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As Close as I could Get Without Spooking It: Essays on Sports

Steven Rinella

The University of Montana

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As Close As I Could Get Without Spooking It

Essays on Sport

By
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B.A. Grand Valley State University, 1996
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On Catching Whitefish and Hopefully an Atlantic Salmon in the Edison Sault Hydroelectric Plant's Water Diversion Canal

In Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, there is a man-made canal that drains water from Lake Superior, runs it through town at a brisk flow, and pours it through the generators of the Edison Sault Hydroelectric plant. After spinning the turbines, the water runs into the Saint Marys river, which flows south and southeast 40 miles to Lake Huron. If the Edison Sault power canal were a river, which is what some people call it, though they shouldn’t, it would be the ugliest one in the world. The canal is lined with broken blocks of concrete and is fenced along its course. It has opaque water and flows with a uniform lack of character; there are none of the riffles and eddies and rapids and holes that make creeks and rivers the pleasurable things that they are.

If you’re walking through town, or driving, the canal is a constant inconvenience because you always have to go over a block this way or that in order to find a bridge to cross. When I lived on Pine Street, I had to cross the canal in order to get to the laundromat, the good restaurants, the happening bars, and my friends' houses. What’s more, the canal can’t even be thanked for providing all of the electricity for the city, because much of the
wattage it generates gets fused into a power grid formed by
a conglomerate of electricity production facilities
downstate. And on top of that the 97-year-old canal carries
on its currents a constant reminder that the Saint Marys
River, which was once the unmolested travelway and fishery
of the Chippewa Indians, is now a docile stretch of water
stocked full of exotic pests, tapped by industries, and
divided by dikes and canals like a giant rope unbraided
into a tangle of weak threads.

One would think that the canal is a contemptible
beast, unfit for a town as lovely as Sault Sainte Marie.
But I must admit that my hatred for it is tainted by a deep
love, for the canal is an inauspicious yet excellent place
to catch native Great Lakes whitefish, one of the finest
tasting creatures in the world.

The first time I ever fished for whitefish in the
canal was with Matt Drost, a fellow student from Lake
Superior State University. The night before, we had been
hanging out in Moloney’s, a bar that sits across Portage Street from the Sault Locks. Around closing time, Drost
mumbled something about plans to go catch whitefish in the morning. This caught my interest, and I asked if I could go
along. He tugged at his bushy sideburns for a moment and
then said it would be great if I joined him.

Figuring that we'd be getting up early, I gave Drost
my number and headed for the door. Drost called after me.
"The only thing is," he said, "I'm leaving now. I want to
be sure to get the good spot."

"Now?" I said. "It's not even two in the morning yet."

"Well, not exactly now. But I'll pick you up in
fifteen minutes."

"Where are we gonna go?" I asked. "Ashmun Bay?"

"No, man, the power canal. Where it dumps out of the
dam."

Reminding myself to act like the kind of person I want
to be, I said, "Great. Let's go."

Sault Sainte Marie, a northern tier border town
surrounded by water, unproductive farmland, and national
forests, is not on a typical nine-to-five office schedule.
It has about 16,000 residents, and aside from the roughly
3,000 students from the university these are mostly
teachers, loggers, miners, Forest Service workers, members
of the Coast Guard and Merchant Marine, or prison guards
from the nearby penitentiary. The only rush-hour in town
coincides with the closing of the bars; it starts at 1:30
A.M. and lasts until 2:30 A.M. College guys in Chevy
S-10 pickups cruise laps up and down the strip, yelling at girls. Police drive slowly by. Boyfriends and girlfriends get in arguments next to cars, make up, and drive home. Then, suddenly, the busyness ends and the streets go empty. The town doesn’t make any sound at all. It is my favorite time of night. It is an excellent time to think, and fishing is usually what I’ll think about.

As I walked home to grab my rod and some warm clothes, I recalled a time I had tried to catch brown trout in the power canal, and the time I’d tried to catch whitefish on nearby Ashmun Bay. Truth is, I hadn’t had the best of luck in either case. I’d fished the canal when my brother, Matthew, was visiting. We took our rods, climbed up on a big slab of concrete and tried with all our might to land a cast in the middle of the canal, where fish were sucking up mayflies. We had a theory that these browns were the size of vacuum cleaners.

My brother back-cast so hard that he hit a slab of concrete behind him and broke his brand-new rod. Two kids watching us got into a fight. The bigger one trounced the little one and then rode away on the poor kid’s bike. An older man pulled up in a truck to tell us that the water is poisoned and that we’d get sick from eating those fish. I told him that these fish came from Lake Superior, and that
Lake Superior was one the most pristine, healthy water systems in the world.

He drove away. We decided that it was impossible to reach the fish, and left.

I’d been even more unsuccessful on my first whitefish outing. My roommate, Danny, and I had decided to build a spearing shack, hoping to spend our deep-north winter huddled over a propane heater while swigging Boones Farm Wine and spearing fish. We nailed old sheets of plywood to a frame built out of disassembled oak shipping pallets.

We put our shanty on Ashmun Bay, which is on the Saint Marys River above the rapids between Lake Superior and Lake Huron. Several hundred yards from shore, I sawed a hole into the ice with a chainsaw. We positioned the shanty over the hole and tuned in Border Rock, WKLT, on a portable radio. Danny dumped two baggies of boiled macaroni and a jar of maggots, which we’d purchased at a local gas station (where you can usually find whatever leaf worms or night crawlers or maggots or leeches or spawn sacks you might need in the mild and soda coolers), down the hole for fish chum, and we watched the current carry them out of view before they could sink. Danny went outside, took an ax from the sled, chopped a small hole 20 feet upstream, and dumped
more chum into that hole. Luckily, much of it settled on the riverbed below our shack.

We waited several hours. A large pike swam by, uninterested in chum. A school of menominee swam by and I tried to drop the spear on them but they moved out of its way. Several times I hallucinated Atlantic salmon beneath our hole. They are the Holy Grail of the Northern Great Lakes, and I've always lusted to have an encounter with one, but Danny assured me that I wouldn't see any on this side of the Sault Rapids.

Soon, one whitefish swam past too quickly for a clean shot. A few hours later another whitefish came through. He was about as long as from my elbow to the tips of my fingers. He lingered around picking up macaroni and then seemed to fall as close to asleep as a fish can get. Danny held the weighted spear directly over the fish's back and let it slip from his hand. The fish wiggled frantically on the spear's tines but quickly tired, and Danny pulled it up. I looked at it for a long time, then tossed it out next to all the yellow spots we had made by drinking Boones and relieving ourselves. After another couple of hours it was too dark to see into the water, so we left the shanty - pretty much forgetting about it - and went home. Later we
baked the fish with paprika and lemon, and the white flaky flesh was delicious.

Toward spring, it came to my attention that we’d be subject to a hefty fine if we didn’t get our structure off Ashmun Bay before ice-out. Danny and I went out, and after two days of chopping and sawing, we got our structure torn down and burned it on the ice. With the death of the shanty, I figured that I would resist any future inclinations to go after whitefish.

But time heals, and here I was in front of my house, in the wee hours of a chilly June morning, waiting for Drost. As his truck drove up, I thought about how good a lone set of headlights can make you feel when it’s dark and you’re waiting for someone. Drost was on the sad downslide from Saturday night into Sunday morning. He grunted hello when I climbed in the truck. We bought gas, coffee, and maggots at a gas station, drove under the footings of International Bridge, which crosses the Saint Marys River into Canada, took a bridge over the power canal, and turned to parallel the Sault Locks. We passed a bar that used to be called the Horny Toad; after it burned down it reopened as the Satisfied Frog. Then we crossed the power canal again where it curves in toward the Edison Sault dam and
widens to a quarter-mile from bank to bank, the full width of the hydroelectric plant. The dam and the building sitting on top of it don’t look so much like an electricity production facility as they do a medieval castle set upon an outlandish moat.

A skiff owned by the university’s aquatics lab was moored at the west end of the dam. We piled our gear in the bow and headed across the downstream face of the dam, where the water runs out and mixes in with the river’s flow on its way to Lake Huron.

Across the river were the lights of Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, population 85,000. I’ve always been amused by the contrast between the two identically named cities that border this river. The U.S. side of the river feels like a northern outpost, inhabited by rural people of Nordic descent, while the Canadian side is a southern city of that nation, largely Italian and industrial. Each side has the tendency to regard the other with a dismissive shrug. Cruising those boundary waters in a boat with no running lights feels dramatically smugglerish.

Whitefish from the Great Lakes average two or three pounds. Their colors vary a little with locality, but they have greenish backs and bluish silver sides tinted with
purple iridescence. This sounds like an interesting palette to paint a fish with, but the most remarkable thing about a whitefish is how utterly nondescript he looks. He has a small mouth that points down and forward. He has a forked tail. He resembles, in shape, other freshwater fishes like herring and smelt. The word that comes to mind when I see a few whitefish together is “Biblical.” If I imagine someone turning five fish into enough to feed thousands, I imagine them to be whitefish.

Whitefish feed upon crustacea, small fish, and aquatic insects. When they’re feeding in the water of the Edison Sault canal where it pours out of the dam made from boulders and concrete, they’re eating insect larvae that get picked up from the canal floor and washed down. Thirty-seven tunnels allow water to pass through the dam. Each tunnel houses two generators. Each generator has two turbines. Each turbine spins at about 180 rpm, and the dam, with all its parts, sounds like a humongous beehive.

Of the 37 discharge tunnels, two offer superb fishing for whitefish. Why or how this may be is a mystery, and as Drost explained it to me I though he must be kidding. I looked at the length of the dam - all 1,340 feet - and couldn’t believe that a ten-foot-wide stretch about a third
the way in from the west end could really be that different from any other.

Yet Drost was adamant enough in his beliefs that here we were at three in the morning, not to fish, but to hold his spot at this particular tunnel so that we’d have it to ourselves at dawn. This seemed extreme at first, but once we were tied up to the wall of the dam, it seemed like a great idea. When it started to drizzle, it seemed a tad extreme again. Then Drost started the motor, gunned it, and drove into the tunnel to get out of the rain, and the trip turned scary for a moment. If we weren’t in the dam’s bowels, we were definitely in its rectum. When I turned out my flashlight there was darkness. I could feel the turbines spinning only feet away. It was very warm. I dozed off.

When I woke, a faint light was breaking outside the tunnel. Two old men in new Starcraft fishing boat pulled up to our tunnel, the most coveted spot along the dam. The man in front was brandishing a grappling hook over his head, preparing to hook to the stone wall. He looked triumphant about getting the spot. Drost called out, “Hey there, fella, we’re fishing this one.”

Drost’s voice nearly knocked the guy over, and he peered into the tunnel like the generators were talking to him. Without saying anything, the men motored over a few
tunnels. We backed out, hooked ourselves to the dam, and
let out ten feet of rope. The cathedrals and industries
across the river were becoming visible. I could just make
out the rolling mountains of the Canadian Shield.

I rigged my line with a few pieces of lead split shot,
tied two feet of tippet to the leader, and tied to that a
small white fly made from the fur on a snowshoe hare’s rear
foot. Drost recommended a maggot on the fly. I cast into
the tunnel. Before the fly had sunk far enough to tighten
the line, it was already out past the boat. This can hardly
work, I thought. I added weight to my line and tried the
cast again. I shot my hook five feet into the tunnel, the
weight pulled the line tight, and it swung like a golf club
in reverse. I followed the line with my rod tip about ten
inches over the water. The progress of the line halted
right under the boat; I set the hook with a jerk and was
into a slab of concrete on the bottom the run. I snapped
the line off, re-rigged, and cast again.

Drost, who was stretched out in the back of the boat,
lazily putting his rod together, told me to use less line,
because sometimes the fish lay suspended a few feet down. I
cranked up some line, threw into the tunnel, and the drift
stopped before it left the tube. I lifted up. A fish was
there. It dove deep and I gave it line. It shot out past
the boat on the current, rose near the surface, and popped off the hook.

