Practices

Fly-Fishing

Christopher Schaberg

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Fly-Fishing

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A Glimpse

I fish the faster water where it slows,
and kick up rocks to chum the pools with nymphs.
Why am I here? The river only knows,
but I'll keep at it till I've had a glimpse
of a brook trout's orange and green, a rainbow's pink
and dipped the colors briefly in the air
of pine and lupine, before I let them sink
back into the shadows that they were.
I apologize to those of you
who haven't felt the river's push and pull
or drunk its air until the mind turns blue
and think that fishing's just a bunch of bull.
I concede, it is a waste of time,
this ploy to sense another through a line.

—Greg Keeler

CONTENTS

Fly-Fishing 1

Afterword 97
Minor-Fishing Lessons

Bibliography 103

Fly-Fishing

I'M STANDING IN WATER UP TO MY WAIST. It's cold, the ice having melted only a few weeks prior. But I'm wearing fleece pants beneath my waders, so I am warm and dry. I'm making my way slowly toward a stand of submerged dogwood trees that are poking up through the surface in about four feet of water. Once I'm about fifty feet away from the red creaturely fingers of the branches, I'll pull a dozen coils of line off my reel, piling it in front of me in the water, and then cast a chartreuse-and-white minnow-pattern fly past the submerged tree, retrieving the fly with darts and twitches to give it a simulated fleeing appearance. I'll bring my fly past each side of the flooded limbs, avoiding them while trying to attract the fish that I know are lying in wait. I can't see what is happening under the water—but I can feel it, imagine it. I'm *almost* there.

I wrote the majority of this book over one summer in northern Michigan, fly-fishing in the inland lakes and ponds that pepper the coastline of Lake Michigan, where I'm from and where I return for a portion of each year. I wrote before I went fishing, after returning from fishing, and even during fishing (in my head, at least, and one time I even audio-recorded myself trying to "write" a part of the book out loud to myself as I fished—that was awkward, and I didn't attempt it again). While I wrote this book, I read various fly-fishing memoirs and guidebooks, and I paid attention to the ways people talked and wrote about fly-fishing, and how they mythologized it. I've attempted here to write my own fly-fishing book. But the truth is that this practice is shared, even as it's highly personal and individualized. And part of the shared aspect of fly-fishing is that it includes more than the people who fish—more than the humans who do it. It always exceeds the tactical mind. I try to reflect on fly-fishing, or project it out onto a map or grid of knowledge, or experience it fully . . . but it always escapes.

Fly-fishing gets its name from the typically small lures that are used, called *flies*. Contra their name, they don't always represent insects. Plenty of them *do* look like bugs: ants, mosquitoes, mayflies, grasshoppers, dragonflies, and all their larval forms. But they can also mimic shrimp, crawfish, frogs, leeches, or small fish. Even mice. In fact, sometimes they don't represent anything at all. I thought it would be useful to begin by describing what flies are, since they are the literal point of attachment between me and the fish that I pursue. A lot of the flies I use look basically like this:

There might be a little red material near the head, small reflective eyes, or some silvery or sparkly strands tied into the body. A fly like this looks stiff and alien when out of water, but when it swims, it comes to life.

I didn't always tie flies—for a long time I felt that it was a waste of time and too much extra crafty stuff—but I do it these days to amplify the experience of fly-fishing. For there is a special thrill that comes with catching a fish using the cumbersome technique of fly-fishing *and* using a fly made by hand.

When I was eleven years old, I fell headlong into an obsession with fishing. I learned how to fish with the intensity of a budding (if somewhat antisocial) adolescent. I devoured books and magazines on the subject, and I absorbed the ephemeral lore of random old-timers I crossed paths with, who would share a productive technique, secret hole, or effective lure pattern. I have a hazy recollection of saving babysitting money, buying an inexpensive fly rod combo kit (a two-piecer, line already on

the reel), and practicing casting across the lawn. I don't think I ever used it on the water, and I'm not sure where it ended up.

Nobody in my immediate family fished, but my parents gladly indulged this obsession—probably because it kept me out of the house for hours at a time, pursuing the sunfish and bass that populated the suburban ponds near our home in southern Michigan. I became so engrossed with fishing that I convinced my parents to homeschool me the following year. My mother responsibly researched and purchased a curriculum, but in truth my weekday education rapidly became one-third book learning, two-thirds solitary fishing. But I was learning other lessons, too, as I explored those ponds. I was learning about ecosystems and watersheds, weather and seasons, predators and prey. I was encountering life cycles and fertilizer runoff, die-offs and different species' fragility and resilience, private property and shared commons.

