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The Watershed

River memories come and go—they ignite and trail away. They're a silver and gold cutthroat body charged and reflecting in boulders and rapids. Lately the river memories have been persistent—they flare out from the deep water of my mind.

One such flash is of a long walk through a field of tall, yellow grass. My mom and dad are there and my brothers and sisters. We're going to see the Snake River. We plod through the field, aware of the cattle grazing all around. But they're not interested in us.

We hear low susurros from just beyond the approaching cottonwoods. The Snake crawls into view. It is slowly flowing—away. We see the banks eroded to an almost vertical wall just below us, and on the other side a river-rock bar, dotted with rounded rocks, emerges from the passing water. Suddenly my dad is alarmed, alert. The scene is now filled with fear. The kids are all rounded up and hurried off, away from the river, back toward the house. I don't understand. I look around and see no reason to be panicked.

But my parting memory of that early encounter with the Snake River is from my last glance as we scuttled off—a cow moose and her calf, staring at us from among the cottonwoods. Glaring I should say, challenging us for the rights to river land.

At the time I didn't understand what danger that animal posed. Now I do: A mother moose with a calf is one of the furies of nature—destructive and unforgiving.

And now I'm on another river a few years later—the Teton River. It is November and it's snowing. My dad is baiting hooks with frigid worms and numb hands. I am standing on the bank watching snowflakes land on the water and disappear. The fishing line runs out into the faster currents. The line begins to shudder, the pole shakes and the next thing I see is a flash of light from the darkest water, just in front of the sweeping current. The trout's arched side flares out from the deep white landscape—blue and green and pink.

I'm remembering a small town, and no signs to show where it is, but the town is between two rivers. Blaire N. is running his sheep to new pasture, and the Salem Highway is clogged by a mass of curly, white wool. Wayne R. is riding his Appaloosa along the pavement, metal on rock, their feet tapping out the metallic rhythm. A wind comes up and fills the air with cottony seeds from hundreds of cottonwoods—a snowstorm in mid-July. I'm remembering the two rivers on fire at sunset, flaming their way to sea.

I live between the two rivers. The Henry's Fork of the Snake to the north is slow and droning, oozing its way down the continental divide toward the Pacific. The Snake is ancient and gray. When Lake Bonneville broke through its granite cradle up near Logan, the water flooded into the Snake River Plain—draining the leviathan lake. And it's still hobbling along, aged and wise, growing more mysterious every year—an old bent hermit, chipping away at the stony riverbed.

The Teton River away south comes crashing down out of its valley in the shadow of the Teton Range. It starts high up as a branch-work of rivulets, rushing over Douglas fir roots, merging and gliding, powered by the sloping land. It leaves the hills a newborn, roaring and kinetic, bent on movement and speed.

I live on the middle ground between the Teton and Snake. I've fly-fished on both of them, and so I say I've staked my claims to both. But sometimes in July, on a humming, sweaty evening, standing transfixed next to the old man Snake's riverbed, I wonder if I could ever understand this acreage I claim as my own.

A few cottonwoods clinging to the rocky Snake soil and a stand of solitary aspens on the Teton bear my mark—I carved out my claim with a silver Old Timer pocketknife there in the bark. It's the age-old need to own the

rivers—to have their value or authority or age somehow associated with me. That’s what made me etch those runes.

In the end, though, I guess it would be more realistic to say that the rivers’ initials are carved in me—I am a tributary, crawling, drawn by an invisible, unknown gravity, back to the Rivers, and flow into their roiling bodies.

When I was thirteen I drew a map of the Snake from the Salem Highway bridge upstream for about a half mile. I made the deep water dark blue and the shallows a light, sky blue. The best places to catch minnows I circled with dashes; the vegetation and cottonwoods were amoeba-shaped outlines of what I thought a tree would look like to, say, a passing heron.

The finishing touch was a register of the trout caught in the dark blue holes. For each trout I would write what species it was, when it was caught, how long it was, and what bait was used. I guess I probably broke every cartography code in the books by paying such attention to the deepest and darkest places on the map. But so it was: Trout were Everests and the bluest spots the thriving populaces.

My methods were tinged with empiricism. If I could quantify and analyze the trout as they related to locations on the Snake, I would be able to predict with accuracy the most probable places where trout would congregate—and consequently eat worms. Modern science with its data clusters and extrapolations promised results. In my map-making hands it would produce the ultimate trout fisherman.

In theory of course. The strenuous method produced little results--the trout and river did not comply with my empirical results. I simply was not catching fish where I should have been. My only conclusion: Trout operate in a sort of quantum flux, well beyond my comprehension. Pinpointing a trout is like pinpointing an electron—every time I thought I had a probable trout pinned down, it was gone in a flurry of scales and atomic orbitals.

The Snake is brooding, churning in mystery, partly because of its depth. The Teton is mostly shallows and gravel; the Snake is dark-blue colored pencil and mossy brown bottom. Standing alone there at dusk, fly rod in hand, is unnerving—it feels as if pearly, starry eyes are blinking from out of the depths.

The Snake is alien. Even though a deep-sea probe would just bring green algae and diatoms back from the bottom, I’d still feel unsettled, constantly scanning the underwater horizon for skinny, emerging bodies with bright,

churning eyes.

One spring while the Snake water was high from runoff and a lack of irrigation diversion, a boatful of fishermen floated down past Peterson's, along atop the murky, gray-brown water. An old cottonwood spanned the river, fallen and a foot under the surface. The boat grounded and groaned on the log and the boat turned perpendicular to the current and slowly slipped under the log. Luckily the boaters survived, but their tackle and wristwatches lie at the bottom of the river.

