

## DAVID MOLESKY

*Blue Fish Cove, 2011*  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in



## POTTER WICKWARE

### On the Navarro

**S**teelhead fishing is winter fishing. It's difficult. You have to be there when the tide and the river are high, during or just after one of the big rainstorms that drive in from the Pacific, when the fish mobilize themselves for the huge effort to get upstream, to the next shelf, then the next.

The fish are tough and intelligent. They know both sides: the ocean's vast sweep and the river, with its local odors of root and pool, which they know better than any man or woman ever could. A steelhead can take a lure lightly, wind it around tree stumps and rocks until the tackle is hopelessly tangled, then spit it out. Or else take it and run with it so fast that the fisher on the bank has to release the drag completely, at which it suddenly reverses direction and swims back upstream, making everything go limp, and there go fish and tackle both. They're fearless and persistent, holding out against rough water and high tides and people casting lures with treble hooks at them from the shore and from bridges and even in the main channel. Smart, tough fish.

Two fishermen had been standing in the river, just off a little beach, all afternoon. Their feet were wet and they were cold all over. Nothing was happening for them. One of them said, "This reminds me of something." The rain, which had let up for a time, started again. After a drawn-out pause, his partner replied, "They're smarter than we are. They must know more than we do."

"Sure they do. We're here and it's their place. We're outsiders." A steelhead actually swam between his legs as he said this, bumping against his rubber waders, slipping right past him, his tackle strung out uselessly in the river. "Damn me if one of them didn't swim right between my legs, and my lure way out there!"

Just deal with it, said the flat look on the other's face. He looked up the river to where the fish were headed, a gray-green blur of timber and ash-tinted moss. At intervals sheets of rain mixed with ocean spray swept in, diagonally, drumming against the rubber fabric of his rain suit. I'm here to test myself, he'd thought upon setting out, before he'd even departed, and now he was beginning to feel a headache and, worse, a kind of discontented itch in the back of his throat. Before he'd been strong, challenging himself. Show me something real. Push into the core, find what's solid, spread apart the strands or fibers that obscure

the central thing, whatever it is. But the waders were uncomfortable, unbroken-in, and after the long ride north and the frustrating bother of assembling the kit in the parking lot in the rain, his perspective had altered.

What makes them strive so relentlessly? The same bed they were spawned in years before is just a little bank that one wouldn't look twice at, that for all one knows has been bulldozed away by a tract developer. Such hardship to get back to some little hump of sand and gravel far up the river that, realistically, isn't much different from the one right here near the mouth, by the beach. As these thoughts were passing through his mind, a steelhead flipped above the surface directly in front of him, a flash of silver and rose.

Upstream from the two friends, a group of steelhead in a hole were waiting for the next high water, leverage for their journey up to the next gravel bar. Practicing for the ordeal, they leaped above the flow and thrashed their bodies against the rain-swept river in spasms of liquid ecstasy. Briefly airborne, they glimpsed the men through a filmy blur, standing a certain distance out from the bank, unsteady on their leg-prongs, separate, ungraceful, immobile, exposed. Between two worlds as the air as sharp as knives lashed around them, they saw the two men and perhaps even detected their suffering. The rain itself, water though it was, was water of a difficult, unfamiliar form, as though altered from its natural state in river and ocean, air-water that was hard, discontinuous, and swiftly downward moving in a most unwater-like fashion.

Near the little beach the men winced, turning away from the half-liquid wind. One of them backed into his poncho, trying to find with his shoulders a place in it that was not damp. They passed a flask of brandy between them. The one with the sore throat had a premonition of the flu. They'd driven all night to be here.

The steelhead, by contrast, were comfortable and protected in their pool, cradled in gentle undulation of waves, and the resonance of the distant crash of surf on the beach sounded muffled and reassuring in the distance, like the sound of the oil burner coming on at night in your snug house. They were full of athletic purpose and self-confidence while they waited, and they amused one another with the pleasant banter that good friends enjoy when they are taking their ease. During the moment, of course,

there's no levity; then it's all purpose and destiny. But for the while they lolled in their hole in wonderful intimacy.

"Imagine being driven as they are," observed a medium-sized fish, whose large round eyes gave him a scholarly appearance, noticing the dim shapes outside. "Putting oneself in such an exposed position."

And another, a younger one, whose mouth swept back in a malicious grin, chimed in, "Absurd! All that effort for such an elusive thing."

Just then a lure splashed down nearby. Some of them glanced distastefully at the thing, a crudely made fake, insulting in its cartoonish exaggeration, garishly painted, with ugly bits of hardware hanging off it. Nevertheless, it was only with difficulty that the youngster restrained himself from striking at it. The others stared at him, goggle eyed.

"It's not hunger," he explained. "I'm not hungry. I'm not eating at all; I'm in training, like all of us. I just felt irritated at the thing. It's vulgar! Insulting! An invasion of privacy! I feel like taking it and wrapping it around a stump!"

An older fish commented, "They occupy themselves with facsimiles of challenges, don't they? Contests that stand for something else. And what do these things represent, really? They only end by isolating themselves. Chasing their illusions. There's not much sense to it."

"Since when does logic govern behavior?" challenged the scholar with an emphatic wave of the pectorals.

"To me it's their reproductive program that's mystifying, or let us say bizarre," said a female, big bellied with roe. She thought for a moment and then added, with a watery, rhythmical shudder, "The struggle to get to the spawning bed is a hard thing to be sure, but for them that's not the end of it. Then the male actually swims up inside the female, if you can imagine such a thing."

A wave hit the pool just then and made all the fish move in unison.

One of the males said in a musing tone, "One is driven by a force outside oneself. You do it, maybe, without being aware. Maybe you have a dim glimmer. I'm doing this but it's not me that's doing it. If that makes any sense."

"Sure," chimed in another. "No need to think about it. You're only doing what everyone else is doing. Reinforced by group validation, how can you not do it?"

Another, a youngster at the margin of the group, volunteered, "For me it's the smell. You get your nose down

in it and forget about everything. It's like nothing else in the world. Smell that smell and somehow it's all worth it. You don't understand it, no. Trying to understand just gets in the way. It's not the spreading of the semen that's so fulfilling, but being home at last. The smell of that bar where you were born. I don't care about the semen. The semen just runs out by itself."

"But now as for these humans," chimed in another, "so much of what governs them seems all ritual and instinct, but masked by layers of ego domination and self-importance. What shallow delusions, that ultimately only serve to diminish them!"

"But consider this," said the professorial one, settling back comfortably into the cleft of a boulder and preparing to spin out a theory. "They think they're acting as individuals when they announce their goals. In reality, of course, the urge that drives them is a huge indefinable thing that stretches over the generations. It makes fools out of them, and yet you have to pity them. Because at the same time isn't there something grand and tragic about them? They imagine in their pursuit of power, of wealth, in all that they do, that at the end lies some meaningful outcome. They can't bear to admit that they are no more than small, temporary bits of consciousness that have condensed for the smallest moment out of an endless continuum."

But then there was a crash of water, an upward heave of the pool, and with a transporting movement that was like roller-coaster giddiness—heart-stopping fear (an indescribable feeling, really)—they turned and with one movement faced upstream.

**Potter Wickware** has been a machinist, pipeline welder, college lecturer, journalist, and scientific editor. In addition to his novel *I'm Still Here*, he is the author of *Crazy Money*, a memoir of Alaska in the 1970s first published by Random House in 1980 (soon to be reissued by Rolling Circle Press), a quantity of journalism, and other work. He is a science writer in the Department of Pathology at the University of California, San Francisco, and lives and writes in northern California.