

CLARK'S RIVER BOTTOM & KENTUCKY DAM:

A REMEMBRANCE

by

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Place in poetry, then, or for that matter in much fiction, is often spiritual, and yet it is important to note that this spiritual location clarifies itself and becomes valuable only through one's absence from it. Eden becomes truly valuable only after a fall, after an exile that changes it, irrecoverably, from what it once was. . . . After I had left (California) for good, all I really needed to do was to describe the place exactly as it had been. That I could not do, for that was impossible. And that is where poetry might begin.

--Larry Levis

"Eden and My Generation"

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The contemporary, urban young man is a curious specimen. He dresses daringly and wears his hair short; reads the newspapers, Antaeus, The New Yorker, and The Paris Review; pretends to read Barron's and The Wall Street Journal; listens to Squeeze, Modern English, U2, and The Clash; smokes cigarettes and drinks coffee and Scotch to the romantic borders of self-destruction; takes mega-quantities of Solotron, selenium, beta carotene, and vitamins C and E to preserve that all-American look. The sun, for him, is solar-powered fluorescent, and the luminous figures on the blue-dark of computer screens have replaced his moon and stars. His vision is international, and growing more comprehensive every day. No one is quite sure how he spends his time.--They just know that, whatever his interests, motives, and goals might be, he's going places. If I speak of him with unflagging certainty, there's good justification for it: I'm him.

And yet there are times when the unbridled excitement of all this New Age cultural skirmishing fails me. Dawn arrives parti-colored and luxuriant out of the eastern darkness, a pine bough fills with golden sunlight after a spring rain, or twilight paints the distant mountains with gentle brushstrokes of violet and blue, and I'm borne back on the gilded wings of memory to an earlier time, to a landscape so untouched and so full of wonderful possibilities that I'm overwhelmed by it all, unable (and unwilling) to return to the present place and time.

As far back as I can remember, my family made frequent weekend trips from our home (an apartment or subdivision duplex in Nebo, Stanford, Richmond, or Winchester, depending upon where my father was working that year), across Central and Western Kentucky to my grandparents' home (a forty-acre farm/woods in Symsonia, or, as it was more colloquially referred to, "Slab"). It was at the latter location, of course, that I received my most formative impressions of the infinitely various world of nature: seemingly endless fields of soybeans, tobacco, milo and corn; a huge garden that annually yielded beets, radishes, green beans, tobacco patch beans, sweet corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, celery, headless lettuce, onions, grapes, watermelons, cantaloupes, strawberries, sunflowers, eggplant, cabbage, spinach, turnips and turnip greens; milk cows that would kick the milker if given the opportunity; hens, and a rooster that, after violently flogging me one afternoon, became supper; bird dogs (one Irish, two home-grown), and the stray cat that slept in the barn; the snorting pigs that ate slop until autumn, when they were shot in the head, strung up from a tree, and dismantled, their exposed bowels steaming like hot, coiled snakes in the frosty air. And so much more: BB gun safaris in the path-laden woodslot back of the house; frantic squawks of bluejays on summer mornings; sound of gravel grinding underneath the tires of the rusted-out old cars that occasionally passed; desperate sprints to the frozen out-house in winter; black iron of the woodstove upon which my grandmother cooked quail, opossum, rabbit and squirrel; my terrified grandmother

hacking a chicken snake to pieces with a hoe; the inimitable music of my grandfather belting out classic rural songs over the perfectly squeaking strings of a flat-top guitar:

Well they gave him his orders at Monroe, Virginia
Saying Steve you're way behind time
This is not 38, this is ole 97
Gotta see her into Spencer on time . . .

The oak floor of the small, warm house shook resonately as he stomped his foot for the beat. I was soon to discover, though, that all these were mere preludes to the full-scale, archetypical endeavors of hunting and fishing.

On the Christmas following my tenth birthday, I acquired my first real gun: a black and silver sixteen-gauge breakdown model with modified barrel (halfway between full-choke and open cylinder--"all right for everything, good for nothing"). I entered the ranks of the quail hunters that very afternoon, when my father, my grandfather and I set out for the Old Turner Place, with our retrievers--Bill, Queen and Prince Samuel III--bouncing joyfully ahead. After an hour or so of climbing over barbed wire fences and dragging our canvass pants and green rubber boots through muddy rows of soybeans, we saw Ann go on point. My father kicked around in the heavy brush, until a whirring of brown shapes filled the air. I heard three thunderous shots, but there was not a bird in sight by the time I had awkwardly gotten my new gun up to my shoulder. Moments later Sam returned, wearing a Bob White

for a smile. My father then began imitating the duo-tone whistle of the birds, trying to discern the general direction the scattered covey had taken. This process was repeated several times before we began the long walk home in the dark. I hoped to do better the following day, but didn't get the chance. For that night it snowed "asshole deep on a tall Indian," as my grandfather so eloquently stated it. It would be a year later when I bagged my first quail, its line-drive flight stopping in a small explosion of feathers from the invisible shot pattern my by-then-familiar gun belched forth.

