

VI.ii: becoming

Yesterday. Woke in darkness, cool darkness, downed some fruit and coffee, and then, while so many lay swaddled in their cocoons, blasted up into the Sierra, deep in the Sierra, then down a dirt road, a road carved 170 years ago by those blasting gold miners. Present at the trailhead at dawn, with the sun's whispering light just beginning its rise above the eastern horizon. A howling wind raged the sugar and yellow pines on the ridge, but it mellowed to merely a murmur as I descended into the canyon and bottomed out at the pure river. Felt like autumn - the chill air, the low angle of the sun's rays, the oaks bony from shedding their leaves several months ago - but the blooming wildflowers - shimmering buttercup and royal hound's tongue and brilliant violets - told a different tale, a springtime tale. I thought of Her, all flowing yellow hair, sparkling jeweled eyes, wordless, hand in hand, a contentment, a completion found in intimacy, in a simple, shared life in a vibrant land. Along the pure river, the eternal restlessness of aching water desperate for the ocean, I thought I saw her perfect form, naked, but it was just an aberration, a bark-stripped tree slanting the sun's rays that confused me. I lingered at the river, enthralled by myriad wildflowers, searching, scanning hard for a sign of my most intimate lover in the snowmelt water, but saw nothing. Birds, however, served as solace, as substitutes, as friends - the elegant robins especially. Two young people then appeared: one an ugly guy, another a young woman, glowing red hair, bright shiny copper, long, flowing, sinuous, body clothed all in black. I only saw her from behind - I wish I could've seen her face. She may have been beautiful.

I realized the most mystical time there, in that canyon, along that pure river, was dusk - if transcendence would ever envelope me there, it'd be dusk. Such possibility tempted me to stay, but with solitude shattered, with the stifling compression of other people, with the allure of climbing that gnarly trail at sun's apex, the challenge for this recovering post-surgery body, they overwhelmed the seduction, so I rose, I rose back. As I rose, so did the wind, but the wind's personality had shifted since dawn: it was now a bright wind, not a howling wind or a wailing wind that hammers you in the summer Delta afternoon or during a dour storm, but an effervescent wind, a laughing wind. I made the ridge and dallied for a spell in the bright wind, trying to decipher what the wind was chattering about, but of course I could discern no words - laughter needs no words to communicate.

After a glorious four-mile sway awash in violet shadow and sunflower sunlight, dropping 3,000 feet from the little wigwam camp I snuggled into last night, I bask by the shimmering river under a soft spring sky. Alone the whole time - not the faintest whimper of humanity. But the birds - fuck, tons: robins; their compatriots, Black-headed Grosbeaks; a giant, gallant Pileated Woodpecker; warbling, wandering Cassin's Vireos; so many others, dippers, mergansers, several warbler species. Tons of plants, too, given the elevation change. And mammals - a doe muley with soft, loving eyes and a shaggy, cinnamon black bear. Been sitting next to a foot-plus 'bow feeding in a soft, foamy eddy. He's mostly been sipping midge pupae from the water column, flashes from his pearly mouth with each bite, but he ain't been that picky - he's slurped a few ants off the surface, burping bubbles each time. And yes, "he" - his mouth too big, his rose-red stripe much too gaudy to adorn a lady. He's been chewin' a lot, no doubt having bulk back up after lovin' season. So much non-human life, no human around other than me, although a historical vestige of many remains, piles of slag and rusted, red metal from bygone mining days. But non-human life's embraced that human detritus, crawling, creeping grapevines and poison oak all over the rusted metal, deerbrush and cedars and blossoming dogwood aspiring from the slag heaps.

I lingered by an old miner's cabin, a stout, hardy edifice, even with the roof caved in by a massive hardwood. It's in a gorgeous place - adjacent to a laughing little trib with sweet water but high enough above the river to avoid most floods, surrounded by majestic, protecting firs and pines. The loveliness of the place - wonder if it ever got into him, if he ever absorbed and then appreciated the native life, or if he and his ilk had already stripped the riverbanks and hills of the conifers that give life and form to the place before he built his cabin. Drunk on the new high of the Industrial Revolution, the majority probably considered the Wild tinder for domesticity and the rapacious revolution and nothing else. Still, I'd have to think that among that vagrant miner horde, just like for any group of people, a few dissidents existed, and they resonated at the same frequency as the grosbeak's song and were joyed by it.

The fragrance, the silence, of this mystical mixed-coniferous forest, it just gets so deep into me, it penetrates so deeply, so remarkable given how stony I so frequently am. Here in this beautiful forest, along this beautiful river, I feel the wind and the stream's song and the robin's song move not around me - but through me.