"A whitefish has a soft mouth," Drost observed. "You can't hog them around like that."

"Like what?" I said. "I was giving him line." Drost shrugged.

After a few more casts, I hooked a small one, played it gingerly, and brought it to the boat. Drost netted the fish, thumped its head over the gunwale, and handed it to me. I sat down to enjoy the sensation of having caught my first whitefish. I looked at it until I became self-conscious about my infatuation with the fish, and then slipped it into the cooler. In a few seconds, I cracked the lid to have another look.

Drost made a few casts off the other side of the boat. He hooked something that went zinging along the wall of the dam, heading east, and then dove out toward Canada, raced back in, and jumped three times about 40 yards from the boat, turning almost complete somersaults in the air. It was the size of a fence post.

"Shit!" Drost yelled. "It's a damn Atlantic salmon. All right! Hell, yeah! Shit, he's gone!"
When you’re floating in a boat below the Edison Sault dam in the Saint Marys River, facing the United States, you can see a parking lot at the dam’s east end. In the summer, ten or 20 men and boys from the nearby Chippewa reservation will be standing at the edge of parking lot and casting large, weighted snagging hooks into the water along the dam. They give the hook a moment to sink, and then reef the rod with all they have, hoping to dig one of the hooks into the side of an Atlantic salmon. (It’s illegal for non-Indians to snag.)

The salmon are trying to return to their home spawning area, which doesn’t technically exist, because they were hatchery-bred inside the Lake Superior State University aquatics lab, which is in the hydroelectric plant. Under a grant, the space was given to the school, and the labs director has been trying to introduce Atlantic salmon into the Great Lakes ecosystem. When salmon run rivers to spawn, they try to return to the place where they hatched. Atlantic salmon are so good at this that many actually return to the aquatics lab. But the fish are liable to show up anywhere around the dam, and that keeps the excitement level way up.

In order for a fishing spot to be great, it has to offer the angler the possibility of a freakish catch.
Michigan is full of places like this. While fishing for northern pike through the ice on Muskegon Lake, you might just hook a sturgeon that weighs a hundred pounds. When surf-casting into Lake Michigan in November, the possibilities are endless: steelhead, coho, menominee, chinook, lake trout, almost anything can come along. At the power canal, it’s Atlantic salmon.

I know a guy – he seems to be a credible, honest person – who says that he hooked an Atlantic in tunnel 14 that came out of the water in a cartwheeling jump and landed in his boat. He threw it back overboard.

I would throw mine back, too. They are one of those things that have a lot more enemies in the world than friends.

The whitefish kept hitting throughout the morning. Sometimes I’d be casting up into the tunnel, only to look down and see several fish just two feet below me. I hooked fish beneath the boat, and on each side of the boat. I caught a steelhead no longer than my foot, and a sculpin no longer than my finger. Around noon, the current from the dam shut off. The whirring generators hushed. The swells and bubbles disappeared from the rapidly flowing water; it was like a glass of soda going flat in hyperspeed. “Closing time,” Drost said. He explained that every Sunday the
engineers in the powerhouse shut down the turbines. That’s right, I reminded myself. They can do that. The power canal is not to be confused with a river.
In the San Juans

Sitting in the back seat of the van, I could see that at least eight rows of cars were parked to the right of us, parallel to the row we were in. Two rows were parked to the left. Beyond them stood a high fence plastered in billboards. I could not tell just how many cars there were ahead or behind us. We had been waiting like this for three hours. A man had come by the window asking for spare change. After him, a man came asking for donations to a missing children's foundation: "Sir?... and you miss?... and how about you miss?... and you, sir?...thanks anyway." He was followed by two newspaper vendors. One was selling USA Today and the other had the Seattle Times. They each came from somewhere in front of us, stopping at every car in our line.

An hour later, I'd see them leaning into the windows of the row of cars next to us. The only other thing moving on this loading dock was a constant stream of people - mostly young parents with kids - cruising past as they licked ice cream cones, so close I could have stuck my head out and had some. I had no clue about the ice cream's source - just out there somewhere, getting scooped. I thought of going to find it. Above us, the sky was as tight and blue as a well made bed. It would stay exactly that
way, except for when it filled with stars, for the next three days. We were in the rain shield of the Olympic Mountains, where only 20 inches of precipitation fall per year. It was 75 degrees. High altitude mare's tails were breezing promiscuously in and out of one another. They were as wispy as if someone took a wad of cotton and streaked it across an old plank of barn board.

In the front two seats of the van, my friend, Matt, and his wife, Rachael, were not talking because of something that had happened the night before in a bar. Matt was messing with his tape player, showing me where Elvis Presley says "shove it up your nose" between lines in "Suspicious Minds," on the Live at the Madison Square Garden album. Robin, Rachael's sister, was sitting next to me in the back seat. She was watching three blonde-haired brothers play catch next to the fence of billboard advertisements. The older two never threw a pass to the little one. Whenever the ball took a bad roll under a car, they'd make him go fetch it out. Robin is my age, twenty-five, and she is the divorced mother of three kids who live in Ontario. This was the first significant period of time she's been away from them, and she obviously had mixed feelings about it.
Every hour or so, the upper deck, antennae and radar of a ferry would slide into view over the tops of the Ford Explorers and Isuzu Trackers in front of us, but nothing on the pier would budge. From my vantage, that was the only clue that Puget Sound was out there. Over twenty four hours earlier, I had stepped onto a bus in Missoula, Montana, and rode it for thirteen hours to Seattle, over the same ground my van could cover in eight hours. My friends picked me up at the downtown bus stop just after a girl with a backpack completed a tortuous bout of vomiting into a trash receptacle labeled, Pitch In Seattle. A security guard came out to tell her to go to a hospital. "But I'm allergic to shots," she said.

It was late in Seattle, and the traffic would be thick. We decided to eat some Mexican and get some drinks, and wait until morning to begin our vacation to the San Juan Islands, a place I had never visited and would soon never want to visit again. After all, we figured, it was only Thursday and we had until Sunday night. It was vacation time.

Waiting for the ferry, I was amazed about the uniformity of the parked cars, how clean, new, and neatly lined up they were. The waiting lot at Anacortes looked like it was being occupied by WWII drill sergeants. In The
San Juan Islands, Afoot & Afloat, (a book I read post-journey, with much forehead slapping) the authors, Marge and Ted Mueller, share their thoughts on San Juan ferrying in a chapter called "So You've Decided to Take a Ferry..." It reads: "For the novice ferry user, the system may at times seem bewildering; even for the experienced ferry commuter accustomed to cross-sound runs, the procedure in the San Juans is different." Later in the same chapter, under a sub-heading called "Vehicles," the authors write: "Oh, you want to take your car? Well, that's another matter. The first question is - won't you reconsider?" Considering the situation with our boat and crab traps, we weren't going to reconsider. No matter what they say in Afoot and Afloat, the ferry schedules are based on someone's lacksaidaisacle concept of time, a concept where there aren't really exact moments, or even general timeframes.

If the ferry schedule says there will be ferries running at 4:40, 6:40, 10:30, 3:40, and 7:30, one can safely assume that there will be roughly four to six ferries between the hours of 4 a.m. and 8 p.m., however clustered or spread out they choose to run them. I'm prepared to defend myself on this against whatever libel suits the State of Washington's DOT cares to file against
me. Part of my evidence will be this quote, taken from a man in an orange vest, who, with a legion of colleagues, guides the ferrygoers' vehicles into very long and tight lines to await transportation: "Man, I've been here five years and have never seen one of these things on time."

When I say that this guy guides the cars, I mean it literally. He and his co-workers are unaware that drivers are in the cars. They make eye-contact only with a vehicle's headlamps and direct their hand signals toward the radiator. When a car is parked, they walk away with choreographed nonchalance.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon, after I had been awake eight hours, after I had passed seven of those eight hours either getting from downtown Seattle to the docks or waiting at the docks, the line of cars ahead of us breathed, yawned, nudged, started, stopped, started again, then lead us onto the ferry. It was such a big boat that it didn't even bob in the water when we put the weight of our rig on her. We parked, got out, and walked up to the top deck. I'm like most everyone, in that when I get near the confluence of water and a dry surface that has a railed perimeter, I simply have to lean my upper pelvic/lower abdomen region against the rail and look at the water. Just as I was taking position to perform this duty on the
ferry's upper deck, someone came over the intercom and announced that a lecture on the Last Great Glaciation in the Puget Sound was to be given in the front of the ship by a member of a local environmental awareness group. Our speaker was a fifty-ish white male who smiled ferociously and looked to be cut out from a Lands End catalog. What I assumed to be his wife stood next to him and held up charts and photographs. He started the talk at such an elementary level - what snowflakes look like, how fast glaciers move, that it used to be colder in North America, he mixed in a subtle apology to any creationists in the audience - that I feared we would hit dry land before he even got to the part about the San Juan Islands. He proved faithful to his topic though, and explained that all these islands are the tops of mountains that have settled in and been ground over and smoothed off by enormous sheets of flowing ice that completely covered them, and that you can still see the gouge marks. The glaciers cut the channels on their southbound journey, and receded, leaving huge piles of gravel and gigantic lakes that would burst their icy dams and create floods the likes of which the world had never seen and will probably never see again.
He answered two questions. Then he said that 60% of the carbon dioxide released into the air in the state of Washington comes from cars; of that amount, 60% comes from SUVs, which were snaked under environmental codes as farm implements. Without a segue, he told us that over 25 gray whales in the area have washed up dead recently, and no one can tell what the hell they're dying from. Then he explained that he can't say whether that's a bad thing or a good thing. That's up for us to decide; he only promotes awareness. Then we got back into our van, the ferry docked, and drove off into the mayhem and recreational bustle that is Friday Harbor, San Juan Island.

Over 40,000 transient cruising ships visit Friday Harbor's public dock every year, and the vast majority of those come during the summer months. Many, many more people come the way we did, via the giant green and white ferrys, which act like the town's heart. With every pulse of the contracting muscle, new surges of oxygenated blood flood the arteries of the town. (A couple weeks later, I would hear on the news about a San Juan heart attack of sorts. A ferry had a computer glitch and smashed into the dock at Orcas Island. Tourists' cars were stranded out there for weeks).
Friday Harbor has the same overwrought, maritime self-consciousness that spoils otherwise beautiful places like Key West, Florida; Mackinac Island, Michigan; and Pikes Market, Seattle. Nothing is utilitarian. It has such a vivid notion of what it should be that there isn't room for anything else to emerge out of the corners. One of the most interesting things to me was an ice cream shop that had people waiting in line forty yards down the sidewalk. The store was long and thin, with just enough room for a single file line of people to pass between the counter and front wall. The counter was as long as a bus and had hundreds of flavors. The servers worked fast enough that the line of people moved through one door, ordered, received their goods, paid, and slid out the other door without ever really stopping. I stood out in front of the store, on the street, and I thought of those old cartoons they used to show us in school to explain assembly line production, where raw materials get poured into one door of a building and instantly the door on the other end begins birthing finished goods. Here the raw materials were want and dollars, the product was a happy vacationer.

San Juan Island is like Australia; Everyone lives along the shore except for those who have been there a long time. As soon as you drive in a ways there are pastures
textured with sheep, old barns, forests, rolling hills, and farmers trying to fix broken sprinkler lines. I looked at a group of llamas that were all lying down except for one, and I also watched a herd of alpacas grazing in a green, round field. They wore heavy coats that would make very expensive sweaters. I looked for a pig but never saw one. I had hoped to see one, because in 1859 an American named Lyman Cutler shot and killed a pig that belonged to the British owned Hudson's Bay Fur Company, which almost drove the United States and Britain to a war that could have made things very different on the island. I thought seeing a hog would be historic, like a dinosaur track. Cutler shot the pig because it wouldn't stay out of his potato patch. After he told the Hudson's Bay agent what had happened, an argument broke out, and it quickly escalated into a dispute over just who owned the island, anyway.

