuffle. A night on the cool earth always leaves my muscles tight and it will be a while before they fully

uncoil. For a long time, I sit on a riverside rock, the water only feet away and amazingly clear in the new light. The Ampuru is wide here and on the south side is a meadow that stretches the valley to a half mile between the surrounding hills. During last night's hike, I walked into a different topography.

Upstream, the hills are steeper, less wooded, and I can see for a distance, from the water up the sparse, brushy highlands and further, the white mountains behind shifting clouds, just within vision and long out of touch. I am struck by the notion that no one on this earth knows where I am or how long I'll be gone, that this place could swallow a person whole, leaving not even bones.

I leisurely fold camp into my backpack, leaving only a few footprints and a bare spot where my shelter lay. The pack seems to have gained weight during the night, and my shoulders and neck, hips and thighs, grow tense and burn as I begin walking. From here it's all uphill, noticeably so, a constant incline that forces me to lean hard against the pack. For a mile or more the south shore remains open, the grass waving as morning thermals slide upstream toward the mountains. My north bank has turned rocky, a jumble of massive boulders, some large as refrigerators, and I hop from one to the next until that proves too tiring and too dangerous. Break a leg out here and it's a long crawl back to civilization. A crossing to the opposite side would be difficult, the river rushing white and

fast over broken and shifting cobble, so I pick my way along, staying between the rocks, scaling over when there's no space.

By midmorning, the valley has evened out and the rocky shore is equidistant on each side of the Ampuru, one hundred yards wide from tree line to tree line. The rolling land surrounding the river is treeless, or nearly so, and only in the low spots and along the streamside is there growth. This country is in stark contrast to the jungle where I began. Downstream, everything is close at hand, within reach, but now there is a strong and unabiding feeling of space and great distance. For the first time on the Ampuru, I can fix myself in place, can measure the steps from here to there, picture myself on the map between the Southern Alps' giant folds.

I take an early lunch, lollygagging for an hour or more and listening to the river, now shallow, wide, turbulent and loud in its rush. The sound is large and dampens the forest static, the birds and insects and wind, but as I stand to continue my hike, another noise emerges, grows in volume and takes over the valley. A jolting, repetitious thump, metronome-like, and because of the hills, I cannot tell where it's coming from. It's moving closer, at incredible speed and begins to drown out the river. I stand still and wait. Several minutes pass before a helicopter appears around a bend upstream, sixty feet above the water and sprinting toward me. A brown mass hangs from the skids and swings below the

chopper's gliding movement. Within seconds it's over me, stopping abruptly and nodding in my direction, not more than twenty yards away. The cacophony rattles my bones and flattens the Ampuru's ruffles, sending swirling clouds of vapor up around me.

Now I can see the cargo, the carcasses of three red stags. Kiwis use helicopters in much the same way Americans use pickup trucks, and this one, a sleek, white Hughes 500D, must be shuttling hunters down from the high country. The chopper hovers, facing me until I extend my index finger, wave it in the characteristic New Zealand salute that says, "Yeah, I know where I am and I'm where I want to be, and all's fine." With the sun's reflection on the glass, I can't see into the cockpit, but my greeting registers with the pilot and the machine turns back downstream, tilts forward and moves away, its dead prize swaying below. For too long I hear its blades beating and resonating around the hills. It will take this obnoxious contraption and the men it carries only minutes to cover the distance I have spent hours walking. A few spins of the rotor and it will wheel past my truck miles downstream and then, in mere seconds, reach the coast.

This intrusion, though brief, doesn't sit well. As I continue walking toward the mountains, strong feelings of resentment settle on me and stay, long after the booming echo of the helicopter has disappeared. Had the passengers

been on foot, had they won the right to be here with blisters and worn boot leather, then perhaps I could have met their trespass with something more cordial. A long and gracious meeting, even. But in their rush to be either here or there, they miss what's in between. In it, one can careen up a remote valley at fifty miles an hour with little regard for the country passing beneath and no true knowledge of one's whereabouts. All forests, after all, look more or less alike when passed by at aircraft velocities. The men arrive somewhere up river without knowing what it takes to get there, skipping over the terrain that leads to that place. And to know a place, it seems there has to be an extended and deliberate period of bonding, a slow and steady immersion that allows the visitor to climb through successive layers of perception that build, one upon the next, until a complete spatial awareness forms. Of course, I'm not there yet either, but I'm still walking.

I'm distracted as I hike up the Ampuru now, my link to the valley having been temporarily severed by the spinning blades of the helicopter, leaving me here in body, but disconnected in mind and heart. The sun is high and bright in the clear sky, and the day is warm. I begin to sweat under the weight of my pack. The going is slow, the dry portion of streambed now a jumbled and uneven layer of worn round river rock, bowling ball sized stones that are tough to stay on top of, and my boots slip again and again, smacking my ankles on the next stone.

The hills are growing steeper and closer together. When the river cuts close to them, I am forced to half walk, half crawl, sidesaddle along the embankment several feet above the water. The tributaries that run between the hills are becoming more numerous. I leap across several, ungracefully throwing my body and pack, probably 260 pounds in all, over the streams and landing each time with a guttural grunt. Later I find a stream that can't be jumped, about twenty-five feet wide and moving fast. I take off my boots and trip my way across, stumbling over the broken cobble on bare feet. On the other side, the ground is flat, a small patch of sandy gravel deposited by this tributary where it meets the Ampuru. It's a good spot to camp, and though it's early, I decide to stay the night here.

Near dark, I fight my way through a bank-side thicket, climb the sharp incline of a hill and sit, high above my camp, to watch the night come. From this high spot, I can see far downstream, to the west and the sunset where a billowing gauntlet of wet weather has stalled at the coast. The Maori people call New Zealand "the long white cloud," an allusion to this place where moody, sea-born weather becomes trapped between ocean and mountain. To the east and just within sight, snow covered peaks push hard against the sky, combing clouds from the air. From this vantage, I watch the earth working around me, a battle of elements, the clouds cracking like eggs against the mountains, their rain eroding,

the ground rising up, the river wearing down. A slow kind of violence, a story that takes millennia to tell. But sitting here one can intuit the gist of it, the how and why that shaped this place. At full dark I lie on my back and stare up at the strange southern sky. The stars are out of order, just a little, and so seems everything in the moonlight. The hills glow a somber blue, the river below a flowing silver. It's a good thing to be out of one's element, to see the world anew and to watch it spin around you. For a long time I do, connecting the bright dots in the sky, forcing constellations into place and losing them just as quickly, tracing their course over me until the slow moving light of a satellite breaks my reverie.

Rain falls hard during the night, loud enough to drown out the Ampuru's ruffles. I wake late to grey skies and standing water surrounding my shelter. The temperature has dropped, and the river is visibly rising as I eat breakfast. I take my time tearing down camp, shaking the soggy nylon of my bivvy in the wet air while straddling puddles. Dampness has seeped into me and everything I have. It's not a simple thing to motivate oneself on mornings like this.

As I shoulder my pack, a long and raspy roar echoes through the valley, ricochets around the hills and startles the hell out of me. It tapers off, then disappears. It takes a minute for me to recognize the noise: the bellowing call of a

red stag. I've been hearing it for weeks. The animal roars again and I'm able to locate it. On the high ground across the river, the stag appears, antlers first, peeking over the ridge, then the head, neck, and thick shoulders. He turns broadside, stops to stretch his mouth skyward and calls again, lion-like and proud. With his head tilted back, his antler tips reach nearly to the stag's hindquarters. It's a robust animal, heavy with muscle, close in size and appearance to the North American elk.

The stag mills around the crest of the ridge for a few minutes, occasionally and defiantly voicing his challenge to other males. It's breeding season, the rut, and this posturing is prelude to a fight. Soon he will lock antlers with another stag, and if he wins the pushing match he will have established his territory and will then gather a harem of hinds. This same scene is being played out throughout the Southern Alps, common enough to be thought natural, and natural enough to be thought endemic. Atop its ridge, silhouetted against the grey sky, the stag is a fine and beautiful creature, but, like the wild boar, it was brought to this hemisphere with only the most rudimentary scientific knowledge to guide it.

It's easy to get caught up in the wildness of this country. The stag, at a casual glance, completes the landscape. It fits in. A cog in a large and intricate wheel. Like me, though, the red stag is a foreigner, a creature out of place, and its

travelogue is impressive. The species came here from Scotland via Tasmania in the nineteenth century, guided here by European nostalgia. Just a single pair at first, but others were brought soon after. New Zealand was the stag's promised land, a Nirvana of green hills absent of predators or competition, and they prospered, over-running their range and overgrazing grasslands wherever they strayed. For the European settlers, the animals proved to be less desirable than first thought. No one, apparently, paused for even a moment to contemplate what ramifications such a rearrangement of species might have.

In time, though, the damage done, the bare hillsides and depleted range became all too apparent. It was a realization slow in coming, a tardy and reluctant awakening. And so, for more than a century, New Zealand has been at war with the red stag. By the mid-twentieth century, overgrazing became such a concern that the government employed commercial hunters. Riflemen shot from helicopters and killed deer by the thousands. Today, the Kiwis have settled into a kind of uneasy *détente* with the stag. Now, trophy hunters from around the world come to New Zealand for sport, leaving fat wads of foreign currency and taking away massive antlers.

In human terms, this new arrangement seems beneficial enough. New Zealand, after all, has plenty of stags, and overseas hunters have plenty of money. A win-win. But a greater, ecological cost can't be tallied, not here, nor

anywhere else people have introduced non-native wildlife. Though the stag is beautiful and wild, I cannot separate it from the human-made world.

The stag begins to roar again, flexing his stomach and straightening his spine to force out the call. This one is short, though, tapering off before the echo finds its way back to me. Silent now and nervous, the animal perks its ears and turns to face upstream, focusing its attention toward the mountains for a few seconds, then turns again and trots over the ridge and out of sight. It takes another minute for me to hear the *whomp, whomp, whomp*, of the helicopter coming my way.

By the time the machine passes overhead, I am walking west. It's a different one this time, a fat white Huey. The pilot dips the chopper's tail, pausing a stone's throw away and showering me with sand and leaves caught in the whirling vortex. I wave without stopping, without even slowing down, and a man in the passenger's seat waves back as the chopper noses down and continues toward the coast. I'll follow its path, stumbling along at my own pace and that of the Ampuru's, weaving in and out of the forest, the mountains fading step by step behind me and in a day or two I'll reach my truck. I'll drive south beside the Tasman, searching for another valley to walk. Something wild and untouched.

ANOTHER THING I LEARNED ABOUT BEARS

Another thing I learned about bears is how they figure in the news. The *Anchorage Daily* is calling this the summer of marauding bears. A few weeks ago it was a black bear, a large female, on a rampage just across the border in British Columbia. Reports rolled out of Laird River Hot Springs: a woman visiting from Texas killed in front of her two children; a man, her would-be rescuer, dead as well, two others wounded. Names are dropped – rogue, man-eater – and speculation and sensationalism abounds. Maybe it was a sow protecting her cubs; a bad year for berries forced her to seek another food source; perhaps it was an old bear, or it had been wounded in some way. Many believe that the animal was startled by the hikers, or accidentally cornered, or felt cornered, and turned on the Texas woman.

Similar reasons were sought back in July, when the partially eaten remains of a hiker were found in Gates of the Arctic National Park. And again in early August after two men were mauled on the Kenai. Bears are in the news and on everyone's mind, an entire season of fear.

It's September and I'm in Anchorage buying a fishing license at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. A few feet away, leaning on the same countertop,

is a man filling out paperwork. He's studying it closely, tapping his pencil on the formica. I sneak a look. On page one of his form, next to the state seal, it reads, *Defense of Life or Property Game Animal Kill Report*. The guy notices my interest and tells me a bear, a young grizzly, was coming through his kitchen window when he shot it. Now the state wants the details, and frankly, so do I. Below question number one – *Why was the animal killed?* – he circles option three: *Animal was charging*. He pauses and considers his answer.

“Was it a charge?” He looks at me and I shrug. “The thing was trying to wiggle its fat ass through a tiny window,” he says. “Had the screen stuck around its neck.” He erases number three and moves down to four: *Animal was thought to be dangerous to people*.

Later I drive across town to a bar and, while waiting for a couple of buddies, I talk with an off duty police officer from Juneau. He's in town visiting family and he's drunk. He tells me that his department responded to 418 bear related calls this year.

“Most were just garbage bears,” he says, “trash can tippers and dumpster divers. But they're sure not afraid of people.”

My friends and I are heading out into the bush, so I listen intently to what he has to say, until the television hanging above the bar reports that a popular jogging trail on the outskirts of Anchorage has been closed due to nuisance bears.

A woman walking her dog narrowly escaped a big brown just this morning. Yesterday a man was chased up a tree. The television says state troopers and wildlife control personnel are searching for the animal, or animals. A woman being interviewed says she's scared, "One got in my garage a few weeks ago. I don't understand why they keep coming into our neighborhoods."

And there's the problem.

This city is growing around the edges, amoeba-like, moving deeper into the wild. Everyone here wants to live "just outside of town," but just outside of town is getting farther and farther away and is now diluting in bear country. Next on the screen is a middle aged woman who looks like a librarian, but sounds like a mafia don. "I want it dead," she says. "Find it and kill it." Bullet or trap, it doesn't matter. People want to feel safe in their neighborhoods.

The old timers, the sourdoughs I've talked to, they know better. For them, it's just the price of living here. Instead of searching for answers, they pile on more questions, some of them big and philosophical: Why have we chosen to call this place home? Is it to be near the frontier? On the edge of wilderness? And, do these things not come at a price? Like fifty-below winters or a freezer full of moose meat, the recent spree of bear attacks allows them to self-actualize as contemporary mountain men, as rugged individuals.

The next day, more news jumps the border, this time from British Columbia's Kluane National Park, this time a grizzly, this time a husband and wife. According to the newspaper, it's the worst kind of bear, a stalker, quiet and calculating. The wife is dead; the husband will be lucky to walk again. I read about it while my two buddies and I wait for a seaplane on the shore of Lake Hood. Also on page one is a black bear attack in the southeast part of the state. The victim lived because she fought back. She punched and kicked until the bear decided to cut its losses and find another meal, something less feisty, which is what experts say you should do when confronted by a black bear. Grizzlies, though, are another matter.

Another thing I learned about bears is that opinions vary. Everyone, it seems, has a theory for surviving a grizzly attack. Play dead is always near the top of the list. Fall to the ground and ball up, the old timers say, fetal like, knees drawn tight to the chest to protect the vitals, hands interlocked at the back of the neck, face covered by forearms. And then just wait it out. You'll pay your toll, your pound of flesh, but ninety percent of the time, if you remain still, a grizzly will lose interest and leave you be, well chewed, but alive. No one mentions the other ten percent.

Then there's weaponry. Newcomers to Alaska, the brightly clothed Patagonia and North Face crowd, carry giant cans of pepper spray, holstered, poised for fast action and containing enough capsaicin to thwart the most determined bear charge. They read about it in a glossy outdoor magazine aimed at kayaking, mountain biking suburbanites, and the article had testimonials, charts, and graphs that undeniably proved effectiveness. The old timers disagree. They call pepper spray marinade, a dash of spicy Cajun seasoning to liven up a bear's otherwise bland and predictable supper.

Fire power, they say. Big guns and a suppressing line of fire is the only way to stop a bear. And they have recommendations: 12 gauge, three inch magnum and one ounce rifled slugs; hand canon sized sidearms; or a big bore rifle. Think elephant stopper. Think kinetic energy and hydrostatic shock. Think, *What would John Wayne do?* But what the old timers won't tell you is how much better a gun is at getting you into trouble than it is at getting you out of it. When wielding a firearm, the average person couldn't hit an aircraft carrier while standing atop the flight deck, and a wounded bear, one shot full of nonlethal bullet holes, is far more dangerous than one left unmolested.

Some experts say that when facing a bear charge, your best bet is to stand your ground, wave your arms, yell. For a bear, appearance is everything, so make yourself look less like an easy target, and more like a god, someone who

could summon lightning from a clear sky. They want dinner, not a street fight, so look large and brave, stout and stalwart. Make it look as though you are more trouble than protein.

Likewise, most agree that when walking in bear country, you should make some noise, so tie bells to your backpack, shout into the forest, or blow a whistle. The truth is, the majority of maulings are not predatory in nature. When encountered in the wild, the average bear is far more prone to flight than fight and most will scramble into the bush at the first sight or scent or sound of an approaching person. But you have to give them fair warning. Bears are quick to anger when frightened and trouble starts when you stumble across one at close range, effectively forcing the animal to action. So create some racket, be an annoyance, an intruder, a human being. Let them know you're coming so they can get out of the way.

