

from Wild Thoughts from Wild Places

by David Quammen (1998)

## *Synecdoche and the Trout*

It's a simple question with a seemingly simple answer: "Why do you live in Montana?"

Repeatedly over a span of some years you have heard this, asked most often by people who know you just well enough to be aware of the city where you grew up, the tony universities you attended, and a few other bits of biographical detail on the basis of which they harbor a notion that you should have taken your place in New York café society or, at least, an ivy-adorned department of English. They suspect you, these friends do, of hiding out. Maybe in a way they are right. But they have no clear sense of what you are hiding from, or why, let alone where. Hence their question.

"The trout," you answer, and they gape back blankly.

"The trout," they say after a moment. "That's a fish."

"Correct."

"Like lox."

"In some ways similar."

"You like to go fishing. *That's* why you live out there? *That's* why you spend your life in a place without decent restaurants or

bookstores or symphony orchestras, a place halfway between Death Valley and the North Pole? A place where there's no espresso, and the *Times* comes in three days late by pontoon plane? Do I have this straight, now? It's because you like to go fishing?"

"No," you say. "Only partly. At the beginning, that was it, yes. But I've stayed all these years. No plans to leave."

"You *went* for the fishing, but you *stayed* for something else. Aha."

"Yes. The trout," you say.

"This is confusing."

"A person can get too much trout fishing. Then it cloy, becomes taken for granted. Meaningless."

"Again like lox."

"I don't seem to fish nearly as much as I used to."

"But you keep talking about the trout. You went, you stayed, the trout is your reason."

"The trout is a synecdoche," you say, because these friends are tough and verbal and they can take it.

A BIOLOGIST would use the term *indicator species*. Because I have the biases of a literary journalist, working that great gray zone between newspaper reporting and fiction, engaged every day in trying to make facts not just talk but yodel, I speak instead of synecdoche. We both mean that a trout represents more than itself—but that, importantly, it does also represent itself.

"A poem should not mean/But be," wrote Archibald MacLeish, knowing undeniably in his heart that a good poem quite often does both. Likewise a trout.

The presence of trout in a body of water is a discrete ecological fact that nevertheless signifies certain things.

It signifies a particular complex of biotic and chemical and physical factors, a standard of richness and purity, without which that troutly presence is impossible. It signifies aquatic nutrients like calcium, potassium, nitrate, phosphate; signifies enough carbon dioxide to nourish meadows of algae and to keep calcium in solution as calcium bicarbonate; signifies a prolific invertebrate fauna (Plecoptera, Trichoptera, Diptera, Ephemeroptera), and a temper-

ature regime confined within certain daily and annual extremes. It also signifies clear pools emptying down staircases of rounded boulders and dappled with patterns of late-afternoon shade cast by chrome yellow cottonwood leaves in September. It signifies solitude so sweet and pure as to bring an ache to the sinuses, a buzz to the ears. Loneliness and anomie of the most wholesome sort. It signifies dissolved oxygen to at least four or five parts per million. It signifies a good possibility of osprey, dippers, and kingfishers, otters and water shrews, heron; and it signifies *Oncorhynchus clarki*, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, *Salmo trutta*. Like a well-chosen phrase in any poem, MacLeish's included, the very presence of trout signifies at more than one level. Magically, these creatures are literal and real. They live in imagination, memory, and cold water.

For instance: I can remember the first trout I ever caught as an adult (which was also the first I ever caught on a fly), and precisely what the poor little fish represented to me at that moment. It represented (a) dinner and (b) a new beginning, with a new sense of self, in a new place. The matter of dinner was important, since I was a genuinely hungry young man living out of my road-weary Volkswagen bus with a meager supply of groceries. But the matter of selfhood and place, the matter of reinventing identity, was paramount. My hands trembled wildly as I took that fish off the hook. A rainbow, all of seven or eight inches long. Caught on a Black Gnat pattern, size 12, tied cheaply of poor materials somewhere in the Orient and picked up by me at Herter's when I had passed through South Dakota. I killed the little trout before it could slip through my fingers and, heartbreakingly, disappear. This episode was for me equivalent to the one in Faulkner's "Delta Autumn," where blood from a fresh-killed buck is smeared on the face of the boy. *I slew you*, the boy thinks. *My bearing must not shame your quitting life*, he understands. *My conduct for ever onward must become your death*. In my own case, of course, there was no ancient Indian named Sam Fathers serving as mentor and baptist. I was alone and an autodidact. The blood of the little trout did not steam away its heat of life into the cold air, and I smeared none on my face. Nevertheless.

The fish came out of a creek in the Bighorn Mountains of north-central Wyoming, and I was on my way to Montana, though at that moment I didn't yet know it.

