

As the Rivermouth Breaks  
by Taj Hittenberger

Before logging started in the 1850's, and the major dams and water diversions went under construction at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the salmon of the Russian River returned each winter by the millions. By some unknown force, each one makes its way back from a lifelong journey around the Northern Pacific, and settles back into its natal stream where it swam as a mere fry some three or four years prior. If you ever doubt the notion of homecoming, look no further than the few coho and steelhead that still manage to find their way back each winter. Draw some inspiration from those red and silver beauties that still persist in sight of redwood stumps and earthen dams. And take some hope in the fact that a handful struggle upriver each year to dig their nests into the gravel, spawn, and then wash ashore, dead from exhaustion. The nutrients of their decayed remains continue to feed their young, who will venture out into the Pacific and then, with some luck, return once again to the Russian River.

The river and its many small tributaries were once perennial, drying up each fall, but now the Warm Springs Dam and Coyote Valley Dam capture much of the winter rains, and release the water throughout the summer and fall when vineyards need it most. The low valleys rarely flood now, and the riverbanks no longer run dry. In this respect, the Russian River holds the acclaim of being one of few western rivers to now have a stronger year-round flow than it did pre-civilization. Those dams kept us alive through the last four years, through the worst drought in recent memory, and just as intended, kept the river flowing. They also kept this year's estimated 120 returning salmon struggling to find calm, deep shaded gravel pits they require to release their eggs and milt.

Those once vast salmon runs are what brought my great-grandfather to the region sometime just before 1900. I hold a few distinct memories of his son, my grandfather. In most of them he's an old man standing with rounded shoulders beside a pond, holding his casting rod in one hand, relaxed at his side, with large clear-rimmed eyeglasses and a wool fedora decorated with what I assume to be his favorite red and green fly. I find his same squinting smile in old black and white photos of him posing beside a line of a dozen salmon drawn up by their gills, having fished all day in a white-collared shirt and wool slacks. He died when I was ten, so I can only guess as to whether it was those same salmon runs that kept him from leaving.

When the winter rains return to the North Coast, and a tall sandbar stands between the river and the Pacific Ocean, the entire watershed funnels down, forming a lake at the mouth of the river. Here lies the town of Jenner, a small coastal community tucked in a corner between the riverbank, ocean, and rising headlands. It's a pleasant surprise to learn that this part of the coast still boasts a pair of bald eagles who, despite having every good reason, have not abandoned their nest. They're seen most readily in the early morning, quietly soaring up and down the beach. Their approach is marked by the frenzy of chirps and squawks and then a frozen silence. At least

once each year, the town floods until a trench can be safely dug across the beach, releasing the river's turbid storm of freshwater. Nowhere does the ocean look so blue as where this brackish cloud meets the cold California Current a half mile offshore. I've heard stories of standing atop the headlands, just after the rivermouth breaks, to watch for the splashes and red-dappled hints of coho making their way upstream. It's for this reason I'm drawn to the river in January rains. It's the hope - the hope of catching a single red shimmer and knowing that despite the many obstacles, the salmon's return is not in vain.

Far too often it seems I seek to understand the history of this place and find myself, weighted in grief, wanting to run away - to find a place that hasn't been cut down and held back, confined and tormented as this one has. Several times I have run. I know many others of my generation wish these small towns and hidden streams could hold them for a lifetime, but I fear such a task requires a type of care we have yet to learn and a scope of time few here have inherited, and so we set off in search of more. We set out for the "true wilderness", or the cities, or any other distraction, where the scars of the West are not so readily and plainly defined. If I were to indulge in such a privilege, I would not only be leaving the remaining salmon and eagles, but forsaking the four generations of kin that lie woven into the fine roots and fissures of this bedrock.

And so I've made a commitment, insofar as I am able, to stay and learn to care for this place as if my great grandchild will one day go out to the rivermouth in the same winter rains to watch the salmon at once complete and begin a new cycle. This is to say I have committed to learning what it means to belong, learning how it feels at the base of my chest as I listen to the songbirds in the break between storms. By way of intimacy, such a task yields for each of us an understanding of what our place needs, and what we are best suited to provide.

So go out and meet that grief where it lies. Gather the strength you can muster, and vow to heal those wounds in any way you are able. Sit with the river. Learn the birds. Go slow. Please, go slow.