Everyone suggests that you don't run. Prey animals flee, relying on speed, agility and stamina to put distance between themselves and a carnivore. Which is fine if you're a caribou, or as quick as a caribou on uneven ground, but most of us aren't, and running triggers a bear's predatory instinct. Something that runs must be worth catching, and a well motivated bear can move at thirty-five miles an hour. So, if you run, you'll only die tired.

Beyond the hearsay and conjecture, beyond the expert advice on what you should and should never do, and beyond the generalizations that strive to group all bears together, there is one undeniable truth. Like any dog you've ever known, or any horse, bears are individuals. And they act as such. Rarely can their demeanor be characterized. At any one time, they may appear as jester or genius, plunderer or pacifist, coward or killer. The problem is you won't know which until it's too late.

Another thing I learned about bears is how they start rumors. Like loose cheerleaders or that crazy old man who lives down the street, bears inspire a constant stream of gossip. Much of it is hyperbole, pure rural legend that always features a willful human protagonist, usually the friend of a friend of a friend of the story's teller. But if you listen close, each story, no matter how ridiculous, always has a definite message.

The bush pilot that picks my friends and me up at Lake Hood and deposits us 300 miles past the last road, knows all the stories. As he navigates his antique seaplane up wide river valleys and through narrow mountain passes, we are his captive audience, trapped three times over – by the altitude, by the wilderness below, and by the raw power of his narrative. He tells us of the ex-Navy Seal down near Soldatna who, though severely mauled, fought off a huge

brown bear with his bare hands. His face half ripped off, his limbs shredded to the bone, and his major organs exposed, he still managed to crawl for miles, eventually making it to the highway and rescue.

Then there was the Fairbanks mother who glanced out her back window to see her two year old daughter sitting in the sandbox, giggling as a four-hundred pound grizzly gently licked her ear. And further north, where an Inuit hunter, alone and on foot, outpaced a hungry polar bear for sixteen hours across the ice of Prudhoe Bay.

The stories are massive and incredible, fanning out over decades and from generation to generation, constantly growing of their own volition, or that of the tellers, to become folk tales, or more, to become fable. And like any good fable, they carry the weight of lessons hard learned. "A life worth living," the Navy Seal tells us, "is one worth fighting for."

From her window, we can hear that Fairbanks mother warn, "Watch out for the ones you love, for danger is everywhere."

As the Inuit hunter sprints past, the polar bear hot on his heels, he shouts over his shoulder to us, "The important thing is, you never give up."

But despite the strength of their underlying theme, despite the courage and determination of the people who populate them, our greatest fear is to become the story's main character. In a well told bear story, or even a mediocre

one, the truths of human frailty are exposed. We become prey, slow and soft, naked out in the wild, and for modern humans this is disorienting. It challenges our place in the world. We have cell phones and SUVs, hand-held gizmos that talk to satellites. All the power is ours, so when confronted by tooth and claw, that most primitive type of death, we are sent wheeling backward in time to crouch in fear beside our Neanderthal forefathers. Bears, and the stories they inhabit, are a part of our primordial psychological matrix. From the earliest days of our evolution, bears formed part of the baseline from which we measured ourselves, and in this way they gave us a sense of identity as a species. Our first awareness, I have to believe, was the realization that we are little more than nourishment for something bigger and stronger and quicker than us. A few eons have come and gone, but we hold fast to that very original fear. And it holds fast to us.

Another thing I learned about bears is how they go about the business of living and staying alive. The Alaskan tundra has very little sense of humor and is, in fact, inclined to be rather harsh. Winters are severe, but in even the warmest months people die of hypothermia here. A seventy degree day may end with snow, and the following morning might dawn dimly through a Biblical rain. But be it sun, snow or rain, you can see weather coming from a distance, from long

off, because no matter which direction you turn, the earth bends away and disappears. There's a vastness to it, an incomprehensible largeness, and the Alaskan brown bear is the very embodiment of this landscape.

Anatomically, taxonomically, brown bears and grizzlies are the same animal. What separates them is geography. Grizzlies are interior bears, mountain bears that live far from the sea and that grow tough and lean from a constant search for food. Browns, on the other hand, are coastal bears, beach combers whose food comes to them. Moist, warm maritime air means blueberries, raspberries, crow berries, service berries. Rich deltaic rivers means salmon – kings, pinks, chum, sockeyes, and silvers – so from June to late September, the buffet line never shuts down, a perpetual parade of groceries delivered right to the brown bears' doorstep. And they grow corpulent. Twelve hundred pounds isn't uncommon. So, when stepping out of a seaplane and onto the tundra, you are entering into a world in which human beings are not the alpha predator. That's something to keep in mind.

Jeff, Bill and I do keep this in mind. Our heads are still swimming with stories as the seaplane disappears over the Kaktuli highlands and we are left hundreds of miles from civilization in the heart of Alaska's bear country. Our plan is to float the Stuyahok River, following the meandering and braided channel north and west to its confluence with the Mulchatna River, where the

seaplane will return to collect us. But that's three weeks and forty-two miles away, and in between here and there, we have to run a gauntlet of sorts.

The three of us are here for trout, colossal rainbow trout, some of the largest on the planet. And the bears, too, are here for fish. By September, crimson red sockeye and chrome-bright coho salmon move in from Bristol Bay, ascending more than 150 river miles to end up here on the gravel spawning beds of the Stuyahok. As the salmon gather, the river swells with fecundity and, in some sections, the streambed writhes, a driven, jostling traffic jam of fish flesh – millions of salmon that draw hundreds of bears. Every gravel shore and muddy bank is littered with tracks, wide paw prints haloed by holes from long claws sinking deep into the earth.

Crouching, I place my outstretched hand over one particularly large track and my splayed fingers fail to cover it. The stories become tangible as Jeff and I study the print. We are dwarves in a land of giants. I look up at him and he smiles and pats his .44 magnum. "Don't worry," he says, "if one comes for you, I'll shoot him off."

This is supposed to be a comfort, but I've seen Jeff shoot and he's lousy with a handgun. I remind him that I'm a lot more likely to survive a bear attack than I am a 300 grain hollow-point to the skull.

The Stuyahok's bears are a different animal than those milling about the Anchorage suburbs. The urban bears, those near Alaska's road system, are conditioned, are used to human presence and they don't scare easily. To them, people are a nuisance, an interruption. Or worse, a source of food. But in unpopulated Alaska, out here in the wild, if you leave them alone, they'll return the favor.

Contrary to what I've read, there is not a bear behind every tree waiting to eat you. Despite the fantastic stories of our bush pilot, and the exaggerated tales I read in the sporting magazines of my youth, you and I are not a part of a bear's daily diet. Human predation is rare. In fact, over the last one hundred-twenty years, there have been fewer than thirty recorded bear related fatalities in Alaska. That's one death every four years in a state that has seen twenty-seven people killed by dogs in the past forty years.

Still, it pays to be cautious, and many times, as we drift around a bend in the river, we get close to fishing bears, rousting them from their spot, and our yells send them sprinting into the treeline. Once there's distance between us, they often stand tall on hind legs, fluffy ears perked, trying to make sense of us and our boat, this odd floating thing and its waving appendages.

Each night they come into camp to forage through our boat and rummage our gear as we lie fully alert, sweating in the cold tundra darkness. Most nights I

wake to the sound of crunching footsteps, deep breaths, and guttural grunts just inches from my head, the bear and I separated by only the thin nylon of our tent. Always, I hear my friends ready their guns.

For Jeff and Bill, the fear is up front and honest. Both carry large caliber pistols when we are on foot. Around camp at night, neither wanders far from the twelve gauge shotgun. For my part, I've become a bit of a fatalist. Since most bear attacks happen at close range and without warning, the likelihood of drawing, aiming, and firing a lethal shot from a handgun is just this side of impossible, so I left my big Freedom Arms .454 back in Anchorage, and have given myself over to chance. I've put myself at the mercy of the world's largest terrestrial predator, but not because I'm brave. Far from it. With all of the recent bear news, the harrowing accounts of man versus nature, I've come to realize that, out here, the only certainty is that when your number is up, it is absolutely, unconditionally, irretrievably up. Gun or no gun.

Being unarmed, I find myself carefully considering each step. When alone on the river, I swivel my head up stream and down, watching the treeline for shifting shadows and brown fur. I look for movement everywhere and listen attentively to each sound, no matter how slight, because in the past I've heard bears walk through dry leaves making no more noise than a chipmunk.

By the end of our second week on the Stoyahok, I begin to enjoy this state of constant alertness, this newfound awareness of my surroundings. In truth, being defenseless in bear country is an awakening. I've never been closer to the wild. It's possible that I've never been more alive.

But this constant state of readiness is tough to maintain. Over time, attention falters. As we continue down the river, we grow used to being in the presence of bears. I become confident, then complacent, which is a dangerous thing to be. Because, as anyone who has spent time here will tell you, if you knock around an Alaskan salmon stream long enough, it's never *if*, always *when*.

I know this, but I'm still surprised when I walk up on the bear. It's raining, a steady drizzle that makes it difficult to hear as I wade through waist high bramble at the river's edge. I move quietly, foolishly, watching the water glide past and not thinking about anything in particular. The bear, a young brown, must have been sleeping in the tall grass as I approach. We are only a few feet apart when the animal bolts away from me, crashing through alder and parting the forest for ten yards before stopping quick and turning broadside to stare at me. He's about 300 pounds, small for a brown, but plenty large enough to do serious damage. I freeze and so does he, both of us unblinking.

It turns out that most of the clichés are perfectly true. You really can be paralyzed with fear. Time really does stop. Basic motor functions shut down, you

go catatonic, and all the rules about surviving a bear encounter disappear from memory. The distance between us could be covered in a fraction of a second, and the bear stares hard across that distance, looking at me like he hates me personally.

The bear assesses the situation, trying to decide its next move. Something inside tells me to act first, so in a deep, confident and firm voice I tell it, "Go on."

Of course I'm bluffing. I have nothing to enforce the command, but the animal buys it, or seems to. It answers with a low, chattering growl, then turns away and disappears into the forest.

For a long while I stand in place, unable to move my feet, unable to still my shaking hands. Unable, even, to pee my pants, which, I've been told, is what you're supposed to do at times like this. It takes a few minutes before I have my first thought: *Jesus, am I lucky*. This is quickly followed by a second: *Jesus, that was stupid*.

For the next week, and for years after, I'll replay the scene in memory and the blame always circles around to land on my shoulders. I was moving quietly in dense brush though an area that has more bears per square mile than any place else on earth. I was unfocused, my mind wandering. The mistakes were all mine, and they were profoundly idiotic. If the bear had come at me, I would now be the star in one of the stories reported on the news, told at the bar, on the

seaplane. It would be a tale of human perseverance in the face of nature's wild fury, one of those legendary fables that always seems to vilify bears and glorify their victims. But it would all have been a lie. Because, if there's one thing I've learned about bears, it's that it's never their fault.

RIFLES AND GREED

When I came around the corner, the brown bear stood not more than ten feet away. It towered above me on its hind legs, snarling down from twelve feet or better. His stout, stubby bowed legs were set wide apart to support his weight, his forelegs held out in front, bent at the wrist and his paws drooping, but ready. Had this been someplace other than a suburban parking lot, I might have been worried.

How I came to be in this position – face to face with one of the world’s largest terrestrial carnivores – was through an arrangement between my construction company and a taxidermist. In exchange for permission to park our equipment on a vacant lot next to his shop, Greg, the taxidermist, asked that we use our flatbed truck to deliver mounts too large to fit in his van. I agreed to drive the truck.

The animal’s dense flesh, blood and bone had been replaced by a foam form and four of us load it onto the flatbed with little effort. Wandering about the tundra, this bear might have weighed 1200 pounds, but that was nearly ten months ago, and in the interim, it had been shot and skinned, its hide salted and air-freighted from the Alaska Peninsula to Anchorage for tanning. The hide was

then shipped to Greg's shop, where he soaked it to make it pliable, then stretched it over the foam form. As we wrestle the bear up the truck's wooden ramp, Greg describes the process. "When it's wet, a hide this size weighs over two hundred pounds." The job required high ceilings, and he had to rearrange his shop, set up an elaborate block and tackle to lift the hide. He then spent days balanced atop a ladder, fussing over the bear's eyes, ears, nose and mouth. "But this was nothing," he assures me. "I once spent a week inside an elephant. The tough part of this project was the base."

If the bear looks alive, aggressive and ready to pounce, it's because of his new surroundings. Fully erect, he balances on a small section of Alaskan river bank, complete with grass, driftwood, and lichen-covered stone that tapers down to rushing water re-created in acrylic resin. Beneath the ripples is a school of spawning sockeye salmon, caught by the hunter for this very purpose. The detail is astonishing. While I study the base, Greg carefully lashes the bear to the truck bed with nylon tie-down straps.

"Did you notice the vole?" Greg asks, and points to a piece of driftwood. "You have to crouch down," he says, and points again. I do, and notice a mouse-size rodent peeking out. "Reality is in the details," he says. "But this isn't quite how the hunt went."

As I drive, Greg tells the story of his client's brown bear hunt. "A bear on the Alaska Peninsula can be had for about eight thousand dollars," he begins, "but by spending nearly twenty grand, John, the hunter, was guaranteed a real trophy." And a real trophy is what John ended up with. The bear now making his way through the city streets, to the surprise and delight of other motorists, is one of the ten biggest ever killed. Though the body is incomprehensibly large, trophy quality is determined by the size of the skull, its length fore to aft plus its width, and John's bear measured nearly thirty-one inches. A large black bear, by comparison, may measure eighteen inches. "You get what you pay for," Greg says. But what of the mount itself? What does something like that cost? "You don't even want to know."

At a stoplight, another driver gawks through her window, describing what she sees into her cell phone. Greg continues, "But the scene I created has little to do with what actually happened." The bear in my rearview mirror, so close, angry and ready to charge, is part of a new reality, one dreamt up by the hunter. "In truth, it was shot at a distance of four hundred yards as it grazed on berries," Greg says, sketching an image uniquely different than the one in his recreation. More often than not, the leaping lion, the crouching leopard, and the snarling bear are a product of imagination, a bit of subterfuge. "No one wants a mount of a bear eating blueberries." Greg says.

The house is a massive stone Tudor in a neighborhood full of massive stone Tudors. Before we reach the double-wide front doors, they swing open and we're greeted by the owner, a man I'll call John, a tall, sixty-ish, gray haired guy who shakes my hand like he means it. "Nice to meet you." Turning to Greg, he says, "I have my work clothes on. Let's see this bear." As we walk around the truck, I notice that John's work clothes, his khaki shirt and pants, are neatly pressed. He has a comfortable ease about him, one that comes with age and money. Despite this, there seems to be something in their past that makes Greg nervous and the taxidermist's tone has changed, taking on the demure cadence of a subordinate. Leaning his six-four frame over the truck bed, John inspects the bear, and Greg and I are silent until approval is given. Righting himself, he pats Greg on the shoulder and says, "Well, my friend, you've outdone yourself." And with this, Greg smiles.

John, Greg and I tip the bear on its side and thread it through the double-wide front doors, make a quick left, and step into the trophy room, where we stand it up. With the mount righted, I lift my eyes for the first time to take in my surroundings and my mind whirls. At least sixty feet long, thirty feet wide, the

room resembles a mid-size field museum. In it, the visitor is encircled by dead things, creatures from the far flung four corners of the globe. Hundreds of them.

“Where’s it going?” Greg asks.

“Opposite the polar bear,” John answers, and as we are standing near the entrance, at the apex of the room, it’s obvious why. Even to the casual eye, the animals are arranged carefully. Behind us are the smaller North American deer, the whitetail, blacktail, and Coues deer, which lead, naturally, to the left wall and the larger mule deer, then several species of caribou, elk, moose, and bison. To the right are the diminutive African antelope and gazelles, the impala and bushbuck, increasing in size the further you move down the wall to oryx, waterbuck, sable, eland, and cape buffalo, all building, progressively, to the room’s focal point, a two and a half story stone fireplace adorned with a rhinoceros and, finally, the head of an enraged African elephant, its ears flared wide, its trunk trumpeting toward us.

For a few moments, I stand silent, trying to wrap my mind around the carnage. “Something, isn’t it?” Greg asks.

“Let’s move this thing and I’ll give you a tour,” John says, and from his tone it’s obvious that what he’s offering me is a real treat.