Montana was the one place on Earth, as I thought of it, farthest in miles and spirit from Oxford University, yet where you could still get by with the English language, and the sun didn't disappear below the horizon for days in a row during midwinter, and the prevailing notion of a fish dinner was not lutefish. I had literally never set foot within the boundaries of the state. I had no friends there, no friends of friends, no contacts of any sort, which was fine. I looked at a map and saw jagged blue lines, denoting mountain rivers. All I knew was that, in Montana, there would be more trout.

Trout were the indicator species for a place and a life I was seeking.

I went. Six years later, rather to my surprise, I was a professional fishing guide under license from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. My job was to smear blood on other young faces. *I slew you. My bearing must not shame your quitting life.* Sometimes it was actually like that, though quite often it was not.

*Item.* You are at the oars of a fourteen-foot Avon raft, pushing across a slow pool on the Big Hole River in western Montana. An August afternoon. Seated in front of you is an orthopedic surgeon from San Francisco, a pleasant man who can talk intelligently about the career of Gifford Pinchot or the novels of Evelyn Waugh, who is said to play a formidable game of squash, and who spends one week each year fishing for trout. In his right hand is a Payne bamboo fly rod that is worth more than the car you drive, and attached to the rod is a Hardy Perfect reel. At the end of the doctor's line is a kinked and truncated leader, and at the end of the leader is a dry fly that can no longer be even the most technical definition be considered "dry," having been slapped back and forth upon and dragged through several miles of river. With this match of equipment to finesse, the good doctor might as well be hauling manure in the backseat of a Mercedes. Seated behind you is the doctor's wife, who picked up a fly rod for the first time in her life two hours earlier. Her line culminates in a fly that is more dangerous to you than to any fish in Montana. As you have rowed quietly across the glassy pool, she has attacked the water's surface like a French chef dicing celery. Now your raft has

approached the brink of a raffle. On the Big Hole River during this late month of the season, virtually all of the catchable trout cluster (by daylight, at least) where they can find cover and oxygen—in those two wedges of deep still water flanking the fast current at the bottom of each raffle. You have told the doctor and his wife about the wedges. There, *those*, you have said. Cast just across the eddy line, you have said. Throw a little slack. *We've got to hit the spots to catch any fish*, you have said in the tactfully editorial first-person plural.

As your raft slides into this raffle, the doctor and his wife become tense with anticipation. The wife snags her fly in the rail rope along the rowing frame, and asks sweetly if you would free it, which you do, grabbing the oars again quickly to avoid hitting a boulder. You begin working to slalom the boat through the raffle: The wife whips her fly twice through the air before sinking it into the back of your straw cowboy hat. She apologizes fervently. Meanwhile, she lets her line loop around your right oar. You take a stroke with the left oar to swing clear of a drowned log, then you point your finger over the doctor's shoulder: "Remember, now. The wedges." He nods eagerly. The raft is about to broadside another boulder, so you pull hard on both oars and with that motion your hat is jerked into the river. The doctor makes five false casts, intent on the wedges, and then fires his line forward into the tip of his own rod like a handful of spaghetti hitting a kitchen wall. He moans. The raft drops neatly out of the raffle, between the wedges, and back into dead water.

*Item.* You are two days along on a wilderness float through the Smith River canyon, fifty miles and another three river-days from the nearest hospital, with cliffs of shale towering hundreds of feet on each side of the river to seal you in. The tents are grouped on a cottonwood flat. It's dinner hour, and you have just finished a frigid bath in the shallows. As you open your first beer, a soft-spoken Denver architect walks back into camp with a size 14 Royal Wulff stuck past the barb into his lower eyelid. He has stepped behind another fisherman at precisely the wrong moment. Everyone looks queasily at everyone else, but the outfitter—who is your boss, who is holding his second martini, and whose own nerves are already frazzled from serving as chief babysitter to eight tourist fishermen—looks pleadingly at you.

With tools from your fishing vest (a small pair of scissors, a forceps, a loop of leader) you extract the fly. Then you douse the architect's wound with what little remains of the outfitter's gin.

*Item.* Three days down the Smith on a different trip, under a cloudless July sky, you are drifting, basking comfortably in the heat, resting your oars. In your left hand is a cold Pabst Blue Ribbon. In place of your usual T-shirt, you are wearing a new yellow number that announces with some justice, "Happiness Is a Cold Pabst." On your head, in place of the cowboy straw, is a floppy cloth porkpie in a print of Pabst labels. In the bow seat of your raft, casting contentedly to a few rising trout, is a man named Augie Pabst, scion of the family. Augie, contrary to all your expectations, is a sensitive and polite man, a likable fellow. Stowed in your cargo box and your cooler are fourteen cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon, courtesy. You take a deep gulp of beer, you touch an oar. Ah yes, you think. Life in the wilderness.