I stink like a railroad tie because I didn't shower after the gnarliest hike I've undertaken since - holy shit - perhaps when I bagged Pyramid several years back. Only my rope's tattered end remained when I reached my car in the still evening yesterday, but, fuck - I made it. And this morning, sore I feel, but sore is always a blessing - signals the birth pangs of growth. And camp - I camped, too, among my heaven the mixed-coniferous forest, the cedars and sugar pines and white firs all fawning over me like godfathers, godmothers - gods. Dug a little nook in the ground, sunk my ass down there as night fell, then had my mind washed by myriad dreams. Both while snuggled in my sleeping bag and for much of the hike, the air, it was so still, the quiet, it was overwhelming, massive, and I felt an intruder if I likewise didn't soften my steps, quiet my breaths. And I did both, so well that a blond black bear and I - we nearly kissed, and I spied her before she did me. And that gentleness, that softness, it lingers today back here in this sharp-edged domesticated suburban fuckin' valley town - I don't wanna make a sound. The exertion of yesterday and the impression of that Wild place - they caused it.

On the canyon floor, with the river, so lush, fecund, and all Momma's critters in attendance - numerous birds (MacGillivray's Warbler the star of the show), perfumed deerbrush and towering cedars and firs and a cold, crystal river stuffed with rainbows, and ticks, and mosquitoes, and a lone little coppery rattlesnake with sable spots, who I regretfully scared out of her hollow when I tried snapping a photo. The river's water was so fucking cold that I had to get naked and jump into it - it was such a shock, such a smack in the face, such a novel experience, I had to do it again. And again. And again. I left my shirt off the rest of the day so the wind could lick the water and sweat off my body directly, so I could feel the wind. I'd never felt so comfortable being so exposed.

After busting ass at work on Monday, I busted ass up the mountain that evening, quaffed a nice little salad with some sunfish nuggets for dinner, then drifted to sleep in the stone-still, the seemingly eternally still, coniferous forest, the summer dog-day coniferous forest. Woke at dawn, then down the slope I wound, reaching the river fairly early in the morning. Found a smooth perch to perch my ass, and just sat and absorbed the scene for a while. The air remained so still, breathless - the continuing summer dog day. The birds, correspondingly, were notable by their absence - only the burrs of the Spotted Towhees, the squeak of the Hairy Woodpecker, and the squawk of the Steller's Jays permeated the air. Swoops and dives by a Black Phoebe and Water

Ouzel graced the docile, tinkling river. Base flow in a dry year. Still, the trout appeared joyous, sinuous in the sapphire, pristine water, pirouetting for emerging mayflies. A tranquil setting as I lazed in the mid-morning pleasantness. Then, facing my fear to feel, my fear of change, I jumped in the river, finding it warmer than my other plunges earlier in the year, and I glided for several minutes in the refreshing water. To further beat down the fear, I scaled a cliff and jumped off the fucker - first one in over four years, when I met and conquered the same fear at a more northerly river.

Thought about Thoreau while there, his criteria for happiness: magnanimity, independence, simplicity, and trust. I doubt he identified those requisites haphazardly and with little thought. To express all, one needs two things: strength and resourcefulness. If you're weak, you have little to give. Too, with little to give, you're more likely to be mistrustful since you've such little of value that you fear losing it. Strength comes in two forms: strength of body, strength of mind, and strengthening one strengthens the other. For body: diet and exercise. For mind: analysis (intellectual, left-brained) and creation (artistic, right-brained). Strengthening mind and body informs resourcefulness by enhancing the ability to see the commonality among things and lives, where patterns exist, the core of things, and from there, you can recognize and eliminate redundancies, leading to simplicity. The result: less dependence and therefore ascent towards independence.

Fourteen miles through lovely wilderness to the very tip of a renowned, remote peak, the wind blowing and swirling, pushing, rattling the shingle-like rocks topping the spire, while the sun, in contrast - in an eternal bluebird sky, a steadiness of warmth, light, spellbound and spellbinding. Many birds and mammals as I wove my way up there - they seemed nearly lazy, unhurried, confident, a behavior reflecting the static bounty of high-country summer. Careless, seemingly - the Green-tailed Towhees, the MacGillivray's Warblers, the Sooty Grouse - all seemed remarkably tolerant of me, as if knowing I'd do them no harm. They were right.

This body, while sore near day's end, big toes aching, did it, and as I sit here now - and after being disciplined and stretching well after the 14 miles - my body, it feels intact. And as far as state of mind, mood, integration - rare has it been that I've felt as together as I do now.

