

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

MY STORY AS TOLD BY WATER



CONFESSIONS, DRUIDIC RANTS,
REFLECTIONS, BIRD-WATCHINGS,
FISH-STALKINGS, VISIONS, SONGS
AND PRAYERS REFRACTING LIGHT,
FROM LIVING RIVERS, IN THE
AGE OF THE INDUSTRIAL DARK

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1. Valmiki's Palm

In the Beginning

"In the beginning," says the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*—a scripture composed, according to the rishis of ancient India, by no one; a scripture self-created, found floating like mist, or the bands of a rainbow, in the primordial forest air—*"there was nothing here at all. . . ."*

Death alone covered this completely, as did hunger, for what is hunger but death? Then death made up his mind: "Let me equip myself with a body" (atman). So he undertook a liturgical recitation (ar), and as he was engaged in recitation, water (ka) suddenly sprang from him. Amazed, death thought: "While I was reciting, water sprang up for me!" This is what gave the name to and discloses the hidden nature of recitation (ar-ka). Truly, water springs up for he or she who knows the name and nature of recitation. Recitation is water."

Adoration of a Hose

I was born in a hospital located on the flanks of a volcanic cone. This cone, named Mount Taber, looks as innocent as an overturned teacup as it rises over a densely populated section of Southeast Portland, Oregon. Decades before my birth, scientists had of course declared the cone to be unimpeachably extinct. The hospital, however, afforded a nice view of another cone, thirty-five miles away in the same volcanic system, also declared extinct in those days: Mount St. Helens. Forgive my suspicion of certain unimpeachable declarations of science.

My birth-cone's slopes were drained by tiny seasonal streams, which, like most of the creeks in that industrialized quadrant of Portland, were buried in underground pipes long before I arrived on the scene. There were also three small reservoirs on Mount Taber's slopes, containing the water that bathed me at birth, water I would drink for eighteen years, water that gave me life. But this water didn't come from Mount Taber, or from the surrounding hills, or even from the aquifer beneath: it came, via concrete and iron flumes, from the Bull Run River, which drains the slopes of the Cascade Mountains forty miles away.

I was born, then, without a watershed. On a planet held together by gravity and fed by rain, a planet whose every creature depends on water and whose every slope works full-time, for eternity, to create creeks and rivers, I was born with neither. The creeks of my birth-cone were invisible, the river from somewhere else entirely. Of course millions of Americans are now born this way. And many of them grow up without creeks, live lives lacking intimacy with rivers, and become well-adjusted, productive citizens even so.

Not me. The dehydrated suburbs of my boyhood felt as alien to me as Mars. The arid industrial life into which I was being prodded looked to me like the life of a Martian. What *is* a Martian? Does Mars support intelligent life? I had no idea. My early impression of the burgeoning burbs and urbs around me was of internally-combusting hordes of dehydrated beings manufacturing and moving unnecessary objects from one place to another in order to finance the rapid manufacture and transport of more unnecessary objects. Running water, on the other hand, felt as necessary to me as food, sleep, parents, and air. And on the cone of my birth, all such water had been eliminated.

I didn't rebel against the situation. Little kids don't rebel. That comes later, along with the hormones. What I did was hand-build my

own rivers—breaking all neighborhood records, in the process, for amount of time spent running a garden hose. In the beginning, in Southeast Portland, there was nothing much there at all. Dehydrated Martians seemed to cover the place completely. So I would fasten the family hose to an azalea bush at the uphill end of one of my mother's sloping flower beds, turn the faucet on as hard as Mom would allow, and watch hijacked Bull Run River water spring forth in an *arc* and start cutting a miniscule, audible river (*ka*) down through the bed. I'd then camp by this river all day.

As my river ran and ran, the thing my mother understandably hated and I understandably loved began to happen: *creation*. The flower-bed topsoil slowly washed away, and a streambed of tiny colored pebbles gradually appeared: a bed that soon looked just like that of a genuine river, complete with tiny point bars and cutbanks, meanders and eddies, fishy-looking riffles, slow pools. It was a nativity scene, really: the entire physics and fluvial genius of Gravity-Meets-Water-Meets-Earth incarnating in perfect miniature. I built matchbook-sized hazelnut rafts and cigarette-butt-sized elderberry canoes, launched them on my river, let them ride down to the gargantuan driveway puddle that served as my Pacific. I stole a three-inch-tall blue plastic cavalry soldier from my brother's Fort Apache set, cut the stock off his upraised rifle so that only the long, flexible barrel remained, tied a little thread to the end of the barrel to serve as fly line, and sent the soldier fishing. I'd then lie flat on my belly, cheek to the ground, and stare at this U.S. Cavalry dropout, thigh-deep in his tiny river, rifle-rod high in the air, line working in the current; stare till I became him; stare till, in the sunlit riffle, we actually hooked and landed tiny sun-glint fish. "Shut off that hose!" my mother would eventually shout out the kitchen window. "You've turned the whole driveway into a mudhole!"

Poor woman, I'd think. It's not a mudhole. It's a tide flat.

I'd gladly turn the hose off, though: that's how I got the tide to go out. I'd then march my river soldier out onto the flat, to dig for clams.

Celilo

One Sunday morning when I was five, my siblings, first cousins, and I were loaded into the two family wagons by our parents and driven up the Columbia River past The Dalles, Oregon, where, for hours, we watched the deceptively smooth, one-to-two-mile-wide flow of the

lower Columbia squeeze into a single four-hundred-yard-wide basalt chute, and explode, in a long series of rapids and falls, toward the Pacific. The occasion of our coming was a familiar one in the Cold War Northwest: the falls before our eyes—one of the world's great natural wonders, and one of humanity's—home of the longest-inhabited village on the planet, and annually the largest "city," or tribal gathering place, west of the Mississippi for six hundred generations of Indian fishermen and traders—was doomed, in a few weeks, to be inundated by The Dalles Dam.

The first thing I remember, from the moment we sat, is that my big, usually noisy clan was engulfed by the sound and struck silent: Celilo was louder than thunder, more constant than storm surf. The second thing I recall is the way sound and smell, usually two things, were crushed by the falls into one: Celilo smelled, simultaneously, of ozone, intense life, and constant death. The third thing I remember is that the falls were far more complex than one mind or pair of eyes could take in. Rather than tumble, Niagara-style, over a photogenic cliff, Celilo smashed the river open for a mile and a half, charging the air with its energy and fragrance, telling your nose, ears, and skin a thousand-stranded story about the myriad lives those waters had touched, countless places and beings they'd seen and been, countless places and beings they would circle back, as vapor, cloud, and rainfall, to enliven and inhabit again. The Northwest's great river, Celilo Falls revealed, is a convection, not a collection; purest verb, not noun; an intensity that annihilates dispersion, diversion, coercion. A million cubic feet of exploding water per second may be a hydroelectric bonanza, but it is not a river. The Columbia at Celilo was no arithmetical sum. Rain + springs + snowbanks + rills + creeks do not equal River any more than cops + entrepreneurs + fashion designers + shoppers + junkies equal City. You can't part out a great river, because it is both greater and other than its parts: its constancy and immensity of flow are a *union*, the antithesis of parts. The Columbia's ocean-bound heart was utterly exposed at Celilo, and what I saw, smelled, and felt there was inhumanly joyous. The great river at Celilo was a boulevardier, not a pioneer: the grandstand-shaped cliffs from which we gulls, terns, and humans watched, the earthshaking drumroll, endless rainbows and prisms born of water's constant crushing, gave the place the aura, strange to say, of an H₂O Manhattan or Paris on some fabulous holiday, a madcap downtown celebration of the multitudinous whole.

