A Fish Out of Water

Since I was old enough to hold a pole I have attended my family’s annual Memorial-Day-Weekend fishing trip to Pelican Lake up in Orr, Minnesota. Pelican Lake--the primary economic driver of that corner of Cook County--unlike any other place in my life has remained mostly unchanged. For almost twenty years I have enjoyed the escape to the North and gratefully I have yet to witness its beauty become marred by evidence of ever-expanding human dominance.

I have, however, witnessed the transformation of the green velvet horse pastures that once lined the shoulders of County Road 5 by my house in Stillwater, devoured by the grinning mouth of suburban sprawl, paved over by serpentine lanes with clichéd names and row after row of hideous green-roofed condos. The growth of the suburbs is a painful necessity, watched in silent horror by the generations that were here before that hill was a Taco Johns, before that prairie became a Starbucks and a Verizon store, yet we are helpless to stop it. Nature’s downfall is the gruesome reflection of our own ascendency.

Unlike the accommodating soft hills and welcoming plains that make up the foundation of the Twin Cities suburbs, the northern Minnesotan landscape defends itself against the push of civilization. Driving up highway 53 to Cook County, this becomes quite clear. North of Duluth, hundreds of miles of dense, coniferous forests stand upon a harsh, rocky terrain. The highway, a winding representation of the capability of human dedication, passes through still woods and exploded rock to press continuously north. The farther one gets from the throbbing heartbeat of the Twin Cities, the rougher the land becomes. Traversing the iron range where Bob Dylan grew
up is like traveling in a different world entirely: in the absence of the millions of people who make up the Twin Cities and surrounding areas, the air becomes a living thing. Not having to fight past the overwhelming number of cars and cigarettes and pollution of the south, the air takes on a potency that could make any city-dweller physically well. Still and dense and filled with the musky aroma of pine rot and moss, it blows through car vents and sticks on my skin the minute I climb out of the car, with wrinkled clothes, stretching my legs and shielding my eyes from the glare of the winking water.

Even now, decades after my first fishing trip, the lake appears exactly as it did when I started going. The gently sloping boat launch next to two rickety docks, the sheer pine-topped cliffs ringing the majority of the lake’s edges, the sleepy islands breaking up the water’s surface with tangled jungles of green--all unchanged. The only difference is now we appear in t-shirts and shorts whereas a decade ago it was almost guaranteed we would need winter coats and double layers of pants--a pleasant but not unnoticed presage of climate change, perhaps. In addition to the improved weather, my skills with a pole have gradually improved over the years, as has my patience for the activity.

I remember the biggest fish I ever caught up there. At the time I was quite small--only ten or eleven years old, so in retrospect he wasn’t a trophy, but the battle he gave me was immense. The fight wasn’t a long campaign--it was an exploding skirmish. He dove, took line, then found bottom and had no choice but to bend to the pull of my line and face me. It was immediately clear as his body broke the surface--and kept breaking and breaking through those steely gray waves--that he was far too much mass for my lightweight line and pole; we would need the net. As I began to lift his massive weight, my brother carefully maneuvered the net
beneath him, just in time for the violent *snap* of my line and the accompanying splash of the fish’s body hitting water and net. And then he began to thrash.

Most fish his size know not to thrash in the net. Though it’s said fish don’t have long-term memories, they must have evolved to develop instincts for human-related scenarios. Many large fish who have become ensnared in my family’s nets with lure in cheek seem to understand that any fevered attempt of escape does more to hurt than to help. Thrashing causes the exposed barbs of the lures (we usually use lures with a single, three-barbed hook) to tangle hopelessly with the netting, which in turn causes the fish to linger out of the water for longer periods until we can manage to untangle, measure, and release them.

But this fish, this beautiful giant, had forgotten not to struggle. His fear of suffocation combined with the pain in his mouth were too much for him. I can still remember those ten minutes, how his fight resulted in the hook being buried deep in his throat, and how my father patiently and tearfully wrestled it free only to have him float, belly up atop the choppy waves. How my dad cursed the gulls who tried to land on him and devour him there on the water, but how it was an eagle, beautiful and graceful, who finally took him to the sky, clutched in golden fists. I recall the salty tracks of tears on my face as I cursed myself for destroying such a magnificent creature. Not even the fact that his body would provide nourishment to the eagle could comfort me, because eagles are more than capable of catching their own food, and this fish had obviously outlived many other, stupider comrades.

The worldview of a fish is unchanging, and his behavior is based purely on instinct and necessity—until his “lunch” decides to fight back and force him out of his only known environment. The confusion and fear tied to that moment must be immense. To see a world that is not one’s own, a world which steals the very life from one’s lungs—that is terror. The fish’s
violent reaction to being netted is akin to my own netlike struggle against the shrinking natural landscape.

For humans, there is no single moment, no fevered flash of fear that rips our world away from us. The death of our world is slow: it looks us in the eye with a wry, sad smile. Before we learned to settle and before we became so selfish with the land and its resources, we were like fish, living out of necessity, knowing only about the world immediately around us, using the resources to survive and raise our young. For centuries, humans and nature have coexisted, the former taking only what was needed from the latter, the latter giving without voice, consent, or complaint, but each maintained its own position until human life became more than the goal of surviving each day, or month, or year. We have all been hooked, by our ancestors and by our own lazy unwillingness to respect the natural world. Like a fish out of water, we are becoming a species without a natural environment. Will we be fortunate enough, patient enough to pull each painful barb from the face of our habits so that we may return to the water--return to earth before it is gone? Or, are we as helpless in our own lives and decisions as the beautiful creature who died by my hook, unjustly, unwillingly, fighting until its last breath?

I envy the fish. Though people believe they have no thoughts, no goals, no inspirations, no perception of time--future or past--no emotions or dreams, they exist. Day by day they swim, hunt, eat; they lay eggs and they stalk through the weeds. The instinct that drives them to flee from larger fish also compels them to preserve their surroundings. Like all non-human animals, fish are perfectly adapted to and feel no need of improving their environments. It is this missing element that humans desperately need: to look at nature not through a lens of progression or enhancement, but nakedly, so that we may recognize the one-directionality of our actions and curb them before all the land, fierce or welcoming, is gone.