The two sides couldn't agree. In 1846, British and American negotiators had drawn up the boundaries between Canada and the United States, but they weren't really exact about the border through a cluster of what they called "worthless islands" lying between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Hudson's Bay Company sent men to San Juan Island, built a fort overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and claimed the land for Queen Victoria. They had realized that
there was good timber and grazing land and a lot of money to be made in furs.

Americans moved to the island, too, and the two nations tolerated each other until the pig was shot with a rifle and the British tried to arrest Cutler, who then questioned the crown's jurisdiction. The governor of British Columbia sent a battleship to back up Hudson's Bay, then the Americans sent one, and soon both sides were massing men and equipment and it looked like a lot more than pig blood was going to spill. On each side, the advocates for war were arguing the strategic location of the island for national defense and trade.

It seems, now, awfully short sighted that the two nations weren't battling it out for access to the tourist dollar. Or pound. The war was put on hold when the two sides agreed to a joint occupation plan while the case went to a mediator. Then, in 1872, an impartial arbitrator, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, sided with the Americans. Now the camps of the two armies are historic national parks. People dressed up like old soldiers will show you around the place, but there is no overnight camping. We had to sleep at a privately owned campground.
The next morning we woke up early and resumed our efforts to get out to one of the small islands with a state park. The socioeconomic reality of the San Juan Islands really hits home whenever you get near the water. Roche Harbor, a privately owned marina, launch, and resort, hits it home so hard that it hurts your head. There's a cool, old hotel at the harbor that used to be a Hudson's Bay Company trading post back in the 1850s. Later, when it became a hotel, presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft each stayed there. It's called the Hotel de Haro.

In the late 1800s, at Roche Harbor, a man from Indiana named John S. McMillan built the largest lime-producing facility west of the Mississippi. He became one of the state's richest and most influential men, ran for the senate and lost, pretty much ruled the harbor for fifty years, died in 1936, and had his ashes put inside a big stone chair. The chair faces Westward at a big stone table, which sets in the center of an open-air, Classical-styled mausoleum with towering pillars that is based on tenets of the Masonic Order, of which he was a member. The members of his family are in the five other chairs at the table, but he faces the sun as it plunges into the sea and islands, and they sort of face him.
When the lime ran out and the McMillan lineage moved away and passed away, the facilities were bought and restored into a resort and boating place, but the premises has the moneyed aura about it that McMillan must have had floating around him like a haze.

We pulled through the gate with Matt's boat lashed to the roof (very securely, I'll have you know) in a fashion that drew to mind the image of the Tom Joad family's vehicle packed and ready for the move to California. We had tied the fore and aft of the vessel with manila rope, a substance that looks fit for a lynching tool. A boat trailer is the standard tool for shuttling a vessel on the San Juan's, and we were reminded of this fact by the impatient glares of all the people waiting to back in their scarabs and teakwood-laden antique sailboats.

It took us a while to untie all the crab traps we had lashed to the roof rack underneath the boat. The launch charges a hefty docking fee, which we did not pay under the flimsy premise that we were carrying our boat to the water and not actually backing a trailer down the ramp. I hosted mild feelings of guilt for about ten minutes, but when I saw a sign that said the marina charges you five dollars to dump a bag of trash, I knew these folks were making enough money as it was. The only other people at the launch who
were off-loading vessels incapable of either harnessing wind or traveling mach speeds were the large touring groups that had booked guided sea-kayaking voyages.

By far the most interesting thing about the tour groups was picking out the guides, a task that usually took no longer than three or four seconds. The sea-kayaking gangs were not the family reunion and Midwestern church group types that go on white water trips down rivers. These groups were seriously corporate; They had that hard-edged casualness that can only be called Microsoftian. What gave the guide of the group away was his or her affectation of some physical, aesthetic quality that would prompt the clients or dockside passersby to think, "Oh, he's so wild and crazy." I'm talking about things like very unkempt, yet fashionable, hair; super old life jackets with a skull and cross bone on them; helmets with shark fins sticking out of them; things like that.

Also because they have to carry the boats and teach people how to sit in them. It takes a long, long time for a group of kayakers to get it all together and hit the water. The boats are about 17 feet long and two people sit in each, wielding paddles like ninjitsu warriors with staffs. Once the dozen or so boats that makes up a tour group gets out far enough that you can take them all in as one
panoramic view, the forty-eight whirling paddle blades have the appearance of how I've always imagined the Netherlands to be: a beautiful flotilla of windmills, precariously close to drowning.

My party had not booked a guide and we didn't have one boat per every two of us, so we figured out a shuttle plan where Matt would take one of us over, then come back for one more, and then do that again. No problem, just a lot of gas and a considerable amount of boredom for everyone but the first to get shuttled, who was me. A quart of two-cycle at this marina was five bucks and gas about three dollars a gallon and the trip to our destination, Stuart Island, was over four miles one way. Matt's boat is a short Starcraft that someone painted brown with a brush. Here's an idea of how small the boat is: If it were a Jacuzzi and the water was inside and bubbling instead of outside and rolling, Matt and I would have looked very intimate and the scene would have taken on an unquestionable homoerotic undertone. As it was, we just looked like adventurous idiots sitting amongst crab traps and camping gear, weaving through huge boats (two of which actually had helicopters on board, and the ships' ample deck-spaces were not compromised by the presence.) Guarding the harbor's entrance is a rock called The Rock. Kelp beds to the right of the rock, smooth
passage to the left, said Matt, so we skirted past and
bucked out into the real waves. Over the brrr-oww brrrrr-
oww brrr-owww noises of the circa 1960 10hp Evinrude
rocking over deep swells, Matt was telling me about the
different islands floating around us.

"That one there is owned by the guy who owns Oakley
sunglasses. It used to be an exotic animal hunting farm,
and 60 minutes did an expose' on it, and then it closed.
There're still all kinds of different weird animals out
there and I think the guy and his friends shoot them." The
island looked to me like a miniature Kenya, with lots of
dead grass and low, brushy trees.

"That one's owned by a guy who owns a professional
sports team. It has its own airstrip. So does that one,
too.

"Steve 'Guitar' Miller - you know, big old jet
airliner - he lives there. So does the guy who runs Strohs
brewery"

The already big waves got even scarier when we made it
out to Spieden channel. The mixture of tidal currents and
cross winds make small water craft handling about as hard
as keeping a pinball going where you want it. Spieden
Channel is a whale thoroughfare, too, and I kept on the
lookout for huge, wet shiny objects blowing mist into the
sky, but never seen one. There are some 84 resident orcas that live in three separate pods, named J, K and L. Other orca pods come through at various times of year, chasing salmon. I've been told by several people that a good whale watching strategy in the San Juans is to go boat watching, as the beasts are perpetually hounded by cruising ships full of eager tourists.

Matt looked up and down the channel and said, "Nope," meaning no whales, as their entourage was nowhere to be seen. The San Juan archipelago is packed so densely with islands that it's hard to decide if it's mainly water or land. Estimates on the number of islands there are ranges from 172 to over 700 because there's an ongoing debate over what exactly differentiates a rock from an island. Some of the rocks I could see had no vegetation on them and disappeared at high tide. One rock had a seal on it. Gossip Island is only the size of a small home. It has a beach and lots of brush and a gravel bar and its own reef and a good spot to park a boat, and a boat was parked there. Some had a little grass and some brush and one or two trees. Some were coated in cedars and had meadows and usually you could see the gigantic rooftop of a mansion sticking up on those rocks, and then I figured them to be full-fledged islands.
Stuart Island is 1,786 acres and in many ways typifies the larger-sized San Juan Islands. It is boat and plane access only, has no ferry service, has some huge homes and a few cottages and some public parks. Around thirty people make up the island’s permanent population. There are two harbors to park boats in, and there are some decent clam digging and crab trapping spots. In many places the island falls into the sea with thirty foot rock cliffs, in other places forested fingers of land come down to the water and in the back of Reid Harbor there's a nice gravel beach with about sixty kayaks pulled up on it. During this boat ride out, I had been constantly in a state of something between dismay and disgust over the amount of boat traffic. A little guilt was thrown in too, as I was a participant. No matter where I looked, there would be a white projectile on the water trailing a frothy streak that was its own wake. Having a certain faith in literature, no matter what period it portrays, I was expecting the sad and lonely San Juans of David Guterson's novel, Snow Falling on Cedars, a book set during the WWII era. Once we got into Reid Harbor, a 44 acre, half-mile indentation into the island, I could see a waterscape that was dotted with moored sailboats and yachts the way a golf course is dotted with blades of grass. Going through them all felt like one of those things
that you drop a penny into, and it falls through all the pegs and lands into a slot that you never knew it would make it to.

At the back of the bay are two state parks that lie on an isthmus between Reid Harbor and Prevost Harbor. Boaters moor their ship in the harbor, hop into their dinghy (always, I mean always, with a miniature dog. I cannot explain this, other to say that it must be fashionable to have a small dog on your boat. People accessorize the dogs with lifejackets and elaborate collars and haircuts or captain's hats. I'd swear, dog ownership in Reid Harbor exceeds that of, per capita, places like Eastern Kentucky and Palm Springs by about 80%.) and then go up to the state park's docks and play bridge at the tables with other people and small dogs. Because of this, when we emerged from the cloud of ships in a small boat and pulled up to the dock, it was assumed by the crowd that we were in a dinghy and had crossed over the channel in a grander fashion. By watching us unload and listening to us talk, the crowd gleaned that, in fact, our dinghy was our boat. Then the members of the crowd went into either astonished whispering, excited chattering, or snickering. In some ways it was like Charles Lindbergh's landing in Paris after
his transatlantic flight. The awe was there, but it was mixed with a certain amount of disgust.

We piled our stuff on the dock and Matt started motoring back out towards the channel and, on the other side, our waiting companions. He disappeared into the ships, and I stood on the wooden dock, looking around. Then I sat down and looked around. A large piece of bull kelp, deep green and shaped like an enormous circus trainer's whip, was floating on the water. Bull kelp is the fastest growing plant in the world, and its leaves are edible. The leaves growing from the whip's handle stirred in the water like the hair on someone who's been drowned. My shellfishing license was also good for kelp gathering, so I reached off the dock and plucked a thick strand of the hair and chewed it. Salty, I thought. Well, no shit, I thought next.

I decided to carry some of our stuff up the hill to the campground. I couldn't get a site anywhere near the water, or even in view of the water. There was a big sign that said camping in non-designated areas is prohibited, so I had to take the only site available, a site that was located, it seemed, specifically to inhibit the enjoyment of the locale. The footpath skirting my site was so busy with people going to look at an old lighthouse that I felt
like a wax dummy demonstrating late-twentieth-century camping techniques at the Smithsonian Institute.

I went down for another load of stuff when I noticed a small, brown boat coming my way. It was piloted by a guy with long greasy hair who looked a lot like Matt, which couldn't be right, of course, because Matt wasn't supposed to back for over an hour. I noticed the boat was making the same noise as Matt's, which also couldn't be right because Matt's boat was supposed to come back with our food and drink cooler and crab bait, and this boat looked as empty as when he pulled away.

A young boy who had been watching his grandparents play bridge on the dock came up to tell me that that looked like my friend, who shouldn't be coming back already. The kid was about twelve years old. He had on baggy khaki pants with large pockets. He started into the same routine that his grandparent had given us twenty minutes ago. "Boy, I thought that was your dinghy. You should get a bigger boat. Our boat's 35 feet. We thought that was your dinghy. I can't believe you took that little boat out here."

Meanwhile, Matt had pulled up to the dock. The kid left. Matt said that he barely made it out of the harbor because the waves were so rough. He'd gunned the motor as hard as he could, but the nose-wind would just
pitch him sideways and put him into a wave. Then the trough would carry him back sixty feet. There was no way he was going to get over there any time soon. Rachael will be very worried, he said, and after that she'll be very pissed.