Awed to silence, both by Celilo's power and by its unimaginable doom, my family and I watched Indian men wait, with long-handled dip-nets, on preposterously frail platforms above the bone-crushing white, as they'd done since before the births of Pharaohs. But we expected to see salmon caught, or at least leaping. The fall chinook were running. One reason the Army Corps of Engineers was building these Columbia/Snake system dams, they solemnly told us civilians, was to protect salmon from all those rapacious, dip-netting Indians.

We did not see a fish caught. We did not see one leap. And after a few hours we were exhausted by the brightness and thunder, the wait for nothing, the raging whole. We were then returned to the coffin-quiet of our cars and breezed the hundred miles home, to enjoy the fiercely mandated fruits of cheap hydropower: frozen dinners served on throwaway aluminum trays; pop from throwaway cans; snap-on lamps; a snapped-on TV, and—the detail that froze the day in memory as the strangest of my early life—Elvis the Pelvis on *Ed Sullivan* for the first time, singing "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog" while he writhed like a salmon in its death throes.

Woe v. Wade

The spiritual and economic overseer of my large suburban family was my maternal grandmother, Ethel Rowe. Gramma Rowe was four feet eleven, but insisted with such vehemence that she was five-one that most of the family felt her missing two inches were surely an oversight on the Lord's part, and should be imagined as real. For my part, I wished Gramma Rowe was three feet eleven, or even two-eleven, since at four-eleven she was overwhelming. In those days we called people like her "firecrackers," but firecrackers explode once and that's it. Gramma Rowe could just keep exploding. She was more like a four-foot-eleven-inch Uzi. When a young nephew who had trouble with *r* sounds one day referred to our matriarch as "Gwamma Woe," it was too perfect. I called her nothing else ever after.

Gwamma Woe's lovingly despotic rule, like her mystical five-foot-oneness, was based on an interpretation of scripture that corrected countless oversights on the part of the Bible's authors. All this "God works in mysterious ways" stuff, for starters, was hokey. Gwamma Woe knew *exactly* how God worked, exactly how humans should work in response, and mystery, garden hoses, rivers, and U.S. Cavalry dropouts had nothing to do with it, thank-you-very-much. A fiercely devout

Seventh Day Adventist, Gwamma Woe had, per her self-bowdlerized Bible's instructions, turned herself into a crackerjack real-estate saleslady, the better to serve the Lord; she was now spending her life getting rich by the sweat of her brow and enjoying all but a tithe of those riches, just as God ordered, after which she might agree to die, or at least briefly slumber, until such time as Jesus woke her, gave her body the complete rebuild that would make her a true five feet one inch, and whisked her up to the gold mansions and permanent riches of heaven to frolic and sing hymns forever.

I had just one small objection to Gwamma Woe's Gold-Mansion-Track Plan for her life: it was her plan for *my* life too. There were just two incarnational options for a Woe grandchild. You either (1) became a staunch Seventh Day Adventist like Gwamma, spent your life pursuing wealth like Gwamma, and later retired for eternity to the even greater wealth of heaven with Gwamma, or, (2) surprise, surprise: **YOU BURNED IN HELL FOREVER!!!**

Ah, Gwamma Woe! If only I'd been able to embrace her plan for my life, I'd have saved myself a lot of heartbreak. Capitalist fundamentalism, I still believe, is the perfect Techno-Industrial religion, its goal being a planet upon which we've nothing left to worship, worry about, read, eat, or love but dollar bills and Bibles. My boyhood worry, though, was that this world might not *be* techno-industrial. Maybe only the *human* world is techno-industrial. Maybe the world God made is *natural*, its "industry" a bunch of forces like gravitation, solar rays, equinoctial tilt, wind, tides, photosynthesis, sexuality, migration. And if the world *is* natural, I'd fret, if it was the *natural* world God loved enough to send His son to die for it, then it might not be such a God-pleasing thing to spend my life converting that world into industrial waste products, dollar bills, and Bibles.

Needless to say, our matriarch disagreed with every jot and iota of this. She recognized natural beauty in a way: a "beautiful day," for instance, increased the likelihood of selling a house. But the word *nature*, to Gwamma, had an unwashed, unsaved ring to it. Wild Nature, she believed, was basically a bunch of naked, dirty, heathenish creatures having sex with, stalking, and devouring each other—more or less like realtors, she admitted, only in Nature's case there was no post-prandial Gold Mansion to give purpose to the earthly jism and gore. The Natural World's duty, Gwamma Woe was certain, was to be knocked down, processed, and converted ASAP into Industrial Christian World. And unconvertibly wild creatures and wilderness were to

be avoided from cradle to coffin, by staying voluntarily shut up in the Adventist fold.

I didn't argue with this. Gwamma would turn the Uzi on an arguer. But from the day I first heard even a garden-hose trout stream deliver a sermon, I began to hear the Adventist word "fold" as the move one makes in poker when one's cards aren't worth a damn. I began to compare the Natural World to the Industrial World, trying to decide for myself which was the more unwashed and unsaved. One day on the lower Columbia River, for instance, in the interests of theological investigation, I poked a stick into the belly of an enormous dead carp—and when the thing flapped open, releasing a riot of vile gases and writhing maggots, it sure enough was an unsaved, sexual, heathenish-looking business in there. But growing up on the same great river we heard rumors of industrial and national defense maggotry writhing in the bellies of the paper mills, aluminum plants, weapons dumps, and nuclear weapons works into which no one could even poke a stick and live to tell the tale. So. Maggots or PCBs? Maggots or anthrax? Maggots or plutonium?

Gwamma Woe believed, prophetically, that her best chance of keeping me on the Heavenly Mansion Track was to keep me as ignorant and suspicious of the nonindustrialized world as she was. But the wonders of my boyhood world—the things that filled me at first sight with awe and yearning—were, in order of preference, (1) Rivers, (2) Mountains, (3) Ancient Forest, (4) the Ocean, and (5) Cute Girls. Gwamma Woe's leading man, Jesus, though I revered him, was so besmirched in my mind by his followers that he merely tied with Disney's Davy Crockett for sixth. When the matriarch got wind of these priorities, she deployed her boundless energy, twisted scripture, bribes, threats, and Uzi to convince me that I was gravitating toward unwashed heathen nonsense. And she was a force: I was convinced, by age six, that I'd eventually become a well-heeled Adventist doctor or lawyer, not because I wanted to, but because any less remunerative, more nature-loving career would result in that formidable annoyance: eternal damnation.

One day when I was still six, though, my religious adviser committed a fatal tactical blunder . . .

We all like doing what we do best. Gwamma Woe also liked showing off while she did it. As a combination matriarch/real-estate whiz, she had an exhibitionistic love for hauling my siblings and me to "Open Houses" at the various properties she had up for sale, and letting us eavesdrop while she hooked and played prospective buyers like fish.

Between clients she delivered impassioned sermonettes on Salesmanship, a biblical virtue that ranked right in there with Cleanliness and Godliness in its power to convert penniless wretches like us kids into Gold-Mansion-track sales experts like her. No matter how many times she explained the key concepts, though—terms like “earnest money,” “commandment,” “mortgage,” “Holy Ghost,” “immaculate interior,” “redemption,” “FHA approval”—I couldn’t wrap my nature-smitten mind around them. After a single Open House spent cross-eyed with boredom, I became an extremely reluctant companion.