We wheel the bear on the casters in its base to the left past a seventeen foot long Nile crocodile that has occupied itself drowning an impala, presumably in some unnamed equatorial river. We move under a mountain lion that growls at us, protecting the carcass of his mule deer prey while directly across, twenty some feet away, his African cousin, the leopard, has dragged a Thompson gazelle into the branches of an acacia tree. A Siberian brown bear guards the arched entryway to another room to our left, while to the right, two African lions fight over a zebra. Despite its size, the room is close to overflowing,

“Let’s not push it against the wall just yet,” Greg says of the brown bear. “I want to comb it out first.”

With this, John begins an extended, and unrequested, tour of his collection. The brown bear is sharing this far left corner with a standing polar bear whose feet straddle a dead seal. The seal’s blood stains the faux ice beneath it. “Can’t import these any more,” John says of the white bear. “So I was lucky to have taken this one when I did. CITES has really botched things up for good, solid conservation.” But CITES, from my understanding, was designed to do just that – conserve.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was the 1975 brainchild of the World Conservation Union, an agreement

between eighty countries to monitor and restrict the import and export of threatened species. Today, the number of CITES nations, all of whose governments join voluntarily, has grown to 173, and together they impose strict quotas on over 30,000 species of flora and fauna. It's an idea drafted with sound stewardship in mind, but for people like John, CITES is little more than a pebble in their shoe. "I took this bear almost fifteen years ago, and I'm glad I did because the polar bear has become a flagship species for the bunny huggers," he says. CITES has determined, at the prompting of wildlife biologists, that polar bear numbers have dropped significantly in recent decades, possibly due to habitat loss from global warming. John disagrees. "When you're up there, on the ice, and you ask the Inuit, they'll tell you that some localized populations have actually increased." This is one case in hundreds worldwide where researchers and hunters are at odds.

While CITES does have its drawbacks – a species, for instance, must decline to a certain level before it makes the list, and the list focuses on trade and not other, often more detrimental, issues such as habitat loss – it does accomplish what was intended, curtailing illegal trade in wildlife. John however, sees it another way. For him, CITES restricts his ability to collect game like the polar bear. "You can thank Al Gore for inventing global warming," he says.

Though I hadn't noticed his absence, Greg is walking back into the trophy room after retrieving his tool box from the truck. He kneels near the base of the brown bear and opens the tool box, revealing various combs and dog brushes, several one-ounce containers of paint, and a bag full of moss and another of synthetic lichen. With these things, he begins to groom the mount, fixing what was tussled on the ride over. He works quietly, ignoring us. Having mounted most of the animals in this room, Greg has had the tour, heard the stories. I watch him for a few minutes before realizing that John has continued the tour without me.

"The bongo is found only in the densest, most impenetrable jungles of central Africa," he's saying. "I took this one in Cameroon." The bongo is a beautiful, spiral horned antelope whose reddish brown coat is striped by vertical white contrasting bars. The white chevron that marks its face adds shadows to its form, camouflage, or the illusion of camouflage. The animal is here in its entirety, perhaps four hundred pounds on the hoof, and appears to be walking across the jungle floor, a rich, humusy, organic looking soil growing clumps of ferns and other wide leaf tropical plants. There are even bongo tracks where it's already stepped. Greg is a very thorough man. Elusive and reclusive, this animal is a true rarity. "Not an easy thing to get these days," John says. "Permits are tough to come by and the hunt is very expensive." In a few months, I would be beginning

my fourth year of wildlife biology study in college, and I have a rudimentary knowledge of the bongo's plight because it mirrors that of many other species. The reason they are expensive and tough to come by is that deforestation has claimed much of the bongo's home range, creating narrow, disjunctive corridors of habitat. The mahogany wainscoting that covers the walls of John's trophy room contributed to the bongo's downfall. John doesn't make this connection.

Moving towards the African wall, John motions to one rather unremarkable antelope head. "That's supposed to be a world record blesbok," he says. He opens an album lying atop a nearby table. Like the room itself, it's full of dead animals. Thumbing through the pages, he settles on one and says, "Here." The photo is of him in safari kit. He's holding the horn of a blesbok, his rifle lying across the antelope's shoulder, its tongue hanging limp and bloody. "Does that look like the same animal?" he asks, but I really can't tell. "Well," he says, "look at the horns." I do, and it becomes obvious that the one on the wall has shorter headgear. I tell him so. "I think my professional hunter ripped me off," he says.

World record animals, those with the longest horns, the most antler points and mass, the largest bear and lion skulls, are worth a great deal of prestige in big game hunting circles. For a hunting guide or outfitter, there are often

financial benefits for owning such a trophy, not for record status, but for enticing future clients. After killing his potential world record blesbok in the Kalahari, John returned home, and months later, when they cleared customs, his trophies from that safari made their way to Greg's shop. John didn't see the animal again until a year after he pulled the trigger. This is when he suspected that, while still a very large specimen, it was not his world record. "Son of a bitch probably sold my animal. Or put it up in his lodge." Since the guide was in Namibia, I wondered about what someone would do about such a thing. "Oh, he'll get his," says John. "I notified SCI."

As an internationally powerful and outspoken pro-hunting organization, Safari Club International (SCI) isn't the stereotypical, beer-swilling, redneck crowd. Rather, the majority of its members are upper middle class; many are wealthy and, in various ways, know what they want and how to go about getting it. Among its ranks, SCI counts the George Bushes (Senior and Dubya), several sultans, Arabian princes, and captains of industry and commerce. Men and women who are experienced lobbyists and law makers. Having conquered the financial world, then turning his sights on conquering nature, John embodies the competitive spirit and ego-driven compulsion that permeates SCI's membership.

As I flip through the pages of his album, he explains how, through an intricate awards system, SCI separates the men from the boys, the haves from the have-nots. Within the hierarchy of the organization, a hunter can climb the ladder of achievement by shooting certain species that earn him recognition in different categories – wild sheep of the world, antlered game of the world, predators of the world – more than fifty awards in all. Beyond these groupings are awards for individual species, the largest of the large, and each can be ranked by its size – silver, gold and diamond. And if a hunter has the resources to hunt in enough countries, and shoot the requisite game in each, he or she can win one of the group's major awards – Hall of Fame award, International Hunting award, Pinnacle of Achievement award – the lists are dizzying and John doesn't seem concerned that I'm not following his description. What I am hearing is that SCI's awards program not only condones the killing of unique and sometimes rare animals, but celebrates it as well.

On the surface, SCI seems to represent blood lust run amok, deifying those hunters wealthy enough to travel to obscure corners of the globe to collect hundreds of different species. The group has more than its fair share of political pull and is able to assert itself, often forcing changes in legislation or successfully battling laws like those imposed by CITES, as its members are currently doing with polar bear importation restrictions. But SCI's mission statement belies a

different goal: "To protect the freedom to hunt and to promote wildlife conservation worldwide," a mantra that strives to form an unholy alliance between hunter and naturalist.

Protecting endangered species costs a great deal of money and, with 55,000 members in more than one hundred countries, money is something the SCI has ready access to. And the organization has proven more than willing to use its resources to support conservation efforts. At banquets, SCI members purchase raffle tickets and bid in auctions to win donated rifles and hunting trips, the proceeds earmarked for various preservation efforts. They choose pet projects, mostly large mammals that are close to vanishing, and then they write checks, buying much needed equipment for anti-poaching patrols in places like Tanzania and Botswana. Many of its members will never have the opportunity to hunt jaguar in Brazil, or polar bear in the Canadian arctic, but their money, through SCI's conservation foundation, finds its way into the hands of the scientists who monitor and research these species and others. As animal populations around the world succumb to human encroachment and poaching, especially in poorer countries, researchers are beginning to see the advantages of working with wealthy hunters turned conservationists. "A polar bear hunt," John tells me, "costs about forty thousand US dollars. This money is a real windfall in some arctic villages." Money from license and permit sales goes into

bear research and, in some cases, it's these very funds that protect a species. "We save a lot more bears than we kill."

John is obviously very proud of his trophies, and the point in gathering such a collection is to show it off, so he doesn't linger long in any one place. Next, he wants to show me his North American mountain sheep. If animals like bongo and polar bear are a special and hard-won prize among jet set hunters, then these sheep are truly coveted, though in this room they appear rather modest, as anything would be when surrounded by buffalo, rhinoceros, and elephant. In the center of the room, each standing on its own imitation rock base, are three rams. John has collected the Alaskan dall sheep, the Rocky Mountain bighorn, and British Columbia's stone sheep, but a fourth, the rarest and most expensive, is missing. When I ask whether or not he's ever hunted desert bighorn, John changes the subject, focusing instead on Alaska's Brooks Range and his dall sheep.

Being limited to certain mountain ranges in the American southwest and Mexico, desert bighorn represent the most difficult North American big game hunt. The cost of a hunt begins at \$60,000 and can climb quickly to \$100,000. Together, all four sheep constitute a "grand slam," something that all trophy

hunters aspire to, and the fact that his collection is missing one appears to be a sore spot for John. I don't push him.

All told, John and his rifles have made nineteen trips to Africa. Together they have traveled to Australia for water buffalo, bentang, and feral camel. Of the camel, he says, "big, ugly bastards. Bad teeth. I'll take you down to the gun room to see the rug when we're done here." Having never seen a camel disassembled and laid flat, I nod my head. But first, in an alcove off of the main trophy room, he has to show me the Himalayan tahr and the Chinese blue sheep. They are perched on ledges of granite colored plaster atop one of Greg's twelve foot high faux mountains alongside Spanish, Turkish, Austrian, and Mongolian ibex, their long, gnarled horns curving back like scimitars into the shadows where the track lighting fails to reach. "That one," he says, "is a Nubian ibex." It looks like all the others on the mountain, but, "oh, no," John says, a little irritated. "It ranks high in the record book. Took him ten years ago in the Red Hills of the Sudan." He admires the ibex for a few seconds before adding, "Beautiful place." I think about the Sudan, about Darfur, the Lost Boys. "One hell of a tough hunt," he adds.

In another corner, atop its own mountain diorama, a Tajikistani Marco Polo sheep stares out into the room. John notices me looking at it. "Fifty-six thousand dollars," he says. "That's just for the hunt, and then you have air fare, hotels, tips, shipping, the taxidermy bill, and many," he pauses, "many other expenses." He's as proud of this figure as he is of the animal's scarcity. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife only allows a few of these to be imported each year." The big ram, significantly larger than a bighorn sheep, stands alone, but the rest of his foam and plaster mountain, John assures me, will be filled within a few years. He is, after all, planning trips to Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Pointing, he says, "I have to shoot something to put there, and there." The way he says this, it sounds more like shopping than hunting. I wonder what he will do once he's shot it all. "There's always more," he says. Dugustrian tur in Azerbaijan, Afghan urial in Iran, three types of markhor in Pakistan, snow sheep in Siberia, takin in China—the destinations, species and subspecies are dizzying. "And Vietnam is in the process of opening its doors to foreign hunters. As are the Philippines." John plans on keeping Greg busy for the foreseeable future.

I'm quiet for a moment, and this silence leaves an empty space in his otherwise full trophy room, something that John doesn't care for. "But I'm not even done with Africa yet." He'll make several more trips to the Dark Continent, he tells me. "And," he says, lifting one eyebrow and one corner of his mouth, "I

haven't shot a desert big horn yet, or a Roosevelt elk." This big deer, living in the forested mountains of Oregon and Washington, once collected, will complete his American Super Slam, all twenty-nine North American big game animals.

Another head on the wall and, perhaps more importantly to him, another SCI plaque.

The walls of the basement gun room are devoted to what trophy hunters call the exotics, animals from across the globe that have been imported to the States, and to the high fence game preserves, where people like John can shoot them. Texas leads our country in this type of operation, but today most states have them. And new preserves are opening all the time, every one of them offering a one hundred percent success rate, challenging the concept, the very meaning, of the word hunting. There's a barnyard quality to this type of shooting which robs the experience of its mystique, but for the ardent collector, it matters little where or how the trophy was taken. To give recognition to those hunters skilled enough to kill a fenced in animal, SCI's record book has a section devoted to "estate" game. This allows the hunter to receive credit for killing without putting forth the labor and hardship of the hunt.

John tells me that he has over one hundred guns, the most impressive of which is a British made Holland and Holland double barrel rifle in 470 Nitro Express caliber that costs \$75,000, "An old elephant stomper," he calls it. One wall of this room is lined with gun safes, the rest a staggered row of trophy heads, all killed within the confines of metal fences in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. The addax antelope, with its black corkscrew-shaped horns, is nearly extinct in its native Sahara Desert, but thrives in Dimmit County, not far from San Antonio. Likewise, the Aoudad sheep and Dama gazelle, who at one time shared their home range with the addax, but whose numbers are equally precarious in North Africa, is also doing well in Texas. And John has them all. They hang on the wall in an odd hodge-podge, a geographical clusterfuck of animals that, in the wild, are separated by niches, natural barriers, mountain ranges, oceans, continents. Upstairs, the main trophy room was segregated – Africans here, Americans there, Asians there – but the gun room finds the Indian blackbuck antelope, the Persian red sheep, and the Eurasian mouflon sheep touching horns, their only common bond being that they were brought to America to be killed.

John sweeps his arm, saying almost dismissively, "And these are the exotics." I look around at the fallow and axis deer, their tall antlers challenging the low ceiling, the nilgai antelope and Jacob's four horn sheep. On the far wall,

there are four different color phases of Corsican rams, a complete collection, and the bizarre Pere David's deer, no longer found wild in its native China. Next to one gun cabinet, there's another deer, dark haired with long, forked antlers. Below it there's an SCI plaque, and without approaching, all I can read is "World Record, Handgun Division." It seems familiar, so I ask him where he shot the Sika deer. "Oh, on a ranch up north." I ask him if he shot it with a pistol. "Yeah," he answers.

It's my turn to tell a story and I begin by mentioning what a small world it is, how, years earlier, I was delivering some livestock to a farm up north. On the way home, I blew a trailer tire and, upon trying to change it, discovered that the jack didn't work. The nearest driveway was marked with a wooden sign reading "Game Ranch," then, in smaller letters, "Trophy Wild Boar, Bison, Exotic Sheep, Goats and Deer." The ranch operator was very kind, and loaned me his floor jack. When I finished with the tire, I mentioned my interest in wildlife and he took me on a tour of his hunting preserve where small fenced sections formed a tessellated labyrinth of the three hundred acre property. The visit ended in a clubhouse, the walls of which were adorned with mounted heads and this was where the man showed me a video of a record book Sika deer hunt.

On unsteady and twitching footage, the video opened with a deer running through a gate. The camera shifted and we're then looking over the shoulder of a hunter, who soon raised a large, bright, stainless steel revolver. The deer was panicked and ran about the small enclosure, maybe fifty by thirty feet, testing and retesting its boundaries, searching for an escape route that it might have missed. A few yards away, the hunter cocked the big revolver, lowered his head to see through the scope, and squeezed the trigger. The camera momentarily lost, then reacquired the deer, and the animal was hunched up like a child with a stomach ache. Like something sick. It ran a short distance and headlong into the fence. Though no longer in view of the lens, I heard the gun's hammer being cocked again and saw the deer struggling, its antlers tangled in the chain link. Boom.

In the next scene, I heard the ranch owner, "Let's drag him outta here." The camera followed as two men pulled the deer along by its antlers. "Over here by the pond," one of them said. Kneeling on the grass behind the deer, the hunter propped the revolver on the animal's shoulder, then held the head of his newest acquisition high as a flash strobed somewhere off screen. These were the photos that would go into the hunter's album and onto the SCI plaque. With the forest and pond as a backdrop, they show an image much more bucolic than the mud, feces, and fence of the deer pen.

Throughout my narrative, John is smiling. He looks at the floor, at the sika deer, but never at me. He isn't embarrassed by the story, doesn't see that he's been exposed as a fraud. When I finish, he looks at me and calmly, clearly, says, "Well, we should get upstairs and see how that bear is coming along."

Back in the trophy room, Greg has finished sprucing up the brown bear and is talking with John's wife, a quiet, beautiful woman, perhaps twenty years younger than her husband. When we enter, no one offers to introduce her to me and after a few seconds she quietly disappears. While the hunter and taxidermist talk, I wander around the room, studying the animals for a second time, and while I do so, I notice John occasionally peering over his shoulder, keeping tabs on me. When the men say their goodbyes, I'm at the far end of the room, and John shouts across to me, "Thanks for your help." I holler back that it was nice to have met him, and as he turns away, he says, "Yep."

