

The Fisher of the James

Richard L. Rose (5/29/2012-

A fisherman furtively retrieves his fishing pole and tackle box from behind a bush, looking around to see if anyone is watching. He throws the worker's cap from a fast-food restaurant behind the bush, puts on a dirty cap covered with fishing flies and walks away from town toward the river.

Fisher: "Might as well fish, nothing else to do
but wait while a manager molds me for his crew,
or stand on the corner with a sign,
or wait for a handout in a line.

I will follow the river,
watch it splinter and gather
into pools where the muskies¹
catch crayfish and stone flies²;
sunfish splatter, caught grounded
in potholes of granite
where the gulls have been waiting,
where the current is bleeding
in the feeding and fleeing,
dying, grieving, and healing
in the catch, in the drift down.

With the river around me,
I can leave far behind me
empty days full of carping
and complaining.
A bluegill or a crappie
slipping easily through debts
without any employment,
steady income or gumption,
shows me more about living
than a job-trainer making
always making a living
his long, wearisome lesson.
I will follow the river,
clear and swift, uncomplaining."

¹ *Mashkinonge* Ojibwa word for this kind of pike, *masque allongé* (elongated face) in French, the muskellunge, *Esox masquinongy*. Caught with a four aught hook and thirty pound line, normally in deep water with crankbaits, spoons, and spinner-bucktail combinations, but early in the year sometimes by trolling shallows. Silver greenish, often with vertical black stripes, from 2 to 4 feet, rarely up to 6 feet, and 30-40 lbs., rarely 70 lbs. They shake their heads to be free of hooks, they are only prey to humans. Like other pikes, they are plated and less flexible than other fish, feeding in shallows on anything that will fit their mouths, usually swallowing it headfirst, eg. Frogs, muskrats, crayfish, etc.

² Stone flies, mosquitoes, caddis flies, dobson flies and other insects have aquatic larvae which are particularly abundant in clear, unpolluted streams and are therefore indicators of water quality. Dobson fly larvae, used for bait, are called hellgrammites.

“Here is the place, downstream from Bremono,
last week, a muskie lunged from the water,
me with no pole, tackle or shiners—
nothing for bait. He, seeming to know,
sallied and dived, flourished his caudal
shaking a head big as a shovel.”

“Spinners, four-aught hook,
thirty pound line;
ready now to troll.
Spinners, four-aught hook,
ready to troll shoreline and wait:

Let him nose his way,
finding the bait
shining, minnow-bright,
gill-cover pulse
slight enough to seem
real as a fish.
Come! Come and take my gift!

“Something has stuck—snagged—
My hook is lost—
stuck as I am stuck.

“No! It’s alive!
Pulling, shaking line;
tugging the hook
deeper. Deeper! Pull!
Now shake it free!
Pull yourself away!
Bull—not a fish!
One of us dies—
ending ache between us,
ache so taut between us.
One of us dies;
let it be me.
God, what a fish!
Let it be me!”

Fish: “Not a god, not a fish.”

Fisher: “You speak! What then?”

Fish: “My name is Mashkinonge,
my spirit name, now my only name.

My people swim the river.
We live in eelgrass and sunken trees.
My name's now Mashkinonge.

“My other people—Haudensaunee—
gone now, so long ago, bones to smoke,
to clouds, to pale sky shining
for Opekankano³ burned away:
their lives for lives he ended.

You only know one time.
You only know one place.
You only know one people.
I wear the long mask.

His people went to white villages,
bringing them deer, smoking kinnikin;
traded and listened to singing.
They listened to English singing:

*“Busy, curious, thirsty fly,
Drink with me and drink as I.
Freely welcome to my cup,
Could'st thou sip and sip it up.
Make the most of life you may.
Life is short and wears away.
Life is short and wears away.”*

They listened to English singing,
then slit their soft throats
and clubbed them all.

Opekankano said, “Burn them down!
Clear out a space for new planting.
Sprinkle tobacco to cleanse the land.
Bless it with holy maize pollen.”

But chewing up from their graves beneath the trees,
rattling their death like cicadas,
rising many as the grass,
they came back and fell down upon us.

You only know one time.
You only know one place.

³ On March 22, 1622, Opekankano (or Opechancanough) attacked plantations on the James, killing 374 settlers, including John Rolfe. Reprisals were later taken by colonists, although their diseases and tobacco farming took a greater toll.

*You only know one people.
I wear the long mask.
I was asleep in our hunting camp
swimming in dream-time the Powhatan.
Sachem and spirit-fish, I did not wake.
My body burned and my people cried
for me to stay in dream-time.
So I became my dream,
my dream of Mashkinonge.”*

*“I wear the long mask
and live a mud dream
of hellgrammites, snails
and cities of ash.
Once, women would wade
for Tuckahoe root⁴,
but they come no more.
I wear the long mask.*

Fisher:

*I may not have a job.
I may not have a place.
But I can do one thing,
fish: I can throw you back!*

He throws the fish back into the river and kneels to peer into the water.

*What is here, in this river?
What is under the churning,
ever-flickering surface ?*

*Are the struggling peoples
who have lived on the river
still alive in the turning,
ever-plundering current?
Do they watch us and listen?*

He returns home. His wife stands on the porch, holding his trainee cap.

Wife:

*Your trainer called at noon.
This time he says you're done.
And I have had it too
Unless you've found a fortune.*

⁴ *Peltandra virginica*, the arrowroot arum, formerly worked loose by bare feet from streambeds, pounded and dried to remove oxalate toxins, and used as a substitute for acorn flour.

