

At the River

by Sydney Lea

This strange tale unfolds by moving water in Wyoming. It's a fisherman's story, involving an enviable spot to cast a fly, so out of an inveterate angler's secrecy, I won't specify the exact location, though I'll never go back there now.

All you need is a picture in any case. Early September. I could see slate canyons, hawks and eagles soaring all day, more than my liveliest imagination could have conjured, through air so clear that it winked with frost at sunrise. That world, of course, contained more, much more. And yes, the river running by my camp teemed with trout.

Never had I believed so completely in the sufficiency of quotidian *things*, a sense bound up with what I'll remember in this account. Let me state something right off that will become more and more obvious. Sometimes I'm a person too bent on finding connections among things I observe, even, or perhaps especially, when most of the observations are inner and visionary, if you'll forgive that grandiose word. Is this the sort of thing you also do? I mean, do you make up some narrative that threads things together by way of what we glibly call *mere imagination*? Is your narrative for that reason flatly untrue? I won't tip my hand on such a matter. Not yet.

But back to those everyday things. I'd slipped into that splendid corner of the world as easily as I might have into bath water—no struggle, no ripple. I might have been carried there on air. I'd hyperbolize if I said that I became, as sentimentalists sometimes claim, *one with my environment*, but that's how my thoughts tended. All day, I watched late-summer clouds of ephemerids hatch and lift from the water. An indescribable radiance poured through those countless, lacy wings. The frantically feeding fish were a challenge and a glory to anyone tossing fine steel and feather onto the big river, whose mirror-like surface belied its power.

One noon I so forgot myself that I wandered midstream, no footing left, the current washing me south. It was deep and rough there, yet I was full of vague thanks that I'd

held onto my rod. I eventually made my way to the shallows and put the whole adventure out of mind. I struggled out of my chest waders and emptied them. Surrounded by all manner of brilliance, I scarcely felt the wet of my clothes. And all day long, those hefty, eager trout. I'd have no cause to exaggerate my fishing stories.

Most days I'm like anyone else: I take a step at a time, my hours consumed for the most part by small matters. That sort of existence feels comfortable, even gratifying now and then. But I can get a yen for something I vaguely construe as higher. I'm sure the same urge comes on everyone now and again. The days I'm attempting to describe felt mystical, but again, physical details remained a central, all but exclusive part in that feeling.

Those details kept me from wanting anything beyond what lay at my disposal each day. As for a higher dominion, I woke up before dawn each morning to stars sown on the sky in their millions and that miraculous river's lisp, a day of splendor looming just beyond the evanescent darkness. Who needed more?

Once out of my tent, I'd melt skim-ice in a smutted kettle over a small but adequate fir-twig fire, whose smoke was so redolent it made me sigh. I'd sit on a bank among a few hardy, remnant wildflowers, warming my hands on a favorite tin cup until the beach stones dried and the mist climbed from the river. I'd hear the first redtail's or eagle's shriek, would watch ouzels wading along the banks, probing the shallows for nymphs. As the graceful mayflies hatched, the fish would rise for them. *Wake. Cook. Fish. Cook. Sleep. Wake.* Even my blue tin cup seemed sacramental. So sustaining did this daily life seem that I resented my trips to the tiny nearby town for tinned milk, bacon, coffee, whatever.

Among the few people I encountered in that patch of Wyoming were some, especially the barroom cowboys, who labored at local color for the sake of an easterner. The less they could actually provide, the more they invented in anecdote: "By Golly, I'll tell you what!"—and so on, all flamboyance.

The old man keeping the store was entirely different: taciturn, almost sullen, although what I saw may have been no more than some quietist reserve. His shop held a clutter of crosses, skulls, and strange shamanic figures. And something in his blade-

thin presence hinted at more than a past of bodily struggle—intractable cattle, wind-lashed winters, wearisome calving, stringing barbed wire, and so on.

What I respected in that proprietor may have been no more than evidence of a soul gone bitter with age, but in my strange zeal, his bearing implied to me that getting and spending were, if not quite sins, just necessary nuisances in his view.

I'd put off my shopping until I was down to nothing but fish and water, and I did have a perverse attraction to the storekeeper's almost icy demeanor. Beyond a need for food, one also has habits, good and bad: a pipe; some sweets; caffeine. I entered the little store, whose owner would scarcely say three words at a time. Three he said to me on my next to last morning were "John the Baptist."

Why on earth the Biblical allusion, I wondered? I stood perplexed until the old trader jerked his head toward a window behind him. I saw a young man at the back of the little building, hardly more than a boy from the looks. He sat cross-legged on the ground, sprigs of sage in his hair and beard. Gaunt and hollow-eyed, he'd been living, it seems, in the high desert to eastward, or so he'd told this clearly unimpressed older fellow with whom I shared terse conversation.

The boy wore a pack that showed a rough-sewn symbol for peace, a gigantic yellow flower, and a row of self-approving words: *I'm With the Righteous*. The storekeeper curled his lip in a sneer. I left.

Immediately after that visit for provisions, I began to feel that I'd be yanked from a dream of paradise, that I'd now go back home bereft, anything but rejuvenated. The Queen had cast off her scintillant robe. We'd shared wine whose savor no words of a waking man could describe, along with a never-before-heard music from somewhere, which had thrilled me to the quick. More: sentences had passed my lips and hers, so eloquent that it may have been their very splendor, whose particulars would instantly vanish, that brought me back to consciousness with a thud.

