

The Unspoken

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All rivers race to the heat of the heart, where water whispers a name and a place, spreads itself flat, stops waving goodbye and returns to reflect the green shore.

—Roslyn Nelson

For almost two decades, I have marked my life by the April steelhead run on the Salmon River outside Lower Stanley, Idaho, in the broad embrace of the Sawtooth Mountains' jagged granite teeth.

I have marked these years in equal measure of friendship, laughter, the escape of civilization, and the knowledge that I am, if only briefly, a guest in this ritual life dance of a dying species, the great ocean-going rainbow trout, the steelhead. Such illusionists of light and shadow, these anadromous steelhead travel over 900 miles to spawn in their original hatching grounds on the Salmon River. The biological need to reproduce. Such instinct for survival. The possibility of life. A beautiful thing, life.

For the past two days, temperatures outside the hand-hewn log cabin on Crooked Creek Ranch have not been above zero. This year, spring has refused to arrive and holds stubborn to the particulars of the land. A fire crackles in our cast iron stove, and the cabin breathes and cracks with its own winter songs. Stiff, dark coffee percolates in a battered pot, the aromatic smell of dark Arabian beans as seductive and mysterious as life itself.

I have arrived a few days before the others so Cole and I can fish together. We begin a slow and ritualistic chorus in preparation for the morning. The conversation is stripped of anything but the essentials. In

all honesty, we have said it all before. Our morning chatter is liturgical and measured in ritual.

“It’s going to be a cold one.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I hope we can see them today.”

“It’ll be difficult.”

“Yes, it will.”

And it will. These are true words. There is no room for anything else in this landscape of snow, ice, the gurgling of the Salmon River, and steelhead. This is a small part of the beauty. There is a reason I have arrived early this season to steelhead fish with Cole. I need to talk with him about my health, but in two days, I have said nothing.

To put these words into the universe makes me feel as though I will begin to disappear. My health issues are real enough. I am not a foolish man. There are medical facts and mathematical percentages and still, I can’t help feel that there is medicine and magic in this water of equal weight. In the rumble of water over rock, the Salmon River whispers to me of its own sacred medicine. So I say nothing.

The serpentine road downriver from lower Stanley is slick with a layer of snow-covered ice. We pay attention. Around the bend, a smashed sports car reminds us there are no second chances. Frozen rocks, loosened by the breathing of the canyon walls, have crashed onto the slender two-lane highway. A herd of elk, dusted in snow, huddles close to the road. A giant bull stands guard over the herd, measuring us for danger. And when our rig gets close enough to see into his deep mercurial eyes, he is done with us. We are not a threat, and he turns away, toward the sweeping basin, toward the wolves. It has been a harsh, brutal winter this year in the Stanley Basin. The herd looks thin and weary, and I say so.

Sixteen years ago, over a dozen wolves were released in central Idaho by the state’s wildlife agency and protected through the Endangered Species Act. Immediately, lines were drawn between conservationists and local farmers and sheepherders. At the center of this maelstrom against the reintroduction of wolves into the landscape is a man by the name of Ron Gillett. Ron owns a very successful river running company in Stanley, and Cole and I both know him. The rugged landscape of the Sawtooth Mountains and the great Stanley Basin have provided him with a good living.

“Did you hear what happened with Ron and the Wolf Lady?”

“No,” I replied, thankful for the distraction.

“You know how he hates the wolves?”

“Yes,” I replied, pouring us both a cup of coffee from a battered Stanley thermos.

“Well, he’s driving into town when he sees the Wolf Lady taking photographs of wolves frolicking in the snow. Ron pulls his rig over, jumps out with his .22 rifle and starts yelling at the Wolf Lady.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?”

“So, the Wolf Lady turns her camera on Ron and starts shooting off pictures.”

“And?”

“They got into some sort of scuffle. The Wolf Lady claimed Gillett tried to grab the camera from her. She ended up falling to the ground. They’ve been at it for some time.”

“What happened?”

“Ron got thrown in the tank overnight. There’ll be a trial in July or August.”

“What do you think will happen?” Cole blew on his coffee, took a sip and chuckled.

“Stupid question.” Cole nodded his head. We both knew the outcome.

Four months later Ron Gillett walked out of a Custer County courtroom a free man. It was justice in northern Idaho. Nobody was surprised.



Winter months in this landscape can break even the hardest of people. Stories are told and retold of townspeople who got cabin fever and just up and left, people who disappeared or committed suicide or drank themselves to death. It’s rare, but it happens.

For an outsider, these narratives beg questions: How and why does this happen? What is the pathology of this winter landscape? How do things fester in us? Is it one thing that becomes another, and we finally snap?