As I said, though, Gwamma Woe was a great saleslady. One day in October she drove her red Rambler convertible down our driveway, spotted me merged with my garden-hose river and fishing soldier, but instantly conjured three words that made me leap into her car with anticipation. The words were “*Creek-front property!*”

10 I don’t remember a thing about the drive to the Open House, the sermonette en route, the layout of the home. All I remember is hearing—the instant Gwamma parked beside a FOR SALE sign and shut off her engine—the unfamiliar song of unpiped, nonhosed water flowing somewhere behind the house. In the lost Celtic recesses of my bloodstream, a bagpipe and a drum immediately answered. I told Gwamma to holler when she needed me, shot around the house, scrambled down a ripped embankment into a ribbon of ancient fir and alder—and the world of mortgages and immaculate interiors vanished as a remnant slice of green world, non-man-made world, Ancient World, suddenly shimmered on all sides.

It was just one of Portland’s dying creeks. Really, one with a much-needed but long-lost Indian name. Johnson Creek was now its anemic title. But it was twenty-six miles long, hence a little too big to bury. And when you fail to bury Northwest creeks, or to poison them quite to death, a few of them—even now—receive unimaginably non-Adventistic visitors from wild and distant realms. Vigilant though she was, Gwamma Woe had not foreseen this.

I found a walking stick. I began wading a stone streambed for the first time in my life. Because of what ensued, thirty or so pairs of wading shoes later I am wading them still. Love, it turns out, is for me something slippery, arrived at on foot, via lots of splashing.

A creek, given its visual complexity, is a surprisingly simple construction.

Two nouns: Water and Land. One verb: Gravity.

Plant and animal life, growth and decay, the play of light on water, the visual and liturgical improvisations of current, all obscure the simplicity. But the grammar of creeks is the antithesis of complex. The instant it alights on Earth, the first noun—Water—is turned by the verb, Gravity, into a ceaseless search for the lowest possible place while the second noun, Land, does all in its passive power to thwart that search. The result? Riffle; rapid; eddy; pool; scouring sand; sculptured wood and rock; soil-making mud; insects; birds; fish; *ar-ka*; endless music; sustenance; life.

Kids tend to befriend creeks the way adults befriend each other: start shallow, and slowly work your way deeper. So: skippers; water-striders. That’s what I noticed first. Inch-long, spraddle-legged, white-walled, black-topped creatures embarrassing Gwamma Woe’s man, Saint Peter, by demonstrating that mere bugs not only walk on water, they *run*. Next, deeper down: caddis fly larva. Driving their glued-gravel RV’s back an’ forth, back an’ forth all day across the bottom like it was Arizona down there an’ they were sick o’ golf, dang it, an’ maybe shouldn’a took early retirement after all. Deeper yet—I had to turn submerged stones to flush these—crawdads: designed right there in the fifties by staunch war hawks, it seemed, judging by their attraction to bombproof rock shelters, their preference for traveling backasswards, their armor; Cold War antennae; oversized Pentagon-budget claws.

Then I came to water too deep to wade, too deep to see bottom: a shady black pool, surface-foam eddying like stars in a nebula. And though I wanted to keep exploring, though I’d barely begun, the big pool proved a psychic magnet . . .

Its surface was a night sky in broad daylight . . .

Its depths were another world within this one . . .

The entire frenetic creek stopped here to rest . . .

I was 78 percent water myself . . .

I felt physically ordered to crawl out on a cantilevered log, settle belly-down, and watch the pool gyre directly beneath me, the foam-starred surface eddying, eddying, till it became a vision of night; water-skipper meteors; sun-glint novas. The creek would not stop singing. I spun and spiraled, grew foam-dazed and gyre-headed. Pieces of the mental equipment I’d been taught to think I needed began falling into the pool and dissolving: my preference of light to darkness; sense of rightsideup and upsidedownness, sense of surfaces and edges, sense of where I end and other things or elements begin. The pool taught nothing but mystery

and depth. An increasingly dissolved "I" followed the first verb, gravity, down. Yet depth, as the dissolved "I" sees it, is also height.

Then, up from those sunless depths, or yet also down from foam-starred heavens, a totem-red, tartan-green impossibility descended or arose, its body so massive and shining, visage so travel-scarred and ancient, that I was swallowed like Jonah by the sight. I know no better way to invoke the being's presence than to state the naked name:

Coho. An old male coho, arcing up not to eat, as trout do, but just to submarine along without effort or wings; just to move, who knows why, through a space and time it created for itself as it glided. And as it eased past my face not a body's length away, the coho gazed—with one lidless, primordial eye—clean into the suspended heart of me: gazed not like a salmon struggling up from an ocean to die, but like a Gaelic or Kwakiutl messenger dropped down from a realm of gods, *Tir na nOg*, world of deathlessness, world of *Ka*, to convey, via the fact of its being, a timeless message of sacrifice and hope. The creek would not stop singing. My bagpipe heart could not stop answering. When you see a magnificent ocean fish confined in small, fresh water, it is always like a dream. And in our dreams, every object, place, and being is something *inside* us. Despite my smallness, ignorance, inexperience, I felt a sudden huge sense of entitlement. This creek and its music, secret world and its messenger, belonged to me completely. Or I to them.

The coho vanished as serenely as it had come, back into depth. But not before its shining eye changed the way I see out of my own. I'd glimpsed a way into a Vast Inside. A primordial traveler through water and time had said, *Come*.

But, ah, the worlds, the overlapped worlds . . .

Not three hundred yards from my first draught of Deep Primordial, Gwamma Woe had found a buyer for the house! She was exultant when she called me up off the water, literally dancing: a four-foot-eleven-inch pot-of-real-estate-hoarding leprechaun. Yet as I stepped from ancient streambank onto neatly mowed lawn, my intensity, for the first time, was a match for hers.

She could see something had happened, and asked about it at once.

I tried to tell. But my words, as I spoke of the coho, were bereft of the yearning that still gripped me.

Being a purveyor of precise square footages for exact amounts, Gwamma Woe had just one question about the salmon. In answer, I held my arms as wide apart as they'd go. She snorted, obviously not believing a good foot-and-a-half of it, then began triumphantly narrating her incomparably more tangible conquest: *They offered twenty-six. I pointed out more features—immaculate interior, garbage disposal, good schools. They wouldn't budge. So I mentioned the other interested parties (a leprechaun wink)—even though there weren't any. They panicked! Came all the way up to twenty-seven-five! Four percent of that mine! Except the tithe, of course—for Jesus. Not bad for an hour's work! You're my good-luck charm! You and your fish. What say we go get a banana split?*

What a strangeness, our overlapping realities. There was no doubt in my matriarch's mind that she had achieved the day's great feat and was wooing me toward similar greatness. But *I'd just glimpsed a messenger from the Vast Inside!*

Poor Gwamma Woe. Never more certain of our united course in life than at that moment. And I was already gone. Lost to matriarchy, Adventists, Gold Mansion Tracks. Gratefully lost—to deep woods and deeper waters, with a green and crimson compass gripped tight in my fist.

What the Second Troll Showed Me

So now I had an interior coho compass. *Find water*, it told me daily. But mine was hardly a culture, church, or family whose members employed salmon as compasses by which to direct their lives. A salmon, in my family's and culture's view, was a "resource" placed on Earth by God, so that human beings (which in our suburbs meant white folks) could "convert the resource"—via a process of commercial fishing, cooking, chewing, and swallowing—into ever-larger and more numerous white folks. To admire the flavor of the "resource" was allowable. Even to admire the resource's beauty was tolerated, though it might mean you were sexually unusual—hence the typical meat-fisherman's backpedaling response to a captured salmon's beauty: "What a *hawg!*" But to *revere* the resource; to believe the resource in some sense lived inside us; to fuel this belief by worshiping the waters that spawned both this faith and its salmon—this was all, of course, a lot of unsaved, unwashed, heathen nonsense.

