Passion play: Life and death on the Root River

by Chad S. Mason in the April 18, 2006 issue

“The secret of life is that it is a passion play.”
—Holmes Rolston

At Preston, Minnesota, the South Branch of the Root River meets the highway. There I am greeted by the town’s “Welcome to Preston” sign, which the Prestonians have affixed to the base of an enormous statue of a brown trout—the Sign of the Fish, as it were. From Preston all the way to Whalan the river follows the road. I drive downstream from Preston toward Lanesboro, keeping one eye upon the river and the other upon my way. At Lanesboro I park in a blacktop lot beside the river and get out to stretch my legs and listen to the water.

About a hundred yards upstream from the parking lot, a broad curtain of water cascades in long white threads from the dam in Lanesboro, scouring a deep green pool over which the mist is nearly opaque. Downstream from the pool, the river turns white again as it squeezes itself into a swift and narrow chute filled with rocks the size of October pumpkins. From there the river spreads out and bounces through a run that is thigh-deep on an average-size fellow like me. Off the main run, a quiet eddy shows occasional blips where small trout glean from the surface something I cannot see. Below the run, the river slips into a quiet, languid pool, then disappears around the bend. I listen and look until dark, then drive up to Forestville and set up camp in the headlights.

Though I live too far from it, the South Branch of the Root River feels like home to me. Like all great rivers, this one has its origin in an obscure place. About a county and a half northwest of here, the Root begins as a sluggish creek born from the effluent of farm drainage tiles. From there the river swells from numerous warm and turbid trickles, and grows to typical size for a stream in farm country. It accepts the burden of silt from adjacent farmlands, becoming deeper and darker as it goes.

Then something strange begins to happen; the river starts getting smaller. I say this is strange because everyone knows this is not how streams ordinarily behave. Streams get larger as they progress, and eventually become rivers through a

cumulative process of consumption of tributaries. But at just the point where you would expect it to follow the usual path to bona fide riverdom, the Root surprises you. It goes on a quick slide to oblivion, pouring itself into the earth through cracks in the limestone bedrock. After just a few miles, you can tell the Root is going to die altogether. A few miles more and all that remains of the Root are deer flies buzzing over coon tracks in the mud. And there you are—standing on the grave of a river.

But as you stand there on the river's grave, something even stranger happens beneath your feet. Deep in the bowels of Fillmore County the Root cools and clarifies. Then its waters issue forth again as a trout stream, from a black hole called Mystery Cave, near Forestville. From there on, the river rushes over limestone and carves deep valleys between rocky bluffs.

Along the river you can find pieces of the bluffs and, in the pieces, fossils. They are brachiopods, little shellfish that once lived on the floor of a shallow, ancient sea. They have been locked in darkness ever since the sea's extinction, waiting for the river to bring them to light as it descends to the realm of all the dead. Now exposed to the sunlight, they are pulled free and taken home by barefooted children on summer days.

After pitching my tent I spend the evening by the campfire, staring at flames the shape of oak leaves until the beer and the pipe smoke make my eyelids heavy. The fire consumes all my consciousness and reduces a formerly vast world to one dark little place with a warm, glowing center. When the fire wanes, the vast world returns. I kill the fire's last embers with melted gas station ice from my beer cooler, and go to bed.

I wake at dawn and fish all day. It is June, and when evening comes I see the first caddis rise aloft, signaling the onset of a hatch. The caddis larvae are little worms the color of freshly peeled ginger root. They carry their coffin-like houses—which they spin from a mixture of river sand and their own secretions—on their backs and cling for dear life to the rocks in the oxygen-rich whitewater. When the time is right, they entomb themselves to pupate. During a hatch, millions of pupae ride tiny bubbles of gas to the surface, where the worm disappears and a winged thing appears in its place.

It all sounds so very beautiful when narrated this way that one may be tempted to forget that thousands of caddis flies perish—smothered by silt, or eaten alive by

hungry trout, or stillborn in their pupal shucks, or drowned in the last few seconds before their wings dry. Even those that take flight are not done with travail. Many become fodder for the swallows and bats that flutter over the river. But by some inscrutable mercy, some caddis flies reach the streamside vegetation and live long enough to mate. After mating, which takes place in midair above the river, the female returns to the water, where she spends herself to perpetuate her kind, diving toward the bottom to deposit her eggs in the last few seconds of her short life.

To a trout, the meaning of all this is simply food.

The fish aren’t entirely safe, either. Great blue herons wait in static stealth along the shorelines, watching for careless trout. And a trout never knows which caddis fly is a bogus copy hiding a hook. That, after all, is what I’m doing here. Indirectly, a hatch means food for the fisherman, too.

I tie on a Henryville Special #16. It is a beautiful concoction of feathers and fur, with a curve of sharpened bronze running through its middle. Whether you release your trout or not —and I usually do—there is no denying that a hook’s original purpose is bound up with death. The caddis flies, the bats, the trout, the herons and the fisherman: we all inhabit a river where life is purchased at the price of death. The Root River shares the cost with us, for its death has established the web of life in which we all participate. When an angler puts an instrument of death at the core of his art, he does more than merely tie a fly; he tells the truth about the world, the truth about himself.

Upstream is the pierced side of a mountain, where everything begins. Downstream many miles, the river stops running where it meets the sea. In between, all that indwell the river reenact the story of its death. Perhaps that will not always be so, but for now it is.

This article was the author's homily for Good Friday 2004. His collection of bird-hunting essays, Voices on the Wind *(Countrysport Press, 2002), received the* "*must read*" *rating from* Today's Books *in the category* "*Essays - Environment & Spirituality.*"