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The Fish Metaphysical

The marvels in a committed angler's eye.

by Allen Jones

YOU GET TO HELL CREEK LIKE THIS:

From Billings and its early-morning clatter of schools and delivery trucks, you drive in traffic north to Roundup, then alone to Winnett. From that white "W" on the hill, you hurry to Jordan, the boat swinging behind you like some recalcitrant toddler.

If you're late anyway, and you are, stop in at the Hell Creek Bar for a beer and a bump and a few tips on the fishing. There's a pile of red-faced locals in a half-circle by the window, arguing about the Constitution, fish and trucks. Like the Cuervo, take their tips with a few grains of salt. Some say the Big Dry Arm's the best, some say the piece of shore along Devil's Creek. Don't believe a word of it. It's all good; it's all bad.

If it's raining to the north, or looks like it might, you should stay and drink. There's a big-screen TV on the wall, and a pool table with enough room for rail shots, and a jukebox with nothing but country. And if you can keep them away from politics, the ranchers are the best company in the world. That last stretch of road down into the lake is like a staircase, and with enough water, its top layer of clay and silt turns into gumbo—a kind of sticky 40-weight. Impossible to pull a boat over. You're much better off with a drink in your hand.

But once there, no clouds, no worries, sliding the boat into the water—it's like pushing your chair back from the table.

The lake's calm, and the boat rides smooth at 20 knots. Drawing near one of the larger rocky points, you cock the old 30-horse Chrysler up out

of the water and drift to the downwind side. From the bow, you lower the small trolling motor, powered from a car battery and controlled with a foot pedal. Slowly. There're walleye down there, lying around in the warm, coffee sludge and taking the occasional minnow like a hand snatching flies from the air. This lake also holds northern pike, smallmouth bass, catfish, yellow perch, ling, carp...but walleye are what you're after. Sauger would be good as well—you're not picky—even though they are smaller and not as pretty.

You fish for walleye like this:

In these rocks and with these slow speeds, you use a bottom bouncer: a pair of wires that makes up two-thirds of a triangle. There's a weight on the bottom wire to keep the hooks mostly off the rocks while the top wire has space for a swivel, a medium-sized spoon and a hook harness strung with (according to preference and reputation) worms, leeches or minnows. You pull this rig with a droning patience, broken every 10 minutes or so by the thought that you may have lost your bait or that you may have had a hit and not known it.

The best places are the rocky points where an abrupt clay escarpment falls away into sandstone boulders and rough edges. The rest of the shore is clay, unsuitable for the predator fish. When you accidentally step off the boat ramp, you sink in up to your knee.

The fishing is better without the sun, in the mornings and evenings. But you're impatient, and even mid-day fishing is better than taking the time to set up camp. When they don't bite at 10 feet, you take it out to 20 and try it there. For whatever reason, your fish finder has become a mush of interference. Braids of floating algae or

boneyards of sunken trees. Which? The water spits out ropes of light.

They're still not biting. Walleye are typically deep-water fish, but everything you've heard has suggested that the Fort Peck is best fished in the shallows. You take it out to 30 feet just to be sure.

The chain-saw buzz of another motor pulses toward you, too far away to tell if it comes from the sky or the lake. In this stretch of dry wind and sun, the irritation is like a mosquito lost in a tent. After a few minutes, it fades.

Here's this lake, this enormous piece of water, and you're the only boat in sight. The only *person* in sight. Thank God there's still a body of water where you can skinny-dip without worrying about the church camp just down the trail, the kids with unbroken boots and the devil's own cigarettes hidden away in cellophane bags.

These Missouri River breaks are a collected residue, a massive runoff from the mountains to the west. Eighty million years ago chemical erosion turned the edge of the rising Rockies into clay, spreading it away into the inland sea just above where you fish. In the process of feeding the Missouri, runoff has since turned this deposit into a series of running corrugations, so steep in places the gumbo rolls up and skitters down the slope like dirty snowballs, finally tearing some farmer's wheat field into shreds.

The irony is that it's why you came here as well: running away, sort of.

Since they're still not biting, you run the boat up onto a small clay flat, brushy with sweet clover. As you slide poles through tent sockets, you try not to think about that quick movement through the weeds that could have been (and almost certainly was) a rattlesnake.

The sound of your voice singing Hank Williams startles a coyote out from under a bank less than 50 yards away. He runs up the hill, long-legged and gaunt, stopping to stare back at you with a hunter's face of compounded wisdom.

