

I should tell you about fishing. Perhaps more accurately I should say that if you read any further I am going to tell you about fishing. Not everything you need to know, that would be literary and intellectual feat beyond my powers, just my psycho-social-political-mythical perspective on fishing which, I modestly suggest, every real Canadian will share.

At the elementary level what I am trying to explain is why I don't like it, fishing. That's too crudely put. I see no problem with eating fish, among my favorite foods, nor with the stalking of fish deep into their hidden homes. That's mythic and entirely wholesome. It's the catching and killing that's unwholesome and immoral. There's no contradiction here, Canadians can eat fish caught by foreigners in distant lands, no problem. It's the heathen immorality of killing fish here in our native habitat that I want to discuss.

Once upon a time I really went on major canoe trip. I've been on several minor expeditions, like every good Canadian, but this was the big one. My three companions were not experienced canoeists, although they were all great at something, mountaineering, barbequeing, fucking by moonlight, whatever. In fact this was to be their epic journey into the wilderness to hone their survival skills. And, of course, they were all expert fishermen, fishpersons, if you must.

They allowed me to lay out a very challenging route through southern Quetico Park on the American border, but they would have none of the freeze dried food which I naively thought we should take along to eat in case we got hungry, a stylish sensation among the right sort of people in similar circumstances. Trapping rabbits and foraging for edible roots are rare skills for young professionals even the mystic variety. And fishing, frankly, is not something I would ever count on for dinner, if you understand my meaning. I perceived it, aside from my moral theories on the subject, as chancy, like the lottery.

But these three would have none of it. Not only would we catch and eat fish, we would not take artificial food products into God's wilderness to tempt us to commit impure acts. I had to fight to hold onto my hunk of cheese and baggy full of dried apples!

I don't need to tell you they had fishing gear - lures and spinners, hooks, flies, sinkers, detachable and retractable whipsaw poles, spools and spools of nylon thread, nets, bait boxes, tool chests, special knives - I just closed my eyes. We negotiated a deal. I wouldn't fish, but I could share in their catch provided I washed the pots and didn't bring any F-D pork chops. What the hell, what are friends for anyhow? And off we went.

The first day one entire pole went to the bottom of a swamp. The second day five lures were lost either to a pair of five-foot muskies or a school of or submerged stumps. I never voiced my minority opinion which. With the lures went half the nylon string, don't ask me how, they couldn't explain, enough for one thousand buttons, to put it in common parlance. The third day we lost all but two of the remaining lures with just enough string left to let these little silver baubles sink out of sight in the beautiful black water. (What a waste of beautiful earrings I thought silently to myself.) And while they fished I read my

book. It was glorious while the cheese lasted. And no pots to wash.

But do I need to tell you that by the forth day the cheese was consumed (yes, I shared), the Tang was getting low, the apples were no longer dry, nor apples, and they had caught no fish?

On the morning of the fifth day they lost the net.

I admit it, at that point I began thinking I-told-you-so. But I never said it, even then. No real Canadian would ever make a scene, even when facing starvation at the hands of raving loonies. We invented the word unscenely. And proud of it!

But I was perversely pleased that the three of them were finally getting serious about their impending death. They would come to me and beg forgiveness I felt sure. And I would forgive, of course, by a slight nod, and die reading my book, just as we agreed. What in fact they proposed was an indignity worse than death. I was to stop reading and help them fish! I should paddle one canoe while Peter trolled for his hapless scaly victims. Something about the problems of landing twenty pound lake trout while paddling alone and fishing without a net. A final futile defiance, it seemed to me. And I said no.

This was not well received. They sincerely believed in the redemptive power of their murderous paraphernalia. But a deal is a deal, and I refused. Besides I had a dozen F-D pork chops hidden at the bottom of my sleeping bag. So off they went, threatening to come back and eat me if they failed. I knew no mythic, psycho-social strictures against this in extremis remedy, just more personal objections. But the sun was sunny, and off I went to read my book and not to worry about this second generation death threat.