There is a poison in Ron that does not fit how he has governed himself on the river. At the mention of healthy wolf packs he can hardly control himself. One of Gillett’s frequent battle cries in preaching the anti-wolf gospel is “We don’t care if you nuke ‘em or poison ‘em, just as long as they’re gone!” If possible, he would rid the west of all wolves. This frenzied madness plays well in this landscape of ranchers and

shepherders, but it is hollow and vacuous. For Ron, it is consumptive and leaves little room for reflection and balance.

“It’s like a cancer, and it’s eating Ron up. Them wolves.”

There it was: the opening I needed to talk to Cole about the aggressive return of my own cancer. I’d promised my wife I would speak to the boys, to keep it all out front and on the table. I’d practiced what I would say and knew it would not be an easy conversation for either of us.

In most profound and sacred ways, Cole and I are brothers. We go deeper with each other than we do with our own kin. Still, we tend to keep our emotional cards close to the table. I am good at this, but Cole is much better. I began slowly, trying to get the words right in my mind.

“Speaking of cancer...,” I said, clearing my throat.

Cole interrupted me. “Pull over. A pair of steelhead.”

I eased my rig off onto the shoulder of the road. Cole was out onto the pavement headhunting for steelhead before I could yank on the emergency brake.

“A male and a female.”

“Where?”

“See the dead branch, directly across the river.”

“Just above the white pyramid rock?”

“Yes.”

My eyes strained. I hadn’t been back on the river long enough to shift to my steelhead eyes.

“Can you see them?” Cole asked.

“How far out from the pyramid rock?”

“On our side up about a rod length.”

Again, I tried to focus. First I looked upstream, distracting myself by the canyon walls with the hope that I might then be able to see, as Cole often said, “the absence of what should be there.” He didn’t press me.

Seconds before I was about to confess I’d failed, the female fanned the redd. Moments later, a large male slid over and held to her side. We moved slowly, staying low and in the shadows, hardly breathing. Every so often, Cole stopped in his tracks and studied the river.

“Grab your rod and go cast to the male. I’ll spot.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I replied stubbornly.

“I’ve been up here a week, Metcalf. Go get your rod.”

“Rock...paper...scissor,” I suggested, pounding my fist into an open palm.

It's not that either one of us wouldn't die to be the first to cast to this large rogue male, but Cole's generosity is such that he will not fish until his friends have all cast.

Long ago, we'd resolved how to take care of such a problem. Rock, paper, or scissor. I threw down paper to Cole's rock. I assembled my 8-weight rod. Cole selected a couple of flies, and we talked about the best way to approach the male.

"We'll both cross the Death Wade. Drop below the male and work upriver. I'll cross above and spot for you."

As we slid into the Salmon, I began to tense up. Cole offered calm words.

"Take your time. No rush."

This area of the Salmon we refer to as the Death Wade, and I am not fond of it. Because the canyon walls narrow significantly in this stretch, the current is often swift and treacherous. I pushed against the current trying not to lose my footing. My footing was uncertain. The next fifteen feet of river demanded full attention. To slip here would be disastrous.

After working my way through the tongue, I paused and tried to settle down. Cole was climbing up a scramble of rock, already on the other side.

For a moment, I closed my eyes. The sounds of the Salmon began to soothe and calm me. It is a transformation so absolute and complete that I knew the conversation I'd planned to have with Cole about my own health issues would likely not happen. I'd come home again. When I opened my eyes and looked to Cole, he quickly signaled me with his hands.

"Hold up. The male is moving."

Cole gestured to the water. The light from my vantage point was poor. In the general vicinity where Cole had pointed, the river suddenly erupted in a violent swirl of fins and tails. A small male had probably tried to slide alongside the spawning female.

"He'll be back," Cole yelled to me, "...as long as she stays put or until he gets his ass kicked good. Let them settle down before casting."

I stood in the river waiting. Sunlight began to appear and slowly cut a diagonal slash of light against the canyon wall. The river glimmered in deep-flecked grays and oranges, reflections from the tumble of river rock. The chorus of the Salmon became, at once, hypnotic and soothing.

"Ready to cast?"

"Yes."

“Can you see them?”

I nodded.

“Okay. Cast about three feet above them, almost against the bank, and let the fly swing directly in front of them.”

I pulled line off my 8-weight and let it float behind me until I'd reeled off what I thought I'd need for a proper cast. I made several false casts directly upriver until the line was measured, and then I shot the line diagonally above the holding steelhead. It was a perfect cast, the weighted fly sliding directly in front of the male.

“Good to see you haven't forgotten how to cast,” Cole yelled over the water, adding as he often does, “Same thing. Same place.”

Again, I made the same cast. And again. And again. The pair held tight.

“Tie on something different.”