Yet Gwamma Woe's youngest grandson was suddenly full of just that.

I became the Hamlet of the Adventist church, lurking in back pews, haunted by a suspicion that something was rotten in the State of Rote Worship. I managed not to blame the followers on the Leader: I saw Jesus as an expert fisherman and non-Christian, same as I longed to be. But I did notice, as a born river-lover and tree-hugger, how Christ never really got cracking till John the Baptist dunked Him in a river, and never saved the world till He died on a tree. Jesus, as I saw it, needed Christianity and churches the way an ocean needs sailors and ships: i.e., not at all. It made no sense to me to demote the Cause (Jesus/the Ocean) of an effect (churches/ships) to the level of a mere occupant of the effect (Christian/sailor). So I didn't.

And with that conclusion, church became a stagnant pool in which I waited for rain, fresh flow, and escape. The real sacrificial dramas of the Northwest, the Christ-like activity, as I saw it, was taking place not in the buildings where Christians so brackishly tried to worship, but in the lives of the salmon I spontaneously *did* worship, for the way they poured in from the sea in defiance of every threat, predator and pharisee, climbed increasingly troubled mountain streams, nailed their beautiful bodies to lonely beds of gravel, and died there not for anything they stood to gain, but for the sake of tiny silver offspring.

Howell Raines, decades later, nailed my plight pretty well in his book *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*. He wrote: "As I reflect more deeply on the fish's history as a mythic symbol and religious icon, I begin to wonder if having fish shapes around me is a way to stay in touch with the ideas of Jesus without having to go near the people who do business in his name." The big difference between Howell and me: I hit the crisis at age seven. One dying creek, one primordial coho, and I was longing to bust out into the natural, God-given world in the hope of further exploring a world within me. And, young though I was, there was no doubt in my mind as to how to go about this: *I needed to fish*. And not just in hose rivers. My intuition blasted me daily with the sense that real rivers had something crucial to teach, that this something lived in fluid darks and deeps, that I needed to lay literal hands on the literal life of these deeps.

My father fished now and then. I began hounding my father—failing to take into account the fact that fishing was what the poor guy did to escape his five kids, endless home fix-it projects, rocky marriage, and tedious electronics-plant job. I was as relentless as a force of nature,

believing with the intensity of an Adventist preacher the dogma that nature *must* win in the end. But Dad, to my amazement, proved as resistant to my yearning as a Columbia River dam.

He did take me fishing two, three, maybe four times a year. And his favorite destination was also mine: the Oregon high desert, Crooked and Deschutes rivers. The drive took us up the Doug fir and alder slopes of the Cascades, over the timberline-touching south shoulder of Mount Hood, down the tamarack-and-ponderosa-pined backside of the range, then an impossible burst out of pine forest into vast, stark desert broken only by an occasional flat-topped butte, shockingly deep basalt canyon, stunted junipers, hawks, and sage. Every trip was an ecstasy for me. Each time out I saw places so beautiful I lost all interest in the gold gewgaws of heaven. And the cast of characters! Raven! Meadowlark! Prairie falcon! Osprey! Eagle! Black bear! Coyote! Porcupine! Beaver! Cougar! Bullsnake! Rattlesnake! Chinook! Steelhead! Sockeye! Lamprey! Sturgeon! Desert rainbow! Salmonfly! Grasshopper! Mayfly! Lupine! Forget-me-not! Black-eyed Susan! I caught fish so magnificent that just to touch them was a healing. I beheld water so wild yet familiar I'd feel, for hours on end, that I was standing in the kingdom Christ said we carry within us. When my father would end these communions with a chipper "Time to head home!" I'd unashamedly weep. The instant we'd arrive home I'd begin begging for the next date of departure. And when Dad would answer with vague, politic phrases like "Couple, three weeks, maybe," I'd be incredulous. Wait "a couple three weeks" for *rivers*? Wait for ecstasy? Wait to revisit the kingdom?

Something had to be done.

My family moved twice during my boyhood: The first time was from the foot of the volcanic cone to a country lane nine miles east of Portland, called Rockwood Road. We had a huge vegetable garden there, a cherry/apple/peach orchard, eight long rows of three kinds of berries, fifty chickens, a yard big enough for baseball if it hadn't been for windows and foul balls, a large rose garden, a thick laurel hedge between us and the quiet road, and a row of stately, climbable maples just inside the hedge. Three Rockwood Road neighbors owned little Jeffersonian farms, and a fourth owned two hundred acres of ancient fir beginning behind our garden, which forest I freely roamed. Our front window faced Mount Hood—my way-marker to high-desert bliss. It took no effort on my part to consider our home an earthly paradise and me the luckiest boulder alive.

Then, one calm country morning, a chunk of basalt the size of a football crashed through the front window and landed on the couch. Turned out it was blown there by the dynamite of "a developer." I didn't know what a developer was. Or a metaphor, either. Over the next few months I found out.

16 First, we learned that state and federal highway planners had designated Rockwood Road as the main connecting artery between Interstate 84 and U.S. Highway 26. Next, our little road's name was changed to N.E. 181st. As a hydrophile and optimist, I rather liked this reminder that we lived exactly 181 blocks from Portland's east/west divider, the Willamette River. Then the highway department cut down our big maple trees, tore out our sheltering laurel hedge, widened the road to four lanes, ran a concrete sidewalk through our rose garden, traffic increased a hundredfold, and a car ran over my dog, Hunter. My parents got me another dog. I named it Hunter the Second. Two weeks later a bus ran over Hunter the Second. The Jeffersonian farms vanished beneath a multicolored acne of the dynamite developer's housing. Another developer snuck up from behind, converting the two-hundred-acre forest into another vast housing tract. There were suddenly no woods to wander, no dog to wander with, and we no longer knew our neighbors. Bikes began to be stolen, homes robbed or vandalized, the words *rape* and *abduction* entered our vocabularies. A sicko in an old Pontiac tried one day to steal me out of the now-hedgeless, unprotected yard. Another jolly old soul wagged his penis at my little sister while she stood waiting for the school bus. We learned never to leave the yard, never to talk to strangers, never to go anywhere alone, always to lock doors. In recognition of our changed circumstances, my father bought my brothers and me boxing gloves. First time I tried them, I was still just gawking at the bizarre look of the gloves themselves when a sizable new neighbor kid hit me flush on the jaw, I fell onto a concrete floor, hit my head, and was knocked out cold.

When I awoke, I no longer wanted to learn to box; I wanted forests, country roads, dog, trees, gardens, friends, farms, and freedom back.

Amazingly, I got them. When I was eight, my parents moved again to what felt like "country": this time a fir-tree-lined street called Osborne Road, twelve miles east of Portland, five rural miles from the town of Gresham. The population of Gresham, when we moved, was six thousand. Ten years later it was sixty thousand, Osborne Road had become N.E. 205th, my world was again destroyed, and so it keeps on

going. But for a six-year hiatus, before Progress had its way with another big piece of the Primordial, I had daily access to a large piece of world more wild than tame.