I would occasionally leave fishing for a year or more at a time, but then always return to it with passion. I didn't fish a single day while I was in college, but after I graduated and was working a summer job in Wyoming guiding river trips, I discovered fly-fishing on the streams that coursed through Yellowstone National Park—I was hooked once again. I spent the following two years earning my master's degree while fishing the waters around Bozeman, Montana. Then my rod and flies sat dormant again for six years as I worked on my PhD in Davis, California.

When I moved to New Orleans for a teaching job at Loyola University, I didn't plan on taking up fishing again, even though the license plates bragged about Louisiana being "Sportsman's Paradise." But after a couple years I discovered I could fly-fish a postapocalyptic swoop of the Mississippi River, and then later

I ventured into the lagoons of City Park and around Bayou St. John—not for the biggest fish or the most picturesque scenes, but because I had to do it once I saw fish swimming there. I don't know how to get by, otherwise.

When I can't fish, I try to find time to tie my own flies at home: small puzzles of various materials that, when presented in the right way in the right spot, might just catch fish. Fly-fishing for the small fish near my home in the neighborhood of Mid-City, and catching these fish on the flies I tie, has become a centering—or really, a humbling—activity for me during the school year. And in the summers I fish as much as possible when I'm back up in Michigan.

I'm not going to turn to rods or casting next. In fact, I'm not going to talk about line or knots or gear in any real detail. There are plenty of good and instructive resources that outline just how to tie flies; how to assemble the rod; how to load the reel with backing, line, and leader and tippet; how to tie different knots; then how to cast in different conditions on different kinds of water. But these granular topics, when written down or otherwise recorded, can easily feel too abstruse for the uninitiated—or too academic, for someone who feels fishing in their bones.

I'm taking a different tack. Here I reflect on how fly-fishing has been a constant in my life, and about the lessons I draw from fly-fishing. Or just as often, how I run into conundrums around fly-fishing—while I'm fishing, or preparing to fish, or reflecting on it later. If fly-fishing has become a mainstay in my life, it always leads to farther-flung realms of thought, ob-

servation, and practice. The things we do that we love most, the activities that give us peace, or focus, or thrills, are entangled with all the other parts of life. I hope to show how those inevitable entanglements play out around fly-fishing, for me.

Two days ago, here in northern Michigan near the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, I was sitting where I am sitting now as I write this. Two days ago, I was feeling a buildup of anticipation to go fishing the following morning.

I had spent several days preparing for this outing: getting my flies organized and repaired, arranging my leaders and tippets in my vest pockets for easy access, deciding what layers to wear (or to have as backups), and putting my waders and boots in the back of my car. I was literally counting down the hours until I would sneak out of the house at 4:45 a.m. (so as not to wake my three sleeping children) and drive to the spot where I would hike in to a small lake in the nearby national park. I was debating the different possible shorelines where I might fish, imagining the various contingencies and varying conditions that would make me choose one area over the other, or fish on the surface versus underwater.

I spent a lot of time that day mentally planning and visualizing the morning to come. But now I am sitting here again; that morning has passed. Now I'm writing about fishing.

It was a good fishing morning: misty at dawn, mirror-calm water, and fish dimpling the surface of the lake. A pair of nighthawks were looping and diving right at the water's edge. My friend Glen and I caught dozens of fish in the first couple hours, releasing them all back into the water. The sun came up strong

in a blue sky and created intense glare on the lake—and Glen had left his sunglasses in his car. This made it difficult for him to see where his fly was landing, or where fish were holding. The midmorning hours were slow. We trudged along in waist-deep water, casting to promising-looking spots where we knew fish should be, but they were skittish. We saw plenty of fish swimming in the shallows, sometimes darting right between us. But the water was so clear and the day so bright that it was, well, clear that they were not easily tricked into biting our flies. The wind also came up and created just enough chop on the water to make precise casting much more challenging.

Toward the end of the morning, we waded over to a protected shallow bay and managed to catch a few more nice fish that were hanging out in nooks between crowded reed stands. We hiked back to our cars tired and sore but satisfied—if also tacitly frustrated that the day had been less than ideal for fishing. It was illogical, really: we probably caught upward of a hundred fish, hadn't seen any other people, had been surrounded by loons and swans and sandhill cranes and green herons and redwing blackbirds—for all intents and purposes, a picture-perfect fishing morning.