My squirrel hunting debut was somewhat more successful. We rose at three o'clock on an August morning, had a generous breakfast of sausage and eggs and biscuits and gravy, piled into the cab of my grandfather's black Ford pickup, and drove to a deserted farmyard at the edge of Clark's River Bottom. The Bottom consisted of fertile lowlands that flooded each spring, making farming there lucrative but tricky. My father and I set out in our own direction, traversing a difficult field of milo and entering the dark, archaic cathedral of woods, rousting hawks and blackbirds from their high platforms of sleep. Settling down near a hickory in the pre-dawn swelter, we smeared our hands and faces with mosquito dope. (Mosquito dope was a strange concoction. It did not repel the insects, but rather attracted them. The object was to put it on thick enough so they'd drown in it.) When the sky, barely visible through the tall, close trees, turned periwinkle, we began to hear squirrels barking in the distance. (Yes, believe it or not,

squirrels bark, and swish their sprightly tails while doing so!) My father explained how to "paint the tree with your eyes," starting at the trunk and following each branch and twig to the outer circumference. Any irregularity in the tree's form might be a squirrel. He was finally able to make me see one, and whispered that it was all mine. Trembling, I raised the shotgun to my shoulder, beaded in on the dark lump, and squeezed the trigger. The morning filled with echoes of the blast, strong smell of spent powder. A gray shape fell eighty feet down through protesting leaves, and hit the ground with a thud. I looked over to my father, whose silent approval sent waves of relief through the ram-paged nerves in my shoulder.

It was around that same time that I made my first voyage out onto the Tennessee River below Kentucky Dam. We had a little aluminum johnboat with a Johnson outboard motor; the craft seemed tiny in the massive gray presence of the dam and the wide expanses of deep, rapid water. Leg cramps, sunburned necks, and short tempers were common ailments. The stench of fish and bait made the bologna we took along unappetizing. The chance of catching a large catfish (they'd been known to get up toward a hundred pounds near the turbines) was about all that sustained us. The river was statued with the variegated boats of half-miserable sailors like us. River gulls grazed the surface of the water around the pier for careless shad and dead, bloated garr. On the rocks on the far shore, old men were tirelessly casting treble hooks in hope of landing the shark-like spoonbill or shovelbill, which were generally

considered inedible. I caught a two-pound fiddler that morning, and listened to it thump for the next hour among coke bottles in the ice chest. Drowsing in the noon lull, my abdomen and wrists sore from setting the hook and reeling, I was abruptly awakened to see my unheld fishing rod bend double, somersault over the side of the boat, and descend into the murky depths. I didn't look at my father.

Thankfully, my prowess increased over the next few years. It was not unusual for me to chalk up four squirrels, three birds, or a couple of bellyfuls of catfish per outing. My grandfather introduced me to the more subtle arts of fur trapping and digging for wild ginseng, all the while providing me with numerous philosophical insights which I still use to embarrass my wife at parties. Soon, though, organized sports and girls were to take their toll upon my love for the great outdoors. I grew older; my tastes became more urbane and fashionable. Gradually, the reality of Clark's River Bottom and Kentucky Dam gave way to the dreamy, mythic significance of a gone place and time--that vague notion of an "Eden" we all lament the loss of. I nevertheless carry those landscapes forward in memory and imagination.

THREE SUPPLEMENTARY POEMS

In Spring

1

Your morning opens, perhaps,
with madrigals the new dead are imagined to sing, or
angel-flight of ancient birds, the soft
places under their wings
warm gray and beginning to fill
with light reflected by the frail, changing
surface of a river they float over
like flags--

Though you are only a girl,
eighteen and afraid, pulling
the cool cotton dress around your body
like the arms of a lover, letting
your lips travel the rim of a coffee cup
as if it were the flesh of a man, as if
it could give back something more
than exotic smell and its bitterness.

