

Just a River?

by John Engle

Holding on to bushes for balance, we descended the steep bank in an awkward slide and came abruptly to a level spot where a peninsula, like a tree-fringed foot, stepped into the water. “A perfect fishing place,” he said. “You take that side; I’ll take this.”

He quickly began to assemble his tackle for catching “the big one” he’d talked about all week. But I, in wordless wonder, was blending with dipping willow tongues that lapped up liquid music. He’d made his cast before I at last responded, “It really is!”

“Is what?” he wanted to know.

“Is perfect, as you said.”

Although his back was toward me, I observed his shrug of annoyance. It obviously bothered him even more when my camera came out before my hook went in. “I thought you came to fish,” he grumbled. To please him, I put down my camera long enough to prop my pole between the winding willow roots and release my hook straight down into the water.

He turned to watch with scorn. “Some fisherman you are,” he said, as I continued snapping scenes I knew could not be duplicated. In all my years of being wooed by water, I was never so completely taken over by light and shadow shimmer on a river. I was concerned with camera, he with casting. Ratchet rush of reel and click of shutter joined the river’s gentle rocking rhythm—cast, reel in, and curse; aim and frame and shoot, for at least an hour and through my second roll.

“This river never shows the same face twice,” I said in self-defense.

Just when I thought he hadn’t heard or didn’t choose to answer, he turned to me and said, “Oh, yes, it does. It’s always wet, it always makes more mud than sand, and it is always good at hiding fish.”

While I was laughing at this observation, he reeled in his empty hook again and added, “I was wrong. This is no place for fishing. I think I’ll go upstream to try my luck. You’re welcome to come along if you’ll just fish instead of always taking those damned pictures. Why don’t you use a simple digital camera like everyone else? Frankly, it’s hard for me to understand your curious fascination with this water. After all, this is simply just a river. Rivers are rivers, man, they’re all just rivers.”

“Just a river?” I felt my spirit laughing. I knew I’d never convince him otherwise; still arguments appeared. I could tell him that any river is always more than merely “just,” that it is a sea-seeking poem writing itself toward an ending that never comes, for although it is truly made of water, it is never “just” water, but a cycle of beauty whose meaning leaps from mist to cloud to rain to rill to river to ocean and back to mist to

begin the cycle again. I knew by the way he slowly put his fishing gear together that he expected an argument or at least a quick response, but my responses were all inward. I could tell him that a river is a water wish on its way to wonder, a rippling rhythm merging man and nature and confronting the nature of man. Bridged, dammed, and polluted, it fights back and keeps flowing—over, under, or around, making new ways when old ones are denied. Taking and giving, it is a fickle, liquid lover, constantly inconstant, seducing trees, animals, people—fondling fish, licking hollows and inlets, inviting new input, accepting deposits of dream, debris, and drift.

It is a paradox of joy and sadness, recreation and regret, tragedy and tenderness—a friendly enemy, deadly, deliberate, indifferent as a god, combining life and death in one full flow. And yet, in softer moods, it is a quick-change artist, a chameleon of clouds and rainbows, linking earth, ocean, and sky—a magician turning mud into music and water into a mirror for blue-green beauty.

But this was an argument I would never use, for neither I nor the river needed a defense; besides, long before it ended, it became more of a celebration than an argument, more of a musing than a celebration, more of a meditation than a musing. Somehow, I felt grateful rather than offended by my friend's remarks. As I began to load roll number three, I said to him, "Go on. I'll wait here. The light has changed a lot, and I want to use a different lens and filter."

"Suit yourself," he said, as he disappeared into the bushes, leaving me to contemplate the stream that defined our differences. Suddenly I realized with joy that I had found in my river-thoughts what I had hoped to capture in my pictures. I had continued shooting through my thinking; that is, until my mind began to turn a drifting log into a raft, seducing me into a Huck Finn dream. That was when I put aside my camera, sat down, leaned back against the willow, and let my dream flow freely with the water—but not for long.