We saw the submerged log a few days after the accident—when we floated the Snake on past Peterson's. We skirted the log miraculously, paddling the boat out of the sweeping current and over to the bank. We heaved ourselves out of the boat onto land and carried the aluminum vessel through wild rose thorns and twisted willows and put in below the log.

We floated on but my eyes peered back at the log; I was disturbed, and in my mind suddenly submerged, trapped within a boater's watch face on the river bottom, peering up through silt and algae. Peering out from that face—the log above wavy and undulating across the watery-sky—all around were glassy eyes filled with spinning electrons, unpredictable, and measuring time in their own way.

While drawing the map of the Snake I often thought of voodoo rites. What if this map, if I paid close enough attention to detail, turned out to be a scale model of the Snake—with tiny swimming cutthroats and microminiature wading sandhill cranes?

The map became a way of taming the river, of charting the depths, of reconciling myself to the river by making a pictograph of it. The mystery of the unnerving eyes didn't seem so scary after charting the watery depths with my graphite-tipped sonar.

The ancients made scaled-down version of the universe—Stonehenge, the Egyptian observatories, Central American town plans. They measured angles and star patterns, seasons and cycles. It was where one's bearing came from—one's reconciliation in a vast and mostly unpredictable universe.

I don't blame them. What is more inspiring than moon and stars, cottonwoods and flaming waters, and so terrifying as infinity and uncharted depths? Their replicas were where light and dark came together—the middle ground, reality and mystery.

I guess one of the main flaws with my map was my imposing words on it. Nature doesn't like to be written on. Maybe. Some ancient cultures believed that alphabets and words could be derived from the stars—by con-

structing imaginary grids from Vega to Arcturus and an angle south to Altair—an entire book written in light years.

My map was written in the language of trees and sandbars, rocks and fence posts. I was attempting to understand what I could not comprehend by translating it into my own tongue. The problem was that I missed the entire meaning in the translation.

When my map was finished and I went back to the river it was still the same brooding mystery. I had not tamed the river by drawing it on paper. It was still making its way to sea, and it winked at me with its myriad electron eyes, blinking out of the murky depths. What did I expect—to see my hazy words hovering above the free-flowing stream? *Rainbow 14" - minnow* suspended in thin air? Is the Snake so easy to tame and know?

A river reduces everyone to the shivering core.

This life is all about appearances. It's an act. We deal in illusions. But the Snake deals in stranger currencies. You bring your Land Rover and business suit, I'll bring my degrees and laptop, but when we leave we'll be quivering skin and bones. The Snake is anything but an illusion. It dug the deepest gorge in the country looking for the bottom of Hell's Canyon, the essence, and it's still burrowing, reducing with its currencies.

My dad grew up fishing the clear, cold waters of the Teton. There's an old black-and-white photograph of him standing with a cutthroat trout in one hand and fishing rod in the other. He inherited the fishing gene from his father—a man who wrestled burly steelhead on the Salmon River and drove his '59 Willyz Jeep to the top of treacherous Patterson Ridge to get huckleberries. Late in life, my dad's dad told him that he probably fished too much in his life—but if he had it to do over he'd have fished more. The Teton River my dad fished was boiling with trout, abundant and teeming.

Nowadays when my dad takes us back to the river we watch the trout rise and waters tumble from behind barbed wire. Our view of the Teton Range is blurred by tiny Babels—outlandish homes erected as watchtowers for the parcels of neatly proportioned river land. The Teton I know is lined with twisted and barbed metal and grazed right up to the bank—it's fenced in and eaten out.

The only access we have to the river is by water. Dad ties the 14 foot aluminum boat to the car and we put in at Harrops or Cache Bridge and float down to the next dock. The water is clear and the river flecked with pulsating waves of light, refracted and twining just over the gunwale. Brook

trout hurry in and out of the shadows of rocks, and rainbows glide for cover when the clear-cut outline of the boat invades their watery vision. Dad guides the boat with a skinny lodgepole pine body we found in a slash-pile while cutting wood for the winter. He looks like a Venetian pushing off the river bottom—a stirring of silt with each movement.

My dad doesn't fish anymore—he says he'd rather guide the boat and watch his kids fish. I'm not sure if I buy this. One time I cast over to the west bank—right under a branching willow and over a submerged boulder. The fly lighted on the water and we knew it was perfect. Climbers can feel static energy in the air when storms are around, and their carabiners will rattle and glow. As the tiny fly floated along, I felt an energy building as it bobbed and drifted. My dad and I watched the Renegade ride the bank water—and then the energy converged: Lightning shot from the water all scaly and wet and disappeared. A rainbow streaked along above the rocky bottom. My dad coached me as the trout raced under and around the boat, peeled line off the reel, and torpedoed upstream and down. The coaching continued until the rainbow was hoisted and released. That's why I don't buy it.

Maybe my dad doesn't fish anymore because if he started again we'd just keep on floating on past Harrops Bridge and past Cache Bridge, gliding down the newborn stream, and on into the high-walled Narrows where the river enters its valley and bounces off massive rocks, corraled and pressed; on past the old Teton Dam that couldn't hold back the rushing water. We'd follow the migrating rainbows and cutthroats and float on down past the place where we live, past the watershed, and down to where the energized Teton joins the crawling Snake.

And we'd keep floating, drifting along as the rainbows with compass needles in their eyes rocket through Hell's Canyon and into the Columbia, and on through Oregon and out to sea. Then we'd wait there and just glide, and watch the rainbows turn into steelhead in the briny Pacific. That's why my dad doesn't fish—because if he did we'd end up out on the ocean with a 12 foot lodgepole pine in one hand and a steelhead in the other, and no way back home.

I lived between two rivers, and stood on the watershed, watching trout rise. I go less often to the river these days, even though the Snake is only a mile south. It is still flowing, falling slowly to sea. ■