Fisher:

This time there was a fish—
no, more than that—a spirit.
I caught him, saved his life.
Such power and beauty!
I watched him swim away.

Wife:

You saved a genie's life?
What did he offer you?

Fisher:

Why, the sight of him—
just to know that such things exist!

Wife:

It's just like you to avoid success
when you hold it in your hand;
lose your one shot; never even guess
it slips away like sand.

You should have made this angel
pay at a stiff rate.
You should have made your angle
pay off—or fill our plate.

It's just like you to let luck pass by.
As I've told you all along,
you must make your luck. But you don't try.
You always get it wrong.

What you've pulled before—
Gambling—pick three, pick four—
the start-up only needing a giver—
the bet that couldn't fail—
None of them came from the river
like this fishy tale,
but it's the same—NO SALE.

It's just like you to have overlooked
something simple as a wish.
So as usual, it's us both cooked,
while others clean the dish.

It's just like you to have overlooked
something simple as a wish.
Maybe we're so well off you are hooked
on dreaming like that fish.

Slamming the door, she goes back into the house. The fisher returns to the river.

Fisher:

What is here in this river?
What is under the churning,
ever-flickering surface?

Fish:

Do you come again?

Fisher:

I come with a question.

Fish:

Men always return,
Hoping there's a secret.
Now I tell you, life for life,
how new people came,
settled on the river,
died; other people followed.

Their pigs ran through the forest,
dug our corn and gardens;
their houses, tick-tight
on our Mother's skin—
crossing trap-lines, trails,
paths, and spirit places—
buried in our skin.
Would you know more?

Fisher:

I would know more.

Fish:

You only know one time.
You only know one place.
You only know one people.
I wear the long mask.

Others in slave ships, two hundred years
came up the river. Stealing themselves,
they took our place—we who were left,
lived in spirit time; watched them as eagles
see Earth, crouched like a woman
bending over her mealing stones.

Others followed, bathed their blistered feet,
swollen hands, and backs;

hid here from the overseer,
sitting on these banks.

Others followed, washed on these flat stones,
took mussel shells and spice bush twigs
and made potions, songs, and masks;

They prayed that the river speak,
tell how it comes and goes,
moves like blood through flesh,
goes freely, cleansing itself
of all it must pass through.

Fisher:

And did the river speak?

Fish:

*I spoke: I wear the long mask.
You only know one time.
You only know one place.
You only know one people.
Life for life, trading in sorrows:
take and give, rise and sink.*

Fisher:

What shall I take?

Fish:

All that serves you well.
Would you know more?

Fisher:

I would know more.

Fish:

Armies crossed the river—came and took,
sank in heaps, sank in heaps
with pigeons and mallards,
rust clouds and slag from the Tredegar,
Minie balls, toes, knives, and cannon.

Armies crossed the river—came and took,
sank in heaps, sank in heaps.
Grand white porches crumbling,
fluttering casements opening
to cormorants diving for minnows.

Mules sprayed with shot, men caught in traces
rolled gripping bridles over the falls.
Armies crossed the river—came and took,
sank in heaps, coins from their pockets,
shining golden locketts,
sinking and settling,
sank in heaps.

Life for life, taking and giving,
I wear the long mask.
I know what you ask.
You only know one time,
one place, one people.
You gave life to the river
I owe life to the giver.
Go now. I give what you wish.

The fisher returns home.

Wife:

While you were gone, a letter came.
Your uncle left you his estate.
And a patent lawyer called to say
Your claim will pay big in every state.
And your lucky number won,
your horse came in, and your pal paid back
the money I assumed was gone.

Every crazy scheme you've tried paid off.
No one here believes
we've won a shopping spree, and summer cruise.
And we even made the evening news.

Fisher:

Now you have all you want
I can dream, invent, and fish.

Wife.

It's just like you to think this is all.
You so easily have your fill.
You have always had your fill
though we didn't have a stick.

Get me a chateau from the Loire
disassembled brick by brick,
slowly carried up the hill
And planted where it shows.

You always settle for how things are
But what good's luck if no one knows?

Our cost of living's vanished.
We'll know all the elite.
We'll watch our status soar,
Set fashion, heads to feet!

All our troubles banished
as our brand name grows,
just to keep up, we'll need more.
What good's luck if no one knows?

You always think you have enough.
With you, that's as far as it goes.
But what good is our good luck
if no one ever knows?

The fisher returns to the river.

Fisher:

What is here in this river?
What is under the churning,
ever-flickering surface?

Fish:

Do you come again?
Would you know more?
Would you have wisdom?

Fisher:

I would know more.

Fish:

Know then, from Falls to Willoughby,
from bubble of kepone at Hopewell;
from the ribbons of effluent from every plant,
every mill, every town, from sewage and oil,
from tires, wrecks, and steaming slops
of every meal, every dump, and every stop
along the roaring highways chewing, chewing,
and the roaring boats chewing, chewing
the river banks, marshes, shores
into boxes on stilts, into feedlots and stores,
in a cauterly of streams and hills
with stitched and unstitched wounds ,
to empty oyster beds beneath the warrior ships.

We spirits of the river,
we spirit-peoples, say *enough!*

The fish dives back into the river.

His wife runs to him.

Wife:

What have you done?
All that we had is gone!

Fisher:

What is here in this river—
so dark, under the churning,
ever-flickering surface?

We only know one time
We only know one place
We only know one people.

River of life, the giver.
Life owed for life forever.
None catches, no one holds the river.

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