*Item.* You are floating a petroleum engineer and his teenage son through the final twelve miles of the Smith canyon, which is drowsy, meandering water not hospitable to rainbow trout but good for an occasional large brown. The temperature is ninety-five, the midday glare is fierce, you have spent six days with these people, and you are eager to be rid of them. Three more hours to the take-out, you tell yourself. A bit later you think, Two more hours. The petroleum engineer has been treated routinely with ridicule by his son, and evidently has troubles also with his wife. The wife is along on this trip but she doesn't fish; she doesn't seem to talk much to her husband; she has ridden a supply boat with the outfitter and spent much of her time humming quietly. You wonder if the petroleum engineer has heard of Hemingway's Francis Macomber. You are sure that the outfitter hasn't and you suspect that the wife has. The engineer says that he and his son would like to catch one large brown trout before the trip ends, so you tell them to tie on Marabou Muddlers and drag those billowy monstrosities through certain troughs. Fifteen minutes later, the boy catches a large brown. This fish is eighteen inches long and broad of shoulder—a noble and beautiful animal that the Smith River has taken five years to grow. The father tells you to kill it—"Yeah, I guess kill it"—they will want to eat it, just this one, at the hotel. Suddenly you despise your job. You despise this man, but he is

paying your wage and so he has certain prerogatives. You kill the fish, pushing your thumb into its mouth and breaking back the neck. Its old sharp teeth cut your hand.

The boy is a bad winner, a snot, taunting his father now as the three of you float on down the river. Half an hour later, the father catches a large brown, this one also around eighteen inches. You are pleased for him, and glad for the fish, since you assume that it will go free. But the father has things to prove to the wife as well as to the son, and for the former your eyewitness testimony of a great battle, a great victory, and a great act of mercy will not suffice. "Better keep this one too," he says, "and we'll have a pair." You detest this particular euphemistic use of the word *keep*. You argue tactfully but he pretends not to hear. Your feelings for these trout are what originally brought you out onto the Smith River and are what compel you to bear the company of folk like the man and his son. *My conduct for ever onward must become your death.* The five-year-old brown trout is lambent, spotted with orange, like as an ocelot, swirling gorgeously under water in your gentle grip. You kill it.

I DON'T guide anymore. I haven't renewed my license in years. My early and ingenuous ideas about the role of a fishing guide turned out to be totally wrong: I had imagined it as a life rich with independence, and with a rustic sort of dignity, wherein a fellow would stand closer to these animals he admired inordinately. I hadn't foreseen that it would demand the humility of a chauffeur and the complaisance of a pimp.

And I don't seem to fish nearly as much as I used to. I have a dilemma these days: I dislike killing trout but I believe that, in order to fish responsibly, to fish conscientiously, the fisherman should at least occasionally kill. Otherwise he can too easily delude himself that fly fishing is merely a game, a dance of love, played in mutual volition and mutual empathy by the fisherman and the trout. Small flies with the barbs flattened are an excellent means for allowing the fisherman's own sensibilities to be released unharmed—but the fish themselves aren't always so lucky. They get eye-hooked, they bleed, they suffer trauma and dislocated maxillae and infection. Unavoidably, some die. For them, it is not

a game, and certainly not a dance. On some days I feel it's hypocritical to profess love for these creatures while endangering and abusing them so wantonly; better to enjoy the thrill of the sport honestly, kill what I catch, and stop fishing when I've had a surfeit of killing. On other days I do dearly enjoy holding them in the water, gentling them as they regain breath and balance and command of their muscles, then watching them swim away. The dilemma remains unresolved.

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves," wrote Oscar Wilde, and I keep wondering how a person of Wilde's urban and cerebral predilections knew so goddamn much about trout fishing.

"Why do you live in Montana?" people ask. For the trout, I answer. "Oh, you're one of those fanatical fisherman types?" No, not so much anymore, I say. It's just a matter of knowing that they're here.

## *Time and Tide on the Ocoee River*

Chris Spelius is inventing a boat. It's a whitewater kayak, only different. At the moment, in mid-July, it exists nowhere but in his mind's eye. Because the World Whitewater Rodeo Championships will occur in October, just three months away, time is short. The task that he faces is formidable: Think up this new boat, persuade the Dagger Canoe Company to design it and build it, then use it himself to win the men's kayak championship. Fat chance at his age, forty-one. Still, Spelius loves a severe challenge. He inhales the pheromones of competition the way others inhale barbecue smoke. He's a big guy, broad-shouldered and blond, with a wide friendly grin and a square Pete Rose jaw, and his enthusiasm radiates outward like heat off a brick oven. As we sit in a small-town café near the bank of a famous river in Idaho, over the aftermath of greasy rib steaks, he describes the logic behind this hypothetical craft. He wants me to comprehend its arcane merits, to share the thrill of a technological breakthrough. He begins folding his paper place mat into the shape of an avant-garde kayak.