

Astream

American Writers on Fly Fishing

Edited by Robert DeMott



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Why I Fish



Kim Barnes

It's not the first time I've been fishing, I'm sure, although I'm only four. It's 1962, and I live in the Clearwater National Forest of Idaho, along with my mother and father and younger brother, my uncles and aunts and cousins, in our one-room wooden trailers that are circled in a creek-threaded meadow we call Pole Camp—not as in fishing poles (it will be years before I hear them called “rods”), but as in the cedar poles the men fell and skid to earn their daily wage. They are gyppos, from the word gypsy, and like the Roma people, we are nomads, itinerant, our self-built eight-by-twenty shacks fitted with wheels and tires and a heavy tongue that allows them to be hitched from site to site. We circle our camps near springs and creeks and the North Fork of the Clearwater River—this our only running water. No electricity, but in the communal wash shed is a wood stove that, when kindled, heats a high-hung tankful, enough for a quick shower. I love standing with my mother beneath the warm spray, the miracle of it raining down.

But today I am in the company of my uncle, the youngest of the four Barnes brothers who left the impoverishment of sharecropping in Oklahoma for the impoverishment of cutting poles in Idaho, where they make up the crew of their uncle's family operation. “No man should go hungry here,” their uncle has told them, remembering the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and it is true, just as it is true that hunger itself is relative. In another few weeks, we will fill our town lockers with huckleberries, and, in another locker, the venison we take each fall. The fish we catch the women will fry for breakfast, for lunch, for dinner, or they will slip them into milk cartons, and all through the winter I will study them there, caught in a frozen current of ice.



Photo by Robert Wrigley

Kim Barnes with cutthroat trout, Idaho.

Today, my uncle and I stay close to home, fishing the narrow reaches of Deer Creek, which drains the meadow, parallels the narrow road. The day is hot, and we stop at a roadside spring to dip our hands in the water and drink. Sawbugs cut the quiet, their summer buzz a reminder that the woods are tinder-dry, that the men must rise in the dark and work with the dew lest the spark of their work set the forest aflame. “Hoot-owling,” they call it, and it is why I have these afternoon hours with my uncle to fish.

But it is not the fishing itself that will remain with me—not the worm on the hook, the tug on the line—but how I work so hard to be silent, stay still, the feel of the sun on my shoulders, the powder-fine dust that sparkles the air, the smell of tarweed and pine. There is the fork of a willow branch strung with brookies, and I am proud that at least one of them is mine. None of them is more than eight inches, but we keep all but the smallest because pan-size are the sweetest, my uncle says, just right for the skillet. Some part of me must know that food on the table isn’t a given, that you take what you can get, and that, today, the getting is good.

My uncle teaches me that what I catch, I clean, and so we squat low at the bank, and I learn the sharpness of a knife from vent to gill, how to thumb-strip the blood from the spine. I throw the guts to the orange-

mottled crawdads that skitter from beneath the rocks. When I rinse the fish clean, they smell like the water, like mineral and silt. When we carry them back into camp, I am showered with praise—I have added to our family's bounty. Dusted in flour, fried in lard, the brookies come to the table salty and crisp, and this is another lesson I learn early on: how to peel the delicate skin, separate the meat from the tiniest bones. Fried spuds on the side, a peach cobbler in the oven, a pitcher of sweet tea—I am blessed in that circle of family as the larch and fir cast their shadows across the creek and fish dimple the surface for stonefly, caddis, mosquito, and midge. Maybe, even then, there was something in me rising with them.



The North Fork drains into the main Clearwater and weaves its way through the arid canyon to Lewiston, Idaho, where it meets the Snake and continues on to the Columbia. Rainbow and cutthroat run these waters. What salmon and steelhead remain beat their way past the dams to spawn, as do the last of the lamprey eels that once draped the Nez Perce drying racks, the oily meat one more stay against the deprivation of winter.

On this day, I am twenty-something, two years into my college degree, living on cases of Top Ramen and three-for-a-buck macaroni-and-cheese. I am in the first throes of what will become a life-long love: Bob, my new beau, fishes beside me. Since my family moved from the logging camps to Lewiston, I have chosen my boyfriends according to their affinity for hunting, fishing, and camping, judged them by their ability to rig a rod, pitch a tent, and build a campfire, attempting, perhaps, to reclaim some part of that childhood I have lost. I have fished the nearby creeks and rivers and lakes, wetting everything from night crawlers (pulled from the soaked lawn the night before) to Jolly Green Giant cans of corn (nothing but Niblets will do) to wedding-band spinners, Rooster Tails, Mr. Twisters, and Kastmasters the size of hubcaps (excellent for reaching the far current of a river as big as the Clearwater). I have learned that you know a fisherman by the tackle box he keeps (I am the only woman I know who keeps one), and I am housewife-proud of mine with its sharpened hooks and spinners shined with four-ought steel wool, just as I am proud of the steelhead eggs I have harvested and cured myself (an atomic red jar of Pautzke Balls o' Fire for backup). Somehow, all this gear—the care and preparation—makes me feel worthy of the fish I keep, as though my ablutions purify my intent.

