

OPEN WATER THE INDIFFERENCE OF PERMANENT THINGS

Words:
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A SMOKY MOUNTAIN stream in January is almost unrecognizable. The glittering riffles and clear pools of warmer months are gone, giving way to dark ribbons of current unspooling through a clutter of empty trees and the exposed gray bones of a landscape worn to bedrock. Shallow flats and tailouts seem to take on the gloomy pallor of a land at war with the season. A death mask.

I can feel it, this leaning toward the ebb of life. The cold swirling water turns my legs to wood and my feet to stone as I wade. The skin of my bare hands pales to a waxen white as the blood abandons my extremities and retreats to my core. My fingers stiffen and refuse to bend. Winter has gotten into this river and it's getting into me as well.

The trout are there as always, exactly where I expect them to be. In the seams. In the quiet glides behind barely submerged rocks. In the almost imperceptible eddies along the edges of undercut banks. I fish for them with dry flies, despite the season. The water temperature hovers only a few clicks above freezing, but I tie on a Wulff something or other anyway. I add a small pheasant tail dropper with some vague notion of hedging my bets, but there is no logical reason to fish this way given the conditions. A gangly rubber-leg nymph knotted to a leader laced with split-shot and drifted through the deepest slots would undoubtedly increase my chances of coaxing a take from a wild rainbow or brown, but most days I can't bring myself to trot out such a clunky and graceless contrivance in the austere silence of the winter backcountry.

I fish slowly, mostly in an effort to stay upright. The felt soles of my boots freeze quickly when I leave the water to move farther up the trail and I am soon literally walking on blocks of ice. Frozen legs plod along heavily and seem weirdly disconnected from my body. Even the terrain itself seems to resent my presence and I begin to wonder why I'm out here at all.

It takes a while before I realize I am being shown considerable favor in these struggles. I am being forced to fit the season. In early spring, as temperatures rise in the lengthening daylight, I have to constantly remind myself to settle down and move deliberately. I usually fish poorly in those first few weeks of warm weather, struggling to slow my pace while the world around me quickens. In January, this landscape offers no such choices. Patience is the only option, regardless of how I feel about it. My opinions don't matter. Any ideas I have about my own significance pale in the presence of ancient mountains and rivers that bear all seasons with the stoic indifference of permanent things that exist in a longer narrative.

Later, in the faltering light of evening, the cold seems to come right out of the ground. The methodical work of casting a fly rod is no longer enough to keep me warm. For the first time all day I think about heading home. As I make my way carefully along the darkening trail back to my truck, the wind picks up and overhead I hear branches ticking together in the empty canopy. Beside me, the river continues its charge to the valley. I can feel the new year advancing into the mountains as it always has, forceful and silent, like current around stone. ☞

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Cold winter skies, low, clear water and sluggish fish force Adam White to dredge deep runs methodically. The ailing hemlocks and skeletal hardwood fit the mood of the fishing this north Georgia morning—barren and demoralizing. Nonetheless, being in the Blue Ridge Mountains and not trapped at home was well worth the trip.
Photo: Sammy Chang