2

You do what you can
to be modern in a country
of fields stitched together
with barbed wire the hunters cut through
before it has a chance
to rust, fields
mapped off by gravel roads
that refuse to swerve,
that make paths for the sun to follow each day.
You do what you can.

But you are late
or early for stylishness,
and all the cities and affluence you will know
are delicate tendrils the white motion
of your slender hands
can raise from the thawed earth.

3

The sun goes still for a moment in the sky;
hills stand up on every horizon,
long grass tilting with wind
and the meanderings of small animals
you cannot see. A cloud
reshapes its own abstraction, its edges

bronzed, as the guttural voices
of pigs swell between the rotting slabs that pen them in,
absent of language.

Next fall,
when the air above your land has darkened and shows
the draw and release of human breath, men will come
to shoot the larger sows in the head
with high-powered rifles, disassemble
the steaming meat with shining knives,
and leave you to your freezer full of pain.

4

At dusk you walk
through woods on fire with sound
and a last red revolution of light
down to the creek
to watch the water clearing itself
of the skeletons of leaves.

When your bare feet
are gone numb in a dark, teeming finger of current,
the stars start to come on
in patterns you are left to decipher.

5

The night is a theater of shadow
the cracked white walls of your house shine into
like frenzied cells.
You reel in the lamplight,
with bourbon burning under your tongue.

And you undress, not believing
the glow of your nakedness in the mirror,
the sculpted forms
your face and body have taken on,
as the night finally makes its silent love to you.

The Road

Sometimes your life arrives at places
 you can't distance yourself from,
 no matter the sudden intensity
 of a face or a landscape before you,
 no matter the long stretches of blacktop
 your '55 Chevrolet leaves glistening
 as a snail's trail in the rearview,
 while the thinning sun of late summer
 skates over a hill statued with trees
 and a few cows grazing:

That bar, say, in Paducah, Kentucky,
 where a woman hurt you once, left you
 alone with your reflection
 in the cool, heavy air, among
 plush furnishings; or that diner
 outside Nashville, and the waitress
 you drank coffee with all night long
 but never saw again.

Smokestacks and steeples click past your windows
 like frames from a film no one ever made.
 You want your life to have a bit
 of the transparence movies have, the quiet
 perfection of their tragedy. But tonight
 your life and losses are strung out
 like mile markers along the road
 from Nashville to Paducah, your headlights
 burning the numbers off.

Later, passing over a bridge,
 you'll look south to see Kentucky Dam
 rising in blue light, and remember
 how you once steered a small boat
 carefully beside a closed wicket before dawn,
 heard river gulls roust themselves and spread,
 lowered a treble hook baited with shad guts
 over the bow, and watched your face
 and its history dissolve into a faint film
 of blood on the dark water.

The Breakup: Kentucky Dam, 1980

1

It was September, one of those nights
the moon would leave nothing alone.
I parked the car beside the water
and waited while your face composed
its intricate silver in that light.
Anything we might have thought to say
would have only affirmed a loss
already felt; so instead we let
the distant rush of the lake
becoming a river be enough.

2

It is spring here. The first full light
of morning shocks the cold earth to green.
The coffee before me is cupped flame,
dark as the thrush that just a moment
ago closed his gnarled feet around
a high-voltage wire across the street
and sang--unaware of the power
that ran so close. He flew away,
not needing it. Were memory only
that lyrical, that fleeting . . .

3

. . . I would not have to think, now,
of that moonlight and the way
the water seemed to swell to meet it,
each entering the other in shapes
so frail the rising of a lone fish
could have shattered them irrevocably;
nor of how, when the sky whitened
and our faces told us it was time
to go, each shaken leaf of each
tree we passed seemed to say so long.

4

I was eighteen then, and scared of what
I didn't know--which was a lot.
And now, as I look out the window
of an apartment on the east side
of a city where the sound of church
bells and the sound of trains are both

numinous to me, it would be wrong
to say I've learned much, or that the ordeal
of distance and years which divides me
from our parting has solved anything.

5

I rise, I fall, I watch the wasted
boxcar of today drifting into
tonight go by. What song is it
I keep remembering the words to,
but not the tune? And the eastern sky
deepens as if to hold each house
and office building for a moment
in its big blue hands, then lets them go,
as the mouth of what could be the past
or the future opens dark and wide.

Notes

The opening quotation is taken from Larry Levis' brilliant article, "Eden and My Generation," Field, No. 26 (1982), pp. 30, 45.

The poem "In Spring" has been accepted for publication in the Southern Poetry Review, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.