There is an old one room schoolhouse on Stuart Island that is open to public visitors. For generations, children living on Stuart, Johns, and Spieden Islands used to go there for their basic educations. Many had to make a cross-water trip to school every morning. Before the outboard engine, they had to row across the channels.

In December, 1961, the entire school was out on a field trip in a boat. The weather turned bad and the boat sank, drowning the entire enrollment. In sixteen years, the school reopened with eight students, but closed again a few years later. To the parents of all those kids lost at sea in 1961, it must have felt like stepping back into the old days, when the sea was the greatest gift of life and also the most mysterious menace; when the sea surrounding these islands wasn't just a weekend play pen that could be criss-crossed in moments of whimsy. Back then, surrounding you on all sides was a force that could so easily pull you under and never let you back up. Storms came over it and enemies came across it. A simple accident could be the end of a whole generation of your kind. On a continent, when you
face the water you still have a whole world of dry land to your back, land that you can travel with your own two feet.

Even though the island I stood on was speckled with people and the water surrounding it covered with boats like crushed ice floating in a glass, I knew what the word island meant only at that moment when I couldn't get off of one. It was a pleasant sensation, being stuck; The truest, most immediate thing I felt while I was on the San Juans. And I knew that Rachael and Robin were having a true maritime experience themselves; waiting at the water, hour after hour, watching for loved ones to enter a horizon line that only gets emptier. I imagined them in helmets with curved, pointy horns, all dressed in furs and carrying leather shields. Widowed Norsewomen. Or whalers wives, tearing their hair and gnashing their teeth in agony at our demise, drenching Plymouth Rock in tears of loss...

We asked some people for a ride and they gave us funny looks. We thought of trying to find a cell phone but had no number to dial. I looked through the stuff we brought over in the boat and I could hardly believe all the things we did and didn't have. We had margarine but nothing to spread it on or fry in it; crab pots with no bait or setting lines; fishing rods with no reels. Matt was pacing up and down the dock, wondering what to do. The young kid
reappeared, drinking a can of Pepsi, and started back into the routine about how he thought our boat was a dinghy. I looked at him long enough to say, "would you please shut the fuck up about the dinghy." Then, in case my point missed its mark, I looked away and said "Goddammit," with heavy emphasis on the second syllable.

He left again. While trying to think of a good way to send word of our survival back to Roche Harbor, I walked along the base of a cliff next to the water. A plant called brown rockweed was growing all over the ledge, exposed because the tide was going out. Its leaves were like little balloons, about the size of a thumb, and they popped and deflated when I stepped on them. Each step would take out three or four. Walking on them sounded like little kids stomping on the plastic bubbles that glass and other fragiles are shipped in.

The wind never let up; it whipped out of the south like it was pissed off at us. After a day of hanging around the dock and asking (unsuccessfully) for rides to Roche Harbor, we were as near to starvation as I care to get. A little before dark, Rachael and Robin pulled up to the dock in a large, open-decked aluminum boat with a small tractor on board. Hoping for the best, they’d thrown all the camping gear into the boat, too.
Two guys in their twenties with long pony-tails and park ranger suits had given them a ride over. They were making rounds to some of the marine state parks, checking outhouses, emptying pay boxes and working on trails. The taller one, Mark, had been living in the islands for over a year. His partner, Andy, was a fresh arrival and Mark had gotten him the job. They thought our situation was a good story and funny, if not too bright. Andy had recently graduated from culinary arts school and Mark held a biology degree from a university in Michigan. Both of them admitted a slight ambivalence about why they were working in the islands; just checking it out until something better pops up, they said. Andy hoped to get back into a kitchen soon, maybe in Los Angeles. Mark was looking at graduate schools. Both of them were a little dismayed by the constant human bustle around the islands. The reality of the place did not match the serene expectations they'd always held about the area.

Mark told me that his story is a near ditto of almost everyone he knows who's working on the islands in the service industries - the waiters and kayak guides and bartenders and ferry dock workers and ice cream scoopers and marine gas station attendants. They come, stay awhile,
and leave. He had yet to meet someone working on the islands who was actually from the islands.

It was too late to do anything but set up camp. We weren't going to attempt crab trapping out in the dark. By that time, I had surrendered almost all hope of doing what I came to do in the first place. We wanted to take our flashlights down to shuck some oysters but a red tide warning had been issued that day. A bloom of protozoa called dinoflagellates had made all the clams and oysters temporarily inedible. I took the news almost personally.

We camped out with Andy and Mark. Whenever one of them spoke, the other looked at him and smiled, like he was excited about whatever might come out of his mouth. By early morning we'd drunk all our beer and a gallon of Carlos Rossi wine. We started to get loud and Mark and Andy worried about having a complaint filed against them while they were supposed to be on duty. A few minutes later they said fuck 'em and got even louder. Mark passed out on a hammock he strung between two trees. Andy passed out on the ground beneath him. Before turning in, though, they said we could load our dinghy onto their boat and they'd give us all a ride back, but we had to leave early in the morning.
Matt and I got up at daybreak and went to set out some crab traps and catch a flounder or two. We were determined to have some fun. We punctured small holes into empty margarine containers, filled them with shucked oysters and clam meat, and wired them shut. It wasn't hard to find the crabbing flats. Buoys marking other peoples' crab traps were spaced evenly across the water's surface. They were as bright as pinheads on a pincushion. Crabs are to the San Juan islands what hot dogs are to baseball stadiums. The one safe topic to discuss on the San Juan Islands is crabs. It's a near guarantee that whoever you talk to will say how tasty crabs are, how fun it is to trap them, and how it's too bad that everyone does trap them because the numbers have declined so badly. Halting the season a few years would bring public outcry. Also, the loss of license fees and crab trap revenues would be sorely missed.

There are two kinds of crabs in the islands that people go after for food. The dungeness crabs are more eagerly sought, and only males over a certain size may be kept. They live in deeper water than the rock crabs, which have really hard shells and don't taste as good, though they're still excellent. Rock crabs have to be a certain size, also, but you can keep females. You can tell the males and females apart because they have slightly
different shell bottoms. Regardless of species, the average crab you get in a trap is no bigger than a compact disc.

We motored to the edge of the buoy field, baited our traps, and lowered them down forty feet to the bottom. Sinking, the black wire cages faded from view like night falling in a hurry. I could see the yellow Land-O-Lakes tubs spiraling down long after the traps were invisible. An oily residue from the oysters stayed on the surface and slowly spread out. The only thing left were the yellow ropes rising up from the bottom. On the end we tied empty two-liter soda bottles with Matt's name and address printed on them in black ink. We didn't have time to fish, so we went back to pack up our stuff and load our boat on to the other boat.

Pulling up a crab trap is like checking the mail when you're expecting a big check but don't know for sure when it's coming. I grabbed the rope of the first trap and it felt like I was dragging something up by the umbilical cord. I couldn't actually tell something was in there but I somehow knew it was anyway. As the trap came into view I could see that the bottom of the trap was the rusty color of dungeness crabs. One after another, I pulled them out and measured them. They were all within one-half inch of keeper size. A few were so close that it seemed like I
could just wait a minute and they would mature into legal-sized crabs.

As I threw them back into the water, I looked again at all the crab trap markers bobbing in the big bowl of the ocean. I knew that as soon as a crab hit the bottom, he'd begin lunching on another bait bucket. That crab trapper would pull him up - only a minor inconvenience to the crab - and measure him. And throw him back. The crab would do this - or have it done to him - several times a day, until that fateful moment when his carapace no longer fit inside the yellow plastic calibration device that everyone uses to determine a crab's legality. Then, instead of the ocean, he'd be thrown into water of a very different nature. A twist of lemon later, he'd be nothing but some artifacts in a trash can. I repeated this process of actions and thoughts four times, once for every trap. Then, skunked, we were heading back to Roche Harbor.

The place was crawling with activity. A bee stung me on the ankle. In about five minutes the bite had swelled to the size of a chewing tobacco tin. Mark and Andy drove off in a van. A boat with a sign that said "I'll Take Shit From Anyone" was circling around the harbor. The kid running the boat had the task of servicing latrine wells on all the yachts. He looked humiliated in a way that went deeper than
is healthy. Kayak guides were loading boats on to trailers and their tour groups were mingling around, watching them. I remembered that we never paid and I felt nervous. But no one seemed to notice us as we tied down the boat and piled our stuff in the van. My hands stunk like the crushed oysters we used for bait, and I couldn't see any place to go wash up. I had given my hands several dozen small lacerations from shucking oysters without gloves, and salt water was excruciating.

For whatever reason, it didn't seem like a good idea to go into the hotel and ask about a public restroom. I felt, then, the same way I feel when I'm in LA; I felt like I don't have enough money and I don't know how to properly dress myself. But in LA, that feeling always seems okay because the place was designed to create just that sensation. I imagine parts of Paris to be the same way. The difference is, one goes to Paris and LA to see what civilization has done with the raw materials of time and land, and that hadn't been what I'd come here for.

After driving past the checkout desk at Roche Harbor, we stopped by the ferry dock to see about leaving the San Juans. They told us to expect at least a five hour wait, but we had to park now to hold our place. Without a car, we were effectively disarmed. We found a bar down the road.
Jimmy Buffet's greatest hits was on continuous loop. The place was decorated like a tiki bar. Bamboo torches burned all around us. A stuffed marlin hung over the cash register. I heard a bartender tell a waitress that "it's time to present that couple with their bill." On the door of the bar was a simple poem:

no shirt
no shoes
no service
Residues of History

I spend a lot of time walking around the mountains in Montana. I’m usually fishing, exploring, or looking for mushrooms, but no matter what I’m doing, or where I am, I always keep an eye out for anything interesting that might be lying around. I’ve found flint arrow heads, a hand-forged bridle, and, from the Bitterroot Mountains, a piece of coyote shit with a deer fawn’s hoof in it. Next to a lake in the Gallatin mountains I came across a trout that had gagged on a frog and they had both floated up to shore. I dried them out and kept them.

On a warm fall day, along a small stream that drains Lake Inez, I found a place where river otters have vomited up fish scales for years under the same tree, and some of the piles were so hard and dry I was able to bring them home in my pocket. These are some of my best finds, but last October, at 9,000 feet above sea-level in the Madison Mountains, I found my favorite possession of all.

My brother, Matt, and I had been camping for several days near some sub-alpine meadows at the head of a small drainage in the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area. In the early afternoon, we hiked off to the south, figuring that we’d fish another drainage until nightfall. We traveled down about a mile, along the stream, then headed up the heavily
timbered slope of a finger drainage. I was following behind Matt up a thin game trail. On the north facing slope, the young lodge pole pine grew so thick that it was as dark as a movie theater.

In front of me, Matt kicked at something on the ground, lightly, and then walked away. It took me a few seconds to find what he had kicked. There was just this little piece of bone, shaped like a half-moon. I kicked at it, too, and it didn’t move for me either, so I stooped down and scratched at it to make sure it was bone, and it was. I scraped at its perimeter with a stick and realized that the half-moon shape was actually a circle of bone, with the center packed full of moss and dirt. Aha, I thought, the eye socket of an elk skull. There might be an old set of antlers attached to the skull, so I jabbed a stick into the hole and tried to pry it up out of the humus. It wouldn’t budge. I scraped around the circle some more. It wasn’t an eye socket. It was a foramen magnum, the hole in a skull where the spinal column passes through to the brain. But this foramen magnum was much larger than an elk’s, and shaped all wrong. I thought for a second that it might be a domestic cow, but that was unlikely as the nearest ranch or even suitable piece of range land was ten miles away. I had seen enough horse skulls to know I
wasn’t unearthing one of those. I searched around for a stiffer, sharper stick, took off my backpack, got down on my knees, started digging, and didn’t stop until I had removed several gallons of dirt and rock from around the bone. After I wiggled the object a few times, it popped free from all the little roots with the sound of a handful of spaghetti noodles getting snapped in half.