True to form of the typical Thursday, I tossed work concerns aside and scooted off into Nature, again, up in the Sierra, again. In black-hole pre-dawn darkness I was up, in the kitchen, coffee brewing and breakfast stewing, then in the car, on the freeway, on my way up out of this overpopulated fucking valley. And the overpopulation exhibited itself elegantly by the shocking number of cars and box trucks and big rigs and RVs and little commuter cars like my own already on the road at 6:15 AM. Hard to see how any human can have any impact, any meaning, in such a density. But I shed most commuters as I rose in elevation, and, true to typical human form, when I reached the trailhead at dawn, no sunlight yet peppering any of the towering mountains surrounding, I was the only one there.

Then onto the trail quickly, in part because I wanted some separation between me and the fellow trail commuters I knew would arrive - it was a popular trail, though I wagered the type of day - deep into autumn, a weekday - would draw the fewest people. Too, I wanted to escape the roar of the freeway, which rumbled and grumbled for a good hour as I ascended the slope - I pretended it was the ocean's roar, which helped, and the roar of both, pretty close. Both a flow, one a flow born of time and gravity, the other of time and travesty. One of those glittering instances that sparks feeling, that fuels the desire to continue this one-time test of life, washed over me as I

jammed up the trail - I exhilarated at the exertion of my body in fuckin' hardcore action, fighting gravity, defying gravity, stepping deftly over root and limb and rock, feeling my body flash out heat, a heat given discernment by the crisp, cool, surrounding mountain air. And I wasn't alone - those welcome residents, the heralds of the mixed-coniferous mountains, the Steller's Jays and Townsend's Solitaires, greeted me in warm, sardonic, cackling glee.

I attained the ridge and escaped the freeway roar still very early in the morning - the sun's light had barely begun to bathe the montane scene. I lingered at the first lake on the trail briefly, but scurried away quickly, deeper, in part because - the lake, too close. Approached another where presence of some fishermen startled me since only my car occupied the trailhead. Their pressure spurred me to keep gunning, so I reached my destination quickly, the furthest lake, and here I paused, enveloped in that empyreal autumn silence, not the merest whisper of a wind, ruby glow from senescing, flaring willow leaves reflecting off the mysterious, placid lake surface. Ice crystals radiated out from the brown, fecund shoreline, recalling the ice, the same-shaped ice, that likewise radiated out from the muddy banks of Arrowhead and Gregory and Big Bear of my youth. The silence slowly eased into, expanded into, a sweet, serene symphony - the robins and juncos awoke, then fluttered down to the lake's shore, both gleaning clean the muddy bank of its invertebrate larder, the robins drinking the lake's water like royals savoring a fine wine. The robins - no more graceful bird, with their perfectly ascending flights from ground to trees, the perfect rhythm of their beating wings, and the lovely, warm laughter that they fill the air with.

The sun now up in its gilded autumn glory, mid-morning, and I softly threaded my way into the epicenter of the robin symphony, a gilded meadow of sallow sedges and bleached, ancient logs. Was a perfect bed, so I had to lie down and take advantage of it, dozing in the warm autumn sun, a freshly born soft breeze riffling over my body, robin laughter and junco twitters serenading me to sleep. Just seemed totally the right thing to do.

I woke about an hour later, the sun approaching its zenith, the breeze billowing into a bona fide wind, an Indian summer wind. The little repose had refueled my tank because I espied a local peak, a promontory composed of ancient, naked granite, and I just ached to clamber to the top of the fucker and have a look around. So I did, where the wind suffered no obstacles but flowed free, as did my vision - no peak nor tree interrupted my view in any direction. My ascension was rewarded: I saw my only Clark's Nutcracker of the day, those well-dressed, genteel denizens of the high mountains, who reigned in a little dell, regally perched on a dead pine tree, and totally hidden from the trail. As I looked down at the sweet little lake I'd come from, the shock of jumping into its ice-cold waters, it allured me, but my fear, it won this battle - I just felt the shock might be a little too much. Also my fellow travelers, with the rising sun, had risen too - I saw my first day-hikers, two groups, one nearing my lake and the other mingling at the second lake I'd skipped by. They certainly would've made me feel exposing my body in all its naked glory rather uncomfortable, and probably unwelcome.

Their approach rang the cue - if they're coming in, I'm to go out. So I scrambled cross-country back to the trail, avoiding the first group of people, which wasn't difficult - Jesus, they were clothed so garishly, fuckin' bright yellow and orange and red - fit into the scene of brown and green and grey they did not. Once back on the trail - the density of people, it'd ballooned. Four groups I passed in less than a mile, and I felt my space recoiling, but I had more fuckin' living to do up there, had to experience more, so I struck off on a less traveled trail, a less defined trail, with the promise of another glacier-created lake to sit by and ogle. And damn was it worth it - not only for additional exercise, to keep these limbs operating to their potential, but damn - the lack of people translated to so much more bird life that I didn't get on the mainstream trail - Red-breasted

Nuthatches, a surprising burst of migrating Western Bluebirds, and a bevy of several ground-bird species at the solemn little lake that, indeed, I had all to myself.

