

Merrill Gilfillan

OLD RIVER, NEW RIVER

∞ *A Miscellany*

Red Dragonfly Press

CONTENTS

- A Chromatic Fantasy 11
- The Day F. T. Prince Came to Town 14
- The Pemmican: Notes with a Young Poet in Mind 17
- Rhymes with Little Wolf 20
- Poem Written for Coffee and Cakes 25
- Alfresco 26
- Notes on the Story 31
- Surrender at the Red Cloud Buttes 33
- Freehand 38
- A Note on "Salal" 39
- Two Sparrows 41
- New River, Old River 45
- For C. D. in a New Light Now 52
- For Dawn Powell (Reading in Place) 53

A CHROMATIC FANTASY

ONE SPRING DAY I happened across a decades-old illustration—no doubt from a large wall calendar—depicting a tow-headed boy with a bamboo pole holding up a brightly colored sunfish. I gazed at the five-inch green and yellow and orange creature for a moment, and moved on. But the image of the little fish and its brilliant design remained in my head. A day or two later I found myself committing to a project to catch, once again, a few of those lovely things—less for the frying pan than to simply behold them again, lift them up for a moment or two from their out-of-sight-out-of-mind depths and into an appreciative sunlight. I began to think of them as benign presences across North America, holding in their ponds and pools, secret gems of the hidden. The long-eared, the orange-spotted, the pumpkinseed, and the dazzling red-breasted. . .

A month before, a slow-rising and steady urge to wade across the South Platte River, simply cross it by foot in an older, nobler tradition after years of vapid bridges, captured my mind in the same manner. Finally, one balmy March morning, I drove ten miles south and walked to the unpre-suming juncture where Bear Creek enters the river, rolled up my trousers, and patiently negotiated the thirty yards across the mid-calf flow over sturdy chutney-colored gravel. And stepped out onto the right bank with a bracing, almost baptismal uplift of heart.

Riding the most recent upwelling, I wiped off my six-foot ultralight spincast rod and began to plot near-at-hand excursions for sunfish. It is quite a different thing, going out to ponds and small lakes east of the mountains, rather than fishing the racy foothills streams. The quietness of it all, standing comfortably on a rocky shore with the creamery of wild plum blossoms rampant on the spring landscape, with killdeers and loud yellowlegs going over. The rhythm is gentle and the adrenaline light. The retrieve of the spinner across a corner of the pond is expectant, but not demanding. It is the steady unhurried pace of the blue-sky lentic.

And of course the people of such settings, the fellow fishers, are a breed apart from the flyrod set of the mountains. They too are lentic: easy going, convivial, salt-of-the-earth people without a trace of L.L. Bean material. An elderly Cambodian man with rod holders. A large fellow in a wheelchair fishing with his wife. All happy to be out there, attached without a knitted brow to the pretty day by a line in the water.

Whenever I reeled in a small stocked rainbow trout, I was mildly disappointed, as I watched for the flash of sunfish on the line, just as a lotic fisherman is unhappy when he lands a whitefish rather than a trout. I fished Boulder County ponds, ponds in north Denver, even a reservoir or two in eastern Colorado. I was catching, among the bluegills, mostly green sunfish, with now and then a brighter specimen I couldn't name with certainty. They all looked good in the sun.

I resigned myself to waiting for a trip east to try for a pumpkinseed or a red-breast. But then one day at Sawhill Ponds an unexpected shunt occurred. Maybe it was the pair of avocets circling, crying overhead, that set it off. But the

subconscious and its technicolor processing made a strong suggestion: I needed to find a Lewis's woodpecker, that handsome green and red bird I hadn't seen, I realized, in nearly a decade.

The woodpecker would be a substitute, that was immediately obvious. But it would also be a leaner chase, with little folderol and less baggage. The following weekend I spent a morning along the St. Vrain River east of the foothills, checking the age-softened cottonwoods the Lewises prefer, with no luck. But a week after, near Basalt, Colorado, I found a pair in the broad valley of the Roaring Fork, and sat back for a long time to watch them sunning in the dead uppers of an oblong cottonwood grove. Three mules dozed on their feet in an adjoining pasture. A red-tail screamed far overhead. And there was the dense coniferous green of the woodpecker's back, the pomegranate red of the lower belly, a brash red any sunfish would feel at home in, grading to a fragile pink reminiscent of daybreak light on slumbrous clouds. The two birds even appeared damp from an earlier shower, their colors freshened and deepened.

As I watched, one of the mules behind me fell over with a thud to the ground, as if he had dozed too deeply, then adjusted himself, tucked his legs with little to-do and dreamed on.

POEM WRITTEN FOR COFFEE AND CAKES

Old Cheyenne men
elegant as cheetahs at ease
rest beneath a tree.
They know the great genomic luck
to not grow gangly lap-long beards
of the closed-coffin Spanish-moss variety.

The noon special at Tallulah's
beef and noodles, enough said.
But then it passes by piled on top
a summer cloud of mashed potatoes.
They might just as well call it "The Bankhead."

And you, Tallulah, with your kettles
singing on the stove—
When the karaoke people found this valley
you held them off with pool cues!