My coho compass, meanwhile, had been thwarted. A spring a quarter-mile from our new house flowed into a series of backyard trout ponds for neighbors, but these ponds were picture-windowed, guard-dogged, private. The closest fish-inhabited waters to my house, so far as I knew, were the Columbia, three miles due north. But the Columbia was two miles wide, had treacherous currents and even more treacherous human visitors, and I was forbidden to go there. My father's yearning for rivers still maxed out at three or so visits a year. My own yearning beat me up daily. I needed fish shapes to stay in touch with the ideas of Jesus. I needed *Ka*. And one June day, I found it.

Riding my bike a mile east, to the general store in the postage-stamp-sized town of Fairview, I scored my vices of the era: one-cent Bazooka bubble gum, chewed five pieces at a time; five-cents-per-bag sunflower seeds jammed sixty or eighty at a time, in imagined preparation for chewing tobacco, into the corner of my cheek. I had just jammed my face full of this chipmunk chaw and set out for home when I heard—seemingly under the pavement of Halsey Street—a gruff voice yell, "*Son of a bitch! Gotcha! Ow! You shit!*"

I stopped for several reasons. One: I didn't cuss (yet), so the dialect interested me. Two: the voice was a boy's. Three: the boy was invisible. Four: despite his choice of words, he sounded very happy.

Further oaths drew me to a barn-red barber shop perched precariously at the point of a V created by two car-covered thoroughfares. "You *bastard!*" yelled the boy from nowhere. "*Come 'ere, ya lil' fucker! Ha! Gotcha!*" I hopped off my bike, found a cavelike opening under the west wall of the barbershop, peered down under, and there—in 3-D, living fairy tale—stood a rough-looking lout about my age, holding a galvanized bucket in one hand and a coat hanger he'd straightened into a spear in the other—both impressive in themselves. But the shocking thing, the magical thing, was that he was standing knee-deep in clear, lively creek water. A creek surrounded on all sides by briars so dense I'd never noticed it before. "Wanna see?" the troll asked, holding up his bucket.

Without a thought to shoes or clothes, I waded in beside him. His bucket was crawling with speared, mangled, and dying crawdads. The troll boy informed me—as I contemplated multicolored skeins of intes-

tine trailing out of shattered shells—that their tails and claws, once boiled, shelled, and dipped in French's Mustard, were delicious. I laughed. Yeah, right. But his ludicrous suggestion didn't make the prospect of standing in a creek catching some of these exotic creatures any less attractive.

I pedaled the mile back home, grabbed a bucket and a coat hanger of my own, told my mother I was going crawdadding, returned to the preposterous bridge barbershop, heard splashing beneath, slipped under—but this time was alarmed to discover an entirely different troll. Bigger. Wilier-looking. And sneaking away—after a single surly glance back at me—by tramping right down the creekbed through the tunnel of briars. Before he vanished, though, I saw that in one hand he held not a spear but a fishing pole, and in the other not a crayfish but a fresh-caught, still-flopping trout.

No Christmas or birthday moment has ever compared: a mile from my house, beneath a magic barbershop, True North on the coho compass: *a secret trout stream*. I tore back home, ditched the bucket and hanger, grabbed a pole, hooks, and split-shot, rode back to the creek, caught crawdads bare-handed, crushed the life out of them without compunction, used the tails and claw meat for bait, and by supertime had caught, absolutely solo, my first two native cutthroat trout.

Native Teacher

Fairview Creek, it turned out, was five miles long, two-thirds wild, and amazingly full of life. Over the next six years I probed its every side-piddle, run, and pool from the gravel-pit source to the Mud Lake mouth, catching hundreds of its cutthroat. Their size shocked everyone. Though they averaged seven or eight inches, the largest I landed was over eighteen inches, and I caught scores around a foot: quite a specimen in a creek just a yard or two wide.

I discovered other life in the currents. In the gravel pits at the headwaters I caught stocked rainbow trout. Near the Multnomah Kennel Club's greyhound racetrack in Fairview, in a small pond hidden by raspberry rows, I plunked for bullhead catfish, cooling my feet in the water. I then noticed, after catching a few cats, that leeches—two on each ankle—had meanwhile been catching me. In the plunge-pool below the Banfield Freeway culvert, I caught a thirteen-inch Giant Pacific Salamander that stared straight into my eyes, flaring and hissing like something out of Dante Volume One, till I apologized, cut my line, and released it. In the deep, cottonwood-lined meanders down near

Mud Lake, I caught channel cats, enormous carp, bluegill, crappie, perch, bass, and a couple of cutthroat approaching two pounds.

Giving way to full obsession, I fished the creek an easy fifty, sixty times a year. There turned out to be interesting problems to work out. I was chased by police, many times, at the gravel-pit ponds, arrested for trespass near the Mud Lake mouth, and run out of yards and off farms by irate landowners, scary teen bullies, and a variety of militant dogs. Did the chasings and arrests combine to “teach me a lesson”? Absolutely. I learned to be *much* sneakier. The moral ambiguities of private-property issues, though, had been resolved for me in a 1964 publication called *Trout Fishing in America*, in which one Justice Richard Brautigan gave this verdict:

No Trespassing *4₁₇ of a haiku*

The fishing koan for me, ever since, has not been whether to trespass but how not to get caught.

I learned to fish the gravel-pit ponds on moonlit nights or at first light, to avoid the watchmen and cops. I learned to drift a worm and bobber down into the backyards of those who forbade trespass, skiing fish back up to where I legally stood. (This twice so impressed people who had no idea their creek even held trout that they gave me permission to trespass for life.) I learned to clean up a big pile of creekside garbage and hold it sincerely under one arm before knocking on the porch of a landowner to ask permission to fish. I used the mailman's trick—a pocketful of Milk Bones—to tame the dogs.

I grew wily as a fisherman. I worked the creek's skinny headwaters in April and May, before buttercups completely closed over the surface. I plied the Mud Lake terminus in summer heat, when the trout had gone into hiding but big warm-water fish were on the prowl. I learned to be invisible and silent to trout. I once lay so quiet on a low wooden sheep bridge that a muskrat swam almost into my hands. (Thinking myself hilarious, I lunged forward and went *BOOO!* at the muskrat, inspiring a lightning quick flip-ass escape dive that drove a quart or so of muddy water up under my eyelids.) I took pruning shears to impassable tunnels of briars, cutting my way back into secret, sunless holes from which I snaked large, nearly black cutthroat. I learned to sight-fish for warily cruising carp—and thirty years later applied the same knowledge to catch bonefish and tarpon. It all empowered me. In fact,

I bewildered my father, every Opening Day six years in a row, by refusing invitations to visit the high-desert rivers I loved best. I then dissipated his bewilderment, six years in a row, by bringing home ten-fish limits of Fairview Creek trout. The thing about the creek: I didn't have to just visit; it was home.

I did much more (however inadvertently) than fish. To spend so much time on a single body of water is to encounter every life-form that water supports. My presence in small marshes and thickets so seldom trod by humans enabled me to catch baby killdeer, baby mallard, baby cottontails in my hands. I stood face-to-face with one of the last blacktail deer ever sighted in East Multnomah County, and glimpsed perhaps the very last fox, which a teen idiot named Booth, no doubt related to John Wilkes, promptly shot. I stumbled onto wood ducks, raccoons, ringneck and lost golden pheasants, possums, turtles; I ran into horned owls and herons, Indians and winos, gregarious winter wrens, kinglets, and joyously fucking teenagers. I learned survival in the creek's two utterly different, confounded worlds—learned, for instance, via terrifying encounters and one painfully lost fight, how to spot and quickly duck hoodlums, but also learned how to build lean-tos in a rainstorm, make small, smokeless fires, create hobo meals of fare I'd find along the creek (stolen corn, green bean, onion, and catfish borscht simmered in a tossed Van Camp's bean can; filberts, apples, blackberries, raspberries collected in an old Dairy Queen cup; the entire heart of a watermelon lifted from a stack of fifty at a crowded company picnic; and of course trout, obscenely fileted with a pocket-knife, broiled on a willow spit.