The ride back to Greg's shop is quiet, both of us pondering the trophy room, though probably from different angles. For Greg, John is a cash cow, a tireless collector who will require a taxidermist's services so long as he's able to travel and shoot straight. A visit to John's house is a trip back in time where Greg

is able to revisit his past work, work that he considers art. "I breathe life into dead things," he says. "I re-create."

And, like any artist, he scrutinizes his earlier work. "I'm still not happy with the way the head tilts on that one moose," he says, recalling a big specimen John shot in Siberia.

I see the trophy room another way: as a place where greed goes unchecked, an intersection where compulsion and ethics collide -- a rich man's craving for ownership manifested in the hides and horns of the world's most unique creatures. And all of it is validated by plaques and awards given to him by like-minded men. On the surface, that's what I saw tonight, but to examine it fully, and fairly, one has to consider another, perhaps farther reaching, meaning.

Though it is, in part, the mission statement of SCI and other groups, the conservation of rare and endangered wildlife and their environs is little more than a byproduct of the desire to possess. However, organizations that focus solely on conservation or ecotourism instead of hunting have failed to flip the bill and, unfortunately, in today's world it all comes down to the final tab.

A common scenario, for instance, would find a herdsman living in Pakistan's Karakoram Mountains venturing out with his World War One-era rifle to shoot a markhor, an endangered, spiral horned type of wild goat. The animal may weigh two hundred pounds on the hoof, but when reduced to boneless meat, might come in at barely one hundred pounds, enough to feed his village for a few weeks. Conversely, through an agreement with the Pakistani government and an international safari corporation, that same herdsman could be hired to guide a foreign hunter to a markhor. Considered one of the Holy Grail species, wealthy trophy collectors pay up to \$95,000 for the privilege to hunt markhor. Even after the money has trickled down through all of the bureaucracies and sticky fingers, the herdsman's village will earn enough for a year or more. He won't have to poach the animals for food and is more likely to guard against others doing the same. In the end, the death of one adult trophy markhor may help preserve the species. And this scenario is played out around the globe wherever big game animals and poor people live close to one another.

Of course, mankind has been collecting trophies from their kills since the first ice age hunter began stacking bear skulls against his cave wall. But what started as a way to honor prey, of reliving the memory of the hunt, has become the entire

reason for it. For some, like John, the record books are now the catalyst, the main motivation behind hunting, and this has a blinding effect, a narrowing of vision that focuses down until everything is seen through the lens of trophy collecting. But to ignore the fact that organizations like SCI donate millions to conservation world wide would be equally blind.

Though their money is usually directed toward huntable species, the outcome often means across the board benefits for all wildlife. Saving an endangered subspecies of Asiatic mountain sheep, the Gobi argali for instance, requires the preservation of its habitat, a habitat shared by many species of flora and fauna. While environmental groups maintain that ecotourism can generate enough income to aid conservation efforts, they rarely mention the fact that it would take dozens of camera-touting tourists to equal the amount spent by a single trophy hunter. After all, not many would be willing to spend \$50,000 and three weeks of vacation time hiking around the Gobi desert for a glimpse of the rare Argali, but hunters are willing, and eager, to do so. Ultimately, selling off a few trophy animals to a few wealthy hunters has less of an impact than groups of ecotourists trampling the landscape.

In a perfect world, wealthy hunters would donate their money to preservation, saving the rare and endangered from the oblivion of extinction. It

would be enough for them simply to know that the animal exists in the wild and needs help if it's going to survive. But our world is not ordered in this way, and trophy collecting will continue to motivate men like John, and their rifles will continue to fuel their greed, so long as there are rifles and greed.

THE TRAPPER

As we drive, Tim asks me to read something he wrote, "Since you're an English teacher and all." It's about bison hunting, written in an uneven scrawl that's tough to decipher. While I scan the story, he guides his rusty Toyota pickup down the two-lane highway, occasionally turning to look at me in a nervous way. He drums the steering wheel with his thumbs and bobs his head to music only he hears, humming just a little before turning toward me again.

Behind us in the truck bed, there are three large plastic bins loaded with steel traps. They rattle with each bump in the road. It's background noise, difficult to pick out from the other sounds, the squeaks and hisses of the old truck, the loud ticking engine and the cold December air rushing through holes in the floor. But I can hear the traps, am keenly aware of their presence and what we are doing with them.

It's hard for me to read on the road, so I skim what I can, getting the gist of the pages in front of me. Ten miles later, I look up through the cracked windshield, and as soon as I do, Tim asks, "What do you think? It's good, yeah?"

"Well..."

"Do you think the part about gutting the buffalo is too gross?"

"Well..."

“Should I talk more about the prairie? The hills and what not?”

“Ahhh...”

“I want it to have lots of description,” he says. “Ya know?”

I don't know Tim very well, have only met him a couple of times. Chance encounters all. The last was a few months ago on the final day of trout season. I was fishing a small stream in the central Upper Peninsula; Tim was scouting for the upcoming trapping season, paddling a worn and patched fiberglass canoe downstream and looking for sign – beaver slides, raccoon tracks, muskrat holes – anything that could help him predict where fur might be later in the fall. We had run into each other twice before that, on another river, and the conversation started easy enough: “Any water in the Sturgeon?” “Seen any beaver down at the High Banks?” We talked for a while, me standing in the water holding his boat still in the current as he sat amidships telling me about the big brook trout in the Slapneck, the Driggs, and a few others. He was a nice guy who was quick to smile, quick to laugh, careful to avoid swearing, knowledgeable about local water and willing to share information, so it felt natural when I asked if I could tag along sometime when he ran his trapline. “Just to see how it's done,” I said.

But soon autumn came and so did the school year. Snow fell and I forgot about Tim and my casual interest in trapping. Then, last night, he called. “Can you be ready at six tomorrow morning?”

The call was a surprise, but more startling was his desire to write. Tim graduated high school ten years ago, though just barely, and he never considered college, instead going to work full time as a logger for his brother's company, cutting mostly pulp wood, some veneer. Writing is new to him. His inspiration came during a South Dakota bison hunt last year, a trip that took him three years to save up for. "It was awesome," he says. "I felt like a mountain man and can't wait to do it again."

Tim turns the truck off the highway and onto a narrow dirt road that pushes straight through a dense spruce forest. The dark green foliage draws in close on each side, leaving only a thin strip of grey sky overhead. I ask, "So, what do you want to do with this story?" As he turns again, taking us down a trail no wider than the Toyota, he bites his bottom lip, sits up a bit in the driver's seat, and starts talking fast.

"Oh, man, let me tell you. I want to be an outdoor writer. I'm going to sell it to one of the hunting magazines." The idea excites him and he guns the engine, charging us through deep, water-filled ruts covered with skim ice. The front tires send a spray of cold, muddy water up through the holes in the floor boards, splattering my pants, and soon the truck lurches to a stop as the rear wheels begin to spin. Tim reaches for the transfer case with both hands, gives it a violent jerk, then another, until the lever pops into four wheel drive. He takes hold of the

door handle and says, "Yeah, that's what I've always wanted to do, write hunting stories." He opens the door and steps out. I do the same. We walk to the front wheels, turn the lock-out hubs, then he leans over the hood. "Imagine getting paid to go hunting and trapping, then just writing about it." When we get back into the truck, he tells me about the only reading material in his childhood home - *Sports Afield, Outdoor Life, Fur Fish & Game*. "I was raised on that stuff."

With the truck now in four wheel drive, we bust through more ice covered puddles, down through a low alder thicket, then uphill to a cedar stand that scratches along the doors and fenders and shoves the side mirrors tight against the windows. "That's what you've always wanted to do? Write hunting stories?"

"Yeah," he says. "Since I was a kid."

Tim grew up in the rural UP, three miles from the nearest paved road. His father, grandfather, and two older brothers were loggers, jobbers who cut for the Mead pulp mill in Escanaba. "When the old man wasn't in the woods working, he was out there hunting or fishing or trapping. Grandpa, too. And I used to follow them around like I was their shadow. We never had any money, but we ate like kings - venison, duck, partridge, and trout. Ma had a huge garden and Dad made extra cash trapping. He'd trap all fall and winter, and when the fur buyer came through in the spring, Dad'd always get top dollar 'cause, see, he's the best skinner around. He'd be out in the shed for hours after running his

line, just scraping those hides until there was no flesh left. Just clean skin and fur.”

Tim’s leaning forward, his chest close to the steering wheel. I can tell from his posture, from his tone, how important this is to him, and how the old man is his hero. “So I learned from one of the best.”

We pull to a stop atop an open knoll, a spot where brown and bent ferns carpet the forest floor between widely spaced red pines. For a few weeks now, snow has gathered nightly and melted daily. In today’s intermittent early morning sun, only small patches of white can be seen, and those only in shady places. “The first set is about a half mile downhill from here,” Tim says. He takes a big gulp of coffee from his chipped and stained travel mug, reaches for a can of Copenhagen that has been sliding back and forth on the dashboard, loads a fat, three-finger pinch into his lower lip and says, “Ready?”

The hip boots he loans me are old, the green rubber white in places with tiny, spiderweb cracks, and the straps meant to hold them up are broken. They’re cold from riding in the open bed of the truck. As I put them on, I notice how large they are, my size eleven feet slipping toe to heel and side to side. “What size are these things?”

“Thirteen. Yeah, I got big feet.” Tim’s a tall guy, six four, with wide shoulders and an elongated head that makes him look rather cartoonish. Though

not yet thirty years old, his reddish blonde hair is graying around his long, flared ears. His hands, too, are long, patched here and there with pinkish scars, and right now he busies them with trapping supplies. He pulls a willow pack basket from one of the bins, stands it on the tailgate, and sifts through other bins, taking something from each – traps, coils of wire, pliers, bottles of scent, a hatchet, a small spade, a length of thick shovel handle with a large metal hook screwed into one end – and places the items in the basket. He stands still and stares quietly at the contents before saying, “One more thing.” He returns to the cab and prods around behind the seat, finally producing a holstered pistol, a Colt Woodsman .22. Like everything else in Tim’s outdoor arsenal, the gun is old, the bluing gone, the leather holster scratched and discolored.

He counts the gun as a necessity after hearing his father’s bear story.

“Back in the sixties, the old man spent an afternoon in the high branches of a cedar, chased up there by a sow with cubs.” Tim hangs the Colt on his left hip, then slips his arms through the pack basket’s shoulder straps, and asks again, “Ready?”

As we walk, the sun periodically breaks through the low cloud cover and the morning warms, though just a little. We follow a deer trail down to where it peters out in a marsh, where we trip over tussocks or step around them, only to sink knee deep in mud. Tim has a wide gait, and as I lag behind I have to stretch

to meet his footprints, post-holing through muck that threatens to suck the massive boots from my feet.

“The creek’s just up here,” Tim says. As we get closer, I hear trickling water, and now and then we pass tree stumps gnawed to dull spires by a beaver’s chisel-like teeth. A maze of muddy trails wind through the frost-killed grass and we follow one to the water’s edge. “This is a beaver slide,” Tim says. “They use these to go into the woods to fell trees. Then they drag the branches to the creek to make their lodges and dams.”

A beaver slide is just that: a slick slope of mud polished smooth by the beaver’s repeated use. To the side of this one, there’s a wooden stake pounded into the ground. Two loops of wire encircle the stake. Tim rubs the sole of his boot in the mud. “Trap’s gone,” he says. “That’s a good thing.” He reaches back and grabs the shovel handle from his pack and uses the hooked end to pull the wire from the mud, then slides the hook down the wire to where it disappears in the dark water. Somewhere down there, another stake holds the opposite end of the wire to the streambed. The trap chain is attached to the wire by a piece of angle iron. When a beaver steps in the trap, the animal panics and runs for the safety of the water, diving as far as the trap will allow. The trap slides down the wire, but when the beaver tries to resurface, the angle iron binds. It’s called a drowning set. Tim makes hundreds of them in a season.

He pushes the shovel handle far into the water, fishes around with it. "Opp, there it is." He pulls back with both hands, but it won't come, so he wiggles it, swishing the handle around until it moves toward him. The chain appears slowly, link by link, then one of the trap's long steel springs, the jaws, and, finally, the nearly black fur of the largest beaver I have ever seen.

"Holy tomatoes."

"Yeah," Tim says, smiling. "It's a big one." He grabs the animal by the tail and hoists it up, waist level. "A real big one."

He throws the beaver aside, landing it in the grass and, with gloved hands, compresses the trap springs, opening the jaws so the animal's leg slips out. It's a big female, about forty pounds, maybe more. In what little sunlight filters through the clouds, the animal's broad, scaly looking tail has a reptilian sheen, a glowing quality. Tim takes a minute to pet the fur. "A few dollars here."

"What's one like that worth?"

"Depends on what fur prices are like come spring." He stands to reset the trap, placing one foot on each of the long springs, then rocks forward to compress them so the jaws flop open. It takes him only seconds to then flip the trigger over, lift the pan and set the trap back in the slide. His motions are smooth and economical, the type that comes from endless repetition.

"Could get a few more out of here," Tim says.

I busy myself inspecting the dead beaver, the coarse guard hair that's a little oily to the touch, the soft downy underfur. I pry open the animal's mouth, clamped tight with rigor mortis, and ponder the teeth as Tim squats over the trap, carefully packing mud to conceal it. "So, that buffalo story. What did you think? Honestly?"

I lie. "It's good."

"You think a magazine will pay me for it?"

"Not sure. I don't read hunting magazines."

"Well, it's just like the ones I've read," he says. "Should I send it to them?"

"It needs a little work first."

"Like the spelling and commas and stuff?" The trap reset, he takes hold of the beaver's hind legs, lifts it into the pack basket, and with confidence says,

"They fix that stuff at the magazine company."

"They do, huh?"

"Yeah, they got people that fix that sort of thing." In one fluid motion, he swings the pack up and onto his back, the straps falling into place over his shoulders. It's a well practiced move, one not easily accomplished with that much weight. "The next set's down a hundred yards."

I follow him through the tightly laced alder to a spot where the bank rises four or five feet above the creek. Tim slides on his butt into the water, landing

next to a pair of stakes two feet apart. He feels around between them with his foot and says, "Hot dang, there's another." He stoops over one stake and pulls hard. When it's free, he moves to the other and soon the trap surfaces. It's a conibear, a body-grip trap wide enough to snap shut on a beaver's chest as the animal swims between the jaws. In its grip is our second beaver, smaller than the first, but with a lush, chocolate brown pelt. Tim tosses the trap, stakes, and beaver onto the bank next to me.

"Hell of a big trap."

"Yep," he says, and smiles. "Had one of these snap shut on my forearm once."

I study the huge springs that power the jaws. They're designed to break bones and smash lungs. To suffocate. "How'd you get it off?"

"I didn't," he says, and lets out a spontaneous laugh. "Had to wear it out of the woods to a gas station and a guy helped me get it off." His laugh is coarse and cutting, abrupt enough to startle you if you don't know it's coming, but it's genuine. "Had bruises for a month."

Tim paws his way up the bank and gets to work freeing the beaver. "So you think I should take out the part about gutting it?"

It takes me a second to figure out what he's talking about. "Oh, the buffalo story. Yeah, that's a bit graphic."

“But it’s the truth.”

“Right, but most people don’t want too much truth.”

“Not telling the whole truth is just like lying.”

It’s tough to argue with that. “Maybe you’re right.”

Tim uses a couple of c-clamp like tools to compress the trap’s jaws, then sets the trigger and hops back in the water. He uses the blunt, mallet end of his hatchet to pound the stakes back into place. He looks up from his work, “So you think I should take that part out? The gutting?”

From what I read, the buffalo piece is poorly written, a random grouping of images with an abundance of technical problems. But I can’t say that, so I say, “It’s up to you.”

The next trap has another beaver in it. “Gosh dang it all, Dan,” Tim says, “you must be good luck.”

We check more, a half dozen or so, but the rest are empty. I follow him back to the truck, carrying two heavy beavers, their black, webbed paws curled into tight little fists in my hands. They are awkward to hold, wet, muddy and slick with glandular oil. We stop often so I can rest.

In the truck, Tim asks again about the buffalo story, if it’s any good, if I think he has what it takes to be an outdoor writer. I don’t know how to answer

him, so I change the subject. "What's next for these beavers? What do you do with them now?"

"Take them home, skin them, stretch the hides and wait 'til spring."

"And the carcasses? There's a lot of meat there."

"I used to sell them to a mink farmer for feed, but he shut down when fur prices crashed. Now I use them for coyote or bear bait. And I give a lot to a dogsledder to feed his pack."

I ask about fur prices, about the market and profitability.

"You sure as heck don't trap for the money."