But it *could* have been better. It could have been like *today*. Today, as I reflect on yesterday, it has been dead calm all day and mostly overcast with a slow-moving but nonthreatening cloud cover. Now *this* is when the fish are really active. Visibility is better for the fish (for spotting prey), and it is easier for us humans to blend in *and* see the fish moving below the surface. And so much easier to cast. Fly casting can be done in all sorts of conditions, but there's nothing like setting up a perfect cast and seeing it through without the line getting

blasted into oblivion by a fierce gust. Today the conditions are perfect.

Instead of fishing, though, today I am writing about fishing. This summer I have been alternating between reading about fishing and actually fishing. And now I am trying to write about fishing. What's so weird is that fishing has always been something I do when I'm *not* writing, or even something I do so I don't *have* to write (or read). So this blending that I'm doing here is a little uncomfortable and strange. I'm also intimidated by the volume of other texts that have already been written on fly-fishing. Just this past winter, as I was starting to outline this book, I was delighted (if also a bit anxious) to see that Mark Kurlansky had a new book out called *The Unreasonable Virtue of Fly Fishing*. I read the book, realizing that our experiences of fly-fishing were very different: his was rather narrowly focused on trout and salmon fishing in rivers (with some brief forays into exotic waters for other fish), whereas my own fly-fishing takes place almost exclusively on a series of lakes near where I grew up, in northern Michigan, and I primarily fish for panfish, bass, and pike. (This is not the standard image of fly-fishing, though it has its own long history.) But I am getting ahead of myself. Or rather, I never really knew where to start in the first place, so I am just jumping in wherever I can. Or whenever I can.

Fly-fishing has something to do with *time*, with the experience of losing track of time but also the anticipation of a time to come—a time that will then recede into the past, and even the highest-definition photographs cannot bring one back to the past present of being there. Losing a sense of time while fishing is a common feeling. As Kurlansky aptly describes it in his book, "There is always that moment, boots on, stepping

down into the river, like slipping through a magic portal" (243). And while this is hardly exclusive to fly-fishing, perhaps there is something about the rhythm of fly casting, or the fact that one is more apt to be *in* the water (a physical marker of time, flowing or lapping, even when standing still) when fly-fishing, that makes temporality a distinctly slippery thing here. The *timing* of fishing is also crucial: an hour or even a few minutes can make all the difference. Simply *finding* the time to fish is yet another temporal dimension.

I find myself looking back at my life to limn out when and why and how I started fishing. And I find myself contemplating the role that fishing plays in my present (ongoing) life now. I wasn't sure, at first, whether to call this book *Fishing* or *Fly-Fishing*, because I didn't always fly-fish. I started out as an eleven-year-old kid fishing with worms beneath a red-and-white plastic bobber, and I gradually learned all sorts of artificial lures and how to use different types of reels and rods . . . and only later, after college, did I really take up fly-fishing in earnest. I'll tell that story later.

There are roughly four genres of fly-fishing books: memoirs, travelogues, how-to guides, and histories. Most books on the topic blend or borrow across these different modes. I find myself falling into these modes from time to time, yet resisting them when I recognize them—always seeking to climb out of the ruts of fly-fishing writing conventions.

I'm attempting in these pages to retrace my life in fishing, and also to make connections with ideas and encounters that fishing has made possible for me. Thomas McGuane sums up

the genre of the fishing memoir this way: most writers follow a predictable path, "remembering their first waters, their mentors, their graduation through various methods; there is for each of us a need to understand and often to tell our own story in fishing" (252). This description feels accurate to my own experience writing about my life in fishing. At the same time, I'm trying to resist some patterns and expected turns.

My fishing these days takes place predominantly with a fly rod, which is why the book is framed around this specific kind of fishing. But I won't expound too much on what makes fly-fishing special or unique, or the most artistic kind of fishing. Fishing is more instinctive and expansive, both for me and around the world, wherever and whenever it happens. I've ended up fly-fishing owing to a series of random encounters across my life—that's all. I've stuck with it because there are certain (or uncertain) ineffable things I like about it. It's not exactly minimalist, but I have embraced a relatively simple version of fly-fishing.

In about two weeks I am scheduled to take our ninety-six-year-old neighbor Ted on what he described as his "last fishing trip." He has been fly-fishing on the lakes in our region as long as I have but has not been out much over the past five years. (His last time fishing was a guided trip in Montana two years ago, the summer before the COVID-19 pandemic.) When I was talking to Ted on the phone to plan our outing, he ended the call by telling me he was "full of great anticipation." He sounded giddy, like an almost century-old child.