I hadn't been with Huck and Jim for more than fifteen minutes when through the squint of my sleepy eyes I saw my neglected pole bend almost double and leap from its niche between the willow roots as the whirring reel whined out the lengthening line. Suddenly an ancient preying instinct took me over, canceled my peaceful reverie, and bounced me to my feet. Scrambling quickly after the leaping pole, I tripped and fell almost into the water. Luckily, the pole had hung up briefly on another root, allowing me to grab it just as it began to drop into the river.

When I caught the reel, I could feel the power of violent lunge and surge, transmitted like high voltage through the pole. I became all instinct and adrenaline—an unlikely warrior primed for battle. Though inexperienced, I had ceased to be indifferent. I know I must have broken every fishing rule to do it, but at last I wore the monster down. Yet he had worn me down as well, and as I began to haul him in, I felt the monster in me vanishing into a mix of eagerness and dread. Still, I could not resist a glow of victory. For a moment I was Hemingway's Old Man conquering the giant Marlin, or maybe a minor Ahab who had just harpooned a minor Moby Dick. I even thought of how I now could show my friend I knew a thing or two about fishing, after all. Some perversity in me hoped that he would come back empty-handed so I could laugh and make him eat his words.

The fish was calm now, no more fight left in him, or so I thought, but just as I began the final tug, bracing myself for his out-of-water weight, there was a mighty thrash and slap of tail as he took off and almost took me with him. I played out the line about as far as it would go, for I knew that it could break at any minute. My adrenaline was flowing wild again. "Okay," I said, "if you want to fight some more, I'm ready!" But before the fight was over, I realized he was more fit for it than I. My

arms were aching, and my back and legs, braced in an awkward twist, reminded me that I must start to include more exercise in my daily activities.

Just when I thought my body would collapse, his struggles ceased, but by this time I was properly humbled and not really sure the battle was over or who the winner was. I had barely enough strength left to reel him in, and when I saw how huge he was, I knew I could not lift him up the five or six feet from the water to the overhanging roots where I was standing. I thought perhaps I'd leave him there until the real fisherman returned to help. But I knew that when the fish regained his strength, he'd be ready for another fight, and I was not at all prepared for that. Painfully uncurling my cramped muscles, I guided my greatly-respected opponent downstream to a small sand bar, pulled his gigantic head up to the water line, grabbed him behind the gills, and, using all my strength, pulled him ashore. He flopped twice and lay still except for a tremble of tail and the gaping of his enormous jaws. I flopped down beside him, exhausted and amazed at what I'd done. I'd landed a fish that seemed almost as big as I was.

Suddenly a thought of pictures gave me the strength to stumble for my camera. In the viewfinder, he became more faith than fish, more truth than trophy as I, the predator, became photographer again. The gleam of sunlight on his scales presented the same prismatic beauty I had tried to capture earlier when dawn had kissed the lifting mist into a rainbow. His eyes were the same bright spotlights that the waves had loved into my lens two hours before. Now I knew it was not just a fish that I had caught, but the river's spirit, and I knew that I must quickly put it back before my camera and the sun consumed it. Two quick pictures only—one of him, one timed of him and me together—for his gasps were choking me with thoughts of how I'd feel if I were forced to breathe in water as I'd forced him to breathe on land.

As my guilt spoke an apology for his pain, I removed the cruel hook and gave him back to the liquid beauty that had built him. And as I watched him slowly swim away, I realized that victory's blessing lies less in holding on than in letting go, for at that moment, all the meaning of morality merged with music somewhere in my heart and pulsed its poetry through every vein. I was still glowing from the glory of it when my friend returned with a boastful grin, displaying three large fish that he had caught. "You really should have come with me," he smirked. "I'll bet you didn't even get a nibble." For the first time, I began to understand what fishing meant to him. It was to him what my photography was to me.

"Not a single nibble," I said, "but I think I may have caught the river."

"You and your crazy camera! Oh well, I'd be glad to give you one of these if you would like," he said.

"No, thanks," I answered. "You have no more than enough to feed your family. Besides, I have an enormous photo developing task when I get home."

He was still admiring his catch as we climbed the bank, but before I left, I turned to take one last departing shot of silver going gold while whispering goodbye thanks to fish and water.