Fur prices are subject to the unpatternable whims of fashion and, because of this, have always fluctuated wildly. But recent trends have brought peaks and valleys that are especially difficult to predict. When the fashion industry deems fur "in", the market obviously soars, and trappers trap and fur buyers buy.

The market, though, is dictated by the ever-changing sensibilities of the fashion conscious. A single well-placed anti-fur ad by animal rights advocates can push fur out of vogue and ruin the market one year, and the next it can rebound when a fur coat appears on the shoulders of a Hollywood starlet, on the runways of Milan, or even in a rap video. It's this fickle, season-to-season variation that determines what Tim's efforts are worth. Possibly worse, fur prices also reflect the overall economy. As the global economy tanked over the last few

years, the international demand for luxury items plummeted as well, and trappers and fur dealers around the world found themselves sitting atop a surplus of raw hides. Coyote pelts that brought a trapper twenty to thirty dollars a year ago may sell for nine dollars next spring. Muskrat that fetched nine to fifteen dollars last season now garners three or four dollars. "Some years it's hardly worth it," Tim says. "I'll be lucky to recoup fuel costs this season."

Tim puts as much as two hundred and fifty miles a week on his truck while trapping. Sometimes more. "That costs a lot. Then there's all the little things, equipment and stuff." Most of the sundries Tim makes himself, even the attractants, the baits and scents used to lure the animals to the trap. "But every year I have to replace a few traps, and, man, are those things expensive." Most of his trapline is made up of hand-me-downs inherited from his grandfather. "If you look at my traps close, you'll see that almost all are the older style, riveted together instead of welded. But they still work great."

He drops a long stream of brown chew spit into an empty Mountain Dew can, takes a sip of cold coffee, and looks back at the road. We are on the highway again, headed south. It's starting to snow and the sun is gone, dampened by a low cloud bank that stretches from horizon to horizon. It's getting colder.

I think about the traps used to complement the rustic décor of modern log cabins, or in those chain restaurants so cluttered with everything from James

Dean posters to vintage bicycles, a testament to the inseparable hodge podge of eras Americans think of as history.

I consider the trap itself, the tool used by voyageur and settler alike to pacify the New World, the device used to tame the wild out of the wilderness. It's always been about fashion.

Like the mountain men who pushed far into the Rockies to sate European gentry's love of beaver felt hats, Tim, too, labors to fulfill the desire of a world far removed from his own. The animals in the bed of his truck will end up in the hands of a regional fur buyer, who will then take them to auction, where they will be bought by a large scale dealer who sells to designers and garment manufacturers. From there, the fur can move about unfettered. A beaver trapped in a small Upper Peninsula stream may end up on the streets of Paris or at a London cocktail party. But no matter how far the pelts travel, or how elegant and civilized the final product, all roads lead back to muddy trails and old steel traps.

"So those are your grandpa's traps?"

"Yeah, he gave them to me when he couldn't get around in the woods anymore. He made it sound like I was doing him a favor by taking them. 'Get them darn things outta my garage,' he said. But you could tell he was sad about giving it up. He hunted and trapped his way through the Depression. Kept the family alive that way. Tough old bird, that one. When I was a kid, Gramps could

woods-walk all day, up hills and through swamps. Carried me when I got tired. Dad's the same way, but he's starting to slow some now, too. But... boy, he sure gets out there and gives her heck."

A few miles further and another dirt road takes us west through a bare maple stand. Soon we turn again, taking a two-track south along the edge of a ridge where hardwoods lean over us to the left and, to the right, the land tapers down to a cedar forest. It looks wet down there, and I ask if there's another creek, wondering if we're after beaver again, or muskrat, otter, raccoon, mink or other furbearers that live in or around water. "Not here," Tim says. "We're going to check some marten sets."

The trail is a mess, nothing but massive ruts made by heavy logging equipment that cut deep into the earth, which causes the truck to pitch and yaw. Tim is driving way too fast, bouncing us from hole to hole. The glove compartment flies open and spills its contents onto my feet. I leave it there. I can't do anything about it now. I brace my hands wide and steady myself to keep from smacking my head on the metal roof and door frame.

"So trapping is a family tradition?" I ask to take my mind off his driving.

"Yeah," Tim says, or tries to. His mouth is full of chew spit, so he rolls his window down and launches saliva into the forest. "Gramps was retired when I

was a kid, so he took me out while Dad was working. Most of what I know, I learned from him.”

“Seems like he did good by you.”

“I do okay, but, man, those old guys really knew their business. They trapped back when you could make some real money at it. In the sixties and seventies, even into the eighties, fur prices were pretty good. And gas was cheap. There was more fur around and no bunny huggers yet. But today... today it’s a lot tougher racket.”

“So why do it?”

“ ‘Cause it’s fun. I like being out here. And every time I run my line it’s like Christmas. Each trap is like a present and you never know what’s in it.”

“A hobby more than a vocation, then?”

“A hobby that sometimes pays for itself. I make just enough to keep doing it.”

We park and walk downhill on an overgrown logging trail, jump across a narrow stream and enter a thick evergreen forest, a mix of young white pine and spruce with a few sporadic maple, birch and poplar. Tim checks a small leg-hold trap at the base of a giant hemlock, another hidden in the tangled roots of a cedar, then two or three others, but all are empty. “Marten are a little tougher to catch,” he says as we hike back to the truck. He tells me about this reclusive,

arboreal weasel, similar in many ways to the mink, and explains how to trap them. "There's never many in one area," he says. "So you have to cover a lot of ground."

It's a low percentage game, but their beautiful mahogany brown pelts fetch a high price when the fur buyer comes through, so Tim stays at it. "They're a challenge, but I like it that way."

This, I suppose, is what I admire about the guy. Modern day trapping is largely an exercise in futility. The costs are high, the profits low, the labor intense. Trappers are hemmed in by stringent laws governing harvest and, to make matters worse, popular public opinion is almost unilaterally against the activity. But Tim stays at it, not for material gain, rather out of familial tradition, an obligation to preserve something from his family's collective history. In this way, it is far more than a hobby that sometimes pays for itself.

Back on the dirt road, we head further west. We're after coyote next, Tim tells me, and there are a lot of them around. "You know, it's us trappers that keep their numbers in check." He's seen coyote sign all over this area while pre-season scouting, has monitored it for months, and now he's optimistic. "It would be nice to get some outta here. Help the deer herd out a bit."

I ask him about the coyote's role, about what he thinks about wildlife conservation and how trappers fit into it.

“The UP would be overrun by coyote without trappers. Coyotes would wipe out the deer and there’d be nothing left for hunters.”

“So you do it for the hunters?” Too late, I realize that there’s a lot of cynicism in my voice as I ask this.

“For everyone. Everybody wants deer.”

“But coyotes and deer co-existed long before the steel trap came along.”

Tim takes this as an attack, a personal insult that challenges some deep, abiding belief. I didn’t mean it that way. I’m genuinely curious and want his opinion.

He writhes a little in the driver’s seat, as if he’s sitting on something uncomfortable. He pushes his shoulders forward and says, “There’s more deer today than ever before.”

“And why is that a good thing?”

Another two track takes us uphill and quickly back down, the grade steep enough to shove everything in the bed of the truck forward, slamming Tim’s trapping supplies, spare tire, and dead beavers up against the cab. I have to push my feet against the fire wall to keep from sliding into the dashboard. Tim is quiet, focusing on the trail, or maybe sulking. It’s difficult to tell which.

We park and eat an early lunch in a clearcut. For a quarter mile in each direction, the forest has been shaved close to the ground and only stumps and

windrowed brush piles remain. Tim is silent and only speaks when I ask specific questions. Around the edges of the clearcut, he tells me, he's set three coyote traps.

We walk a skidder trail to the first set. There's nothing in it. Tim takes a bottle from his pack, opens it, and drips a couple drops of rank liquid on a brown fern, on a nearby log, and on the grass surrounding the trap. He holds the bottle up for me to sniff. It smells like musty urine. "Coyote lure," he says. We move on. Though it's unmarked and carefully hidden in dirt and leaves, Tim walks directly to the next trap, finding it without hesitation, without having to search for it. He freshens up the scent, sprinkling it here and there. "One more," he says, and points east. "This way."

By the time we come upon it, the coyote has been in the trap for several hours, possibly all night. Although the late morning air is cold, the animal is panting, its eyes wide and wild with fear, its tongue hanging long and pink between white teeth. The signs of struggle are everywhere. In its panic, the coyote has worn away the grass and leaves, exposing a bare circle of dirt that marks the animal's outside reach as it pulled against the trap chain. Its head pulses with heavy breaths, its face stretched into a kind of grimacing canine smile, and the trapped paw is rubbed raw, down to the meat. The animal watches us come closer, but it's given up fighting the trap and now just lies on its

belly, prone but poised to move. "Nice lookin' yote," Tim says, though I can't tell. The grey fur is matted with dirt and clumps of pine needles and pieces of maple leaf.

Without hesitating, Tim steps around the bare circle of earth, approaching the coyote from behind. The animal perks its ears, but remains on the ground, turning only its head to watch as the trapper reaches back and pulls the shovel handle from the pack. It knows what's coming, or seems to, and it turns to look at me standing fifteen feet away.

In another second, the club comes down with force and speed, striking the animal's skull with a dull thud. I know it's inevitable, but I'm startled anyway. "Jesus Christ," I hear myself say, and the coyote kicks once or twice, like a dreaming dog, then lies still. Tim steps closer and pokes it in the eye with his club - "Best way to tell if they're still alive." - then quickly opens the trap, pulls the stake, and places both in his pack. With a piece of nylon cord, he lashes the four paws together, lifts the coyote and slings it over his shoulder so the animal hangs at his side like a large furry purse.

"A good day," he says.

"Unless you're a coyote."

This makes him chuckle, "yeah."

I hadn't meant it to be funny.

We have one more stop to make. As he drives, Tim talks about his family and the role trapping played in his youth. Heritage, a connection to the past, is important to him. The snow is coming down heavy now, driven horizontal by a stiff north wind. I watch it come at the windshield only to bend away and over the cab before hitting us. I catch pieces of what Tim is saying, but my mind keeps drifting back to the coyote.

“Tim, does it ever bother you? The suffering?”

“The animals you mean? Nooo. Heck no.” The question takes him by surprise, but he has an answer prepared. “They don’t feel pain like we do. They’re animals, for crying out loud. And don’t forget, the Bible says that God put creatures here for us to use. We’ve been doing it for thousands of years. The animal Nazis started all this suffering malarkey.”

“Animal Nazis?”

“Yeah, you know, the PETA, Green Peace crowd.” His tone is dismissive, and he sweeps his open hand to the side as if to brush away the notion. “They think a flippin’ mouse should have as much right to live as me or you.” The idea isn’t worth any more breath than that, and he changes the subject. “So, that buffalo story, you think I should fix the commas and stuff?”

“You need to do that before sending it in.”

He's quiet for a minute, then softly, humbly, he asks, "You think you could do that for me?"

Another mile down the dirt road and Tim pulls over. We sidestep down the steep embankment of the roadbed and find a creek. It's barely noticeable, about two feet across and flowing dark and tannin-stained. "Muskrat country," Tim says, and leads me through dense underbrush to where the water backs up into a diminutive channel that tapers away from the main creek and into the weeds and alders. "Okay. Time to teach the teacher," he says. "Where's the trap?" He's seeing if I learned anything, and he smiles, watching as I search through the grass at water's edge. He's pleased with himself.

When I can't find it, Tim squats and says, "Here. Here's the wire." It's nearly black, and coiled twice around the wrist sized trunk of a tag elder. He pulls the wire and the trap chain appears out of the water. He lets it hang there and points with his other hand at a nondescript trail in the grass, a miniature tunnel, really, only inches wide. I have to get on my hands and knees and put my face close to the ground, but there it is. "The 'rats use this little backwater to feed on weeds and stuff, and they made this trail here." He parts the vegetation so I can see clearly, then he pulls the trap from the water. It's sprung. "Nothing here," he says, and inspects the trap, turning it over in his hands. "Opp, we did

have one." He compresses the spring and the jaws open. He shakes it and something drops into his open palm, then he holds it up for me to see. It's a small, clawed foot. "Chewed his leg off," Tim says, and spits in the water. "They do that sometimes."

"How often?"

"Often enough." He digs through his pack basket and finds another small leg hold trap. The jaws are the same size, about three or four inches in diameter, but this one also has a third jaw encircling the other two. "This'll fix them. This piece comes over and pushes the animal's head off to the side so they can't reach their leg to chew it off."

Further downstream Tim finds a muskrat in one of his drowning sets. He drops the animal into his pack and places the trap back near the entrance to a den. The next few traps are empty. He pulls some, or moves them a few feet one direction or the other, fine tuning or playing hunches. In this way, we work along the creek, stopping occasionally to study something up close – an owl feather, a pile of pine cones gathered by a red squirrel, the sun-bleached femur of a deer. Nothing is glanced over.

Tim crouches next to the trail and moves leaves aside to study tracks beneath. He's concentrating, eyes narrowed to focus, mouth hanging open a little. "What did you find?"

“Coyote poop,” he says, and with the end of a stick, he pokes a grey turd. “See here?” He points, “There’s rabbit hair in it.”

We stop again so Tim can inspect the bottom edge of a fallen tree. The trunk hangs at an angle three feet above the trail, and stuck in the bark there’s some hair, just a few strands. “Deer,” he says. “But you never know. You got to stay tuned in.” This, I suppose, is why I asked to join him on his trap line: to see what it takes.

To be successful, the trapper has to carry with him an intensely intimate knowledge of his quarry, and of his surroundings. He must be able to read the finely written, nearly illegible story scribbled in tracks and trails, in scat and burrows, and barely perceptible tunnels through the grass. But simply reading them is not enough. Some translation is needed as well, because everything means something. For the trapper, nothing is random, nothing extraneous. A tiny clump of hair, an overturned log, a single blade of grass clipped short by sharp teeth - these are the sentences and the words that, when combined, add up to volumes. And, if the trapper reads long enough and with the right kind of eyes, he’ll find something as utilitarian as it is aesthetic, a guidebook that instructs him on the where, when and how of the forest.

Watching Tim as he reads sign, I realize that what he’s seeing is both a beautifully rendered story, and a loosely drawn document that forms a contract

between man and nature. “The critters,” he says, “leave messages that tell you what to do.”

We walk further, leap the creek, and follow the opposite bank toward the road, moving slowly in a kind of purposeful wonder. At times I can hear the conversation between Tim and the forest, can recall my own experiences and apply them here, but often, I’m deaf to it and so he patiently fills in the details – “This will be a good spot to look for morels come spring,” or “Wood ducks nest in that dead tree.” It’s an amalgamation of knowledge, partly inherited, partly self-discovered. Though I’ve never met his father or grandfather, I get the distinct impression that I am walking with them now, can hear their voices in Tim’s findings. What they have given him is not just the intricacies of trapping, the methods and techniques of killing, they also passed down the art of seeing, a clarity of vision that these days is seldom taught and rarely experienced.

STEELIE BUMS

Wisconsin's Ocanto River is a muddy mess. The usually sedate stream is out of its banks, pushing brown water far into the forest and testing the roots of streamside trees. Judging from our view from the highway, the river is unfishable, but we turn west just the same, following a county two-laner to the Stiles Dam. This structure marks the terminus for upstream migration of steelhead, and today it is churning out water so dark and uninviting that neither Jeff nor I move to put on our waders. For several minutes, we mill around the parking area looking at the river, occasionally peering to the horizon in hopes of finding a break in the grey folds of mid-April sky, not saying a word, both knowing that it could be days, possibly weeks before the Ocanto is wadable. Despite the three hour drive to get here, we can't wait around for something that may not happen.

"Well?" Jeff says.

"Yep," I answer, and we climb into the Jeep and point it south.

This is the first day of our nine day trip, and we had hoped the Ocanto would be our first stop, ideally providing several hours of fishing. But spring has come quickly, overnight, and the melting snow brought the river up, making

fishing treacherous, and wading unthinkable, so we drive further down the coast of Lake Michigan in search of better conditions.

Somewhere in the back of the vehicle, aluminum rod tubes bang together. With each bump in the road, our gear clinks and clangs, a constant reminder that we have brought too much. There are more rods in the Jeep than you might find in a well-stocked fly shop, more flies than any one angler could use in a lifetime. The noise reminds me of the words of an old friend, a real keep-it-simple sort. "If the fish are biting," he would say, "it doesn't matter what you use. If the fish aren't biting, it doesn't matter what you use." He would call our equipment cache excessive, but we'll be covering a lot of water, from small creeks only feet wide to massive rivers measured in hundred yard increments. Much of this water is new to us. We brought everything we have because we don't know what to expect. We are following the run.