“Something dark?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

I withdrew a fly box from my vest, studied the collection of brightly colored steelhead patterns, and selected a Halloween fly. I tied it onto my tippet, and crimped the hook. I submerged the tip of my fly rod into the river to break up the ice that had formed on the guides.

Again, I began false casting. When distance was stretched out, I shot the line exactly where I had placed several dozen unsuccessful casts. This time was different. The instant the fly passed close to the female the male struck violently, the water exploding into silver crystals and the run was on.

Instinctively, the steelhead torpedoed toward a cluster of giant angular granite boulders directly upriver, trying to cut the fly line. If I couldn't properly work this magnificent steelhead soon, it would all be over in seconds. Line screamed through the reel. I tightened the drag.

“Can you turn him?” Cole yelled.

“I don't know!”

The brutal, raw strength of this steelhead was stunning. The steelhead exploded through the surface of the water into a cartwheel and slowed for just a second.

“If he wraps around those rocks, he'll bust you off.”

I knew that. I was getting dangerously close to the backing on my reel. I leaned hard on my fly rod and tightened the drag to a dangerous point, but the steelhead wasn't tiring. My arms were starting to feel the burn. For a split second, the steelhead seemed unable to make

any headway, and under the impression I had some control over this moment, I relaxed. The steelhead reversed directions and beelined directly toward me. Madly, I stripped line as rapidly as I could. In an instant, the steelhead jetted by me and made an abrupt cut to the tongue of the river where the current could be worked against me.

“Jesus! Did you see the size of him?”

“You’ve got to chase him downriver or you’ll lose him. See if you can work him to the bank. I’ll head downriver and see you in Challis,” he cackled before making his way to the bank, grabbing his large steelhead net and hustling downriver. Cole hollered something from the bank. Although I couldn’t hear him, I had some sense of his advice: “Keep your rod tip up!”

In truth, this steelhead was getting the better of me. I took off downriver trying to keep my feet spread apart and balanced. Stumbling at this point would be disastrous.

Quickly enough, I was in the seam of the fast water, exactly where I didn’t want to be. I was moving into treacherous water, and I’d lost sight of Cole. In a way, I was relieved because he would be chiding me about going for a swim if I didn’t turn the steelhead soon.

A sudden shift in footing and I stumbled into the Salmon. I struggled to keep upright, bent almost to the knee. Water topped the bib line of my waders, and a slosh of freezing water streamed into my boots. It could have been worse. I could have gone under.

Somehow in the chaos, I managed to keep the rod tip upright and the steelhead on. Slowly, I regained my composure and settled down to matters at hand. Cole was a speck downriver, descending a steep shale slope to where he believed I’d be able to land the steelhead. I had some good luck; the steelhead swung in a huge arch from the deep water and moved into a stretch of current I thought I could handle.

My fly line grew taut and hummed its own particular music as the steelhead cut downriver toward the proper side of the bank. Then, surprisingly and instinctively, he began a slow, determined course upriver toward the female’s redd. This shift gave me valuable time to gain slack line back onto my reel.

When the steelhead was parallel to me, I got my first good, close look at him. He was magnificent with thick shoulders, a deep steel-blue cast along its back and head, with a wide, rich crimson—almost burgundy—stripe along his side. I could clearly see the fly, sunk deep into his jaw.

There was a slight slack in the line, and I was cautious not to reel it taut until I could move closer to the bank and gain better footing. A slight twist in my footing rumbled rocks, and the male shuddered. I braced for what I expected to be a run. Instead, the steelhead pulled parallel to the female and held. He was spent. In what must have felt like his final moments in the Salmon River, this steelhead refused a last run and, in turn, followed a deep biological instinct to complete a life cycle.

Slowly, I was able to get to the bank, firm up my footing, and land the steelhead. He was massive, talon-scarred across his back, a chunk chomped from his tail, firm and taut and spent. I took him back to the water, held his tail, held my thumb on his lower jaw, and moved him slowly, back and forth in the current, talking to him...offering thanks before releasing him into the safety of the Salmon River.

I sat on the bank and looked downriver as Cole waved his approval. I closed my eyes and savored this moment with deep appreciation and respect. In this instant, my world was as close to being perfect as I could hope.

I thought of my early morning awkwardness in trying to talk to Cole about my health. In truth, what did I really need to tell my best friend? Would I say that my surgery, radiation, and hormonal treatment had not been successful? Did I need to tell Cole that in all probability we would not get as much time to fish together as either of us would like? I suspect, in his own way, Cole already knew these things.

When he joined me at the bank of the Salmon River, I told him the only truth I really knew. "That, my friend, was a noble steelhead."

"Yes, it was," he replied. He dug inside his steelhead jacket, pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights and offered me one. After a few moments of silence, he said, "It's good to see you again." All I could say in reply was, "And the same back to you." It was all that was necessary.