Now the book I lay down on the rocks to read has a lot to do with this story, Margaret Atwood's treasured tome, *Survival*. Every real Canadian knows and loves this book. I continued my read at the chapter on hunting. As with the other chapters the learned author compares the American, British and Canadian myths, about life, death, love, etc., and now hunting. And so she told me that the great American hunter was a swaggering plainsman dressed in buckskin, armed to the teeth, guns, knives, hatchets, the works, quick, shrewd, crude, strong, the works. His definitive adventure is getting caught in a ball-busting blizzard while stalking buffalo out on the prairies, hundreds of miles from his best girl's snug little cabin. His horse dies standing up and doesn't fall over. The wind howls so cold the bulles freeze in barrel of his gun. Then he catches the biggest buffalo ever seen in his bare hands, and with his last ounce of energy he wrestles the one ton monster to the ground, slits him open with his trusty knife, and crawls into bloody but warm belly of the beast, and weathers the rest of the century's worst blizzard in some comfort, thank you very much. Spring comes. He gets up, takes the great buffalo hide from his host which puts on himself like a robe, and heads off to see his girl. Totally triumphant over nature, the new king of the jungle, if you missed the point.

The English hunter is of course a Dr. Dolittle character living in the jungle, taking tea every afternoon, doing scientific experiments for the good of humanity and the local wildlife. He wears Bermuda shorts, even though the island had not yet been discovered, and a pith helmet in a lovely off-white. One day while hunting for specimens he comes upon an young

elephant, alas, having broken its leg in a cruel trap set by ruthless poachers and now orphaned by these same jungle vandals. Needless to say, he frees and comforts the hapless creature, dresses his wounds with the finest linen, applies splints, and nurses the elephant back to perfect health. In due course the kindly Dr. Dolittle is compelled by circumstances to return to England. There is tearful farewell in some steamy river port, and an unfilled emptiness in the heart.

One day, many years later, the good Doctor is wandering lonely on the moors when he trips in a thicket and fall broken to ground his hip broken in two places. No one knows of his absence, or whereabouts. Is this the end? No, of course not. Who should appear but the elephant, having trailed him these thousands of miles just to express his gratitude. The elephant gently hoists him on his back, and takes him back to the Doctor's charming thatched-roof cottage. Don't ask how, but the elephant now repays kindness for kindness by setting the doctor's broken hip, and nursing him back to health on crumpets and elderberry wine. They lived a long and happy life and are buried together in the chapel of St. Anton-on-Cam.

And the Canadian? The Canadian compromises, and transcends compromise. John Buchann's novel Sick Heart River tells all.

A Brit living in Vancouver is a noble heart looking for adventure in the new world. Instead he finds work as a clerk for the Hudsons Bay Department Store, and catches tuberculosis. The doctor tells him he has three months. One night he meets a strange Indian who claims to be a medicineman. He tells him that he can be cured by killing the great white wolf of the hidden valley and gives him some unfortunate vague directions. This was in the days before the Trans-Canada Highway gave more specific direction and purpose to suffering Canadians. But to kill the magic wolf or die trying seems a worthy final task.

Having nothing more compelling to do for the next three months he set out to find the hidden valley and the secret of eternal life. He searched all summer. Every place he looked there were valleys, but none were hidden. And no one had ever heard of the white wolf, though many people said they had bought things from the medicineman and all wanted to know where to find him. Alas as the summer wore on he could feel the rot in his lungs spreading as his breathing grew short and painful. Fall came. The forest was a riot of beautiful colours. The air grew crisp and cold. It burned in his lungs as he took it in. The days grew short. The yellow birch withered to dry leaves which were torn from the branches by the howling wind. Every breath became an agony.

