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An Obsessive Sense of Place

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Lattices of salmon ribs litter the banks of a stream. On cold autumn nights, frost flowers bloom reflecting starlight. The stream babbles an unintelligible song as it rushes westward. It is the salmons’ place to be born, to spawn; it is their place to disintegrate and die. Salmon are anadromous fish, fish evolved to follow an elegant rhythm of always returning to their birthstream to spawn after maturing in a saltwater or freshwater sea.

For male and female salmon alike, the imprint of place is their obsession. As smolts they burst from their transparent eggs still wearing yolk sacs on their bulging bellies. Like their ancient ancestors who breathed glacial meltwater through their gills, the newborns streak downstream to the freedom of the great inland sweetwater sea. In jade green waters they feed their voracious dream until their bodies grow heavy with it—until they resemble silver purses stuffed with treasure: slick coral beads and pearly white milt.

Summer sun dazzles down through the thermoclines—the layers of warm, cool, cold water—where it enters through the fish's pineal eyes—triangles on top of their heads—giving them a sure knowledge of their place in the larger scheme of things. They bide their time drifting in schools, fanning their tails in repose, gorging on small fish. They dream of their place where clear water chortles over quartz and granite under shifting shadows of white pine and tamarack. Overhanging the deep cut bank are birdsfoot violets and ferns. It is their place; and as their urgent need to return gathers force under a moon that grows heavy on the horizon, a moon the color of salmon eggs, a moon that must change to bone white, the salmon mill about in the harbor.

The fish's bellies grow heavy as the harvest moon. The dream gathers force as celestial cues, the sun, the moon, the stars enter each cellule and each dancing atom of their bodies. Then they begin. The fish return to their stream and nothing will stop them: they ignore hunger, snares, treble hooks. On their silvery sides their lateral lines carry everything they need to know, their maps and compasses imbedded in the circuitry of their being—the heredity of their species carried in a network of circuits from pineal to tail. It is a sure knowledge of the west Michigan river system linked to the Great Lakes or in other places, other river systems and other fresh or salt water oceans. It is also the wisdom of the constellations and the way their light glances from silvery skinned fish leaping, leaping, leaping.

Home at last, a small galaxy waits driving a small galaxy; the fish have spent their days, their flesh worn thin, their bones and eagles. They have spent their flesh worn thin, streambed, streambed, streambed, streambed, streambed.
skinned fish, sparking a wisdom older than mankind.

To salmon obsessed with sense of place, failure means nothing. They defy high dams, leaping, leaping, leaping again and again until they hurl themselves over the top. Home at last, the female hollows out a nest on the streambed with her tail then cascades hundreds of coral beads into it which are her unfertilized eggs. The male waits driving away his rivals with fierce charges. It is time. The male salmon releases a small galaxy of milt which will begin the life/death cycle again. Male and female have spent their silver purses in the stream. They are finished. In the next few days their flesh will fall away while they linger, easy prey for the raccoons, bears, ospreys and eagles. With their bones picked clean and their young curled in sleep on the streambed, the transformation begins again. An osprey shadow glides over the shining stream. The sun rises as the moon faintly glows in the west.