Within the next pair of hours, an early moon rises, and clouds build in the north over the Little Rockies. You push the boat out and begin trolling again, losing interest after only an hour. But that's fine. Bass are rising between you and the bank, and you unlimber your fly rod.

The depth that makes for good walleye trolling puts you within casting range of the shore. Toss a popper over there—a square-headed piece of fancy popcorn—and jerk it back, six inches at a time. Everything is good and perfect, and it's as if the nerves in your hands have threaded through into your rod. There's just suddenly a bass on the end of your line. You catch three small ones, and that's enough for supper.

The fillets are light and tender and not as good as walleye would have been, perhaps only because you were fishing for walleye. Coyotes squall and bicker at the top of the coulee. You go to sleep with the odors of smoke and fish in the rolled-up shirt you use for a pillow.

The next morning you troll with sleep in your eyes, twisting in your seat to knock the kinks out of your back. The first pass through the rocks gives up nothing, but that second pass, out a little deeper...maybe the moon is right or the air pressure has dropped or Jupiter just aligned with Mars, whatever; but they're suddenly *biting*.

Walleye aren't the greatest fighters in the world. They're almost lazy, often flopping the hook out of their mouths at the boat. But the trolling speed can add something to the fight, and the big ones, the lunkers you're catching now, seem to put on a good fight regardless.

Then it comes. It's been a half-hour since the last bite, and you've almost decided to reel in and head back to the truck. But then your rod jumps down toward the water, and the sudden, first flash of energy is like a seizure, straightening your legs and tensing your arms. You lean back in your seat like a marlin fisherman and kick the troller's control halfway across the boat trying to cut the connection. The boat drifts to a stop. You're using 12-pound test, thick as a string of saliva, but now you're wondering if it's enough. Is that cracking noise, like an ice tray flexing, the fibers in your rod? The line cuts an arc through the water, away from the bank, and before you can flip your reel's release, the boat begins to move behind the fish. Jesus.

Only when the first run is finished, the only really significant fight, do you pull back, forcing it toward the surface. Twenty feet away a piece of

back breaks through the water and rolls down again. Next to the boat its head pushes past the surface like a mastiff, shaking at the lure in a spray of teeth and water. Jesus. You've never caught a pike like this before.

Its side rolls up toward you. Next to the Magic Marker rule you've drawn on an oar, the pike measures somewhere around 43, 45 inches. Without lifting it from the water, you reach down with a gloved hand and insert your fingers into its gill plate. With your other hand, you pull and push at the treble hook in the corner of its mouth, finally extracting it with only a little blood. You stand and stare down.

It kicks and sputters and finally glides away down into the murk. You sit back with a satisfaction that could only be called smug.

It would be easy, at this point, to turn the morning into something it's not. The stuff that's behind you—the rough job, the aging parents, the menopausal wife—encourages high-minded comparisons. Isn't this a perfect metaphor for lost youth? Dragging a fish through muddy water? Or perhaps there's something here about the illusion of appearances. Even the fish finder drew a blank, yet...you just caught the fish of the century and let it go. Or better yet, maybe you could find a reflection of life itself in this act—pulling a jumble of lures mindlessly through the water in the hope something will take it and run.

Perhaps it's finally enough

to *fish*, collecting the moments like crumbs off a counter. Enough to *live*, trying to more fully experience those simple acts of trolling and casting. The world is always around the corner, waiting for you to come back to it: fish and water, earth and light. Perhaps it's enough to entertain the knowledge that the more fish, the more likely you are to die with your waders on.

Drive back a different way than you came, pulling your shirt collar away from the sunburn. Stop in at the Jersey Lily in Ingomar and have a pot of beans and a beer. On the table toward the door sit four middle-aged bikers on their way to Sturgis, the men with wind-torn beards and bellies hanging out of their shirts, the women with tattoos and *really* short shorts. On the table toward the rear, a rancher and his wife sit in their stiff best, talking in short sentences about everything everyday, enjoying themselves just as plainly as the bikers. The beer is good enough, the beans are unbelievable and the bartender grins to himself and shakes his head as he fills your drafts.

It occurs to you that this might be the point, the exact point, where youth catches up, appearance falls through into reality and life makes sense; where the three largest pieces of the world fall together.

Smile back at the bartender as if nothing at all has happened.

