

Knee Deep in the Mother of God

My daughter, Kiya, and I pull off the narrow mountain highway and park on a cracked asphalt strip. Below us a ribbon of green water emerges from the dry brush, then curves out of sight, exactly where the guidebook said it would be. The author assures us it is stocked with rainbow trout we can keep and endangered native cutthroat trout which must be released. I especially like the name, the St. Mary's. My hope is that the day will be a respite for both of us, an island of amity in a sea of recrimination. Standing side by side in a river named for a mother feels just right, and I sense we've come to this place for forgiveness as much as for fishing.

Although it's been a year, I must still occasionally remind myself that we're in North Idaho now. Before this we lived for sixteen years on an island in Southeast Alaska with one town and seventeen miles of road. Now we've moved to a place with no tides and little rain, where water is confined between the rims of riverbanks, lakes, and man-made ponds. My decision to move from Alaska was abrupt. My marriage had dissolved; my second-grade teaching job had become a suffocating ordeal. Kiya had just finished eleventh grade with friends she had known since kindergarten. I took her away at the end of June, just when the weather was warm enough for all-night beach bonfires and skiff excursions to far islands. Friends called long distance for the rest of the summer describing the adventures they were having without her. Small-town kids do not easily accept a new 12th grader, and her senior year is a painful ordeal. In Idaho she has no tight group of friends, no history, no identity. She is a fish out of water in a wheat-growing place. She blames me for her misery.

This may be the last time the two of us fish together. In a week we'll pack her small, red truck with everything a teenager needs to make it in the world: stacks of CDs, shoes, jeans, a tie-dyed beanbag chair. She's not headed for college; her future is more uncertain. A job of any kind, an apartment of her own. I've tried to persuade her to stay in the area, give the local university a try. *You could live in a dorm, find friends who are more like you, be on the snowboard team.* Her answer is emphatic—*no*.

Perhaps because her day of departure is drawing near, she has agreed to fish with me. We stand together in the chilly current, casting small copper

lures towing treble hooks with the barbs crimped down to make the releasing easier. Within minutes my line telegraphs the bite I've been waiting for. A mottled olive back breaks the surface, and I tow it within reach. The colors on its side are like a mountain dawn, the crimson slashes on its throat the color of fresh blood. This is a cutthroat trout and must be put back. I hold it gently in the flow so that I can extricate the hook without tearing its jaw. In spite of my care and good intentions the fish darts away with a ragged lip, weakened by the struggle.

Here willows and alder grow close to the river. Song-sparrows warble from the underbrush; a red-tailed hawk rides high overhead. Our senses are at odds: sizzling from the neck up in mid-afternoon heat, numb and senseless from the knees down. The more chilled we become, the more often we lose our footing on the slick, river-pounded cobbles. We stagger and slip, we laugh, gripping each other like pedestrians on an icy street. That algae underfoot, I want to explain, is just one filament in a complex web of interactions and processes. Green cells bask in sunlight, sipping a broth of minerals and salts, working alchemical magic by converting light to sugars and starch. Beneath our feet delicate mayfly larvae, snails, and copper-colored water pennies graze on subriverine pastures. Caddisflies spin lacy nets and set them perpendicular to the current. On a flat rock Kiya finds a dozen dry husks with legs and tails, stonefly skins unzipped and shed when the time arrived to leave the water and take to the air. I'm hoping we'll catch a rainbow trout, a fish we can take home and eat. Each bite of pale flesh will contain a bit of sunshine, a bit of algae, a bit of the river's spirit. *When you leave home, I want to tell her, the St. Mary's will flow in your blood, her riverbed will lodge in your bones.*

By day's end we've hooked three cutthroats. We released each one and watched it dart away, a spark in the amber-green current. We braided flat river grass and made circlets for our hair. We sat on flat stones, ate sandwiches, and tossed the crumbs into the river to atone for the crushed and dying invertebrates we left in our wake. We spoke without words about childhood and how it vanished like smoke.

Twilight has arrived, and the river is a rippling band of lead. Mayflies dip and rise. With only moments to live the adult females have no need to hunt, to eat. Their bodies have become hollow caverns whose single purpose is to hold, then deposit their eggs. I watch them skim close to the river's surface and imagine thousands of microscopic spheres falling into the current. In response, trout rise to feed. Mayfly and trout meet at the wavering border of air and water, to predate, to procreate. Concentric circles mark the moment of each encounter, widen, then drift downstream. Kiya and I could fish now, but choose to watch instead. We sit together in the dusk listening to the murmur of the river, a whisper from the St. Mary's that we recognize and accept, a time to catch, a time to release.