There, too, I sat for a while, yearning for that transcendence that frequently fills me when in those mixed-coniferous forests, but I thought about it too much and so only felt a sliver of it wash over me for a millisecond before it vanished. And while the urge to hop into that lake surged into me again, just like the last lake, and while I stifled that urge again, I did doff my shirt and expose my upper body to Nature - I wanted to feel that sun, that wind, against my bare skin.

Then back down the trail, back down to civilization, in the falling afternoon light. Take my limbs to the limit I did - though most of the way back was descending, I had a few ascents that demanded all my energy to attain. Back on the main drag, many, many people - the lake closest to civilization was inundated with 'em, and while I wished they weren't there, fuck - they're better for it, better that they climbed that slope, exercised those muscles, breathed some clean mountain air. And while the little climbs near day's end winded me a bit, the last few miles of navigating craggy rock and bumpy limbs and fallen trees - fuck, I flowed over 'em weasel-like, with grace.

I feel so fuckin' fine now, regenerated, vigorous, and I've only the relationship between She and I yesterday to thank. Thank you.

Final year's descent into the canyon yesterday. Sailed down with ease, and sailed up with ease, reinforcing that all the work I've done to this body to make it strong, keep it strong - the dividends keep paying. It's balancing, calming - I feel clearer in the head, gentler in my actions, than days when I haven't been there, which I can only attribute to the exertion, the physical exertion, but also the release, the freeing, of the stifling clump of humanity on my soul, its big rubber boot, and the energy from the trees and winds and bird calls and trills that saturate me when in the woods and water.

Yet layers of humanity abound in the canyon - remains of Indian grinding rocks, remains of the miners, of long-dead farmers - their slag piles, their leftover metal from their raping days, their little groves of fruit trees, now all swept up and solidly a part of Wild - and me, my footsteps, treading trails that miners and the Indians that came before trod.

This river and her cradling canyon have grown me - climbing arduously out of ever-steeper gulches, enduring plunges into freezing waters, weathering the oven-hot summer heat with sweat and tan and anguish. I'm more physically resilient as a result - but for this river canyon, my vertigo adventure along the Pacific no doubt would've been so much worse. I'd like to think emotionally and intellectually, too. Absolutely the latter with bird knowledge - so many species that previously had just been pretty cartoons in books were breathed into life for my first time here: solitaires, Nashville Warblers, vireos. Emotionally - certainly I've been gifted with rare slivers of joy, such as the euphoria that billowed within me after I braved her snowmelt waters and lay lizard-like, naked, on a riverwater-burnished rock in the warm afternoon summer sun.

Such a mild winter day. Clear, just a soft breath of wind, diamond sun. Nearly T-shirt weather at the canyon rim. And the mixed-coniferous forest I adore - Doug firs, ponder pines, incense-cedars glistening in the dewy dawn. On the river, slag heaps of boulders and rubble, monuments to the gouging of the miners - riverbed would've no doubt been higher had this monumental volume of rock been left in it. But the river still runs well, trilling with remarkable vivacity in this drought year. And atop the slag pile, the coffeeberry shivers in the cool breeze; the yellowed cottonwood leaves wave, falling to infinity.

We're entangled, tangled in each other's arms, Her hair the color of bear buckwheat sprayed across my naked chest, my naked belly. Dawn breaks, arcing curves of soft violet light, alighting the curves of Her back, Her ass, Her calves. The pine-duff perfume, the sweet smoke emanating off the so-misnamed mountain misery, lusty perfume billowing off the thick, embracing deerbrush. And a grand, ancient silence that permeates the forest, through the ponderosa pines and white firs and incense-cedars and their black oak hardwood complement, a transcendent stillness of mixed-coniferous mountains. It renders the intellect less important than the intuition, the feeling, and we get absorbed into it. We become one with it. Words dissipate, linear conduct becomes so stifling when so much life moves simultaneously - the trees, the bugs, the birds, the fishes, the bears, us. Those linear thoughts - useful when concentrating on a very small aspect, such as trying to key out a plant, tending a wound, but not enough to take in the sweep of experience, and therefore they need to be subordinate to intuition. The feeling needs to guide the intellect, to focus it.

And on Her I focus, and with Her I become.