

we between in winter

They were strangers once, but now they're neighbors, in waters old and new, throughout the world. Strangers initially, yes, but they complemented each other elegantly in both space and time: one in faster water, the other slower, one a spring spawner, the other autumn, one dropping deep in still water when warm, the other so often remaining shallow, one liking gravel for nests, the other smaller stuff such as big sand, one feisty and anxious, the other wary and measured, one frequently an open-water roamer, the other often lurking among shadows of plants and wood. In so many waters close to my home, the newer one in many ways replacing the kings now denied the streams by the copious dams. A fitting replacement, and expanding the breadth of possibility for a modern fisher.

Yesterday was my weekday off from work, and with Irongate - my breadbasket as fish-basket - no more, I had to go fishing, and also because of - me. Terrified me, of me, because I learn about me, about my decay, it becomes tangible, my fading touch and sight, my fraying perception of space and direction, my delayed reaction time. Mistaking fish for snag and snag for fish. Too slow to the trigger. Imprecise casts, so more lures banged off rocks or stuck on overhanging plants. Unrecognition of shifting conditions, losing opportunity. Following wrong road or trail, so arriving too late. Fumbling, stumbling, and, most embarrassingly, tumbling down to bash palm and knee and shin. Result: more lost lures, more scabs and bruises, fewer fish caught. But I am a fisher, so to not fish would be self-denial. I'd have to adapt to perform well, and I had to choose a waterway I'd never known - gotta retain some novelty in the face of fear, otherwise stagnation's the fate. "In the face of stagnation, the water runs, before your eyes" - Siouxsie.

I pined for a pattern I've experienced much, still-water pre-spawn rainbows near inlets, timing of which delays with increase in elevation. A few weeks ago at New Melones I was too late, with most wild 'bows already in the streams. So this time I was higher, not quite Sugar Pine height (where rainbows ascend between mid-February and early March, with the exact time dependent on streamflow and water temperature), but in between, 'bout 2,000 feet, where they should go in early February. Weather forecast wasn't ideal, though - a storm, before which had been many others that'd blown out rivers and swirled the surf into tempest. Slaty, snotty, cold weather at lower elevations normally doesn't kill the bite as higher, but even at 2,000', stable weather remains best. If any post-spawn browns were around, however, they would certainly be more on the prowl given they love dimness, and further, I'd be on the storm's front rather than its end, and that for sure riles brownies up (*e.g.*, Schulz and Berg 1992). Another advantage of stormy weather - it chases nearly all modern "outdoorsmen" indoors. It'd just be she and I.

Got to the reservoir with dawn barely peeking - didn't get lost, fruit of poring over a map and measuring each segment of road to intersection. Ambled down to the water to check the clarity, and, with relief, I could see several feet down, so the trout could see my offerings, too. Checked the temp - 41°F - and while cold, not so cold as to put 'em off the bite, though takes would be slow. As far as lures, metal and plugs were absolutely out, but like in late autumn, jigs (and that includes flies, which are just weightless jigs) and bait - in this case, the old redworm - could tempt.

With the sky lightening to violet-tinged grey and heralding dawn, I donned pack and started off, thermometer my guide - wherever the water temp dropped from inflows, the trout, both flavors, would be downstream in the warmer reservoir water. Although "reservoir," in this case, is a little

inaccurate, a little incomplete. This waterway is one of many hydropower stopovers, and their stages vary so much less than water-supply reservoirs, such that aquatic plants can flourish, with more of the waterway a littoral zone than pelagic or benthic. Too, perennial plants on the shore can grow, with frothy, rangy brambles and sedges and rushes - in other words, more lake-like. But unique nevertheless because her small size - this waterway's about the size of little Green Valley Reservoir who I fished so much in my youth - and her high-elevation water source that results in no stratification and cool-to-cold water throughout the year. So more akin to a massive spring creek.

Reached the inlet, light muted and low and perfect, and the storm began gently, drizzle and light showers and only occasional exhalations of breeze. The waterway's very accessible, which, added to her size, sparked my apprehension that she'd get fished out. But many rises just as I reached the bank and began casting quelled that fear. As long as the water surface remained unruffled by wind or rain, the trout continued to rise, mostly on midges, albeit more fish rings opened on the far bank than my own. Still, I'd many surface dimples nearby, and several times I fired off the slip-float rig with small redworm right at 'em, but unlike virtually every other similar situation I'd been in, not once did the float sink from a trout take. Nor did the set-rig rod with a suspended worm receive attention. That continued for about two hours, and, perplexed and with apprehension reasserting, I hiked over to the fishier other side.

Despite the gnawing premonition of going fishless, the loveliness of the place really held me above the lip of free-fall despair - the rain more musical than calamitous, a lovely, thick mixed-coniferous forest soothing my ancient soul, glistening ponderosa pines and some sugars, the feathery incense-cedars, and underfoot the spiky leaves of the sleeping black oaks. And the robins, the beautiful robins, they were on the far bank that was now my bank, and their ever-cheery songs and chatter spurned a fantastical notion in my head that they were heralding a connection between trout and I. The place, the time, still echoed Green Valley, but now more so Deer Creek Reservoir in the mountains I now call home and Frog and Harriet in Oregon's Cascades where brownies dominated over 20 years ago.