The forehead of the skull was as broad as my chest and as round and smooth as a wooden serving bowl. The bone bases of the horns were curled up and textured like gnarled pine knots and woven over in green moss and the thin fibrous roots of lodge pole pine. The shiny keratinous sheafs over the horns were gone, and dirt and time had turned them the dingy color of powdered hot chocolate mix. For a moment I sat there in near shock. Then I jumped up and ran ahead to show my brother. I had found a buffalo skull.

The history of white Americans and the buffalo leaps almost instantaneously from discovery to decimation; We’ve lived more years with the memory of buffalo than we ever did with the animals themselves. It’s been one hundred and twenty -odd years since the West’s last large herd of wild buffalo was shot down and skinned along the Yellowstone
River between Miles City and Wibaux, Montana. All that was left of them, really, I had thought, were the baby blue buffalo skulls printed on the bottom corner of Montana vehicle license plates. So, heading down the mountain toward the Madison river after the end of my hunting trip, I was pretty certain - but not totally sure - that I was the first person in a couple hundred years to be lugging a buffalo skull along the north fork of Papoose Creek.

My brother had decided to stay up hunting for a few more days, so I had plenty of time to think to myself while I walked out, and I thought about how returning to society was forcing me to reconsider my own happiness. After all, I was relatively new to the West. Maybe there are plenty of old skulls lying around and I just hadn’t noticed them... I could be the only one who spends any amount of time in the outdoors who doesn’t already have a buffalo skull? Which left me thinking, If hard times were to settle on me, would this thing be worth five bucks or a thousand? This line of questioning was driving me almost crazy with anxiety, so I returned to my earlier frame of mind, that of self congratulation for digging up such a nice souvenir. Who cares what they think, I decided. I just won’t show it to anyone.
After a few hours of walking I was down at my van, which I had left at the trailhead where Lightning Creek and Sentinel Creek join Beaver Creek. With my feet on flat ground, I was bursting again with readiness to show the skull. A small group of guys were hanging around a tent at the trailhead and I handled the skull in a way that would have been hard for them not to notice. I unlashd it from my pack and loosened up some dirt in the brain cavity with a stick and poured it out. I set it on the bed of the van, then carried it around to the passenger seat, then back to the bed. After brushing some dirt from the horns, it was time to take it back out and tidy up the van, so I placed it on top of my cooler, which was setting over toward the three guys. I waited for them to run over, yelling, Holy Smokes! Gather around everyone, he found a buffalo skull! But no one seemed to notice. Well, I thought, these guys are camped out of their cars; They might be woefully uneducated in the ways of skulls and lost artifacts and treasures from the deep woods.

I set the skull back on the bed in my van and drove down Beaver Creek to highway 287 along the Madison River. Driving north, I carefully studied the flesh covered skulls of every horned bovine I passed, pondering the subtle differences and similarities between them and the skull
that I had pulled over to the side of the road in order to get from the bed and place on the seat next to me. I was growing increasingly uneasy that I had misdiagnosed the object and was getting into a big fuss over a cow with a fat head. In Three Forks, Montana, I got on West I-90 for 170 miles to the Van Buren exit in Missoula, the town where I live, and drove to the public library, went inside, typed skulls into the keyword search, went to the stacks and found Skulls and Bones, by Glenn Searfoss, flipped to figure 2.22 on page 39, matched my find to the buffalo skull in the illustration, then went back outside to face the world. I was afraid that no one would be home at my house, and I was so excited to show someone that I swung by my buddy Ricky’s house. Ricky was standing on his porch in pajamas smoking cigarettes when I pulled up, and I yelled at him to come over and look at something. He studied the skull for a moment through a haze of exhaled smoke, and hefted it like a ham he was thinking about buying. Ricky’s from New York, and not what I expected to be a buffalo skull expert of any sort, but I was eager for feedback. He asked how old I figured it to be. “I’m not sure yet” I told him. “Pretty old, though.” I jumped in my van and raced home.
When I pulled up to my house, I could hear my neighbor, Mike, hammering and pounding away behind his fence. I brought the skull over to show him. He was cutting up a big pile of slate to cover the floor of an old shed that he's converting into what he calls a studio. He had a grinder in one hand and a hammer and chisel in the other. His dogs, Matuke and Gus, gave the skull an indifferent smell. Since I was locked into a certain frame of mind at the moment, I noticed that Mike had bones and skulls and patches of hair lying all over his yard. I had found my connoisseur. I told Mike where I found it. He wanted to know why a buffalo would be so high up in the mountains. "I don't know," I told him, as I worked some dirt out of the eye socket. "But I think it's pretty old."

The skull spent the next few days getting handled by friends and studied over as it sat on the coffee table in my living room. Its presence caused a lot of arguments among my house mates. I had to use a mammology book to defend the skull against naysayers who thought it was a domestic cow. Everyone offered their own version of how it got so high up in the mountains. It prompted discussions about Native American hunting strategies and vision quests, forest fires, grave digging, who serves the best buffalo burgers on highway 287, and whether or not porcupines eat
bones and antlers (they do). Basically, though, we just wanted to talk about it, and any way we could do that was fine with us. Here was something that could take you away from the usual things that make up your life and drop you back into a very different time. That alone gave it some value, and I hadn’t yet even begun to check into it.

Soon after finding the skull, a friend of mine happened to give me a copy of Francis Parkman’s book, The Oregon Trail, which chronicles the author’s zig-zagging journey, in the summer of 1846, through the Great Plains. In the book, when Parkman isn’t relating one of his many tales about wounding tremendous buffalo bulls that always seem to escape, or complaining about his travel mates, or discoursing on various forms of tobacco, or eating the meat of a puppy dog, or using his East Coast intellect to compare the social, political, economic, culinary and hygienic flaws and attributes of the different tribes he encounters, he is usually describing a Great Plains that are covered so thick with the skulls of buffalo that at times it must have been hard to get around from place to place.

His feelings about the skulls depend largely on what circumstance he finds them under. Of one meadow, where he has found a multitude of wild flowers, he writes that he
sat down on one of the many available buffalo skulls to study them. Further into the summer, when he and his companion lose the trail of their party, he notices that “the ground immediately around us was thickly strewn with the skulls and bones of buffalo.” Later, while he’s lost near the Black Hills and it looks like a big thunderstorm is headed his way and he’s increasingly uneasy about being discovered, tortured, and killed by the Snakes, Arapahoes or Pawnees, he writes, “I felt the most dreary forebodings of ill-success...the passage was encumbered by the ghastly skulls of buffalo.” Toward the book’s end, when Parkman has traveled south to the Arkansas River, the skulls take on metaphysical significance. When Parkman fires several rounds at a white wolf that has been skulking through camp at night, he runs over to what he believes will be the wolf’s corpse and finds that the white object he was looking at in the dusk was nothing other than a gigantic buffalo skull.

So what happened to all the buffalo skulls? That question rolled around my mind and turned up the image of a photograph I’d once seen. It showed a mountain of buffalo skulls with a man in a suit standing on top of it. I could remember seeing it, but I couldn’t recall where. The next morning I went to the library and started looking. I
finally found it in Killing Custer, a book by James Welch about the events leading up to the Battle at the Little Bighorn. The actual photograph is housed in the Detroit Public Library, and the mound of skulls is at least twenty five feet high and a few hundred feet long. It would take an impossible feat of extrapolation to calculate just how many thousands of skulls there are. The man on top of the mountain is staring off toward the viewer’s right. He has a skull propped against his leg and he looks like an exclamation point that climbed to the top of a very long sentence about waste and destruction. The photograph was probably taken at a rail yard in Miles City, Montana, or Dodge City, Kansas. In the late nineteenth century, after the buffalo were reduced to scattered piles of bones on the plains, Indians would gather those up and sell them for six cents a ton to the whites, who shipped them back East by rail to be ground into bone meal fertilizer and china.

That the skull I found evaded the bone salesmen and bull dozers and souvenir hounds is testament to the remoteness of its home over the last century or so; That it avoided all the other forms of destruction that can befall a skull is odd chance and maybe a little fate and luck. Just how much luck I wasn’t sure until I showed my skull to Dan Flores, an environmental historian at the University of
Montana. Flores has written and lectured about the West, and its buffalo, all across the nation. If you climbed into an uncontrollable time machine that deposited you at a random historical date and place, and you stepped from that time machine and saw Dan Flores, you would assume that you had met a buffalo hunter on the Texas plains in 1860. He has a dark, weathered complexion, wears a leather bracelet with silver buffalo charms, has long, salt and pepper hair lashed into a pony tail by a thin leather cord, a big mustache, cowboy boots, and an aura of confidence that usually comes from being well armed. When I first called Flores, I simply told him what I’d found and where, and asked him if he’d be interested in taking a look at it. His enthusiasm to see the skull was my first piece of real evidence that I had something of actual interest.

We met in the lounge of a local restaurant, and he took the skull out of its box, set it on the bar and said that it’s from a mature cow, and based on his observations from other semi-decayed skulls, it shouldn’t be any older than 500 years. And he also figured that it couldn’t be younger than 130 years old, because the bison in that area had been wiped out since then. Dan Flores looks like a man who would call buffalo something like buff’ler, but he actually calls them American Bison, because they are not,
taxonomically speaking, buffalo. I prefer the to use buffalo, because I like the ring of it and it the word has historical resonance. I save the word bison for when I’m talking about the buffalo raised nowadays, on ranches.

To most people, the skull’s age and authenticity are of primary interest. To Dan, the most puzzling thing about the skull was where it was found, at 9,000 feet above sea level in thick timber. "Bison were, and are, an animal of the plains and broad valleys," said Dan, "but things like prairie fires and droughts may have forced the animals into the high country, or maybe they regularly migrated through the region in search of mates or food." He also pointed out that the area in the Madison Mountains where I found it may have looked a lot different back then. That slope could have been burned off grassland or who knows what a couple hundred years ago. He also brought up the idea that maybe it was carried by someone up there, because the skulls had great medicinal and spiritual value to the people who survived by following the herds.

I told Dan about the selling of bones for fertilizer, and he already knew all about that. Of all the skulls left over from that, and all those preceding it, he said, some broke apart from the long winters of alternate freezing and thawing; Mice and other rodents and insects ate them; They
dried up in the sun, became brittle, and turned to powder; They disappeared under the sediment of valley floodplains; They were trampled under the hooves of Francis Parkman’s horse and mule. Even today, in Yellowstone National Park, one of the last places where semi-wild buffalo are still semi-free to roam, workers take sledge hammers and smash any skulls they find to avoid thievery by park visitors. The minerals of the bones there belong to the land and the rodents and sun, just like they did in the past. Buffalo skulls have almost as many enemies as the buffalo did.

When our conversation slowed, Dan would turn the skull on the bar like he was looking for a secret place on a globe, and then he’d find something. His well of information never seemed to dry up. Stroking the broad heavy mass of bone on the top of the skull, between the horns, he told me that bison were so well suited, unlike cattle, to winters on the plains because they would use their massive heads, instead of hooves, to clear away the crusted snow. A few animals could snowplow a football field in an hour. Also, in a blizzard, they would head into the storm, plowing and feeding. Cattle instinctively go with it, actually lengthening their exposure to the adversity. On our third round of drinks, Dan put the skull back in its
box, to the relief of the bartender, but we each rested a foot on it and had another round.

Like most all topics of conversation, talk of the skull slowly turned from fact to philosophy. Even though Dan reminded me twice that a historian must search for unbiased truth, he seemed quite comfortable when we began talking about the symbol of a skull, about why it is such a powerful image. And he seemed pleased that we both had to admit to not really knowing why. I think now of an interview with the painter, Georgia O’Keeffe, where the person she’s talking with keeps pressing her to explain why she paints so many skulls. What is it about them? O’Keeffe doesn’t respond with morbidity or hyperbole. She says “bones do not symbolize death to me. It never occurs to me that they have anything to do with death, they are so very lively...they please me.” To her credit as a painter, the image of the skull is about simplicity. It’s About light, beauty, and tangibility. But O’Keeffe painted the skulls of cows, horses, sheep, and deer. They are all species that are doing just fine, that enjoy concrete immortality, and, perhaps, that’s what those skulls mean. But a buffalo skull is about death. The other things I mentioned finding, in the beginning of this essay, are the results of action: a coyote killed a fawn and shit out a hoof; a Native American
hunter knapped an arrow head from a chunk of flint. All I really know about the buffalo is that it died. And that’s the point, because that’s what happened to the buffalo. They died and died and died, until there were only about 75 of them left, docile and fenced and herded like cows until they were as dumb as cows.