Bob and I stand in the blistering heat, choosing our spots—mine at the mouth of a stream that feeds into the river. Over the years, I have learned to read water like I first learned to read books—instinctively, as though the

ability were innate, part of my chromosomal map—and I know that the trout will be feeding there. Bob fishes thirty yards upstream. An Illinois flatlander by birth, a mountain-loving Westerner by choice, he came to the relationship still lugging his Plano of bass plugs, jigs, and poppers. He has his Eagle Claw, I have my Fenwick; this is our first time fishing together, and although we don't say so, we both know the challenge is on.

I wade out as far as I dare, the bald tread of my tennis shoes no help, and take up my cast. A few ten-inchers hit my Red Devil, and I drag them in, thread them on the stringer—that night's dinner. But I know there are bigger fish to fry. I pull out my largest Kastmaster, spit on my line for luck, wind up, and pitch like I am throwing for home. The filament shoots out, and I love the steady pull, how far the lure will take me. When it drops, I let it sink to a count of five, set my bail, and begin reeling in.

You know the saying, don't you? *Big water, big lure, big fish.* A rainbow the size of a steelhead hits hard, and I work hard to land it, the muscles of my arms aching until I can drag the fish ashore. My blood is singing in my ears and a fine sweat has broken out across my chest by the time Bob reaches me. I hold up the treble-hooked fish with both hands and wait for his praise.

"Nice fish," Bob says, and then, "Better throw it back."

"What?"

"Throw it back. He's too nice to keep."

I look down at my beautiful catch, his brilliant pattern of colors—the consummate keeper.

"He's three meals, at least," I say, but what I am thinking is, *You're just jealous.*

"He's good stock," Bob reasons. "He needs to stay in the gene pool."

I stare at Bob as though he has taken leave of his senses. To turn the fish loose would be like throwing a meaty T-bone to the dogs. Who knows when such food might be on the table again?

And here is the thing: I don't remember what I did with that fish, if I kept him and ate him or released him back into the waters I have known since birth. What I know for sure is that it wasn't the last time I would be hungry, but the hungry times would themselves grow leaner, become fewer and farther between.

When, two years later, Bob and I married, our honeymoon was a road trip to the Izaak Walton Inn in Essex, Montana. I remember how cold it was, even in July, and I remember bundling in my coat and crossing the road to the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, how I was mesmerized by its color—as though a turquoise glacier had bled its water down. I had my new husband there with me, we had our little pickup stuffed to the gills with everything we would need to camp and backpack our way across the state for a month, but the thought of dropping a Kastmaster into that crystalline water

seemed suddenly profane. Still, the absence of the rod in my hands was like a phantom pain, as though I had lost my right arm. It was a different kind of hunger that I felt, then. It had nothing to do with food but with a desire to know that water, to feel its rush all around me, to see what secrets I might pull from its hold.



Another river, so close to my childhood home at Pole Camp that a crow could fly there in an hour. The dry dust of summer, the cold water at my knees—all of it familiar and where I always want to be.

I've traded my tackle box of Kastmasters and Pautzkes for a dank vest whose pockets are stuffed with more terrestrials than any one angler will need in a lifetime. Somehow, I'm sure that today's hatch will be the very pattern I don't have, and the thought brings with it a tremor of panic. Caddis in every possible stage, mayflies of every material, midges so small they defy tying, stimulators so large and flamboyant that they sail through the air like neon canaries—my eyes are bigger than my stomach, it seems, when it comes to these bits of feather and fur, my dead grandmother's sibyllic words still echoing: *lean times just around the corner, sister—you can never have too much stock in the larder.*

Bob and I have been angling these waters for years now, dry-camping for weeks with nothing to do but eat, fish, eat, read our way through the heat of the day (Bob with his slender volumes of poetry or his go-to summer fare of James Lee Burke and Evelyn Waugh—go figure—while I critique a friend's new novel manuscript or maybe revisit, as I do each year—and this is true—*The Old Man and the Sea*), fish, eat, drink wine, and fish before falling asleep beneath the stars. I can't remember exactly when we put down our poles and took up our rods, but I know that, even after nearly two decades, we are still learning—learning how to present the fly, how to mend the line, how to roll-cast, back-cast, double-haul . . . how to shoot the line rather than lob the lure. In my worn waders and boots, I stumble and slide across the free-stone bed, curse wind knots and the tangled nest of line my cast becomes when I miss a strike and jerk the rod back as though I were setting the hook in stone.