In this age of rapid-fire, unconsidered change, I suppose that anyone older than five or six is the relic of some sort of lost era. For my part, I'm one of the last Americans raised close to a major city who learned what he knows not just from sitting in thirty desks crammed into eight successive classrooms, or from tough night streets, or from TV screens (though I knew these too), but from full immersion in wind, rain, forest loam, brush, briars, and clean and fouled air, water, and dirt. I gleaned my working knowledge of flora and fauna by being the Huck Finn-style confidant, lover, and terror of a five-mile-long ribbon of life, sticking my hands, feet, nose, eyeballs, tongue, ears, and body into a thousand places they did and thousand places they didn't belong. I learned by tasting and feeling things, poking at things, gathering, stealing, stalking, killing, cleaning, cooking, and eating things; learned by letting things mesmerize, dazzle, and hypnotize me, forming

the million impressions that, when I'd collapse in bed at night, became an equally informative scramble of impression/nightmare/vision/prayer/dream. I learned from Tri-Met bus exhaust and Southern Pacific locomotive smoke, from Crown Zellerbach papermill stench and Reynolds Aluminum effluent, from cottonwood fluff on May pools, tractor dust in July beanfields, October cricket songs waning and geese songs waxing, savage November storms, sudden December snows, frozen January peace.

For six years the living chaos that was Fairview Creek flowed, unmediated, through my hair, fingers, brain-halves, and heart-valves, teaching me that the world is peaceful and absolutely dangerous, wild and artificial, beautiful and wounded, healthy and sick. For six years, in other words, I studied with the most perfect teacher I can imagine for life in the America in which I've lived ever since.

Bodies of Blood and Water

Two weeks before my fourth consecutive Fairview Creek Opening Day, my eldest brother died, at seventeen, of a series of failed open-heart surgeries. The little creek's presence, its flow, its ability to keep generating life, helped me a little with this grief. The ten Opening Day trout I caught that year felt different from any I'd caught before. Their deaths especially felt different: the concept of sacrifice had begun to invade my fishing. I could articulate nothing, but big feelings swept over me as I snapped each neck—and what an eerie version of fisherman pride I felt when my family and I, we "survivors," sat down to eat the little bodies whose lives I'd taken. Men, women, and children, I had suddenly realized, were dying—and no one seemed to notice but the funeral parlors who'd turned death into an industry. But each time I bloodied my hands, killing a trout as innocent as my dead brother, I noticed. Each time I killed a trout, the pain would ease for a time inside me. Why? Christ. You tell me. I sensed a depth, in the act of killing fish, that spoke to my grief. A consciously snapped trout-neck was like a blues-string consciously bent against the day-to-day industrial harmonies. And a bent note, in the ears of the sorrow-bent, rings truer than a note clean-struck. Nothing soothes quite like the blues. A little trout stream, if played for keeps, can be a miles-long blues tune.

By my seventh Fairview Creek Opening Day, I'd grown so confident in my abilities and body of water that I bet a high-school pal five bucks

I'd take a seventh straight ten-fish limit. My five-mile teacher had a strange lesson for me.

At six-thirty or so on a rainy April morning, I crept up to a favorite hole, threaded a worm on a hook, prepared to cast—then noticed something impossible: there was no water in the creek. I gaped numbly at mud and exposed rock, then up at the falling rain. The sky was doing its job, had been doing it all April. How could this be? I began hiking, stunned, downstream. The aquatic insects were gone, barbershop crawdads gone, catfish, carp, perch, crappie, bass, countless sacrificial cutthroats, not just dying, but completely vanished. Feeling sick, I headed the opposite way, hiked the emptied creekbed all the way to the source, and there found the eminently rational cause of the countless killings. Development needs roads and drainfields. Roads and drainfields need gravel. Up in the gravel pits at the Glisan Street headwaters, the creek's entire flow had been diverted for months in order to fill two gigantic new settling ponds.

22

My favorite teacher was dead.

I was sixteen, drove a car now. I didn't know enough to rage, protest, or grieve. I felt so panic-stricken by Fairview Creek's death that I tried—as if attempting to keep a stranded fish alive in a bucket—to transfer my need for water, whole, to the other stream in easy driving distance: Johnson Creek, source of my first glimpse of a coho and an inner realm. But a decade and fifty thousand industrious new human inhabitants had been murder on this old friend, too. I encountered none of the magic of Fairview Creek, little of the wildlife, no native fish species, few of the birds. Johnson Creek's only catchable trout were drab hatchery rainbows, planted in March by Fish and Wildlife to entertain local yokels on the April Opening Day. By May, no one fished for them because the same Fish and Wildlife people pronounced them too toxic to eat.

I kept after them, though. I was old enough, now, to know a metaphor when I hooked one: I was fascinated by the trout's growing discoloration, growing scarcity, growing weakness. I entered a zone, fished Johnson Creek hard. By June it was low, warm, filmy, and the trouts' living skins had burst out in a pox of strange, clear bubbles. By midmonth the rainbows had stopped taking any kind of bait or fly, but I'd still see one drift past now and then, in a flotilla of foam, sometimes belly-up, sometimes weakly finning. One hot June day I managed to catch a few suckers near the creek's terminus with the Willamette: they

were on a spawning run, hadn't been in the creek long enough to be killed by it. One July day, near the 55th Street bridge, my catch was a discarded car radio and a woman's dress (red, with small white polka dots; short; sexy; poisonously sopped). Another day it was twenty bags of rotten meat and vegetables floating along in Ziploc bags, looking like twenty disembodied stomachs still trying to digest their meals. By August, and drought, my new native teacher was an oil-scummed, fetid, foam-flecked sewer, there were warnings posted on phone poles telling kids not to swim, and even the hatchery trout of June seemed like a comparatively beautiful vision. On one of the last days I fished Johnson Creek, I waded into a nice-looking run, knelt low, cast a fly up into the riffle, noticed a more-offensive-than-usual stench coming from the creekbank behind me, turned—and started gagging at the sight of the crawling, maggot-filled head of a horse.

I pronounced Johnson Creek, too, something worse than dead.

23

There was a gigantic commercial nursery near my home, the whole thing full of skinny ten- to fifteen-foot trees—maples, most of them—planted by machines in perfectly straight, quarter-mile-long rows. I passed them often in my teens, late at night, after I'd been out catting around with friends. If it was past curfew and headlights approached, I'd duck into the long rows to hide. One night, after the car passed, I hung back in the skinny trees, suddenly fascinated by their situation.

In the muggy summer heat a faint, forestlike coolness could be felt amid the maples. Yet it didn't console like a forest's cool. These trees felt haunted. Trying to think why, I noticed that my feet, as I strolled the nursery, fell silent in thick, black Willamette Valley soil—soil created by consecutive millennia of thick, mossy, two-hundred-foot-tall ancient firs. To make way for our suburbs, those groves had been eradicated. These anorexic maples were now trying their best to replace the primordial giants. And though they stood in the summer dark, doing that dignified thing that even tiny trees do—which is to say, in dead earnest, *Here*, then grow—somehow it wasn't working. The endless perfect rows, the military order, undermined their earnest effort. *None of this is their fault*, I felt as I walked the night-black nursery. *But look at them. This is no forest. It's an arsenal: every tree for sale, destined to be uprooted, bound in burlap, shipped out. So all their earnestness—all the downward groping of roots, upward yearning of limbs, careful breathing of leaves—is going to be betrayed.*

Then it hit me: How could I, or any boy of those Vietnam-bound suburbs, not feel exactly as betrayed as these trees?