Why this bank was more attractive was now apparent - just a whisper of flow, and when the water's in the low 40s, both species nearly always want to be in the slowest water. Apprehension lightening, but as I fished down-reservoir, my rods remained unexplainably silent while trout continually rose, though fewer than during dawn. Starting to consider silly stuff such as a fish imitation given the bait failing, out of the corner of my eye I saw the set-rig line move, and not from current. I hoofed over, saw the line had indeed been tightened by a fish, reared back, and felt a swinging weight at the line's end. After a short, sunken, bullish shake and sway, I netted a fine brown trout, fully wild, arrow-straight fins and creamy belly and lemony flanks. My fear evaporated. With a near pathological need for documenting my successes of late, I pulled out the camera and tripod and ripped off a few frames before killing and bleeding her.

I re-baited and flung the worm back out there, quickly catching two more brownies, size increasing from 11 to 12 to 14 inches. All three were flawless, so healthy, beautiful, so she deserved restraint: I vowed to only kill four fish and then stop fishing rather than killing the legal limit of five. Too, one more fish could be the meat of two given a few risers I'd now seen certainly reached fillet-able size. But a lull set in as time slid to that so frequently staid early afternoon, and I began to doubt that a fourth would materialize. Despite only the one spot gifting all three trout,

I pulled outta there and continued down-reservoir, with an increased powerhouse discharge raising the stage and putting a heave of current in the spot.

Contentment with the three fish mixed paradoxically with the apprehension that a fourth wouldn't come, and the absolute stillness of the slip-float rig, nearly always the more effective method in such settings, reaffirmed the fear. I pondered whether I should grind it 'til dusk, which I've had to do so, so frequently the last few years, for that fourth fish, or bow down, thankful with three, and then bow out so I could reach home by dinnertime. She decided for me when the line on the set-rig again moved but not like from the force of air or water. I hurried over, thinking I'd mistook the movement for a fish, but my initial judgment was confirmed when the rod bowed over and the spool spun. I snatched the rod, set, and then had to immediately loosen the drag - this was a heavier fish. He dived, rolled, and zigzagged, and when he came within view, the rod's sense didn't lie - indeed, he was one of the bigger brownies I'd seen rising. I loosened the drag further, swooped with the net once, missed, then swooped a second time, and there cradled a deep-bodied canary brownie, a solid 16-inch fish, and I had to combat my low self-esteem with another photo shoot. But I remained disciplined in that after I shot and killed and bled him, with rises still occurring, and of bigger fish of his ilk, I de-baited the rods, loaded my pack, and strolled back to my ride, the showers a song.

I had to go fishing yesterday because it appeared the most reliable day of the week (*i.e.*, third day of calm weather) to explore a new-to-me reservoir nestled in conifers, when the water'd be clear enough for trout to see my baits - been lots of rain lately muddying things up. I'd rather efficiently prepped my equipment the afternoon before, then carefully delineated my plan - the roads to take, the areas to fish, when to fish 'em, and contingencies if I failed miserably. Gotta have options in a day so one failure doesn't crush and implode.

I slept rather well, somehow not horrified to open-eye anxiety because of the fear of failure. I'd the ceremonial cup of coffee in black morning two hours before dawn, a pleasant beginning. Started driving at a time that should've planted me at the right spot and time - inlet, dawn - for post-spawn brownies and, secondarily, pre-spawn rainbows.

I didn't miss a single turn.

Cold but not freezing - frost on the ground, but no ice in the guides. Inlet split by a little island at the confluence, and the inlet's water clearer than the mainstem's - and yes, "mainstem," as this was another little hydropower reservoir where the water always has a little push. The water was cold: 40°F. The trout, both flavors, would be moving very slowly, so I'd have to wait and wait and wait for 'em to engulf the bait and load the rod before swinging.

Copious Common Goldeneyes and Buffleheads encouraged since they eat aquatic bugs, too, but for the first 15 minutes or so, I saw no rises - discouraging. My rigs, though, were fishing well, with a change in the slip-float rig from shirt-button shooting pattern to lone sliding tungsten sinker with float pegged so that distance from peg to sinker was longer than the leader to inhibit twisting and snarls. And proof of improved rig was that I saw my first rise, then slung the float rig towards it, which unfurled and landed straight. Unlike what usually happens when a trout takes in such cold, the float slowly submerging and languidly tracing lines contradicting the current, for the first few moments, the float stood idle. Then I threw a mend, the float plummeted, the line raced out, and...eh, I erred, hitting with too little force before the line'd tightened and the rod

loaded. And the fish had felt the hook's sting, signaled by the few headshakes in the moment of connection before he shook off back to freedom.

I sighed, and drooped my head in self-disappointment.

