

like rose chocolate

She was the only reservoir I'd never met in the wonderfully re-wilded watershed who'd suffered such degradation and desecration from the Gold Rush gougers. Past Labor Day, into autumn, and no one else there – only me. At least that's what would've been the judgment of a dumb, human-only perspective. Far more life was there, of course – *duh* – and, hopefully, the one I'd come for: the disregarded brown bullhead. They don't get the press like salmonids or green basses do in the fisherman's world, nor political fishes such as salmonids or Delta smelt do in the California "science" world. They should – they're valuable, too. I'd failed with the lumbering, lovable Luddite fish twice this year in the Feather's watershed, so I needed restitution – felt that during the Indian summer we were ensconced in, this watershed, so dear to my soul, would reconcile us.

I rolled down dirt roads, searching for an outlaw campsite, scanning the water, recollecting my past successes with brown bulls, and though photographs don't show it, I'd many: Gregory, Hughes, Mountain Meadows, and, of course, Arrowhead - mountain waters, like this one - albeit never in autumn, just late spring, just summer. They like rather shallow and flat areas with fine substrate but with some cover they can snuggle into during the diamond day. And corners for corralling. Such a spot I felt I might've viewed from the main drag, so I ditched my ride and hiked down an old, abandoned side road for a closer look. A touch too shallow, a touch too exposed, but, down-reservoir, better – deeper, muck beginning about 10 feet out, nearby rubble for daytime slumber, and a point forming two corners. A half-hour before sunset and bullhead awakening. I returned to the CR-V for my gear then hurried back to the reservoir, sticking a branch in the ground as my sign to assist my ailing sense of direction for my route back, which would be during black night – to respect the bulls, I had to be there when moonlight wasn't.

Although the solid environment looked correct, my big fear was the liquid: water temperature. In Arrowhead, brownies wouldn't awake until 61°F, and I feared, being high in elevation and fully into autumn, that the reservoir was gonna be colder. That'd switch me over to trout – not a bad thing, just the less desirable, partly because I'd caught far more trout of all flavors in far more waterways than bulls. Less growth. But when I pulled my thermometer out of the water, the Indian summer had saved: 63°F. Greater possibility – I rigged for bullheads.

Surrounded by the calming tremble of dying aspen leaves, shadow chasing the sunlight away from the glassy water surface, autumn's winnowing light gilded ever more as I cast out my stubby, barbless, worm-laden sliding-sinker rigs on both sides of the point, with the wrigglers inflated so they'd rise a few inches above bottom (easier for a clean bullhead take since the worm couldn't snake under rock or into plants/muck, which the bulls would then have to dig into). As soon as the light left me, I chilled immediately and had to throw on a jacket. The trout welcomed it, with two rising, and I feared I'd erred again, like at Davis, at Frenchman. But the mainline on one rod moved, the slack evaporated, the rod bent, and I'd clearly a fish interested in my offering. Take seemed too quick for a bull, however, and I said to myself, "Trout – but I'll take it," as I lifted the rod and set. The rod hooped, signaling a good fish, which darted to and fro, like a trout, but the head shakes weren't right - whump-whump head shakes, which are indicative of catfishes. I finessed the fish in, who now disturbed the water's surface, and to my surprise – and elation – trout

it wasn't, but a big, stout brown bullhead. Set up the camera, ripped off a few good frames, killed and bled her, then got the rod back out there, quick. To get three would complete reconciliation.

And I'd a chance just after I'd re-cast, but I grabbed the rod too soon, the fish felt it, and dumped. Mistake – they typically need several moments to engulf the bait, and they will dump if they feel too much resistance. But quickly a third take, I didn't touch the rod and let it load, and I again had a big, clean brown bull in the net. Flung the rig back out there, dusk almost night, the line tightened, I waited, the rod curved, and carefully, anxiously, achingly, I lifted, set, drew in a fish, feeling the whump-whump, and then, there, in my net: chocolate. A third big brown bully – completion.

Been 13 years since I'd been in such a state with that fish.

I'd originally planned to stop fishing and bail if I'd caught three – unlike my younger days, I now lack the ability for all-night grinds. But that she'd been so generous, and given this my last chance for bulls this year, I chose to stay for another hour and hope for a fourth fish, who, unless hooked dangerously, I'd release. But the feasting had ended, and I caught no more, a shorter feeding spree than in summer's warmer water – likely the bulls had already filled up for their slower autumn metabolism. So I packed up and then weaved through black night, holding tight to the forest edge, peering for my stick landmark, fearing that I'd blaze past it, but somehow I found it, reached the CR-V without a misstep, and then slept untroubled by nightmares.

The next morning, I chose the eastern curve back home along Tahoe, a leisurely drive, maddening at times because of the tourists – even on a post-Labor Day weekday – slowing to near stop to gaze at the tranquil big azure. I couldn't get really angry, however, 'cause I craned my head, too. Passed a few stands of aspen in pure autumn dress, such gold waving in the soft, warm breeze. Once on the main drag and falling down the west side of the great range, the traffic dissipated to near nothingness, and I reached home in a soothing, graceful afternoon. Filleted the fish – beautiful fillets, lovely pinkish rose - and opened their guts, finding their breakfast, our dinner, had consisted of crawdads – not the trash-eaters they're often blighted as by the typical Euro-american fisherman. Cleaned and stowed my gear, and then reposed on my couch in autumn's golden evening light, but in my soul, still in dusk's violet when the chocolate brown bulls came so kindly to hand.