Crash-Test Dummy

My two best boyhood mentors were a brother and a creek, both now dead. My coho compass seemed to die with Johnson Creek. I still loved rivers. But rivers don't come with you to school or ball games, don't brother you when you're haunted, don't speak English, don't intellectualize. So—linguistically, socially, fraternally, intellectually—I felt alone and unguided. The fishing talk of the best anglers I knew—honest working stiffs, men I guardedly liked—was a lingo of technique, conquest, and gloat. The rivers within driving distance—the Columbia, Clackamas, Sandy—were the domain of fishermen who on their work days helped destroy rivers and on their off days plundered them. There was no one to whom I could even mention such perceptions. Love for animals, birds, wilderness, led to no A's on report cards. If Henry Thoreau or Gary Snyder had attended my giant suburban high school, they'd have dropped out if they hadn't been expelled. If they had taught, they would definitely have been fired. There would be no coho questions on my SAT exams. Free-flowing streams made no campaign contributions to senators—and look what happened to them as a result. A big trout sipping a mayfly may be a veritable hymn to the health of a watershed, but no TV or newspaper in those days covered that hymn. On TV and in the papers I watched businessmen, economists, politicians place a dollar value on everything on Earth and discount anything that lacked such a value. I knew this was wrong—knew that if everything was material, then everything was negotiable and one's body, home, friendships, honesty, honor, could all be bought or sold. I then watched American democracy itself be bought and sold; watched the TV war escalate in Asia, the campus and race riots escalate at home; watched a patriotic foster brother die almost the day he set foot in Vietnam; watched Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy die for expressing compassion and love of justice; watched people who define things in the crassest, most material way get what they wanted over and over; watched evil, mortality, and stupidity win and win and win.

There came a time, in adolescence, when I questioned every last thing my heart had intimated to me since childhood. All this "nature stuff" suddenly felt too hard to articulate to bosses, teachers, parents, too airy-fairy to share with red-blooded three-sport pals. My unchecked river-love suddenly struck me as a way to achieve numbnutted poverty, cultural irrelevancy, and maybe a stint in Vietnam.

I began to want to get what *I* wanted. And what I'd begun to want, I came to believe, was not richness, not meaning, not interior truth or depth: I wanted a skin so thick this world couldn't hurt me. A skin I'd open, now and then, if the right-looking kind of girl wanted in. But only briefly.

Hoping to create such a skin, I began to crash-test everything I'd ever loved or trusted, then pick through the wreckage to see what had survived. I crash-tested my connection to creeks and rivers in the simplest way possible: I abandoned them. Quit seeking wild water. Tried my best to quit yearning for it, too.

Taking aim at nothing I couldn't eat, feel, fool, fuck, or buy, I became the most disingenuous and troublesome of high-school students, landed a series of the best-paying jobs I could find, became a cog in the purposeless box of industrial gears that had appalled me as a child, and "repaid myself" for this sense of purposelessness by granting myself every pleasure I could grasp.

I began to grow that thick skin. The sensation scared me for a bit. But life, as I was living it, thickened me so fast that I was soon unable to feel even my fear.

Valmiki's Palm

At seventeen I took a full-time summer job at a plastics factory in the industrial heart of Portland. I then began, after work, to wander the city in the company of my fine new principle of depravity, seeking whatever pleasures I could physically grasp.

One day I happened to drop into a disheveled little used bookstore: the cram-packed, cigarette-singed '69 vintage Powell's Books, as it happens. I read books as a hedonist in those days, read them to trip. Looking for the wildest but least expensive possible ride, I impulse-purchased a musty verse translation of the *Ramayana*, and headed home.

I knew, from having read Homer's *Odyssey*, that epics were a trip. I knew, from reading a remark made by Snyder or Tolkien or somebody, that the *Ramayana*—the story of the prehistoric king Rama—was India's greatest epic. But the translation I'd purchased in a post-work stupor told King Rama's story in wrenched, rhyming Victorian couplets that made even epic battles and ancient wisdom sound like the chuggity-chugging sentiments of an interminable Hallmark card. I soon threw the book away.

Before I did, though, I took one small wonder to heart:

The *Ramayana's* author—the legendary forest poet Valmiki—states in his opening verses that he did not use his imagination while composing Rama's story. He didn't need imagination, he said, because at dawn each day he took an urn to the nearby river, filled it, carried it to his hut, sat down on an eastward-facing mat, then scooped a little river water in his palm: in this tiny body of water Valmiki saw first Rama, then Rama's wife, Sita, then every god, demon, and hero, every love dalliance and bloody battle, in his epic. Fragrances and sounds, too, rose from the water: the smoke of brahmanic sacrifices, stench of demons, cries of warriors and their victims, hissing flight of arrows, blood-burst of every wound. The poet simply sang what he saw. All 25,000 *Ramayana* verses were enacted, first, in the water in Valmiki's palm.

I was smitten by this. The notion that an epic could spring from a palmful of river gave me a jolt of the liturgical joys a garden-hose river and a three-inch fishing soldier had once given. Thanks to the insufferable Victorian prosody and my cynical teen self, this joy didn't last long. In honor of Valmiki, though, I developed a tic: I took to glancing at my own palms, dozens of times a day, as if at a pocketwatch; as if I expected them to tell me something. Just a nervous habit, I suppose. Because of it, though, I came to see that palms have skin like no other part of the body: the moisture; visible texture; almost legible-looking lines. I learned the palms' topography—those four ominous little canyons in which palm-readers claim to see secrets of the head, heart, fate, and life span. I saw that palms, compared to fists or fingers, have no agenda—that they're not a weapon, not a tool, not a talon, just a handy portable shelf. Though I tossed the *Ramayana* and wandered off in search of some more satisfyingly sensual trip, I couldn't shake my palm-reading tic.

The *plastics factory* that employed me produced a tough red polyurethane, dubbed Redskin, from which we made indescribable geometrical gizmos we simply called "parts." These parts were shipped to other factories to be attached to larger indescribable gizmos, which were shipped to still other factories and attached to indescribable mechanical devices, which were in turn shipped and fixed to larger machines. Five or six removes from us, rumor had it, our "Redskin" gizmos became part of something you could actually name: a raspberry-picking machine. We had no way to verify this, but our bosses told us so and we believed them. We were Americans, after all. What could be

more American than manufacturing plastic crap called Redskin to produce a machine that put the real, destitute, flesh-and-blood "redskins," who in those days picked Oregon's raspberries, out of work?

I lived, at the time, next door to a raspberry farm harvested by impoverished Indians. And I liked those Indians. I didn't feel sorry for those our Redskin helped put out of work, though. The reason I didn't was this: we were being severely punished for our crime. Redskin Plant management had, it seemed, deemed the slow torture of workers an acceptable cost of the Redskin manufacturing process. What better revenge could the real Indians want?