Drifted again with no activity, but as I began reeling to re-cast – a take, again shockingly confident and fast given the cold water. The rod loaded, and I hit, but I didn't hit hard enough again, and though I got more headshakes than the previous chance, this one, too, I lost, and my disappointment edged to despair's abyss. My error was falling to mistake. Yet the high southern ridge and low winter sun gifted a very long dawn, so a wider period of opportunity, and as I re-wormed the float rig, the set-rig's line moved, the slack lessening, the line moving out – and I didn't touch it, I told myself not to touch it. For a few minutes, the trout played with the bait like carp so frustratingly will do, the line's arc from rod tip to water surface slackening and straightening repeatedly, but I'd suffered the mistake too much with carp as well as trout that if I were to land this fish, I would have to wait until the line straightened and the rod then curved. The line's arc, though, then sagged for many moments, and I sagged into the black hole, the indication being that the trout had dumped. I shifted attention from the set-rig's line to re-worming the float rig when, however, graciously, the arc of the set-rig rapidly shifted from line to rod, and I snatched that rod, hit firmly, and finally we were tight, and the embrace remained all the way until he hit my net, a burly, manly brown trout. We'd reached an understanding.

First fish of the year, and so I had to photo him, he of big ol' angry mouth, and in the icy air, he posed so very well. But as usual with small-bodied fishes, I needed two more to grow relief into triumph. Re-baited both rods with fresh wigglers, and as the slip float reached the confluence, its behavior changed – it slowly sank, but not smoothly tipping to the water surface then sinking, as if it'd hung on the bottom, but straight down, and then – then the typical slow desultory path, float submerged, *trout*. And this time, I didn't fuck up – as she slowly pulled the line tight, I matched her by ever so slowly reeling my slack up, and then, when the arc was gone, I hit hard twice, and the rod, unlike the first two slip-float failures, stayed hooped all the way until this one, too, was in my net. The second, and I was on the rise between relief and triumph.

But my dawn was running out, and with it the brownies, being dominantly crepuscular critters, especially with fish-eating birds about (Baldy'd already been flapping noisily above the water). While these reservoirs tend to be dominated by brownies - they moderate flows during late autumn and early winter and thereby preserve their redds, and they're often ringed with wood deadfall and submerged willow thickets - good littoral habitat (*e.g.*, Dedual *et al.* 2000) - rainbows are nearly always present, and they'll eat with more light. So while I ached for one more brownie, I felt my window for them had closed but remained open for 'bows. Yet as dawn shifted to morning and sunrays lit my water, my lines remained quiet, no fish rose, and I felt my morning chances at the inlet had evaporated for both.

Further down-reservoir, however, a very late dawn persisted, water surface still shadowed in a gentle cove with deeper water, steep rock, and plenty of wood – a good spot for trout to hunker down in to evade the eagles and Osprey, and given it mid-morning, they still might be willing to eat a well-presented bait. I sifted though snotty rock and trip-line blackberry brambles, ducking under grotto willow trunks, and in it, the spot looked better: a whisper of current was pushing right into the corner, and no doubt with it, floating bits of buggy trout food. I carefully, lightly cast the set-rig, and the extended sink time reflected the greater depth here than at the inlet. Sent the slip-

float rig out, and then, out of the corner of my eye, saw the set-rig's line slack decrease ever so subtly – was it current or fish? I studied it intently, and it moved again, but not in time to the current – *trout*. I put down the slip-float rig but did not pick up the set-rig – the lesson was staying. What I did do, however, and which is a mistake with carp given their extremely fine-tuned sense of touch – I softly pulled line from the spool to give the trout more slack. And some of that slack was accepted, but so slowly that I questioned my interpretation of trout. The reluctant dance again, like in dawn, for a few minutes, and then, as in dawn, the arc shifted from line to rod, I hit with authority, and then a swirling blaze, and there, in my net, my third, and as is so frequently the pattern – a rainbow after the browns, a lovely wild fish of cream and rose and jade.

As is typical with wintertime still-water trout, the hook had penetrated just on the lip – just a very mild piercing, nearly harmless. Since my primary focus was brown trout, and given how this guy was hooked, it would've been excessive for me to kill him. So after a few submerged shots, I de-hooked him and smiled as he raced out of my hands and back into veiling water, and I inched ever so closer to triumph, but that was a rainbow, and I really needed a third brown to stand on that peak.

I re-cast the rods, the slip float drifting ever so attractively to the rock wall, then so close that the crag threatened to snag my rig, so I had to reel in. Often in such conditions, as during the dawn, trout are around the worm but unaware of it – a little movement grabs their attention, and then they bite, albeit still tentatively given the cold water. I told myself this out loud, and slowly began reeling, and then – tap-tap-tap, a trout had nibbled, so I instantly dropped the rod tip to create line slack, the trout ran, the line then tightened, I hit hard twice, and another connection had commenced. I pointed the rod tip down to prevent her from breaching, where they often have a better chance of tossing the hook than submerged, and she willingly stayed deep – more brownie behavior than rainbow. When she came into sight, darting here and there, I still wasn't sure her identity until in my net, and then, then I was on that summit, for a lovely brownie, very well-caught, cradled in my net. I killed her quickly – respect – and then de-baited the rods and stowed 'em – to have kept fishing would've turned triumph into desecration. Too - the lessons had been learned.

REFERENCES

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