As an image, as found art, of course, it’s open to individual interpretation. The chance to make an interpretation has quite a monetary value. I was recently talking to Gary Haaf, the owner and operator of Big Sky Beetle Works, and he told me that an old buffalo skull - an original - can sell to collectors for up to $1500 if it’s big and in good condition. Gary’s company is out of Florence, Montana, and he sells complete, museum quality, bleached skulls from ranch bison for $300-$500 dollars. It takes his dermiftid, or carrion, beetles from two to five days to eat the flesh and brains away from a fresh skull. To have a painting of a buffalo done on the forehead of the skull is an extra $70, though he’s seen new skulls with nice paintings sell for up to $1800, to Californians.

I look for most any reason to stop by Gary’s place, because he’s always got something going on and he likes to talk about it. He does work for hunters and museums and
science classes and the government. His shop is a converted
garage, next to his house, and the odor is unpleasant but
you can quickly acclimate to it. The back room, which is
about the size of a one-car garage, is filled to over-
capacity with a mound of heads waiting to go into the
beetle room. He has skulls from moose, elk, mule deer,
whitetail deer, bighorn sheep, caribou, brown bear and
black bear, fox and coyote, muskrats and beaver, weasels,
mice, silver fox, mountain goats and all kinds of other
stuff. skull believes that the market for ranch skulls is
flooded, and he knows a guy with over a thousand skulls
that he’s trying to get rid of at $100 a piece. But, Gary
added, those skulls were cleaned by boiling, and beetle
cleaning is the only method recommended by Boone and
Crocket, an organization for big-game hunters that
documents and classifies trophy animal heads. Gary Haaf
gets very annoyed when you mention boiling a skull.

After leaving Gary’s, I worked some numbers around in
my head, like how I don’t have much money, but I quickly
dropped the idea of selling it. Right now, the skull is
hanging from my living room ceiling. I have a string tied
to the base of each horn and then looped over a hanging
plant hook above my banana tree, next to the front door.
When I open the door against the breezes that blow into
Missoula valley through Hellgate Canyon, the head swings a little on its mooring. I sometimes face it out toward the street, but usually I have it looking inside. When I turn on my lamp and shut off the ceiling light, the shadow gets almost as big as a buffalo.

Sometimes days will go by and neither me or my roommates will mention it or take it down from the hook. When I do, I feel again what I felt, sometime around 3rd or 4th grade, when I first heard the story of the American Bison: What a horrible mistake, I thought. Back then, in my nine year old mind, I couldn’t imagine buffalo seeing myself looking down on a green, rolling field covered with the black and red dots of skinned out buffalo. I haven’t come that far since then, but now I can think about just this one buffalo, and work from there. Her, plus some thirty or so million others, added up to tremendous sums: the near death of a species; the death of a nomadic lifestyle; and finally, the death of our nation’s ridiculous notion of inexhaustibility.

Hide hunters used to brag that when the buffalo were slaughtered, they lay so thick on the ground that you could walk for miles on the bodies. It haunts me to think that that is still true in a way. Now, when I am out walking along a river or through a meadow, looking for objects on
the surface that I might want to collect and bring home, I instead think of all of the buffalo beneath the soil that I have just walked over for the last mile. And the next time I go to the East, I’ll have to feel all those crushed bones that were spread as fertilizer and I’ll be reminded of what lies beneath the soil all across this country.
To The Bone

At the Cancun International Airport in Mexico’s Quintana Roo province, you have to wait for your flyrod case to come in from the plane on an oversized baggage cart because the long, skinny tubes won’t ride properly on the conveyor. This can make for a harrowing little wait, too. There I sat, my backpack full of camping gear, my two hundred dollars in cash (about 1800 pesos), my month to kill, my employer up north very pissed at me for leaving and probably training my replacement, and the one thing I really needed in order to do the one thing I really wanted to do - catch some bonefish - was likely lost and sitting on some other plane in some other country. When I did get the quick-fix of seeing my rod case, it didn’t last long because I was instantly hit by an intense anxiety about whether I’d have any luck hitching rides and finding fish. Much of this anxiety was thanks to the flyfishing shops I go into now and then back in the States, who unanimously assured me that my plan to hitchhike around the southern Yucatan peninsula would yield me no bonefish and probably find me dead in the jungle at its conclusion (they all suggested, if I really wanted some fish, to book a guided trip through them for only a few thousand dollars).
Once I changed into some cut-offs, mixed up a stiff cuba libra inside a rinsed out hydrogen-peroxide bottle and got on a southbound bus to Tulum, I was feeling much better. Tulum is a small, Caribbean beach town that has a nice blend of local culture and European hippies selling pot and hand-made jewelry, and the place really sets you at ease. The main street is dotted with guys selling grilled chicken, and after sampling around I can say quite definitively that Jorge', the grillman at Pollos Asados Marisol, serves the best bird in town.

Tulum is also a good get-off point for fishing, because stretching south of there along the coast almost to Belize is the Sian Ka’an, a United Nations sponsored, 1.3 million acre biosphere reserve that is open to the public in much of its area. I bought rice and beans, a twelve dollar hammock, four gallons of purified water, and thumbed a ride almost to the reserve’s north entrance, where I started walking.

The Sian Ka’an has lagoons, beaches, Savannas, Mayan ruins, 345 species of birds, coatimundi, monkeys, several types of big cats including jaguars, three species of crocodile, manatees, two kinds of peccary, and, I discovered while walking along the beach when I first entered, shoreline flotsam washed in from most anywhere,
including plastic cups made in Jamaica, Venezuela, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, a full but rusty tank of propane, and the busted-off front end of a handmade dugout canoe.

I wanted to get a ways into the Sian Ka’an before I started looking for fish, so I headed down a 67 kilometer road that is really only a stretch of bumps and ruts running the length of a thin peninsula that separates the Caribbean Ocean from a large saltwater lagoon. The road ends in Punta Allen, a small Mayan lobster fishing village named after Blackbeard’s ship, the Allen, which the pirate used to moor there while he was hiding out. The highest point on the peninsula is only a few feet above sea-level, and in places it is no wider than a football field. Heading south, there’s a jungle buffer on your left, then a thin line of coconut palms, then the ocean. On the right is another strip of jungle, then mangroves, then the lagoon. Every couple hours a truck would come by and not pick me up. After I’d gone quite a ways, I found a dead bonefish as big as a roll of French bread covered in dust on the side of the road. His eyes were dried out and tacky, and his tail had begun to curl up from evaporation. This find puzzles me still today, but at the time it was reassuring
to find my quarry, usually an aquatic creature, lying on dry land.

I finally thumbed a ride from a guy hauling sticks of wood, and I got out when I could see the lagoon off to my right through about fifty yards of mangroves. I was very excited to see what my new hammock looked like in its full splendor, so I strung it between two palms on the ocean side of the road. It was matrimonial size, and very comfortable, but I had a hard time envisioning myself and a girl enjoying much playful adventure while folded up like a soft taco. I found a piece of driftwood for a table and picked a few coconuts that were ripe enough to have firm meat. Little sand crabs were throwing dirt out of their holes all around my camp as I stashed my backpack, grabbed my rod and some flies I’d tied, crossed the road, and entered the mangrove obstacle.

I twisted and wrestled and crawled through mangroves, turning my clothes almost completely orange from a staining liquid that came off the shrub-like trees when I bent their limbs. About half way through, I was stung on the arm by a worm, something that had never happened to me in all my twenty-six years. Before I could retaliate, he dropped from his perch and disappeared under water. The bite swelled to the size of a 35mm film canister, and I got the
terrible feeling that this trip was not going to work out and I would not be finding any bonefish. I named the worm a Mexican evasive fighting worm and made a mental note of its appearance in case I had to describe it at the emergency room.

The swelling receded by the time I finally reached the end of the mangroves. The lagoon’s water stretched for miles, white or gray or blue, depending on the depth, which ranged from ankle to thigh deep. Twenty feet in front of me, a three-inch razor blade was sticking out of the water, waving back and forth. I was hallucinating from the worm. No, I realized, it isn’t a razor at all; it’s the tail fin of a bonefish. I’ll be damned, I thought. He was tipped forward in the water, making the same noise with his tail that you can make wagging your finger in the sink. There were several more fish with him. I fumbled with my rod, cast a sparsely tied brown fly with ball-chain eyes about five feet in front of the fish, who raced over and picked it up so fast that he was into the backing on my reel before I had time to yell “yeehaw.” The line whipping through the water sounded like ripping newsprint and it shot a rainbow colored mist up in the air. Such sweet release.
When I got that fish in my hand, I searched it from nose to tail and am pleased to report that there was no huge price tag stapled to him. I thought of the flyshop guys back at home and one syllable came to mind: Ha!

Funny thing, that exact same syllable came to mind only a few days later when I was fishing a few kilometers to the south of my camp. Sometimes a pod of bonefish will be coming at you so thick you’d swear it’s a green, queen-sized mattress getting pulled through the water, and the fish will fight over who gets to eat the fly. Other times you can’t find any fish but a snobbish loner, and he’ll look at your fly like it’s the stupidest thing he’s ever seen. I was having troubles with one of the latter situations, and I decided to try swimming across a deep channel to get to another flat that looked like it might have fish. Just as I got out in the middle of the channel, doing the doggy paddle with my rod held out of the water, a small white boat hauling a guide and his sport came zooming around a point of mangroves and almost whacked into me. It was one of the more gratifying feelings I had in my life when I beat them to the flat, and it seemed like a great triumph of man over machine. And despite the fact that I
was in Mexico, I felt a surge of faith in the American institution that is Flyfishing.

One thing about on-the-cheap fishing in Mexico is that it has a lot more to do with camping than it does with fishing. To spot fish on the flats, you need a high sun with no clouds, so you can only sight-fish for bones about five hours a day. The beauty is, boredom doesn’t become an issue because you can entertain yourself by dodging the four-pronged spear of thirst, heat, sunburn and hunger that is always waiting to stab you in the ass.

Keeping and eating bonefish is seriously frowned upon in angling circles, which is no big deal anyway because they don’t taste good. In the evenings it’s fun to fish for mangrove snapper and reef fish, or try to snag some mullet. I carry bailing wire and wrap them to a green stick and bake them over a fire. I also developed a strong taste for sautéed conch meat, but I try to stick to eating fish because conches are so easy to get and it makes me feel guilty. As for the wind and the sunburn, tough shit. I guess if you don’t pay for fish in dollars you’re probably going to pay for them in comfort. Not a bad trade, though.