I was bereft, right enough. I recalled routine of a vastly different sort from what had upheld me for a week. Work would await me on rising, my bladder full, my fat clock clucking, my arms and legs sheathed in crepe-like skin, my car in the drive like a listless, wallowing hog. That's the sort of day—everybody has one, at least now and again,

especially perhaps on the job—when nothing appears to matter, nothing, even when I have prospects awaiting that aren't all bad, that may even look stimulating. They're not enough. Or at least they weren't enough anymore at the river, even though hordes of the same trout were feeding on the same lucent insects, the air was crystalline, and my blue cup was ready to be filled again. And no matter that pink Mars, when it showed after dark, seemed to blink at me alone through a notch in the Wind River Mountains; or that I heard a cougar's screech echoing in a coulee before blending with coyotes' howls, a unified, wild melody filling the countryside. No, no matter. Things were not enough anymore.

So my adventure's conclusion ended in dismay, to put it gently—which has endured. There'd be no further easy confluence of things, blood coursing through my body like the water itself, bright birds and animals and I in a wondrous, mixed dominion. All gone. Now I'd see a thing and my mind would tear from it to something it suggested. I was too painfully aware that the simple, unwilling sense of grand coherence had been sacrificed to my old inclination: once again, I was *laboring* to forge wholes out of disparities. The habit had recurred like a sickness from which I was confident I had recovered.

Owing to my brooding, I missed a dozen strikes. Trout spat my flies before I noticed they'd sucked them in. My curses were all but wordless as they caromed off the rocky shelves. I repented, swore again, swore more loudly, and repented again, not because of any doctrinal urge but because my words had troubled the flow of the air through high passes, the sun through my skin, the water through roaring rapids downstream, the fish through slicks and riffles. On the other hand, why not disrupt all that? It was unavailable now in any case.

I found ample grounds to keep cursing—at an osprey, of all things, as it stooped on a whitefish, and I persisted as it struggled to get the prey airborne. I resented the bird for having insufficiently moved me.

Oh so stirring, I snarled to myself.

I was, Lord knows, no fisher of men, but my physical situation seemed to push me in a Scriptural direction. I thought of a passage that has sporadically snared my attention since my teens: *Now the news of a higher kingdom is preached and everyone enters it violently*. Yes, it must have actually been stirring for Andrew, Simon Peter, and all the

other fishermen that the advent they'd been waiting for, even if unknowingly, now broke into their lives! Or did they break into it? As in so much of the Bible, there's an acutely ambiguous ring to these words.

Now a great trout, a rainbow, didn't so much break as *explode* into my own life, and I snapped my leader in reaction. This provoked further angry clamor from me, loud enough that I flushed a hare from hiding in nearby brush. I watched its random yawing, leftward, rightward. Almost comical, that manic weaving.

The hare's jagged path had a motive. That quick animal knew it was far more vulnerable to a raptor if it followed an unvarying path. I envisioned steely talons fanned, the predator's eyes beads of heat, cruel and keen. Again, I loathed that old impulse to appropriate some kind of meaning for myself to what I'd seen, no matter how contrived. Each thought I had in that instant became a precipitous turn from what had prevailed in these late days. My yen for significance felt overwhelming.

Come nightfall, a hot wind blew in from the easterly desert and met the prevailing chill of the mountains. Hard rain came on. My small tent's canvas trapped the dampness and made me sweat, and each time sweat woke me, I'd lament the absence of those blue-white stars and planets, scattered from pole to pole. Or rather, I'd lament what had been my response to them, which seemed so beyond me.

River fog stayed on until about noon next day, or so my hunger implied. I wore no watch. In due course, the fog lifted and the sky returned to caerulean. For all of that, I was done. I knew I'd never return, because my longing to save what I'd known earlier on that trip would be self-conscious and therefore self-defeating. I struck the tent, packed up my grip, all but the cup, because I meant to taste my river one last time.

My sweet gone river.

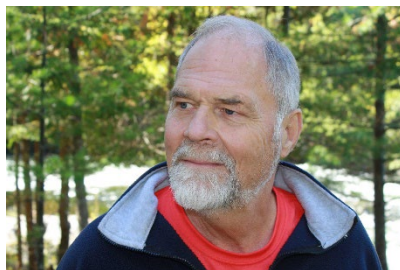
Hunkered on a beach I'd used from time to time for a midday nap, I gazed at a spot where the current broke over ledge. A face appeared in the rapids. At first I assumed it was my own image, but I knew there couldn't be so clear a reflection from moving water, and the angle was all wrong. The eyes in that face darted back and forth across my own face, as if to watch this intrusive angler from all points of view. Hair fanned around the countenance in the water like some dark nimbus.

I flung my blue cup at the apparition, for some reason imagining the taste of flesh and blood. The cup washed away. I heaved myself from the sand, afraid to stay any longer. I tore from the beach, with only my rod in hand. *Tore* is the word, exactly: I thought I heard an actual ripping sound.

On my way to the village, I sought to drag my thoughts back down to earth. A mind can deceive, I knew, perhaps especially on what's called vacation, a suspension of routine. Surely, I figured, what I saw was a phantasm. Had it somehow been spurred by the old goad of duty, of obligation, the welling up in my soul of an inscrutable urge to rise from what lay capaciously before me?

I felt foolish but also curiously bent on spreading my news, which did feel violent. I burst into the old man's store, all breathless, and asked its laconic owner, "Have you seen him? Have you seen John the Baptist?"

The old man's eyes looked into mine: "When you did," he answered.



A former Pulitzer finalist in poetry, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can*, is due in early 2024, and his second novel, *Now Look*, in spring.