

A TERRESTRIAL BROOK TROUT

I am told that, sometime in my youth, too early for me to remember, I ate my own pets. My sisters recounted this fact to me once I was old enough to be horrified, and I was just as shocked as people are now when I tell them this. The story is simple: We used to have pet rabbits, and, one day, my dad decided to shoot them and feed them to us. Met with unsure looks, he told us that they “taste like chicken.” My mother and two older sisters refused to eat them, but, eager to demonstrate my willingness to follow his lead anywhere, I dutifully consumed the animals that had become an extension of our strange family.

I always ate what my dad put before me, especially if it was the product of his hunting or fishing excursions. Squirrels, I vaguely remember, also taste like chicken. We ate a lot of venison growing up. My mom always said to my dad before he went deer hunting, “Bring home as much meat as you want, but I’m not going anywhere near it until it’s on a dinner plate.” This was fine with him. He loved cooking, especially when it was the last step of preparing meat or fish that he had obtained by his own skill. He was a better cook than my mom anyway – we all agreed on that.

I can never forget my dad’s perch. Battered with his own secret recipe and fried to golden perfection, my dad’s perch has spoiled me from enjoying perch prepared by any other cook.

Spoiled. That is what my dad’s nickname for me is. Actually, it’s *Pourri*, French for rotted. My dad, Karl, is full of these verbal mannerisms, Karlisms, derived from who-knows-what obscure anecdotes and movie references. I was a daddy’s girl from the

moment I was born. His third daughter, I imagine he was hoping for a boy. Instead he got me and, knowing there would be no chance for a son, made do with a female mini-me. My first name, Stefanie, is taken from his middle name, Steven. My middle name, Brook, qualifies his favorite fish in conjunction with my last name, Trout. My driver's license elicits numerous comments and questions whenever strangers take note of my incredibly unique name. "Your parents sure must have a great sense of humor!" Often they would call someone else over to see the spectacle of my printed name. At this point I force a polite chuckle while inwardly groaning. Even more frequently I get, "Is your dad a fisherman?"

To which I truthfully reply, "Yes, as a matter of fact he is." A variation on this quip is asking me if I fish, the answer to which is "No."

Others often ask, "Are you a good swimmer?"

To this question I must say, "Actually, no." They are always disappointed by this response. So am I.

It took me a while to come to terms with the uniqueness of my name. For a short period of time in high school I unofficially changed the spelling of my last name to Traute in an embarrassed attempt to sound European... or anything but straight-up American. I felt guilty doing so, thinking my dad would be disappointed in me. In a way, I am quite sure that he would have been, but I actually got the idea from him. On all official documents his name is Carl, but he has spelled it Karl since he was young. So I guess it was sort of a tribute.

Before I got sick of hearing the same tired witticisms, I loved being a Brook Trout. In the house I grew up in, my dad had mounted two trout on the wall, one large

and bland, the other petite and stunning. The latter fish was a brook trout, “the most beautiful freshwater fish in the world,” according to my dad. In the vanity of my youth I took my name as implicating my preferred status among Karl’s girls. Today, I have thankfully abandoned all superficial obsessions with my name. “A rose by any other name...”

My dad was the typical “hook and bullet” father, but he was anything but typical. The pleasure he took in fishing and hunting – by the bullet, bow, trap, and his own eyes in the case of mushrooms – was his religion. As a child, I never understood why he never had to go to church but we did. I was getting the impression that church was a female obligation, despite its patriarchal structure. Every once in a while I got to go to “service” with my dad as a sort of witness, tagging along on a fishing trip or hunting morels in the woods. Once in the wild, he became a part of it. Once he got into his “nature trance,” it became a part of him too. My dad was a boy again in the woods, without worry or responsibilities. These glimpses into my father’s personal spirituality had a profound effect on me that went beyond my childhood endearment.

It is for this reason that I meditate on my past in order to think about my future. Although we have become estranged since his remarriage, I am necessarily bound to my father and the times we shared in the formative years of my life. The details are vague but the memories are vivid. Some were very traumatic, like my first experiences with death and the darkness of coming to terms with lost life. But looking back, I can laugh at many of the things that made me cry in my youth.