In case you decide to give it a go, here are some fishing and traveling tips, along with some easy Spanish translations:
If an old Mayan man hauling fruits and vegetables to a out-of-the-way lobster fishing village lets you ride in the back of his truck, don’t steal any bananas (bananos) because he’ll count them before he lets you get out. Shimmying a coconut palm is a good way to scratch up your belly. When wading out of a mangrove (mangle) swamp in the evening, and you swim across a small channel to get to shore, and then look back to see a six-foot-long crocodile (cocodrilo) cruising up that same channel with just it’s eyes sticking out of the water, it can sure scare the hell out of you. Mexican Federales in transport vehicles are pretty good about picking up hitchhikers (autostopistas). Drinking too much coconut milk will give you a horrendous case of the shits (diarrea). If you wake up on a deserted beach along the Yucatan and see six teenaged soldiers in jungle fatigues carrying grenade launchers and M-16s, don’t be alarmed; They’re just nice guys looking for cocaine and weapons smugglers (contrabandistas). If a stingray sees the silt you stir up from walking in the water (agua), he’ll cruise over to find out what’s going on, but if you poke him in the face with your rod tip he’ll turn around and leave. Disregard as fallacy anything you learned from Gilligan’s Isle about hammocks or coconuts. When you hook a little shark (tiburon) on a fly, like my friend Eric Kern
once did, hang on to your rod. If you can catch them, mangrove snapper, grunts, barracuda, and mullet all make good fish (pescar) tacos, but nothing beats the taste of a spiny lobster (langosta), sprinkled with the juice from a lime (lima) that you picked from a tree growing along the Caribbean Ocean, under a night sky that looks like it’s been hit by a thousand shotgun blasts, each hole leaking a bright droplet of light that you swear is going to drip into your eyeball (globo ocular). When you meet someone, smile and say hola!
Into The Smelt Night

It is 10:30 PM and I’m fumbling through the house looking for my warm clothes because it’s cold and rainy outside and I’m supposed to go smelt dipping with my friend George. I’m tempted to back out, because I’ve already had a full day by anyone’s standard. When I woke up at quarter to six, before even opening my eyes, I could hear the rain, still dripping from the same cloud that’s been parked over Western Michigan for three months now.

By noon I had a terrible headache from my eyes getting flashed while welding support braces to the ceiling of a car parts factory, because I was too tired to synchronize the flick of my head that drops my protective visor with the flick of my hand that strikes electrode to metal. Distracted by this headache, I ran over my co-workers leg with a scissors lift and had to take him down for five internal and seven external stitches.

After that, we went for drinks but I had to stop when my headache came back. I left my wounded friend, tried to find my girlfriend at her house, didn’t, checked several other places for her without any luck, drove home, read a magazine, and went to bed. Just then the phone rang; it was George. He said the smelt might very well be running
tonight, and if I wanted to catch some then I better get over to his place by eleven.

So now I’m wearing my warm clothes and driving north on Pillon Road and I just saw my first raccoon of the year. The windshield keeps fogging up and I roll my window down and something like body heat breathes off the night into my face. It’s a miracle. The temperature must have gone up about ten degrees since I got in my car. The rain has turned to a slow falling fog. Now I’m feeling ready for about anything.

When I cross the Dalton Township drainage ditch I see it’s flooded almost up to the road, and I know those same water molecules will flow into Duck Creek, which flows West from here twenty miles, cuts through a sand dune, and, hopefully, crashes head-long into some spawning smelt that are heading up from Lake Michigan.

George says it just takes proper timing to hit the smelt run, and when I turn down the dead-end road that leads to the trail that leads to George’s house, I know that at least my timing is right on the button because it’s five to eleven. I go through the gate, and a hundred yards into the woods I come to the sign that says George’s Compound; when you look at his place the sign doesn’t seem like a joke at all.
The yard is illuminated by several large lights. There are a number of shabby outbuildings and an enormous kitchen garden fenced off like the perimeter defense at Khe Sahn. An old satellite dish as tall as two men stands next to the house and a newer dish is bolted to the roof. I knock and someone yells, Come In. George is crashed out on the living room couch beneath a photographic collage of his son and daughter, both of them grown up and moved away. He greets me, "Christ, I was out cold. How's it going?"

He sits up and smooths back his pony tail, tugging on the Grey chocks. His handlebar mustache - black above the lip, salt and pepper on the descent, ivory at the handles - is trimmed with straight-edge precision. The bags under his eyes are the size of Lipton tea bags, and for some reason there’s a 12 gauge shotgun leaning against the couch and a small pile of ammunition on top of a stereo speaker. George gives me the latest dispatches from his war with the local rabbits and muskrats, who he says have launched a two-prong assault on the garden and the shoreline of his pond.

He goes into the kitchen and begins setting up a mini-buffet with spiced homemade pickles from a gallon jug, saltines, and an ancient bottle of peach schnapps with crystallized sugar flaking off the cap. He has a case of these bottles, and the tag on the one we’re drinking from,
which is barely legible, says 76 cents. He and his wife, Molly, recently split up and the kitchen has taken on a utilitarian look. The only decorations are a POW-MIA flag and a largemouth bass and a northern pike from the pond, stuffed into an eternally slack-jawed gulp. George tells me that Walt, Molly's boyfriend, just caught another nice northern down in the pond. I want to ask why his wife's new boyfriend is hanging out at his place, but the conversation moves on before I think of a subtle way to phrase my question.

After our snack, George and I head to the garage. Outside, he thrusts his hands into the warm air. "So nice," he says. His equipment is lined up along the wall, one extra everything. He points at the objects, whispering to himself, then crosses the garage and grabs a can of lantern fuel and some string. I ask where his Harley is and he says it's in the basement. I throw the nets and waders and lanterns into the back of his '79 El Camino and we're off. Whether we find smelt or not, we won't return until sunrise. To the west, the clouds blowing in from Lake Michigan are thinning. The moon has emerged through the clouds like pale skin inside see-through panties. It is a knife-point crescent moon. The time is 11:42 p.m.
From a few half-assed smelt dipping trips I went on in junior high school, I know there is nothing even close to beauty in either dipping a smelt or looking at a smelt. As George pulls out to route M-120 and swings west, accelerating hard, he is not anticipating the kind of balls-to-the-walls that drives sporting anglers of the hook and line variety. The average smelt of the Great Lakes looks like a ball-point pen with a horrendous underbite. When pulled from the water the females drip with some of their 60,000 eggs and males expel a reserve of milky come. They are not the subjects of trophy photos. Smelt are eaten whole, minus the head, breaded and fried. To someone who appreciates a fish fry, they taste pretty good, though not good enough for me to understand why George, and many other Michiganders, sacrifice night after night of sleep for them, only to get skunked, then go off to work red-eyed and blue.

George takes a left turn into Zim's party store so he can buy a twelve pack. He refuses my donation for the beer, says it's his treat, and I wait in the idling El Camino. Lately, I've been talking about smelt a lot. I've talked about them with friends, with guys at work, and with guys I meet in the bar, and just the word smelt has mystery. While George is in the store, I review what I know so far.
so I can keep it all straight. Someone told me that smelt got their name from people saying "I smelt it," as in, I smelt it, and it didn't smell good. Smelt do have a peculiar odor, I know that, but I'm at a loss for simile. They don't smell fishy, though you do know by their smell that they are fish, if that makes any sense. I met a guy named Craig Christenson who calls smelt the Devil Fish and describes a big one as The Big Fin and who refers to himself in the third person as Ol' Ahab. I met a guy named Davy Cole who pluralized smelt with simple plural form: smelts. But he also said that he killed "two buck" last year with his rifle.

When most people talk about smelt, they say "the smelt." For instance, several people said to me, "I don't know if the smelt are even coming this year," which sounds cool, because it makes the fish seem synchronized and gregarious and democratic. Another guy said the fish's name came from the refining process of smelting, because you skim them out of the water with a scooper. When I looked that aspect of metallurgy up, his theory didn't sound so good.

George trots out to the car, hands two cans through the window and puts the box in the back. The beer is
called Goebel, and George applies a French pronunciation to the word whenever he says it. His face has livened up and he looks awfully giddy for a forty-seven-year-old-man in black motorcycle boots who has been sleeping on a couch since his wife left.

While I was still asleep this morning, George was at work in Howmet Corporation's plant #3, located in Whitehall, Michigan. He is an X ray technician, a skill he learned during the Vietnam War. After the war he came home to Muskegon and transferred his skills to the service of Howmet, where he X rays turbines for F-16 jets. He stands in the dark on a rubber mat and looks for hairline fractures that show up black and squiggly on the gelatin sheets.

This morning, in the lunchroom, George overheard a reputable man say he dipped a quarter bucket of smelt at the Whitehall pier the night before. That night, George was at the Pentwater pier and didn't see a thing. The man who dipped the smelt did not stay out on the pier for long - he had just come off a double shift and hadn't slept in twenty-seven hours. Tonight, we're following up on that tip. If the smelt were spawning last night, there's a good chance that the run is on full throttle and they'll be spawning again tonight.
I decide to break a code of etiquette and ask George what he thinks the chance of us getting into some smelt might be. Without looking up from the road, he says, "Last year, numbers were real down. I got five teeny smelt one night and forty the next night. That's it for 16 trips out. If you're curious: the year before wasn't a lick better. I'd refrain from getting too excited about any of this shit, my friend."

George's prediction knocks my spirits a bit and they take another plunge when we get close to the Whitehall pier because we haven't passed a car for two miles, and I figure that if the smelt are running there should be some frantic traffic, like the mayhem in old Indian movies when the buffalo finally arrive. George assures me that cars don't mean a thing because he once dipped a bucket of smelt when it was just him and the ducks at the pier. We're driving due north with White Lake flattened and dark out the passenger window. The lake is actually a six mile long, mile-wide bulge in the White River. Most of the major rivers in Western Michigan gather in natural reservoirs before emptying into the Great Lakes, and that's where the first white settlements sprang up while the French and English were still battling over control of the Great Lakes shipping and trading zones.
Thin strips of sand dune keep White Lake's identity separate from the expanses of Lake Michigan. One big, cleansweeping tsunami and the lake would annex a new bay. At the west end of White Lake, the river resumes it's channeled shape and eases through a concrete canal that has been dredged to accommodate iron ore freighters and daily loads of sail boats and pleasure craft. A coast guard station is situated along the White Lake channel, but its officers' sole duty seems to be ticketing jet skiers who whiz through the no-wake zone in a flurry of neon machines and wet suits.

There is hardly a square inch of White Lake's shoreline not illuminated by lights from industries, marinas, yacht clubs, dry docks, and pricey summer homes. At the far end of the lake is the town of Whitehall, proud home to the world's largest weather vane, which isn't as big as you'd expect. Looking at it, I feel surprised that no one has bothered to better the record. Tourist shops in Whitehall sell seagull statues, clocks shaped like sinking steam freighters, and wind chimes that sing out as ceramic fish ting into tin sail boats. Like a maritime tribute to the tourist dollar, flag poles all over Whitehall fly Jolly Rogers below the U.S. flag. This seafaring theme is deceiving, if not entirely cosmetic. On the mean,
Whitehallers are machinists, welders, retailers, and unemployed. The smelt is not to Whitehall what the lobster and marlin are to coastal Maine and Key West.

Reflections from the shoreline lights chase along the water, keeping pace with my eyes as George and I close in on smelt spot number one. Toward the West, beyond the small rise of a dune, lies the complete blackness of Lake Michigan. Gordon Lightfoot sings, "Lake Michigan steams like a young man's dreams," but I can see no such sign of warm water now. It's as if some cosmic child took a set a scissors to the planet and sliced away, leaving nothing to the west of this mitten shaped peninsula. I always need to remind myself that somewhere over there is Milwaukee and all that premium beer, and then Chicago further south, its cultural lightbeam just a little too dim to reach across all this water.

George eases his El Camino into the White Lake Lighthouse Museum parking lot. Now I'm getting excited again because four other beat up, rusted cars are parked there ahead of us: smelt dippers. There is a joke amongst wealthy outdoorsmen that the low end of the blue collar spectrum is naturally drawn to the peripheries of challenging sport: salmon snagging, carp shooting (arrowing sedate, spawning fish, often with their backs out of the
water), pike spearing, sucker grabbing, turtle trapping, deer baiting, smelt dipping. There is some truth to this. It seems that when the world of the dollar - home, car, health care - is balanced on uncertainty, a tangible success in play becomes vital.

Of the beat up cars, George says they probably belong to kids who are off humping and drinking in the sand dunes. The weather isn't that nice, I say. Something beyond mere frolicking in the sand is keeping these people out here. The drizzle has stopped completely now but I haven't seen a star yet. The moon has disappeared. George reaches behind the seat and drags out a pair of yellow overalls that look old enough to span the entire history of Midwestern smelt dipping. He shows me some dried smelt roe still clinging to the leg, leftovers from the smelt boom in the early 1980s, a time when the cyclical smelt population had climbed to the top rung of its ladder.