His journey took him to the remote southeast corner of the Yukon. There it seemed he would meet his end. At least it would be like a man, in the wild, not some hospital bed surrounded by nurses. The pain in his lungs grew, and as he pitched his camp for what he believed would be the last time a profound sadness came over his soul. The first snow flakes began flickering down through the branches.

He staggered not far from his tent looking for kindling. Every step was an agony. It was growing dark and wanted to hurry back. Then breaking through a dense clump of young jack pines he came to edge of a steep hill, and spread below him was a valley unmarked on any map. It was wondrous deep and broad, and the moon shone bright here. He knew where he was at last.

He stumbled down the hill, gasping, panting. But he felt watched, hunted, by a strange presence all around him. He grasped his knife as firmly as was able, afraid but ready to end the struggle once and for all. Soon he came to clearing bathed in moonlight, and there he rested, sucking in the cold, cold air with all his remaining energy.

At first he saw just the glowing eyes on the far side of the clearing, then the quizzical face, shaggy white fur, a mangy body, like a skinny dog. So, the gods had indeed brought him to the magic beast, the creature he must kill to live. He felt a new power in his weaken body, strength that had been missing for months. He crouched, knife in hand, waiting for the beast to spring.

The wolf watched him, starred at him. He approached closer, and the wolf looked deeper. And he returned the gaze, momentarily, then longer, then deeper, in the moonlight. Something happened in a heartbeat, and the wolf was gone. He breathed deep, and easier than he had for months. Returning to his camp he felt his strength returning, his lungs filled and his chest swelled.

He never told the doctors about the wolf. They said it was a miracle, the clean cold air, something. But he was whole again. And he got his job back at the Bay. Or so they say

So I'm sitting there reading this terribly meaningful story, balling my eyes out, on this rock on the shores of great Kanipi about to starve to death, when I remember why it is I don't like to fish. Not mythical speaking, but the actual real reasons.

The summer I was six years old my father rented a cottage on a lake, and every night he'd go out in the little outboard trolling for lake trout. And he'd drag me along to run the motor at low speed so he'd have hands free in case he caught the big one. We never caught a single thing, not even a snag. It was cold, it was boring. But I really did try to like it. The only attempt the old man ever made to connect with the son. So I better like fishing, right? He bought this fishing rod, with a switch on it, so you wind it up click-click-click or just silent as death. And I remembered, as I was sitting there on my rock on the shores of great Kanipi, how years ago that same summer I went down the boathouse by myself and set about to catch my own fish. I would do what he could not, to reward, or to humiliate him, take your pick.

I'd seen a big one swimming around in there, one with great big whiskers, and he looked kind of stupid. So I baited my hook, and sat down on the dock, legs hanging over the edge, and lowered the worm into the water just deep enough that I could exactly what would happen. And along comes the catfish slow and looking stupid. He swims up to the worm and takes a look, then backs off and swims around to the other side, and takes another look, and a sniff. Then he swims the whole way round the worm checking it out, then back again, just getting ready to strike. And then he backs up. If you don't believe fish can swim backwards you're wrong this one could. He back up, then he tilts up forty-five degrees, so he's staring me straight in the eye. Eyeball to eyeball, me and the catfish for the longest time. And I'm looking deep into the soul of catfish and thinking to myself, why do I want to kill you? And I had no answer I could give least while I was looking dead at him. And so, at six while I'm thinking all

this, as sudden as he appeared he was gone again. And I hung up my fishing pole forever.

Now all that's a true story, and I didn't embellish one wit, like, for example, saying I breathed long and deep in the cold northern air after the catfish swam away, though that's probably what happened just the same.

But I do remember I put down my book on the rock, and I studied the far shore where my friends were fishing. The sun was rich and warm. The afternoon sun sparkled on the waves. I thought to myself now I can die happy, here in this beautiful place, knowing who I am, a real Canadian. And pity those across the water, the poor unknowing immigrants.

Sunset came. My companions returned with a fine catch. And I washed the pots more content than they could know.

So I don't fish, and I know the reason why.