From the reports we've received over the past week, the run is near peak. Friends from around the Great Lakes called to tell us that their local rivers are swollen with steelhead, the migration triggered by a sudden spring bringing warm rain and warmer temperatures, weather that erased winter in a day or two. Each night, the phone rang with wild tales. Jerry on upstate New York's Oswego River said he hooked thirty, "maybe more," in a day. Steve on Ohio's Chagrin rattled on about his first twenty pounder. Bill on Michigan's Manistee

said he'd never seen anything like it. "I lost count," he said. The calls came in after dark, when the speaker was fresh off the river, still feverish with enthusiasm, and dizzy with adrenalin.

I've heard such news before, deliriously good fishing in which the angler can do no wrong and where the fish offer themselves up for the taking. And it's best, I've found, to listen with your own yardstick nearby, something to measure veracity. Experience teaches that thirty steelhead in a day, any day, is a hell of a lot of fish. I won't claim that our friends are liars, just fishermen, and therefore inherently prone to exaggeration. It's up to the listener to deduct accordingly and watch for key phrases. Rendered down, what the guys were telling us is that the fishing is as good as it gets.

Steelhead anglers have a way of motivating each other this way, and after a dozen or so reports, Jeff was caught in the fervor. "I have a week's vacation saved up at work," he told me one night. "Enough time to fish our way around Lake Michigan. Whaddaya think?"

I thought pretty highly of it.

On the road, Jeff and I talk about literature and his great affection for Hemingway, which leads, naturally, to discussions about marlin and women and truth, and other things we know nothing about. We talk about old loves and

about regret, though these conversations have a thin veneer of nonchalance over them. When it becomes too serious, we make crude jokes and change the subject. This is how Jeff and I have always traveled together, talking away the miles, and it hasn't changed on this trip. What has changed is the nature of some of our conversations, the topics now more focused on adult concerns –a leaky roof above the kitchen, a furnace on the fritz, anxiety over a loved one's biopsy results. We talk about how life has changed, and whether or not it could ever change back.

Unlike many of our friends who insisted on getting mired in responsibility straight out of college, Jeff and I were able to avoid much of the adult world for nearly a dozen years. While our buddies found their free time cut by their careers, and again by marriage, mortgage and parenthood, the two of us continued to fish as we did when teenagers, working only intermittently and only when necessary. We guided fly fishermen to steelhead in the spring, to trout in the summer, and to salmon during the fall, tying flies commercially in the winter months. Occasionally, one of us might take a job selling tackle, swinging a hammer, or baling hay, but this work was ephemeral and could be left behind during the fishing season. We quit jobs to chase steelhead. Penniless but content, we slept in the dirt and ate out of cans, charging from here to there around the

Midwest and beyond, following the fish, never having a real job, and never wanting one.

Eventually, we did settle down, found steady work, bought houses. Jeff got married and had a kid. Six nights a week on the river became four, then two. Today our free time is rationed through vacation days, subject to schedule, and often I find myself surprised by a life I do not recognize.

Another 130 miles down Highway 43 and we find ourselves staring at the Manitowac River. Like the Ocanto, this stream is in spate and so full of mud that it's thick enough to plow. The water's surface looks like a massive granite table top that reaches over the banks and smothers the winter-killed grass. If steelhead are here, they will be tough to reach. "I'm noticing a trend," Jeff says.

"They've had less rain and less snowpack further south."

"To the Root?"

"To the Root."

More than any other species, steelhead inspire this kind of nomadism. They, too, are travelers, emigrants from the Pacific Northwest who came east by rail in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, brought here by various state and provincial agencies to replace depleted stocks of native brook trout. Back home on the west coast, steelhead are fish of mountain rivers. Genetically, biologically,

they are rainbow trout, but unlike their stream dwelling kin, steelhead have an intense wanderlust, a desire to roam. After two years in the river where they were born – at a stage called smolt – young steelhead feel the pull of the ocean, descending in some river systems hundreds of miles of stream to reach saltwater.

Once there, they achieve sizes unobtainable in the river, bulking up on high protein marine life, gaining length over width and, after a year or two at sea, the fish develops a streamlined torpedo shape. A shape designed to shun friction. Built for constant motion, this form allows them to range far in the Pacific, following a twisted and bowing line of cold water that circulates from Japan to California, north to Alaska and west to Kamchatka. They swim tirelessly, following shoals of baitfish, squid, and shrimp. Steelhead tagged in Oregon have been caught in the Aleutian Islands and off the Russian port of Magaadon, but regardless of how far they roam, during the spawn they all return home.

Unlike Pacific salmon, which die after spawning, steelhead survive their yearly migration, and fisheries biologists have tracked individuals that made the journey between freshwater and salt as many as five times. They dodge killer whales, seals and fishing nets, some swimming thousands of miles of open ocean and hundreds of river miles, using an unerring internal compass that leads them not only to their natal stream, but to the very gravel bed from which they

hatched. The steelhead is a fish unafraid of travel, and to keep pace, the angler must be as vagabond.

In the Great Lakes, steelhead found a surrogate for the ocean. Fish stocked in Midwestern rivers eventually migrated to the inland seas where they continued the life cycle begun on the west coast, ultimately establishing themselves as residents. They have become a permanent fixture in our region, and each year as winter bends toward spring, steelhead return to the river where they were released.

That's the long version. For the angler, it's more like simple physics. One body moves upstream at an unknown velocity and at a nonspecific time, while another awaits its arrival. If all goes according to plan, at some point the two collide. And that is what Jeff and I hope for: momentarily to harness some of the energy from that collision.

We drive south again, fill up the truck, eat an early lunch, talk. It's a drizzly Saturday morning and we have much of the road to ourselves. Along the way, Jeff describes a massive Upper Peninsula steelhead he caught the previous spring. He chooses the details carefully, patiently adding information until I understand precisely how significant the fish was.

In a sport whose participants demand numbers – size of fish, number landed – it is easy to become a braggart. There's a macho bravado that permeates conversations between steelheaders. Often the entire experience of fishing, a whole river day, is gathered and compressed into an account that reads like a spreadsheet. "Hooked eleven," someone might say. "Landed six, the biggest fifteen pounds." And the underlying theme is always consistency. Those that boast of doing well seem to do well regardless of reports to the contrary. Experience, though, teaches otherwise. Tramp around rivers long enough and you begin to realize that even the best anglers have far more bad days than good, especially when pursuing an intrepid traveler like steelhead.

There was a time when Jeff and I talked of numbers, but at some point we grew weary of it, and no more do we assign weight to fish, choosing instead nonspecific prefixes: perhaps, maybe, about. His big UP fish wasn't a sixteen or eighteen pounder. Rather, "It might have been the largest I've caught in a Lake Superior tributary." Good enough. These words are more telling and more truthful than exact numbers.

"Wish I could have been there," I tell him.

"There was a time when you would have been," he says.

"Life has a habit of getting in the way. Yeah?"

A little after noon, we pull into a gravel parking lot adjacent to the Root River, a few miles west of Racine. As we string up our rods and climb into our waders, Jeff counts the cars parked around us. There are twenty three.

This is a mid-size river, maybe forty-five feet wide. With the recent rain and run-off, it is turbid, the color of chocolate milk. The high, dark water hasn't deterred other fishermen, though. The Root is a put and take fishery. Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources plants about 100,000 steelhead in these waters annually, and each spring the fish ascend the river to spawn, swimming six miles from Lake Michigan to Harlick Dam, which keeps them from running further. There is no natural reproduction here, no year to year carry over of hatchlings, so the Root, its fish, and its anglers rely on the DNR's stocking efforts. The result is a predictable, well-ordered run that draws fishermen *en masse*, the state's assumption being that most of the fish will wind up on dinner tables. Being so close to Racine and Milwaukee and within easy driving distance of Chicago, the river receives more than its share of pressure.

Jeff and I typically avoid crowded rivers, but this one is heralded as a truly great stream. For years we've heard the rumors— big fish and lots of them — so we ignore the fleet of vehicles parked along the stream, part ways with better judgment, and collect our gear.

We walk a short distance down a well used path to the river's edge, where we are confronted with a sight typical on urban waters. As far as we can see in either direction, fishermen are standing in a staggered row, each no more than a rod's length from the next. "Holy shit," Jeff says. The streamside is trampled smooth, the bare dirt as hard as asphalt from foot traffic. Worm containers and beer cans litter the bank. Some of the men notice us and stare at our fly rods.

"Get a real pole," someone shouts. A few chuckle. The term "combat fishing" was coined for such places, and already these folks have made it clear that we are going to battle.

We make our way downstream, occasionally passing dead or dying steelhead that have been thoughtlessly tossed onto the bank. There's no reverence in the way the fish are treated, no respect on the part of the fishermen and no beauty left in the steelhead as they flop about in the mud and cigarette butts, suffocating. I'm struck by how odd this is, how callousness can run so rampant. Jeff feels the same. As we step over one particularly large fish gasping on the ground next to a cooler, he stops and turns to say something, "Ya know..." but trails off after realizing that it doesn't need to be said.

Further down, around two bends, the crowd dissipates some, at least enough to find a spot to cast, though we are separated by several fishermen. It's a chilly day, in the high thirties and still drizzling, and as I enter the water, a man

fishing a few yards upstream studies me for a long time before saying, "Hey, fella. They won't take flies here,"

"No, huh?"

"Nope," he says. "Gotta have spawn sacs."

In my waxed cotton wading coat, I feel like a bit of a yuppie. His rain gear is a gas station special, paper thin PVC that probably didn't cost more than six bucks and won't last more than two days of heavy use on the river. Hanging from his belt is a homemade bait holder, and he is heaving greasy wads of salmon roe into the brown water with a spinning rod older than me. I want to tell him that steelhead do take flies, readily and aggressively, but he believes that bait is the only way to fool fish. Probably has believed this for many years.

I thank him for his advice. "Yep," he says.

As Jeff wades knee deep, I can see from his body language, his posture and languid movement, that he expects very little from the Root. As a fisherman, he is usually quick to action, efficient, determined and diligent. Probably the most focused angler I know. But today he seems aimless, taking his time choosing a fly, lazy with his first cast, his attention faltering, his head pivoting upstream and down. I watch him for a minute before realizing that I'm doing the same. We won't last long on the Root.

I make my first cast and almost immediately feel a lethargic but heavy tug followed by a slow and steady downstream surge. I lift my rod and twenty feet out, my fly surfaces. It's fouled in another line, someone's lost gear. Pulling the knotted mess to me, I see that there is an expensive lure attached. I tease out my leader and fly, clip the lure off and stow it in my fly box, gather up the brittle monofilament line and shove it in my pocket, then cast again. Within seconds, the same thing happens. Another bird's nest of old line, rusty hooks and a chain of split shot sinkers. As I pick at the tangles, Jeff approaches. "Can't get a decent drift," he says. "Too many people and too much garbage in the river."

"Had enough of the Root?"

"Ya know," he says, "I think I have."

With Jeff at the wheel, we speed south, past Chicago, driving harder and faster than I am comfortable. He's caught up in the tempo of the highway and city traffic, following the most aggressive drivers and narrowly missing other cars with unnecessary lane changes. Jeff is tense, wringing the steering wheel and shouting commands at the windshield, "Come on. Move it." Anxiety creeps up my neck and grips the back of my head.

"Want me to drive?"

"I'm good."

We stop for a long supper and it's nearly dark as we cross the state line into Indiana. Neither of us are members of the cell phone generation, so we pull in and out of several gas stations before finding one with a payphone. I call Kiegle, our Indiana steelhead connection, and he answers, "Yo."

"Kiegle, it's Dan. We're in Gary."

"Awesome timing, dude. We're slayin' the chrome."

"Good," I tell him. "It's been a rough day, and we could use some fish."

"Right on. Where ya at?"

"Well," I hesitate, "still in Gary."

"Awesome." He says "hang on" to someone else, then continues our conversation. "Meet us at Callahan's. We'll be here for a while." He says, "Later," then hangs up.

I call him back, and he answers, "Yo."

"Where's Callahan's?"

"Ha. Right. I forgot. Where ya at?"

"Oh, Christ."

We first learned of Indiana's steelhead from a friend and fellow guide on Michigan's Muskegon River. "You won't believe the steelies they get down there," he said. To prove it, he showed us a website with page after page of photos featuring fishermen clutching twenty pound fish, asking, "see what I

mean?" each time he clicked the mouse. When Jeff and I agreed that we needed to make a trip to Indiana, our friend put us in contact with a couple of serious Hoosier fly fishermen named Kegle and Skeeter. "Kegle is a nickname," he said, "but the other guy really is called Skeeter," adding, "I swear to God." I got in touch with Kegle and a deal was struck: a long weekend of Upper Peninsula brook trout fishing in exchange for a few days of Indiana steelheading. Kegle and Skeeter will come north in a few months to fish with us, but now we're here to collect on their end.

There's no discernable change in landscape, nothing that marks our progress from Chicago and its outlying area to the industrial corridor of Gary. Much of Indiana's forty some miles of coastline has been consumed by the big polluters, massive steel mills, foundries, and refineries, by British Petroleum and US Steel. Just inland, punctuated by windowless corner liquor stores and flashing cash advance signs, blue collar housing clusters near the employers. Further east, closer to the Michigan border, the shore is taken up by opulent vacation homes and fair weather communities built around strip malls and marinas where high school and college kids idle away summer.

This area, the very bottom of Lake Michigan, is not the sort of place usually associated with steelhead, a fish that requires clean, cool running water. But despite all of its poison-leaking metal works and churning freighters, all of

its convertible- cruising teenagers and buzzing jet skis, Indiana's DNR has created one of the finest steelhead fisheries in the Great Lakes. Arguably in the world.

Like those in neighboring states, Indiana's steelhead arrived by train in 1889, journeying from California's McCloud River to the tiny, spring-fed Salt, Trail, and Little Calumet creeks. This early effort to establish a fishery met with poor success. The fish migrated from the streams to Lake Michigan, as anticipated by biologists, but they never returned. Over the next eighty years, the state made several more attempts, each failing, until 1971, when Washington's Skamania strain rainbows were planted. The Skamania is a summer run fish, more tolerant of warmer water temperatures and, therefore, more suited to Indiana's climate. The new fish took, and today they to show up in the creeks by February, peaking in the spring, often lingering until July. It's a long run, often lasting six months or more. Perhaps more importantly, for the fishermen at least, Skamania are aggressive feeders and cartwheeling acrobats when hooked. I can think of no better reason to travel this far.

Outside Callahan's there are two green Jeep Cherokees, both adorned with multiple stickers advertising for Orvis, Sage fly rods, Umpqua Feather Merchants, and Simms waders. "I'm guessing these are our guys," Jeff says.

Inside, we spot Kagle and Skeeter sitting at a booth with a few others. We introduce ourselves to them and their friends, three off-duty police officers and the conversation quickly turns to steelhead.

“We’re slayin’ the chrome, dude,” Kagle says.

Skeeter agrees, “Fish are stacked in the Salt.”

“It’s carnage.”

“Some real pigs.”

“Probably got forty today.”

“Slab after slab, dude.”

They are young guys, mid-twenties, and they speak almost exclusively with insider lingo, a kind of hip, nouveau steelheader’s dialect. Fish fresh in from the lake are chromers, big fish are pigs or hogs or slabs, and within twenty minutes, I grow weary of it. I turn to Jeff and he to me, raising his eyebrows as he does. He looks exhausted, but tries to stay enthusiastic. “What are ya getting them on?” he asks.

“Streamers, mostly.”

“Strippin’ them fast.”

“We’re spankin’ them on white death, dude.”

“And butt monkeys.” Skeeter pulls a fly box from his coat pocket and opens it for me. “Like this.” He points to other flies. “That’s a busted kitty, and here’s a whisker biscuit, and an egg sucking Tiffany.”

I pick out a small dry fly, conspicuously out of place among the large steelhead patterns. “And this?”

“That one’s a pecker gnat.”

“Pecker gnat?”

“Yeah,” he says. “ Like the bugs that swarm around a dog’s pecker.”

“I see.” Living in the Upper Peninsula, Jeff and I are on the outer fringe of steelhead country and often out of the loop on the latest tactics and equipment. I try to keep pace with the trends, anything that will help me catch fish come spring, but somehow I missed the point at which fly names started sounding like sex toys.

“This one’s a salty merken,” Skeeter continues. “Salty as in Salt Creek.”

“Uh huh.”

“And a merken is...”

“I get it.”