Evening is coming on, and we're at the end of a long trek—hours of walking up the trail and fishing our way back down the river—and our take-out point is just around the bend. I'm tired, my lower back is aching, but I'm happy half-in, half-out of the water, where I somehow feel most whole. We've had a good day—net-fillers but nothing that we might brag about around our nightly fire. The river has gone to shadow, and the chill in the

air is real. I shiver, remind myself to look up and around, to cast my eyes to the wooded flanks of the mountains, the patches of meadow that catch the alpenglow in an otherworldly light. I cross the shallows to better access the far bank, where an aged stump tips toward the water, its roots a catacomb of places a trout might rest.

If you are an angler, you know this feeling, you know that there, right *there*, a big fish resides. You believe that if you do everything just right—if you are smart enough, careful enough, patient enough, if you are true of spirit and pure of heart—the fish will rise.

I have learned enough to take my time, to study the wind, the water, the drag, the drift. Maybe I have been fishing a Humpy, or maybe a hopper pattern—but the shadows are deepening, the air gone cool, and I can feel that fish wanting something, feel him *hungry* for something that I might have. I rifle my pockets and patches, my magnetic tins and compartmentalized cases, but nothing seems right, not even the fairest Pale Evening Duns, the most minute of midges. I look to Bob, who fishes the river above me, his easy S-cast that I envy. In the past, I had tied my arm to the butt of my rod but to no avail—I have yet to break the habit of breaking my wrist. If this is my last cast of the day, I tell myself, I have to make it good.

I remember what a veteran angler once told me about fishing these waters. “What are you using?” I had asked after watching him net a fat cutthroat. “Nothing but Elk Hair Caddis,” he said. “It’s the only fly I carry.” I had flushed with embarrassment at my own trove of tied treasures, no less burdensome than the twenty pounds of tackle I once lugged. Still, when I open my pocket, there it is: a #12 Elk Wing whose blonde hairs will make it easier to see in the greying light. I tie it on with great concentration, then position myself in the box of water below a large stone. Be patient, I tell myself and let my back-cast unfurl, the line haul out ten feet, then twenty.

And you know this story, too, or maybe this dream: the fly delicately dropping to the current just upstream of the stump, the drift dangerously close to the sun-silvered roots, and then the noise that isn’t noise but the fish coming straight up out of the water like a Polaris missile (silly, I know, but these are the words that come to me). In my memory, it happens in a flash of golden light, the scarlet gill stripes and burnished sides, the thick body of him and the mouth—my god, I think, the size of that *mouth*—and then our two worlds are tethered.

Five/six rod, 4-pound test, that impossible barbless hook—how can I hope to hold on? Down the river he runs, my line zinging off the spool until I fear we’ll be into the backing. And then the pause, the steady dead weight like a snagged log, the reconnoitering. *Keep your rod up*, I remind myself, but its supple spine is bent to the point of breaking. And then that almost imperceptible easing up, a second’s give when I can take back an inch, and then another.

By now, Bob has looked up, is curious, is watching, but I can't take my eyes off that place where my line meets the water. When I move, the fish moves with me, then darts to the side and sounds, nosing in against stone. What can I do but hold on? When I work him around, urge him back into the swift current, he makes a streaking attempt to blow by me upstream . . . and so it goes, five minutes, then ten. Bob keeps his distance, afraid he'll spook the fish, but after another few minutes, the muscles of my arms begin to spasm. I want to call for him to help me, tell him that I can't get this fish in—not with this ludicrous rod, this fly with its insufficient hook. "It's me and you, fish," I say under my breath, but I am no Santiago, and this is no monstrous marlin but a Westslope cutthroat grown bigger than most. I begin to growl as I prop my elbows on my hips and arch back, reel in, arch back. My entire body is shaking from the adrenaline, the effort as though my very life depends on landing this fish—as though I might starve to death if I don't have him. But he is the one whose hunger has brought him to this place, who is fighting for his life, and by the time I draw him close, we are both exhausted.

I plow the net, using both hands to raise it, but I'm shaking so hard that I can't slip the hook. I tell him how beautiful he is, tell him to hang on, just a minute longer as I slog to the bank where I can lay down my rod and work him free. I cradle him in the current, move him to and fro, work his gills, croon to him because that is what comes to me to do. He's as long as my arm, from my shoulder to the tip of my longest finger—he would feed my entire family, I think as I rock him in my hands, feel him pulse once, then again. He flexes the muscle of his body, and then he is gone, lost to the river's shadows, taking some part of me with him, and I am glad.

I haven't forgotten what hunger feels like—not *that* kind of hunger—but I haven't felt it for a long time. I step from the river, replete. I know that Bob and I will return to our camp, take our tepid showers beneath the limb of a white pine—nothing more than a strung-up jug of warmed water, a hose, a nozzle—that we will make a fine dinner in our open-air kitchen and tell the story of this fish and then tell it again, the story itself my Horn of Plenty. All winter, as the snow deepens and the river's seams meld to ice, I will dream my larder full.