Instead of walking down to the pier to reconnoiter, we decide to light our lanterns and gather up all the gear. I spill lantern fuel on my pants and boots as I attempt to pour from a square metal can into a ridiculously small hole in the side of the lantern's tank.

We each carry a bucket, a lantern, and a square drop net that dangles from a long pole. In the buckets we have
snacks, matches, and a few balls of string. We leave our waders and dip nets in the back of the El Camino, and I give a silent farewell. I figure about 50/50 odds of them being stolen.

George leads the way as we shortcut over some exposed roots, through a brush thicket, down a muddy embankment and then up to the channel wall. I hold my lantern over the water and it's chocolate brown. Sand particles hover in the water the way dust floats on sunshine coming through the window into a dark room. A ship is slipping through the channel. Green and red lights pin-point its dimensions. The vessel emits a baritone hum like a thousand drowning ceiling fans. As soon as I turn toward Lake Michigan I can tell the run isn't happening. There is a group of smelt dippers on the pier, but in the glow of their lanterns I see that the electric tension of a good run is missing. The nets are in the water but the dippers are milling around, drinking beer and talking or staring at the water like it reminds them of something and they can't remember what. There isn't a ripple on the water.

Once the river channel hits Lake Michigan, two long arms of concrete reach out for several hundred yards; one going northwest and the other going southwest. They look like elevated, extrawide sidewalks protecting the channel.
from the brutal November waves, waves that manage to swipe
an angler or pair of teenaged lovers off this pier every
fall. To the south, at the Grand Haven pier, a monument to
all the people washed away and killed acts as a stern
deterrent to those who would like to get a closer look at a
Great Lakes storm.

George sets his equipment down and approaches a man
who is dressed head to toe in a neon orange suit that is
printed over in a green and grown camouflage pattern.

"Any luck tonight?"

"Almost."

The man claims to have seen two groups of smelt
following the pier wall but they spooked at the edge of his
lantern's ring of light. "Nothing worse than a cagey
smelt," he tells us. We nod, but then I think of several
things much worse than scared fish.

In theory, the smelt are heading to the river channel,
but as the schools of fish cruise along the shore searching
for incoming current, they hit the breaker arms and pace
nervously up and down the immense barrier. After a while
they just start spawning on the shoreline gravel in what
looks like confused frenzy. That's when the fisherman stand
a good chance at filling some buckets with fish.
The sensation of possibility, encouraged by the sighting, had led the seven smelt dippers present to set their nets. By now, they've all evidently lost interest, or hope. George and I look north, toward the Pentwater River, and contemplate the drive. We look south, toward Duck Creek, and contemplate that drive. We contemplate making our final and only stand for the night here at White Lake channel.

Before a verdict is reached, we are interrupted by an urgent rush down the pier. There is some frantic whispering further out on the pier that I cannot untangle. It gets louder. Someone is saying "come you big fucker, come on you big fat fucker." It sounds like the precursor to a fight but it isn't. It is the man who saw the smelt earlier and he is speaking to the water like he's going to kick its ass. It seems the man is talking to a fish. Below him I see a ghostly form slithering along six feet out from the wall. I realize it's the shadow cast from a near twenty pound chinook salmon that is suspended in the water mid-way between sand and air. The fish is moving along a superslow path that may or may not deliver itself over the drop net. When the salmon is straight out from him, the man executes a heaving and desperate pull on the net's handle and manages to only tip the fish, which thrashes itself toward
the net of the next man. This fellow hoists the chrome, three-foot fish up in a dizzying flash. The net job is so expert that by the time the salmon starts doing the fierce body jolts that would have destroyed the cloth netting it is already on the concrete.

Quicker yet, the man wraps up his net, kills the lantern, and hooks his index finger inside the fish's gill plate like he's grabbing the handle on a plastic grocery bag. Three distinct rivulets of blood descend down the length of the fish and drip on the pier in a zig-zag path. With an impish grin that seems to say, "Hey, I'm guilty, but you'd all do the same thing," he heads for his car because he has just caught a salmon in a way that is illegal but seemingly accepted on the pier - actually cheered by some - though approval is obviously not so universal that he can hang out all night with a wet mound of incriminating evidence flopping end for end next to his bucket and his pint of too-sweet Arrow brand schnapps.

George tells me that he's seen muskrats, brown trout, steelhead, lake trout, beavers, coho, redhorse suckers, perch, and walleye netted up by smelt dippers, but the chinook salmon is the perennial treat that gets the blood pumping on the pier. I had seen this happen before and had just assumed chinook were crazy for smelt meat. Then one
day my friend Eric hid fifteen pounds of live chinook contraband down his waders and was surprised, upon taking them off, to find that the fish had shed nearly all of its scales up and down his pantleg. Turns out, loose scales and nettable behavior are the symptomology of a strange chinook kidney disease that sends the fish swimming into shallow water in a sickly trance. I withhold this piece of information on the pier for fear of looking like a jealous loser bent on ruining the fun.

"Let's set up and give it a little time," says George. He tears the cellophane off a pack of cigarettes, inverts his bucket for a stool, and sets into a discourse on smelt lore.

"Everybody, I mean everybody, thinks he knows the this and that of when the smelt will run. I'll cut through a lot of the bullshit for you right now. I've been dipping smelt on this stretch of shoreline since 1974 and only one or two times have I seen a smelt dipped outside the perimeter dates April 19 and May 5. I mark this shit down every year on the same calendar. It's hanging on the back of the kitchen door at the house, if you ever want to see it." George hunches forward with his elbows on his knees and his voice is low and punctuated.
"However," he continues, "you can fine tune your dates. Some guys say that when the forsythia blossoms just start to pop, check for fish. Sometimes that can be accurate. When it is, I write it off as coincidence. Personally, I go when the daffodils are blooming full throttle. I've known guys who run around sticking little thermometers in the water, and they say that 48 to 53 degrees Fahrenheit water temperature is the magical indicator. However. I know of very cold years when the smelt ran under the ice. If water temperature is so critical, explain that."

I shrug, far more interested in theories than debate. George continues, the spinning beam of the lighthouse shining out his face every three seconds. From the profile, the light through his handlebar mustache hovers like a halo around his mouth. "Water temperature? Not quite. Sure, we humans like to make love in nice warm beds, but we all know that when it's time, it's time, and nothing is going to stop it. Not even the cold."

"However. Enough of this. Let's go to Duck Creek and see if the dipnetters are doing any good. As we smelt dippers often say, we ain't getting shit."

George and I have a twenty minute drive to Duck Creek. We must head a couple miles inland, stop at the White Duck
Party and Gas Station, then drive south, then go back west on the next road toward the lake. Despite our involvement in an international angling pursuit, I am still surprised to see evidence of smelt dipping when I am inland and not actually at a river mouth. In the parking lot of the White Duck, while George is buying a six pack, I notice a drop net handle hanging over the tailgate of a black GMC pickup. The truck has a scratched crease that runs inches deep, from the grill back to the tailgate, straight as a ruler-edge. I try to envision the scenario that could lead to such a wound.

The truck's owner steps out of the White Duck with a coffee and some beer; downers from the left hand, uppers from the right. I yell out, "What do you say, old boy, tonight the night?"

"Last night my buddy dipped 16 males at 4am. He was at Duck Creek, wading out from the mouth. I'll tell you something: Males jump the gun a little, is all. Anytime you get all males, it's early, and the females will be there in 48 hours. Following those females will be the rest of the males who are waiting for the females to run. So, you see, then you get all the smelt in there. I'm saying it's tomorrow night at around 4am."

"I sure appreciate the tip, sir."
"Well, keep quiet about it, or all Western Michigan will be out here with us. I used to be a young guy like you, blabbing away at school."

"Hey now, not me," I say. He gives me a quick pistol shot with his fingers and turns to climb up into his GMC. He roars it alive, flicks on the headlights and disappears, headed west into the smelt night.

The dipnetters make me feel comfortably primitive. Unlike fishing with a hook and line, I can see that it's more like gathering, or an ancient form of fatalistic aquatic gardening. We're just waiting to see what might come our way, and there's nothing any of us could do different to make things happen. A peculiar thing about smelt dipping, and smelt dippers, is that the best practitioners of the sport are likely to know next to nothing about their quarry beyond how to best kill it. A good smelt dipper is someone who likes to stay up all night driving around and drinking beer in the dark. They must be willing to punctuate this behavior by occasionally shining a light at the water.

Here is one of the many facts that you needn't know to be a crack smelt dipper: Rainbow smelt are just one of 33 introduced species of fish (one of 2,000 exotics, including invertebrates) that are slowly outdoing the native species
in a blood struggle of environmental sensitivity and adaptability. Smelt are native to the northern Atlantic Ocean, but the Great Lakes host an international crowd. Along with brown trout, Pacific and Atlantic salmon, flathead minnows and the ubiquitous carp, smelt belong to the echelon of non-native fishes whose various members have become the most loved and despised creatures in the Great Lakes watershed. When environmental fundamentalists talk about an attempt at restoring the Great Lakes and reissuing them to the original inhabitants, most anglers get defensive because, frankly, most people in the region seem to prefer the fish that biologists gave them over the fish provided in Mother Nature's original draft. In northern Michigan, calling a steelhead an invasive exotic can get you castrated and hung on the buckpole of the local sporting goods store.

A dipnetter must wade into the shallow water of a natural stream mouth, thrust a stick into the mud, and hang his light on it. Then he or she waits for smelt to come nosing upstream in search of a suitable spawning site. When they do, the dipper takes shots at them with an oversized butterfly net.
Tonight, this is not happening at Duck Creek. A few bonfires are blazing on the beach and three young guys are wading around in tuxedos with their pant legs rolled, holding lanterns up high. Their nets lie unused on the beach. The water is frigid but I imagine it beats the evening that they were just subjected to at the prom hall. The three dates sit, looking unamused in their high-sheen, stiff prom dresses. This is not beach romance. One of the guys says, "Man, I'm changing into my waders, this is too frickin' cold." This elicits a volley of protest from the trio of girlfriends who know that waders will add another level of seriousness to the jaunt and postpone their departure indefinitely. I can tell this was supposed to be a novelty stop to add something zany to the photo album, but I can see the situation coming to a head.

George fires his Coleman lantern and tries to force his yellow overalls into some tight fitting waders. Stiff-legged, he walks into the water and wades south fifty yards, then comes back to the stream mouth, shrugs, makes a confused face, and wades north. A group of middle-aged guys is standing around a fire, cracking jokes and drinking beer from coolers. They take turns speculating why the smelt have disappeared over the last few years. In the short time I listen in, I hear that it's global warming, the local
weather, Native American commercial fisherman, and zebra mussels. Mostly, they agree, it's the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Here, it isn't hard to understand where this logic comes from - If the government is to thank for most these fish being in here, then who better to blame for taking them out. Thankfully, it's still too early in the year to get very upset. The smelt may be here tomorrow, and then everything will be fine. Lanterns and nets belonging to the group of guys are strewn all over the beach. Once in a while one of the fellows breaks from the gang and shines his light into the stream. The loudest man in the group swaggers over to the water and yells, "Holy shit, the smelt plugging up the stream." Pause. "Just fucking with you all."

I can see George out in the water, slightly to the north. Looking at him while he stands knee deep in Lake Michigan, with his two hooped earrings, a pony tail, and a belly full of beer and homemade pickles, it seems a punchline to a sad joke that he's committed lifelong servitude to the Cold War; Vietnam, then thirty years for the United States jet fighter. George returns from his smelt search and peels off his waders. "These things leak," he says. He sits next to me on the beach and we finish off our remaining cans of beer. George tips one back and drains
it, crinkles the can, says, "No bones in that one." I turn back east to see the sky lighting up over the trees like an instant city sprang up overnight. But it's only the sun, peaking through a new day's load of clouds, an hour from rising into the obscurity of a Michigan April. George has to punch the time card in two hours. We make plans to meet again tomorrow night.