

## THE RIVER'S BEST

Examining the trout inside my modish wicker creel is evidence my time on the river has been productive, still, the complete fulfillment and satisfaction I sought is lacking. He has not yet arrived. My anticipation of seeing him has faded somewhat from my hours spent fishing, but I still hold hope he will appear. He is simply the river's best angler.

Years have past from that day we first shared this spot on this river. We may have entered the water from different paths, but it seems we shared a common bond from the onset. Our reason for being on the river different perhaps, but our goal was the same, to apply our skills and knowledge, and to catch the elusive trout.

I observed my counterpart as he readied himself and he seemed to study me with equal interest. Oddly enough, I believe the competition for fish was contemplated by neither. It was more a curiosity and comparison of style and method. My traditional fly fishing equipment, easily visible for his inspection, should have told him I was well versed in the discipline. The sheer number and diversity of my fly assortment, many adorning my well worn but distinguished fishing hat, should've indicated I understood trout, at least what they ate.

He didn't seem particularly interested in my gear that day or any since. He was a rather large fellow sporting a nearly all white head and for some reason, that alone afforded him credibility in my eyes. Experience and wisdom comes to mind with such an observation. His motions were subtle and none were wasted. He appeared to be the thinking type, one who was extremely focused. He didn't appear to be in any hurry either.

I decided to showcase my abilities first. A few false casts, a quick flip, a nice drift and then the subtle 'slurp', and I was hooked onto a good one. A couple quick runs and one acrobatic leap over a small boulder in the middle of the river quickly got the attention of the old gent and his keen eye. I desired not to fill my creel any further and when the trout slid into my net, I unhooked the fly quickly, held the trout up for a quick view, and to possibly get a nod of approval from my onlooker; then, I slid the fish back into the water.

Taken back somewhat, my counterpart seemed confused and his bewildered look suggested he didn't understand. He fidgeted some, then, shot me a strange glance as if he disapproved of my releasing the trout. I backed out of the water, not wanting to invoke further animation or agitation and decided to let the old gent take his turn.

I sat alongside the riverbank, an old log for a rest and removed my vest, reclining in a relaxing position where I could watch. My counterpart quickly seized his opportunity to show

me how it was done. He came to attention and immediately scanned the water. His head moved slowly back and forth and would occasionally tilt to one side or the other as if to focus a little closer. Even from my vantage, I could see the intensity in his eyes.

Though his equipment differed from mine, and I knew his method would too, it was readily apparent he knew how to fish. After thoroughly viewing the water, he picked just one. Instead of blindly fishing, hoping a fish becomes attracted to your offering, he fixated on one fish only and made it his sole target. He watched as the trout darted from the safety of a large rock into the river's current and back. In almost erythematic fashion, the trout repeated his venture seeking crustaceans and other tidbits bouncing along the bottom.

With the trout's timing calculated, the angler cast toward the shallows anticipating the exact moment the fish would be there. The hook-up was immediate and resulted in a spectacular splash and shower of erupting water. Whatever peace and tranquility the river afforded at that moment was interrupted abruptly with the subtlety of a cannonball. The trout succumbed immediately, hooked in a manner which could only result in death.

His objective met, he immediately left the river, satisfied with his catch. I stay for quite a while replaying this scene over and over, and at each conclusion, I am still in complete awe. I vow to return to the river as many times as necessary to encounter him again and to watch him fish.

My day on the river nearly concluded and my gear carefully tucked away, he finally does appear. He arrives from the same direction as always and once here, goes through the exact same ritual as he prepares to fish. I'd like to stay for the show, but can't tonight, so I give him a quick nod, sort of a salute of respect and I think he returns the gesture, though I'm not sure.

Heading down the path that takes me from the water, I look back one last time to see him perched in his rightful place as the top angler on the river, in the top of the highest tree, the throne of the river's best, the bald eagle.

## ***Winning Entry***

### ***2011 Michigan Hemingway Society***

#### ***Short Story Writing Contest***