We are quiet as the Indiana boys drone on for another hour or two, shouting over one another about chromers and slabs. Everyone seems to be feeling their beer. The slang is excruciating. When he can take it no longer, Jeff

walks to the truck and returns a few minutes later with a map of Indiana, then forces Kegel to concentrate long enough to mark the spot where we'll meet in the morning. He jots down the time, six a.m., in the margin. One of the cops points us to an inexpensive motel. We say goodnight and reaffirm the time. "Six, yeah?"

"Right on, bro."

In the parking lot, Jeff sighs, and stops to lean against the tailgate of his Jeep. "Were we ever like that?"

"I think we were a lot like that," I tell him. "Only different."

The morning is warm, fifty degrees, sunny and dry. Kegel and Skeeter are late by nearly an hour, so Jeff and I sit in his truck sipping coffee and wondering if we are at the right place.

"He said the BP, right?"

"Yeah."

"Cause there's a Citgo just down the road."

"I think we're fine."

At 7:30, Kegel's Jeep pulls up alongside us so fast and so close that his side mirror knocks ours loose. He rolls down his window, stares at the hanging mirror and says, "Sorry 'bout that. Don't worry, they snap back on." He looks hung over and pale. Skeeter is sleeping in the passenger seat with his head

resting on the door frame. "Forgot to tell you," Kegel says, "the sports shop doesn't open 'til eight. You gotta get licenses, right?"

"Right."

It's 8:30 when we get to the end of a dirt road next to Trail Creek. This is strange country, a bizarre mix of farmland and subdivisions where new pre-fab housing springs up on tilled land. Neatly ordered cornfields square off with fresh planted lawns. It's disorienting. Jeff and I are accustomed to big woods and freestone streams when fishing, so this is a novelty. "Grain-fed, free-range steelhead," Jeff says.

Despite their being late, Kegel and Skeeter are quick in gearing up. They have their waders on and their rods rigged while Jeff and I are still searching through duffle bags. Their enthusiasm is infectious, and we rush to get ready. "Oh, we're gonna slay 'em, dude." This is their mantra.

If the landscape is alien to us, the creek is even more so. The water has a smoky gray hue to it, the banks steep sooty clay and the water meanders, lazily crawling beneath the crooked, wormy trunks of mulberry and cottonwood, now and then doubling back and cutting itself off, leaving small, stagnant oxbows. The flow is so slight, so non-descript, the only real indicator of its direction is the forest debris, the branches and fallen trees that point the way downstream. This

looks like carp water. Catfish and bullfrog water. "Steelhead live in this thing?" Jeff asks.

"It's sick with 'em," Kegel says. He has a plan. He'll take Jeff down to the Maytag hole while Skeeter and I hike across a cornfield and start below them, working our way upstream through other holes – Goodyear, Culvert, Oven, Lawn Mower – and the four of us will meet at Kitchen Sink. Each of these spots, he tells us, is named for a reason.

Skeeter is a little guy, short and thin, with legs that look to be half as long as mine, but he moves fast and I find myself nearly jogging to keep up with him. He's jabbering incessantly about how our timing couldn't be better. Without Kegel to dominate the conversation, he speaks with authority, and as I follow him through last year's cut and dry cornstalks, I'm learning that his knowledge of steelhead is extensive. He seems to understand the fish intimately and in a way he can't communicate when his friend is near. "Underneath us," he says, "under all this farmland, there's bedrock. Limestone, I think. And there's springs down there. Like Artesian springs that leak into the creeks, so they stay cool. And that's why the steelhead do so well here." Once in a while, he botches up the terminology, "Some of the springs are, like, contributaries."

"Contributaries?"

"Yeah, small streams that feed into the river."

I feel myself squint and turn my head slightly, like a dog trying to make sense of some strange noise. "Do you mean tributaries?"

"No, man. They contribute to the river." He pauses. "Contributaries."

I consider this before saying, "Maybe you're right."

As I trip along behind him, he continues, "The creeks average around fifty-five degrees, so the fish stay active. That's why we get so many with streamers." A cold trout is a healthy and active trout, one willing to chase its prey. Most steelhead caught on flies in the Great Lakes come to egg imitations, small clumps of brightly colored yarns tied to a hook to imitate fish roe. They look a little like jelly beans and the fish tend to take them lightly, without moving from cover. But if the water remains consistently between forty and sixty degrees, steelhead will pursue and pounce on baitfish. Or on flies that look like baitfish. The hit is jarring, and in shallow, clear water, it is one of the most visual and thrilling ways to catch them.

We first have to find them to catch them, though, and my initial impression of Trail Creek has me skeptical. From the field, our view of the water is blocked by dense tangles of briar and sumac. Nothing is green yet, but spring is near and some of the trees are budding. High flying flocks of geese drift by on their way north as Skeeter slows his pace and bends at the waist to peer through the

woods. He stops, rests the butt of his rod in a furrow and says, "Let's rig up.

We'll start here."

Pulling three fly boxes from his vest, he looks a little confused, adjusting his ball cap and staring at his selection of flies for a few seconds before settling on one. "Here." He hands me a large white streamer fly with flashy pearl and silver accents. "These fish are just in from the lake, so they're still thinking about smelt and alwife." I tie the fly to my leader.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

Goodyear is a deep hole slowly revolving between undercut banks. It's most prominent feature is a huge tire from an earthmover, lying on its side mid-river and forming a current break, a manmade obstacle that lifts the water off of the gravel bottom and sends it spinning into the pool below. I can't see into the gray water of the hole, but on the glide above the tire, there is movement. "Look up there," Skeeter says. I take a few steps upstream, inching my way until the water's glare disappears. What I find is a stream alive with fish, large steelhead so numerous that their gunmetal blue backs break up the light colored streambed like a series of tightly drawn hash marks.

"You gotta be kidding."

“Something, isn’t it?” Skeeter says. “Remember, they can see us, too, so we have to stay low and move slow.”

Some of the fish are riled, possessed by the spawning instinct and jostling for the best lie, coursing each other in circles and scattering others with their competitive rage. Most are still, facing upstream, resting, and we are close enough to see the females with their smooth, bullet-shaped heads. We can tell which are males, those with wide crimson stripes along their flanks, their hooked jaws opening to breathe in the current.

“You gonna fish,” Skeeter asks, “or just stand there all day?”

There’s nothing in my angling history that allows me to put this scene into context. I’m not sure where to begin.

Skeeter senses my hesitation and instructs me. “Quarter the cast upstream and strip it down.” He points to a group of fish. “That male on the edge is wound up. He’ll take.”

My cast lands above the active male and drifts toward him. I twitch the line and the fish breaks ranks, following my fly for several feet before taking it with a violent swirl. The hit is brutal and bends the rod deep.

“There. Just that easy,” Skeeter says.

My fish charges past us, bumping into others, causing a chain reaction that spreads panic up and down the run. I keep pressure on the fish as he passes the tire and dives into the hole below.

“Keep his head up,” Skeeter says.

“I know.”

We can't see it in the deep, off-colored water, but I feel the fish writhe, his struggle telegraphing through the rod to my hands. He makes fast, exaggerated circles below us and only succeeds in wearing himself out. The turns become tighter and less hurried and within five minutes I am able to lift, winching the fish toward Skeeter. “Nice,” he says, lifting it. “About twelve pounds.” He hands the fish to me and pulls his camera from a vest pocket. “Time for some fish porn, dude.”

As he fidgets with the camera, I admire my first Indiana steelhead. Fish of this size are rare on my UP streams. Lake Superior steelhead average three to six pounds; one in twenty may break ten pounds, and anything over that is a real trophy. But this Trail Creek, with its gray water, muddy banks and silty bottom courses with hundreds of them. And they are healthy and robust. I feel the tough muscle flexing in my grip, the firm belly resting heavily in my palm as I raise the fish for Skeeter's lens. In another second, the flash strobes. “Good 'nuff,” he says. “Let 'em go, let 'em grow.”

After releasing my fish, I check my leader, running the tippet between my lips to feel for abrasion and find it well chafed. I cut off the fly, trim the frayed section of line, then retie. This maintenance takes less than a minute, but a minute is all Skeeter needs to hook a fish. "Yeah, buddy," he shouts as another large male crushes his streamer and streaks downstream into the Goodyear Hole.

In this way, we work upstream, leap-frogging around each other and hooking fish with nearly every cast. At the culvert hole, I land a large female, about fourteen pounds, sleek and fusiform and as bright as a freshly minted coin. Below the rusty carcass of an electric oven, Skeeter catches a holdover fish, a male that has been in the river long enough to lose his silver sheen and is now black-backed with cherry red cheeks. Further still, where the creek turns against a bank of concrete rubble before flowing around an algae-covered riding lawn mower, I connect with a small female, a petite fish of five pounds that jumps so high and so recklessly that she tangles my line in the bankside foliage. "That one wants to be an astronaut when she grows up," Skeeter says.

By one in the afternoon, I've caught and released more steelhead than I could in an entire season on my homewater. Together, Skeeter and I have landed so many that he no longer reaches for his camera each time a fish comes to hand. Instead he saves the photo shoots for truly unique specimens – a long, thin female covered with a patchwork of lamprey scars, a huge male that is nearly

black in color, another missing half of its lower jaw. With such high numbers, I feel myself becoming jaded, taking the experience for granted. This many fish and the individuals begin to lose meaning. They are all running together, forming a montage of images in my mind, and I'm beginning to suspect that there can be too much of a good thing.

A few yards below Lawnmower Hole, Skeeter bends to hoist another fish, a ten pounder. "That's number twenty-three for me," he says.

"Uh-huh."

"How many you got?"

"Not sure."

Skeeter seems to notice my change in mood and as he rinses his hands in the foggy water of Trail Creek, he asks, "You havin' fun?"

"Yeah," I answer. "You bet." Although I'm not sure.

By mid-afternoon, we near Kitchen Sink Hole. Though we cannot yet see them, somewhere downstream, just beyond the dense weave of thicket, we hear Kegel's voice as he frantically hollers instructions to Jeff, "C'mon, put the wood to 'em." From his tone, we assume that they are into a big fish. "Dude, keep 'em away from that log jam."

"We should get down there," Skeeter says.

Kitchen Sink Hole is more of a long run than a hole, and it marks a place where the creek is pinched tight between high, tree-covered banks, the water narrowing from twenty-five feet upstream to half that width as it slows in the deep channel. As it tails out, the run shallows and chatters over rocky riffles and there, where the stream bed rises, lies a large ceramic sink, conspicuously white and out of place against the dark river stones. And just above that, near the center of the trough, Jeff is scrambling along the bank, coming our way, his fly rod held high as it throbs behind what must be a huge fish. Even from twenty yards away, we can see the strain and concentration on his face, the clenched jaw, the purposeful, flowing movement of his arms as he swings the rod downstream to keep tension on the fish.

Kegel clamors around on the shore, sliding on his butt along the steep bank in an effort to stay out of the water and out of Jeff's way. He tries to give directions several times: "No...Just...Keep it..." but in his excitement, he is unable to finish a sentence.

"It's gotta be a real slab," Skeeter says.

The steelhead is unwilling to leave the deep water, and Jeff's leader traces its progress upstream, moving in quick, determined sprints that cause the rod tip to shake violently. When it reaches the tail out, the fish startles in the shallows,

turns, and charges back upstream. Jeff is so fixated on the fight that he doesn't notice my approach. "What ya got there?" I ask.

"Oh, man," he says as the fish takes line.

"Good one, huh?"

"Might be the fish of my years, Danno."

Now I know it's big.

"You'll tail him for me?"

"Absolutely."

I set my rod aside and step into the water, passing beneath the triangle formed between Jeff, his high pointing rod tip, and the fish, the three sides connected by taut and strained fly line. Halfway between fish and fisherman, I turn and nod, and Jeff backs up, easing his way onto the shore and pulling the fish my way. The tail appears out of the cloudy water and feebly waves at me, but the fish keeps its head down, still trying to bull its way back to the creek bed. I inch forward and reach long, filling my coat sleeve with cold spring water. As my fingers wrap around the tail, I notice how small my hand looks. I can't close my grip. This has never happened before. "Good God," I say.

Calmly, seriously, Jeff asks, "It's big, isn't it?"

"Much larger than big," I answer, and pull the fish toward me. As it clears the water, I reach forward with my free hand, and cradle it just behind the

pectoral fins. With arms outstretched in this way, I have to strain to lift it. This fish is hefty enough to warrant a number. "Twenty-four pounds, maybe more," I say, and hoist the steelhead from the creek and turn to show Jeff as he wades out for a closer look.

With the fish out of the water and its size and upfront bulk resting in my hands, we are silent. Neither of us has ever seen a steelhead this large, so we stare at it, memorizing the minute details, the play of colors, the silvery blue iridescence, the blood-red lateral stripes that flank its length from cheek to tail. Skeeter's camera flashes again and again, and I can hear his and Kegel's excited voices behind us, but nothing they say registers. We are caught up in Jeff's biggest steelhead.

"Jesus," he says.

I want to hang on, to feel its weight for hours, forever, but Jeff is more practical about such things. "Better get him back," he says. He reaches into the fish's toothy mouth and frees the big streamer fly, then says, "Okay, let him go." I lower it into the water and swish the fish forward and back, forcing water into its gaping mouth and over the gills until I feel life returning. Muscles begin to flex in the steelhead, and soon it starts to swim in my hands. I let go and it disappears.

I look up at Jeff and smile. After a minute, he half grins, turns to me, raises an eyebrow, and says, "Huh."

"Yep," I answer, and offer my hand, which he takes in a tight grip and shakes. Behind us, the Indiana boys are still talking, still trying to get our attention. I catch only bits and pieces of what they say – "biggest in years," "slab," "pig" – and their voices have run together, have become indistinguishable from one another.

Jeff and I take a seat on the bank while Skeeter and Kiegle return to fishing, working their way upstream and away from us. Occasionally, one of them yells back to us, "Jeff the slab slayer!" but we are silent, just watching the little gray creek move past us. In the last few hours, we have seen more steelhead than in our collective decades, and I'm beginning to wonder if I've seen enough. The fish are beautiful, but the place ugly. The company is good, but tiresomely energetic. I don't want to be the one to call it quits, to give up on a day of fishing, but I begin to hint around just the same. "What do you think?"

"Lotsa fish."

"Yep."

"Lookin' forward to the PM." He means the Pere Marquette River.

"Me too."

We're quiet for a moment until Jeff says, "When you wanna head north?"

“How about now?”

We rise, make our way upstream, wading past the kitchen sink to where Skeeter and Kegel are trying to hook still more fish. We make excuses, say our good-byes, exchange thank yous and handshakes and, within twenty minutes, are out of our waders and driving north.

Having had a few fish in hand, including a true monster, Jeff slows a bit and the trip to the PM is more relaxed. Toward evening, I am driving as we near the Pere Marquette River and pull into Baldwin, Michigan. I roll past a stop sign. Within seconds, a county Sherriff's cruiser moves in close behind us, follows for a minute, then turns on his overheads. I pull to the shoulder. As the deputy approaches, I get my license out and try to hand it to him through the open window. “Don't need that,” he says. “Saw the rod tubes in the back and wanted a fishing report.”

“Oh. We just got here,” I tell him. “Haven't even seen the river yet.”

“Coming from Indiana,” Jeff adds, “and Wisconsin before that.”

The deputy tells us that there are plenty of fish around, he got two yesterday, but the word is out and fishing pressure is pretty heavy. He says that we'll have to work for each fish. “Nymphs,” he says. “Try dark colored nymphs.” We thank him and he taps the roof of the Jeep. “Tight lines, eh, boys.”

“Right on,” I answer. I watch the deputy in the rearview mirror as he climbs back into his car, then I turn toward Jeff.

He grins wide and says, “Tight lines.”

“Slayin’ the chrome, dude.”

With steelhead in the river, there are no motel rooms to be had in Baldwin. Over a late supper, we decide to spend the night in the truck, hopefully grabbing a few hours of sleep before hitting the water at sun-up. We park near a state owned boat launch, recline the seats as far as they’ll go, and nap in cold discomfort.

Around five-thirty in the morning, we wake to slamming car doors, voices and laughing. The Jeep’s windows are frosted over, and I shiver in the dark. I hear gravel crunching as someone approaches the driver’s side window. A large man leans towards me, silhouetted in headlights. “There’s someone in there,” he shouts, and another voice answers, “You’re kidding me.”

I unlock the door and step out, forcing my body straight, but still hunched a bit. I’m no longer twenty years old and I’m sore and stiff, but manage to greet the man in front of me. “Mornin’”

“Mornin’.” He says. “Man, you guys are hardcore, sleeping out here in the cold. Harrrd. Corrrre.”

“Something like that.”

