

Camouflage

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For a long time, I never understood how fish could live in that creek in the first place. It measured barely six feet across in most spots, and except for the rare place where a pool had developed, it never seemed deeper than a half-foot. My grandfather first stood me on the sandy bank across from our cabin when I was five. He put a salmon egg on my hook, locked a lead shot into place with his teeth a short way up the line, and showed me how to drop the bait gently into the flow and allow it to sink partway to the creek bed. The speed of the water would keep it from snagging in the rocks below. I should hold a small slack of line with my left hand between my thumb and index finger, waiting for the slightest nibbling of a trout to let it be pulled away and, as the slack tightened, set the hook in the fish's mouth. I should not cast—high grass and sage and willow branches waited eagerly to snag my hook. I should not jerk the end of my rod if I felt a strike. If I did everything right, the trout would nibble, the slack would set the hook, I would keep the tip of the rod slightly in the water as it bent and danced and I reeled in my line slowly and evenly, and then before the lead shot reached the first eyelet I would carefully lift the rod-tip while backing away from the bank so that the fish would, in a swinging motion, be brought over dry earth, where it was free to flop off the hook and flail in the dirt until I pinned it down with foot or hand. These were my instructions every spring we returned to Rock Creek. Each spring the routine felt more familiar, something a long winter could never wipe away.

I added my own variations as I got older, one a kind of underhand cast used for sending a line downstream around obstructions, another a different way to bring a fish to shore. As I got older, my grandfather strayed farther away from where he had stationed me, first one fishing hole away, then two,

until I moved from hole to hole myself with only a vague rendezvous point in mind. By the time I was twelve, we were rising early in the morning to fish up the gorge from the cabins, where native Loch Levens might wait for us, where, hours later and two miles upstream, the highway would have wrapped around the mountain to meet the gorge again and my grandmother might sit in our car with sandwiches. My grandfather and I would lose each other along the way, then find each other again, as if an invisible tether had tightened and then relaxed between us. No matter how long it had been since I last saw him, I felt no danger in that V of high rock slopes with its narrow ribbon of water and shrub running below. In that area of the country, the desert side of the California Sierras, you always watched for rattlesnakes, but I never found anything more on the trail than a sloughed skin. Most personal histories of fishing include not so much the size and type of catches as what someone has added to those first basic instructions, how far someone has moved beyond that first sandy bank into different, sometimes more dangerous, terrain. In my forties, I spent a night in one of those cabins again, and I fished a little that evening from that first fishing hole a few yards away. Early the next morning, I moved up the gorge, having some luck here and there, rediscovering the pleasure of a native trout's strike over any other, but I didn't make it all the way to the highway. Halfway there, on the trail from one hole to the next, I came around a willow to find myself less than twenty feet from a cougar. We stared at each other. I had just enough time to wonder if staring at a cougar or looking away was the right thing to do—I couldn't remember. The animal didn't seem eager to attack me. Then I turned around slowly and walked back in the direction from where I'd come.

When did it happen, that first spring or later, that I actually saw the back of a trout hovering above the smooth stones? Until then, it had been all abstract: the soft rush of creek, the song it made, the background noise of magpie and hawk, the smell in the air of sage and turpentine. I put the line in the water and waited, and if I was lucky a fish would find my bait and I would bring it tumbling just under the surface to shore. But when did it happen that I recognized the natural camouflage, that I saw the one trout idling under its low-hanging branch or deep in its eddy? And then the next, and the next? When did admiration become a separate pleasure from pursuit? Maybe the day I stood on the sandy bank near the cabin, the day the hatchery truck arrived and parked along the highway across the creek and just upstream from where I watched. The truck looked no different than a milk truck, steel gleaming in the sun, a wide hatch at the top. The driver got out and pulled himself up to

the catwalk along the side of the tank. He flipped open the hatch and dug deep into its darkness with a long-handled net.

It was sunny, it was noon, it was the first time I ever saw what I found later to be a monthly ceremony. Out of the dark came fifty rainbows at a time, a riot in their net, emptied across the surface of the creek in one sweeping motion, glittering on their way down. The driver dug into the tank at least twenty times, and each time the full net coming out of darkness, the dripping sweep through air, the silver raining miraculous. It didn't take long for some to rush for their rods and drop lines downstream from where fish were landing in the creek. Some caught their limit in no time. I don't remember how old I was that day, and I don't remember if I kept my line in the water, if trying to catch hatchery trout seemed too much of a distraction from the magic in front of me. What I do remember noticing is how easily all those hundreds of fish disappeared under the wavering surface. How I would look down and see only rocky creek bed, wavering, even though I knew the creek to be jammed. When did it happen, how old was I when I could finally see the back of a trout hovering above the creek bed? How much later did I realize that was the fish you rarely caught, that you should not even try to catch? You saw it for a different reason, just for a moment, then it disappeared.