One time, and only one time, I shot a gun. I was accompanying my dad on a day trip in pursuit of squirrels, and he had promised to take me target shooting first. The shooting range, however, was not among our destinations. Instead, he drew a series of irregularly-shaped, concentric circles on the inside of a cardboard Burger King box that he had found amongst litter on the ground and pinned it to a dirt hill with a stick. I guess I had expected a little more pomp and circumstance, but this was, realistically, a very “Karl” thing to do. He taught me all of the safety precautions, none of which I remember anymore. I shot the pistol a few times but never really got good at my aim. I hit the small scrap of cardboard once – outside of the target, but I was a little proud nevertheless. I tried the rifle once. He warned me about the kickback. I tried to brace my legs like he showed me, but they must have been too weak because the gun knocked me off of my feet. I had a bruised shoulder the next day. Sick of shooting because of my lack of skill and my injury, I handed the firearms over to the professional. I watched in awe as he pinched off a quick round and hit the target with each shot. Then we set out for him to hunt squirrels and for me to follow along as I was always keen to do.

He offered me an orange hunting pullover, lightweight, with a deep pocket running the course of the bottom hem. I enthusiastically accepted the jacket, feeling like an authentic hunter in my gear but relieved that I would not have to actually kill anything. This eagerness faltered when he shot the first squirrel. Enlivened by the spirit of the hunt, my dad was oblivious to my terror. I only had a moment to cope with the death, the first that I had ever realized, before he put the corpse into my pouch. Blood seeping out of the gunshot wound and draining from the squirrel’s mouth began to fill the pocket with bright red mortality, and the carcass banged, deadweight, against my thighs as I walked.

I had been trying to act tough all morning, but my tears refused to be suppressed any longer. I started bawling hysterically, and, reluctant but compassionate, my dad decided to call it a day.

Some years later, after my parents divorced, I was visiting him in the house that I grew up in – the one with the trout on the wall. Playing outside, I found a dead squirrel on the side of our residential street. Determined, I approached my dad about the squirrel and what should be done by two decent, kind-hearted people. He tried to assure me that it was the city’s job to clean up road kill, that it would be properly disposed of. I could imagine some heartless, underpaid municipal worker picking it up by the end of the tail with his face turned away in disgust, the way you would a smelly sock, stepping on the foot pedal of a trashcan, and dropping it in with the garbage. To a ten-year-old with a bleeding heart for anything with a face, this was not proper by any means. The extinguished life deserved to return to the earth whence it came. Seeing that I was unwavering in my desire to give the creature a human-like burial, he agreed, supervising that I do so sanitarily. He helped me dig a hole and find a slab of rock large enough to serve as a gravestone. I wrote the epitaph in permanent orange marker; it went something like this: “Here lies Skinny. We didn’t know him, but he was a good squirrel. He didn’t deserve this death, but may he rest in peace.” It was at Skinny’s burial site that I made peace with my earlier encounter with a dead squirrel and also with my father for his leading role in that tragedy.

As the product of my childhood relationship with my dad, I am somewhat following in his footsteps. I neither hunt nor fish, but I have devoted my career to

studying and protecting the environment. Many of my peers find themselves at odds with the “hook and bullet” types. Like me, many environmentalists are also animal rights activists. Thus, they cannot seem to reconcile their differences with other advocates of wilderness protection, those who support the land for its game. Somewhere along the middle of the political divide, I sit, wondering how modern activists think most of our parks have been preserved in the past. Hunting and fishing permits account for a great segment of the Department of Natural Resource’s income. Hunters also donate great sums of money to wilderness-management agencies in order to keep their sport alive. They were the first to argue against the negligent polluting of our natural world and, essentially, founded the basis for environmental science. Aldo Leopold and Ernest Hemingway, the grandfathers of nature writing, both hunted and fished the land and considered themselves more connected with nature because of this personal relationship that mere observers lacked.

Despite political divisions between the two groups of wilderness advocates, they are linked by a fundamental opposition to the popular definitions of “progress” and “civilization.” Instead of focusing on the right to take an animal’s life or on the Second Amendment to the Bill of Rights, these two groups should focus on the tie that binds: the common refusal to accept the destruction of the environment as a casualty of the war of progress. This is what I inherited from my dad: not his politics, not his pastimes, definitely not his choice in music, but his outrage at the Western world. This sentiment has propelled me into environmental science, historical studies, and the field of urban planning, where I hope to influence growth of less economically developed countries. The industrialization of more economically developed countries has robbed citizens of

nature and this is the calamity I hope to prevent in the rest of the world. A man in the modern city is a fish in a cage, paralyzed and slowly, painfully suffocating to death.