He studies me for a moment, says, "Well, good luck," then turns to help his buddy launch their drift boat. The moon is high and bright, the forest around us still dark. I can see my breath in the headlights as two more cars arrive. The fishermen are quiet as they put on their waders and collect their gear. By the time Jeff rousts and joins me next to the boat launch, there are eight cars parked near us.

"What the..."

"Good morning," I say. "Welcome to the famous Pere Marquette."

Among the ranks of world's most popular fly fishing rivers, the PM places high in the upper echelon as an angler's Valhalla. In fact, if asked to build the perfect steelhead river, an angler in the know would probably come up with something that looked very much like the PM. It's a meandering stream with sharp bends hiding deep, shadowed holes that rise and fan out to long gravel slicks stretching wide and gliding only a few feet in depth. Its water flows clear and cold, bolstered by spring seeps, and even this early in the spring with the snow pack melting and the tributaries running high and muddy, the PM remains limpid. For the fly fisherman, this means sight fishing. While some are content to plumb the deepest holes with egg and nymph imitations, the real draw here is the shallow runs where fish are first spotted, then cast to. In the clear water and

under the right conditions, active fish will give chase and pounce on a fast moving fly, all within view of the angler.

The main drawback of the PM is its popularity. In an effort to protect the resource, Michigan's Department of Natural Resources has designated a seven mile stretch as a flies-only, catch-and-release venue, where no bait is allowed and all fish must be returned. As Jeff is fond of saying, "this keeps out the riff-raff." But in trying to keep the overall angling pressure low, the flies-only designation has only succeeded in drawing unprecedented numbers of fly rodders.

As first light begins to sift through the trees, I take note of the license plates: Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Ontario. Like us, they have traveled hundreds of miles to meet the run. They spent winter tying flies and tirelessly searching internet fishing reports, all in anticipation of a long spring weekend on the hallowed Pere Marquette.

Another truck towing a drift boat pulls up to the boat launch. Jeff watches the men get out and load the boat before saying, "let's get the hell out of here." He turns and walks, head down, to the Jeep.

Twenty years ago, Jeff and I fished this river regularly. Weekly, in fact, during the run. We stopped coming about fifteen years ago when it was "discovered," when every middle aged white male with a fly rod descended on these waters.

We drive north out of Baldwin, and within an hour park in our friend's driveway. Though we told Bill we might come fish with him, we didn't specify a time and he's not home when we arrive, so Jeff and I unload our gear and spread it out on the concrete, trying to make sense of it. Everything is a mess. My stuff has found its way into Jeff's bags and vice versa. I turn our waders inside out, and hang them from the Jeep's luggage rack to dry in the sun. I take another look at our scattered equipment, then decide to give up. We'll figure out who owns what when we get home.

A while later, Bill's big red pick-up pulls into the driveway alongside us, and the noise is deafening, the truck's V8 rumbling louder than it should.

"You're here," he says as he gets out.

"We are," Jeff answers. "How do you feel about some fishing?"

Bill points to his truck. "Supposed to take this to the muffler shop, but it can wait."

Bill is in his mid-fifties. He's a small man, but carries himself in a way that makes him appear larger, with perfect posture, straight back and square shoulders. A hippie long ago, he still wears his reddish-blond hair long, but these days he's no hippie. He got caught up in the 1980s, as so many did, and found that material comfort suited him better than peace and love. About ten years ago,

he strapped on a 401K and charged through mid-life, following it all the way to early retirement and a home near the Manistee River. He still dabbles in finance, though. "They call me back now and then for consultations," he once told me. "And it's repulsive how much they pay me." A good thing, because Bill is a gear freak. He likes high dollar fishing equipment, and lots of it.

The Manistee is strong, broad and deep in many places. Around the northwest Lower Peninsula, it's simply known as the Big River.

But *big* is an ambiguous word. Like *old*, *new*, *little* or *love*, it is short, potent, and gets to the general idea, but it's not very descriptive. I can't sink my teeth into *big*. Especially when used in river terms. What the locals mean when they refer to the Big River is that it traverses 230 miles of Michigan Forest, stretching to over 300 feet in width below Tippy Dam, the section we are on. Stout, stalwart, resolute. As I look out at the Manistee from the bow of Bill's boat, I can think of many words that suit it better than *big*.

And it's a river best fished from a boat, so Bill uses a jet drive on his eighteen foot pram, running it at full throttle, or near full, and we have to take our ball caps off to keep them from blowing away. Occasionally, we plow through clouds of midges or craneflies hanging over the water's surface and our faces get peppered by the insects. Jeff and I have known Bill since he first started fly fishing years ago on the Pere Marquette. He was a neophyte then, bewildered

by all the intricacies of the sport. We adopted him, showed him most of the basics, and soon after he sold his golf clubs and his sports car, and now he fishes to the exclusion of all else.

Today, I am impressed by his knowledge. As he powers the boat down the Manistee, he shouts over the engine, pointing to specific spots, telling us when and how to catch fish in each location. On a river this expansive, locating fish is difficult and frequently impossible. With so much water - in length, width, and depth - it's best to break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces, to fish it like it's many smaller rivers combined. I know how I would approach it, but I'm not at the helm. Jeff and I are guests on Bill's water.

We idle down and Bill cuts the engine. The boat swings perpendicular to the current as he retrieves an anchor, checks the rope, and lowers it over the bow, holding it for a minute while watching the north shore pass by. "We'll give her a try right... here." He drops the anchor and we drift to a stop as it grabs the river bed.

In a lock box under the bench seat, Bill finds a large fly box. He studies its contents as he instructs us on spey fly design. "Purple," he says. "Purple and black when the river's this dark." He hands us several examples, commenting on each. The flies are large and bold, with long flowing hackles and bright contrasting colors. They have overtly aggressive names – prowler, intruder,

predator, flesh wound, assassin – monikers that describe not the fly, but how it conducts itself. They are built to agitate, to infuriate a steelhead into striking. They impose themselves on the river and its fish.

We are anchored about twenty yards from shore where a petite freestone stream enters the main river, pushing a plume of muddy meltwater into the slightly clearing flow of the Manistee. Bill knows we will find fish at the seam where the two currents collide. “Time to let the big dog out,” he says. And reaches into the boat’s rod locker, pulling out several sections of fly rod that, when joined, form a seventeen foot spey rod.

“Good God,” Jeff says. He and I are fishing fourteen footers, which are considered massive in most circles.

“Hoo-ya,” Bill says. “This one was designed for Atlantic salmon on those big Scandinavian rivers. I fell in love with it on Norway’s Alta.” I’ve seen this rod in the catalogs and know that it costs over a thousand dollars, and that the Sarcione reel attached to it costs again that much. He admires the rod for a second or two, then adds, “I like it here ‘cause you can cover a lot of water with it.”

And his first cast does, lifting seventy or so feet of line from the water and sending it toward the creek mouth in a rapidly uncoiling loop that seems as though it will continue forever. It’s a graceful, elegant affair, this spey casting

business. The long, two-handed rod is swept across the angler's chest, then out and away in a tight D formation, moving with it a terrific amount of line while a white rooster tail follows on the river's surface. It's also as practical as it is pretty, allowing the angler to place the fly precisely where he wishes, even at great distances, with no back cast and very little effort.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Bill tucks the rod under his right arm and works the fly down and across the current. "The Scots really got it right." Over the years, he's become something of an angling historian and has accumulated a fishing library that takes up over sixty linear feet of shelf space. He regurgitates information gleaned from these volumes compulsively, and tells us about the Scottish tradition begun on the River Spey, all the while following the line with the rod tip. There's only room for one person to fish, so we take turns with the long rod, bombing cast after cast at the tributary, each of us drifting three or four times before handing off to the next. Halfway through the second rotation, we watch as the line hesitates in Jeff's hands, holds for a moment, then sprints upstream.

"Fish on," Bill yells.

With the leverage provided by the two handed rod, Jeff makes short work of the steelhead, stopping its charge abruptly and bringing it to the surface, where it jumps three times, four, then lies languid before sliding into Bill's net.

“Well done, my friend,” Bill says. It’s a dime bright female of about six pounds, lovely and wild, and fresh in from the big lake. The type of fish Jeff and I are used to. Bill snaps a few photos of fish and fisherman, then Jeff kneels and lowers it back to the river. “More. We need more,” Bill says.

As the afternoon wears on, I tire of waiting for my turn to cast the spey rod and switch to my standard, ten foot steelhead rod, casting from the stern as Jeff and Bill work from the bow. This means the occasional crossed line, but for the most part I stay out of their way. Later still, a cold wind picks up and starts to gust so stiffly that it tosses my heavy line upstream, occasionally bunching my cast into a gnarly mess that wraps around my arms and legs and once sinks the hook deep into my coat sleeve. For a long time I fight it, tugging hard on the line in both fore and aft cast, driving it into the wind. This works for a while, but it is tiring and my arms begin to ache. My friends are having the same trouble and, though there is still plenty of daylight left, we decide to quit for the day.

Bill’s guest room has been converted to a fishing den and library, so Jeff and I sleep on short, lumpy couches in Bill’s basement. We wake early to the sound of his chocolate lab peeing in Jeff’s duffle bag. I laugh as he curses at her, “God damn you, you incorrigible slut.” We follow the dog upstairs. It’s six a.m. and

Bill is cooking breakfast, rattling pans and burning toast. Jeff greets Bill, "Your fucking dog is something else."

We sit at the kitchen table and try to form a plan. "Kinda looking forward to getting back to our little UP streams," Jeff says. "But we'd catch more fish sticking around here."

For my part, I'm ready to get home. There was a time, and it wasn't long ago, that I was willing, even eager, to live this way for weeks at a time, rushing from river to river, eating catch as catch can, or not at all. Back then, I didn't mind sharing the water with other fishermen, or sleeping in the car.

But now, after only three days on muddy little creeks, burly bustling tailwaters, and overcrowded urban rivers, I'm starting to think I've had enough. "Bet we could scare up a few out of the Whitefish."

"And," Jeff says, "the Manistique, the Bark, Sucker, Two Heart." He sits up straight, stares at a blank spot on the wood floor, and continues, "We could run over to the Slate and Silver. Haven't been there in over a year."

"And the Sturgeon. " All of these waters are within striking distance of home.

"Wanna bag it?"

I miss my girlfriend, her cooking, our bed. "I think I do want to get home," I tell him. "To fish around there, I mean."

Bill doesn't take the news well. "I thought you guys would stay at least a few days." He says it's supposed to rain, that the big river will probably fish better later in the week. "There's some spots I'd really like to show you." But we're resolved to leave. We make plans for him to come up and fish trout with us in June.

It's a little after noon as we leave US-2 and drive north on a poorly maintained dirt road. A few miles later, we turn onto a smaller road that narrows to a two-track so obscure that topographic maps make no mention of it. From here we walk, using a deer trail that winds down a series of river-cut terraces, through a mature stand of maple whose canopy is just beginning to glow red with budding leaves, and further down, to the river bottom where a cedar forest chokes out the sunlight and leans far over the Whitefish.

This river is an old friend, a place where Jeff and I could meet for a weekend, regardless of how miles separated us, and be sure to find both solitude and fish. A rare combination when steelhead are in the river. This section of the Whitefish is narrow and fast, perhaps thirty feet at it's widest, the water broken, turbulent and riled with spring thaw. Much of the streambed is flat limestone, polished smooth by the current and there are few holding lies, few places for a migrating steelhead to stop and rest, so the fish are forced to negotiate these

rapids long sections at a time, bulling their way through a flow so heavy that it can sweep a two hundred pound man off his feet. When they find shelter in slow water seams and eddies behind boulders, the fish collect in surprising numbers, resting until the pull of the spawning run draws them back into the maelstrom. The Whitefish's steelhead school in pockets no larger than a bathtub and, when hooked, they often bolt downstream, harnessing the speed of the river to drain a fly reel of its line, forcing the angler to stumble along behind in pursuit.

For a long time we sit at the river's edge, watching. Under us, the ground is soft and cool with cedar needles and above the sun is high and warm. I take off my coat and hang it on a nearby bow. It will still be here in a few hours.

Jeff is looking upstream and I know he's thinking about that long deep trough that cuts under the bank and holds fish when they can't be found elsewhere. That spot has been good to him over the years. I have a similar place in mind, downstream, where the river turns gently west, then sharply east to collide with a loose series of rapids. Because of its uneven and shifting rock and thick flow, wading that area can be treacherous, but I know it well.

"I'll head down," I tell Jeff.

"Mind your footing," he says.

"Yep."

"Remember that hole down there. It's a real hat floater."

I walk the bank, crouching under the low cedar branches until they give way to a tag elder thicket so dense that I'm forced into the water. With the strength of the river pushing at the back of my knees and the jumble of round stones threatening to trip me, I edge my way downstream, checking and rechecking my foot placement with each step. The hole I want to fish is a short tail out, a spot where the river tumbles over a rock shelf and settles into a rift in the streambed, creating a run deep enough and calm enough to hold a resting steelhead.

Jeff is three river bends upstream and out of sight. I'm alone, and when alone on the Whitefish everything seems to settle around me. My focus becomes sharper. The rushing water slows. The Whitefish is a "green river," one that fishes best with flies that have a green tint. I tie a lime colored Pompier to my leader. I cast, allowing the line to slip through my fingers and straighten in the air, then land gently on the river where the current bends it into a lunate arch, guiding it downstream to uncoil in the eddy below me. I let it hang there for a moment, then, in a single motion, raise the rod tip, tug the line with my free hand, change its direction mid-flight, and let it fall again to the water. With each cast I add a few feet of line and, after five or six drifts across and down, I take a step or two downstream. Cast, across and down, across and down, and step. It requires a tolerance for repetition, but in this way, I show my fly to as many fish

as I can in hopes that one will be interested enough to give chase. It can be monotonous, even tedious at times. To keep at it for years, or decades, one has to find the beauty in it, to hear each fluid movement as it echoes the one before, to let time and sunlight and moving water, everything, converge and balance on the end of the rod, until that's all that's seen.

I don't notice the afternoon slip away until I reach the bottom of the run when my drifting fly stops and holds fast where a riffle throws itself over a steep limestone ledge. I'm startled by the interruption. At times, hooking a fish is the last thing I expect, but I sweep the rod horizontal and downstream, feel a jolt of resistance, a violent headshake.

The fish, too, is startled, and in a panic it swims toward me, passing an arm's length from my legs before turning and dashing down the Whitefish. It's not a large steelhead, five pounds perhaps, a female, but with the river in spate and near flood, she uses the current to take forty yards of line and I follow her around a bend, tripping and sliding on the slick cobbles of the streambed. She doesn't know that this is a game for me, that it will end with me releasing her back to the river. To her, it's serious business with serious consequences. I catch up to her a hundred yards downstream, reeling frantically to close the distance. She is tired, as am I, but with the rod held high, I turn her toward me and onto a gravel bar. I stand over the fish. Lying on her side in the sand and rock, she

proves smaller than she looked in the water. Four pounds at best. But she is thick and healthy, bright and wild. Not a hatchery fish, but one born of the Whitefish. Though her lineage traces back to the Pacific Northwest and its steep mountain rivers, she seems to belong to this UP stream.

I unhook her, hold her in the eddy, her head facing upstream, her mouth breathing in the river. She is as cold as the water, her sides smooth, not slimy, her muscles firm, belly taut with eggs. She come to, wiggles a little in my hands, rests, then shakes herself head to tail and I release my grip.

The sunlight dissolves in the forest as I weave through the alder thicket to the top of a ridge where the walking is easier. When I find him, Jeff is sitting riverside, his legs stretched out and angling downhill, toward the rushing water. A kingfisher scolds him, swooping from tree to tree, chattering its concern over having to share the river. He is watching the bird as I take a seat beside him and without looking up, he asks "How'd ya do?"

"A small hen."

"Atta boy. Nice work."

"No, just evidence of a misspent youth."

"She dance for you?"

"No, she was a runner. How 'bout you?"

“Hooked one, lost it.”

“Just as well.”

“Yep.”

Across the river, the sun is setting, pushing long shadows toward us.

Except for the moving water, the valley is silent. “It’s the little things,” Jeff says.

“What I miss about this life is watching the seasons change in small ways. The snow melting. The river rising. The trees budding.” He’s squinting at the water as he says this. “Now I walk outside and think ‘spring’s here, better get the lawn mower running.’” We are quiet for a long time before he asks, “It never was about the fish, was it?” He says this as though it surprises him.

“Not sure that it had anything to do with fishing. Just a way of living.”

There’s more silence until Jeff says, “I want to see my family.”

“Let’s go home, then.”

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