The torture weapon was not an object, but a lack of objects. In the time I worked at Redskin I saw no blue-collar employee spend a single hour working with materials that weren't toxic, yet I never saw a respirator, an exhaust fan, a gauze mask. We spent every day stoned on fumes, and no employees expressed resentment over this. In fact, plant morale was high. I think it had to do with Vietnam, which, in turn, had to do with childhoods spent in suburbs, in arsenals, in pews, immaculate interiors, fake democracies, every thing and everyone destined to be sold, uprooted, bound in burlap, shipped out. Every Redskin worker seemed to have an AMERICA: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT bumper sticker on his vehicle and seemed grateful to be spending his *prana*, health, and precious allotment of heartbeats making incomprehensible polyurethane gizmos. The typical Redskin Plant attitude was, "I'm nonunion, I'm underpaid, I'm making nothing I understand, I'm breathing shit, I'll be dying young. And I'm proud of it!"

The plant president was our inspiration. As president, he worked in an upstairs office where it was not necessary to breathe fumes. Like a good Civil War officer, though, he led the charge into death anyway—by voluntarily smoking five packs of mentholated Kent 100's per day. I'd seen chain-smokers manage four packs. The Redskin president was my first—and soon, last—five-pack-a-day guy. What gave him the edge was a big brass lighter on his desk. It looked like a set of golf clubs standing in a filthy sandtrap full of butts. When you flicked the driver, though, a flame shot rather obscenely out of the putter—a trick the president found so amusing that he did it more often than possible, so to speak, and often had two or even three cigarettes going at once.

My job, as plant lackey, was of a janitorial nature. I cleaned up spills, mostly. Redskin started out as a stew of toxic liquids that were mixed together in vats, poured into molds, placed on racks, rolled into a huge walk-in oven, baked to hardness, rolled back out, and removed as

hardened "parts." There were spills at every fluid stage of this process, and spilled polyurethane quickly fuses with anything it touches. Once hardened, the only way to remove the stuff is with an acetone solvent—also toxic. I spent my Redskin career blitzed on solvent.

One of my daily tasks took place in Dumpster bins. Even after they'd been emptied into garbage trucks, the sides and bottoms of our bins remained caked with enormous slabs of waste Redskin. It was my job to climb in the Dumpster, pour solvent on the slabs, let it work awhile, then attack the now-gooey Redskin with a giant C-clamp. The clamp was hooked to a steel cable, which attached to the overhead hydraulic lift. Blinded by tears from solvent fumes, terrifically stoned by them, I'd screw my C-clamp to the biggest, meanest flap of Redskin I could find, hit the Up button on the hydraulic lift's remote, and hope the weight of the Dumpster and me would together tear the slab free while I was still fairly close to the ground. When the slab didn't tear, I'd just continue toward the ceiling, too fume-ripped to tell the Up button from the Down. It was a thirty-foot ceiling. I don't recall dropping a Dumpster from the top—management really didn't like that. But when a Redskin slab tore loose even at eight or ten feet, the Dumpster crashed to the floor with a force that brought a roar of laughter from the other workers, knowing I lay in a swamp of half-dissolved plastics inside. I laughed too, if only to show that I was tough.

Another job of mine was cleaning the walk-in oven. Every time a rack of fresh-filled molds was rolled in, liquid Redskin dripped onto the oven floor. These drips built up after each firing, creating bumps that caused more spillage. My task was to pour solvent on the bumps, then hack them free with a garden hoe. Since "time is money," though, and cooling and reheating the oven took time, the plant foreman considered 140 degrees Fahrenheit "Can-Do" cleaning conditions. At 140 degrees my solvent vaporized the instant it touched the floor, turning the oven into a blinding, brain-fogging sweat lodge. The foreman would stand by the open oven door, watching me scamper into the lodge, throw solvent on bumps, run back out, take a breath, run back in, hoe bumps, run back out, take a breath, run in, hoe, run out, till the floor was smooth. His vigilance was not a kindness. Dead workers waste time, which is money.

Most Redskin parts had thin, sloppy edges created by a skin of plastic that had overflowed its mold. We removed this skin by hand, with X-Acto knives. It was the kind of skin that I too wanted. Tough as hell.

Six weeks into my crash-test job, after yet another toxic sweat in the oven, I sat down at my work station, fetched my X-Acto, and began trimming sloppy edges from a box of parts, feeling, as I worked, as if time and space were drunk and my mind was dipped in plastic and indispensable parts of me were dying and so the fuck what. I was making eight hundred dollars a month to feel this way.

I fetched another part, trimmed away another red edge. Fetched another. Trimmed another. Then something happened: feeling a faint swirl in my left palm, I glanced down—and saw a silver fin crease the surface of my skin.

"Trout," I murmured, too oven-stoned for surprise.

A trout had risen in my left palm. Hmm. My nervous tic was finally producing the goods. The trout's dorsal lazed up into sight and stayed there; broke the surface, making no ripples, and stayed there. I'd seen a lot of fish in my day, but never one rising from inside me. Half-forgotten river thoughts began to swim through my head. *How did a trout get in me? What did it do in there all day? Did it rise to sip some kind of fly?*

Then a second set of notions slopped through me. That something as fragile as a trout could survive inside the Redskin Plant seemed even more unlikely than that one could live inside my hand. So what were my hand and I doing in the Redskin Plant? I grew aware of a throbbing that never left my body, realized it was the digestive rumbling of the whole dark building, felt it sucking at my limbs, my lungs, my life.

I grew less vaguely aware. I looked at the men with whom I worked and joked all day—the black rings beneath their eyes, lethargic movements, liquid plastics splashed on clothes and skin. Then a third wave struck: gazing once more at my palm, I suddenly began to gasp. Like a fresh-beached salmon I began gasping for life, my entire body needing clear running water, moss-trimmed cedars, clean-pebbled streambeds, the vast, preacherless church of the wild so badly that my eyes filled not with fume-tears but with real tears and my palm—*could this be happening?*—began to bleed, right from the rise. I watched blood stream down my fate-line like water down a riparian, watched it fall, then pool, on the factory floor.

It took me the longest time to realize I'd stuck the X-Acto through my hand from the opposite side and was staring at the tip of its blade in my palm. It took so long that, in the end, I reacted not to a blade but to a trout's rise—and began trying to rise myself.

Taking fresh aim at life and water, I told my Redskin cohorts that we were dying, quit my job, bought a box of thirty-nine-cent trout flies, an inexpensive rod kit, a bunch of wilderness maps. I built myself a glass fly rod. I then began—like a blind man with a nine-foot cane—to feel my way back toward things I had loved and trusted.

The palm of a hand is impassive. Fists and fingers have their agendas, but what rests in a palm is free to tell its silent truth. In the years since a steel dorsal rose in my fate-line I have waded the flow of hundreds of wild streams, held thousands of trout and salmon in my hands, watched a million silver rises. To this day I sometimes cup a little river in my pierced palm, cool the tiny scar, check for signs of life there. To this day I keep thanking Valmiki.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness.

—Jesus, in Matthew 6:22–23

*Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sunrise would kill me
If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me.*

—Walt Whitman

2. Birdwatching as a Blood Sport

On certain nights when I was a boy, I used to lie in bed in the dark, unable to sleep, because of eyes. Staring, glowing eyes, arrayed in a sphere all around me. The eyes seemed to be alive, though they were not visibly attached to bodies, or to faces. They were not, so to speak, attached to emotions, either: they conveyed no menace, no affection, no curiosity, no consternation. They just watched me with a vigilance as steady and beautiful as the shining of stars at night.

Because their beauty was so evident, the eyes would not have troubled me were it not for this: I couldn't escape them. They had the ability to go on staring whether my own eyes were open or shut: they could, in other words, move with me *after* I'd close my eyes, from the real into the imaginary world. I was in awe of this power. My mother and father, the moon and sun, the entire world would vanish when I closed my eyes. The eyes in the sphere did not. And I didn't even know whose eyes they were!