Sometime in my youth, on one of the many fishing excursions with my dad, I caught a big fish. I cannot remember what lake we were on or even what we were fishing for, probably largemouth bass. For some reason I can hear my dad saying “bigmouth bass,” a Karlism, as I try to think back. I do remember that we were out for a while, catching and releasing several fish, before we saw any action. I was getting tired and a little bored, so my dad pulled out the lunches we had packed for the afternoon: sandwiches of ground bologna spread slathered generously between two slices of white bread. We always packed this whenever we went out fishing. To me the sandwiches became synonymous with summer.

“You got a bite!” my dad exclaimed all of a sudden.

I threw down my sandwich and grabbed my fishing pole just before it got pulled overboard. The fish on the other end of the line was strong and fought me with all of its power. I propped my legs against the side of the boat for leverage, but my scrawny arms would not hold much longer. Afraid that the fish might win this game of tug-of-war, I cried, “A little help here?”

My dad came up behind me and grabbed the handle of my pole. Not wanting to steal my victory, he said to me, “I’ve got the rod steady, *Pourri*, now you reel ‘er in.” Slowly, fighting every rotation of the spool, the fish allowed me to bring it into the boat. Even though my dad helped me, I felt like I had completed a right of passage, reeling in a keeper. I was proud and so was my dad.

He put my catch in a wire live basket, explaining “This basket is tied to the boat. I’ll throw it in the water, and we’ll drag it along with us until we’re ready to kill it. This way it doesn’t have to suffer slowly out of water.” Only he was wrong. When he tossed the basket overboard, the rope went down with it. He had forgotten to tie the basket to the boat. We both hollered in surprise and went silent.

He was a little upset about losing his basket and I about losing my fish, but we were both sad over what was to become of my catch. Trapped in a cage at the bottom of the lake, protected from predators but never to swim again, it would inevitably slowly starve to death. It was an accident, no doubt, but we both felt very guilty. I could tell he shared my sorrow because he passed up a prime opportunity for a “sleeping with the fishes” joke. Fishing was no longer fun, so my dad started up the boat and turned it back to shore.

My dad and I both feel guilty about the way our relationship has dissolved into fragmented memories. He began driving trucks when he remarried and has never been able to see much of his family or nature since. He never calls and, because I am my father’s daughter, neither do I. When we do speak there is an unspoken nostalgia about the way things used to be, epitomized by his invariable greeting, “*Bonjour Pourri!*” I bug him about getting off the road like he had promised to do after his open-heart surgery four years ago. He reassures me that he will soon – meaning when his body or doctor force him to – and that it is not so bad anyway. He tells me that, gazing out at the highway landscape zipping by, he still slips into the nature trance sometimes. Of course

he is moving too fast to discern any specific tree or animal species, but the scenic gestalt is enough to send him on a spiritual digression.

* * *

Today I am wading in Douglas Lake with my clothes on. I meant to go for a run, but, eager to get into the woods, I forgot my running shoes – how “Karl” of me. So instead I strolled along the shore, climbing over and crawling under fallen trees that gravity has thrown in my path to make the walk more dynamic. It may not have been an aerobic workout, but it brought me back to when I was little at Lake Michigan, quickly navigating the rocks bigger than I was, while my parents watched nervously. It is almost dinnertime, so I know that I am completely alone out here – alone in my sanctuary.

The still water, not a single boat breaking the surface as far as I can see, had called me in. The bright blue sky reflects off of the clear lake reassuring me of its harmlessness. Crossing over the big shoal, I am gradually encircled by a tall ring of thick greenery. My adult mind knows better, but my childlike fantasies imagine that the relatively undisturbed lake is pristine without a cottage, restaurant, or campus on the shoreline. The density of the shoreline forests supports the illusion for my daydream.

My profound solitude tunes me into a vaguely familiar state of being: I am in a trance. I can no longer tell where my epidermis ends and the lake begins. My feet have sunk deep into the sandbar; the loosely packed substrate is suspended around my legs. When it settles I think that it might swallow me, forever joining me with the earth and water. I no longer care about politics, popular culture, or college. I briefly forget about the past and reject the future that awaits me. Every moment is now. The fleeting present is all anyone really has in the world: no friends, no health, no money, no father.

Pourri, it's time to come back in. Time to eat.

My dad is not here to say it, but I obey anyway, imagining what might have been for dinner if he was here. I should call my dad. Sometime. Soon. But what would we talk about?