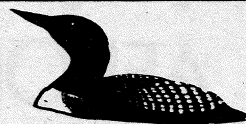


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

The white plastic five-gallon pail just sat there on the patio stones, beading with moisture and drawing me with its promise.

I sharpened the Rapala filet knife and counted myself among the most fortunate of mortals because of the pail's contents, and because those contents were all mine.

"At this point," Steady Eddy likes to tell The Indian, "you would think all this excitement is being generated by some exotic treat within the pail, right—some treat that turns on most people in these civilized parts? Maybe ice cream? Or cold beer?"

I have learned to shut out the triumph in Steady's voice.

"Dead fish," he tells The Indian. "The pail is full of dead fish. To the brim."

"Dead fish?"

I have learned to shut out The Indian, too.

"He likes to clean fish," he tells Steady.

"That's what I'm telling you," Steady says.

"Somebody's got to do it," The Indian says, "but you don't have to like it."

Well, Steady and The Indian are wrong. I do not like to clean fish. I love to clean fish. Cleaning fish is one of the great things The Old Man taught me. Along with drawing the cueball. Playing position. And always leaving your opponent on the rail.

The Old Man used to say that catching fish was only half of it; cleaning fish was the other half. He started me out pretty early and I helped him clean, and after a few years, he was helping me clean, and after a few more years, I got to do it all myself.

I can't pinpoint the day it started to be a joy, but it was during those pine-winey summer days on the shores of the Big Stone Lake when the stringers were full of walleyes, cold and golden-brown and plump as suckers. We each had a limit, seven fish apiece—I think he caught them all—each fish over the 15-inch size limit, and as I cut into them, I just suddenly knew that what I was doing was a joyful thing and there was



nowhere else I wanted to be at that moment and nothing else I wanted to do. Not even going back on the rock bar and catching walleyes. I was content to clean, to *be in the flow*, as the Buddhists say, and to understand what was happening with the sharp knife and the firm flesh; to understand what was happening to the fish because of me and what was happening to me because of the fish.

And why.

I stopped going to church the same year. Maybe there's no connection, but I did spend most of the summer back in the marshes fishing—Sundays, too—and Father Himmelsbach finally shook his head and gave up on me.

Continued on Page 12

Notebook

Continued from Page 11

I remember telling Tom Helmer and Guy Lewis that I loved to clean fish when we went up to Algoma a couple of autumns back, and Tom gracefully let me filet four chinooks, two of them around 25 pounds apiece, the dark blood along the backbones deep and set in the consistency of Jell-O.

Tom's in Atlanta now, but I may send him a page from a new book by Elizabeth Arthur, who, with her husband, lived on an island up in British Columbia. She wrote something on fishing which I wish I had written, because this says it all.

"A long time ago," she writes in *Island Sojourn*, "I caught my first trout, a nineteen inch rainbow. I was standing in a milky lake, aqua blue with glacial silt. I did not want to catch the fish. He needn't have taken my casting seriously. The day was, I thought, far too rarefied for action; too many years lay calmly on the shore. Suddenly, he was on my line; he wanted to come in. We had a bit of a tussle, but I dragged him to the shore and flipped him onto a rock. There he lay, and his eyes grew clouded, troubled. I wanted to throw him back, but quite suddenly, I couldn't move. I felt in the presence of a catastrophic power, his eye like a window of the earth, calmly staring at me, slowly misting over. Somewhere deep within the eye there was a leer which said, *You call yourself a creature. Ha. Kill me if you wish to be anything at all. Kill me before you melt at my feet.*

"I picked him up and smashed his head in. The colors of his skin glinted as he jerked, convulsed like the eruption of a volcano.

"The air around me crystallized; the trees rustled in kind applause. Later I cooked the fish.

"He's still a part of me."

I'd like Tom Helmer to read that page for sure, not to mention every single man, woman and child who has ever dropped a line into the great mysteries below the surfaces of the eternal waters and waited with expectancy and excitement and wonder.

Speaking of which, it may be time to get out on The Catfish Flats with Steady Eddy, and wait with all of the above listed. Plus chunk baits.

"Now," says Steady, "now, we are talking exotic treats."