by Alan Jacobs

An Entangled Thing

I turned around to see that my hook had become embedded in the face of a little boy.

NOT LONG AGO I WAS TALKING WITH an old friend from my hometown of Birmingham, and the conversation turned to a familiar topic: how much the place has changed over the years. If a heavily industrial, iron-making city hobbled and diseased by racial strife can be sleepy, Birmingham was sleepy. That sleepiness arose from Birmingham's limited recreational opportunities. What the smaller towns of Alabama had to offer, Birmingham likewise had but in greater quantity—a handful of decent barbeque restaurants instead of one, fifteen movie theaters instead of two or three. But nothing distinctive. Nowadays, though, something occasionally pops up in Birmingham that surprises me—something other, I mean, than a further proliferation of barbeque joints and cinema complexes. For instance, my friend told me, there is now a store devoted exclusively to fly fishing.

ART BY SCOTT EAGLE

It disturbed me to hear this news, in much the same way I'd be disturbed to hear about the opening of a Starbucks in my old neighborhood. But it wasn't simply the prospect of an increasingly upscale and glamorous Birmingham that troubled me. I had something else in mind. After all, unlike anyone else I knew in my childhood, I was virtually raised with a fly rod in my hand.

Only in my adulthood has the cult of fly fishing reached national proportions, and it is a cult manifesting some considerable degree of pure silliness. The great thing about fly fishing is supposed to be its natural purity. The fly fisherman understands himself as having achieved a communion with fish, water, and nature that other fishermen can't even dream of. He's not sitting passively in a boat with his line dangling in the water; he's striding through the stream itself, constantly waving his equipment about his head like a hyperactive orchestra conductor. He wields a bamboo wand of such exquisite flexibility and sensitivity that, in those rare moments of stillness, he can feel the suction if a trout merely sniffs the fly. Plus, the fly itself is cunningly wrought of purely natural materials and has everything but a hand-tied intestinal tract. How different, our purist thinks, from the benighted bassman in his hulking boat festooned with every bell and whistle imaginable: depth finders, fish locators, water thermometers, beer coolers, holding tanks, graphite rods, several items of apparel with Bill Dance's signature on them somewhere, and a box of computer-designed lures sprayed with various aromatic chemicals designed specifically to attract all desirable species of fish.

But what is the difference? The difference, I believe, is that the bass fisherman likes technology that announces itself as technology, while the fly fisherman likes technology that pretends not to be technology. Gadgets are gadgets, really, whether they are computer-designed or hand-tied, graphite or bamboo. The fly fisherman who looks with contempt on the bassman's boat spends scarcely less cash on his genuine India rubber waders and his waxed cotton casting-jacket—both imported from Scotland, of course. And then there's the matter of the flies, which have to be hand-tied, and that means a tying bench, the proper tools, magnifying lenses, the right kind of lighting. . . .

What's so great about fly fishing is that it allows men to exercise their fascination for gadgetry while giving the appearance of being nature-loving, sensitive primitivists. Thus the recent proliferation of lavishly stocked and outrageously expensive fly-fishing shops. Even so estimable a figure as the

journalist (and native Alabaman) Howell Raines became, some years ago now, an enthusiastic representative of this distressing trend. His book *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis* perfectly embodies this merger of gadgetophilia, high culture, and a Robert Bly–like discovery of "true masculinity."

MY DADDY WAS A FLY FISHERMAN, AND as I said, I was fly fishing from an early age. But we were of a brand very different from those represented in the new fishing boutiques—no waders for us, no jackets, no bamboo, no hand-tied or even machine-tied flies. Our sole supplier was Kmart. Once each of us acquired a ten-dollar rod, a three-dollar reel, a roll of fly line, a few feet of leader, and a half dozen popping bugs, we were in business for a decade or more. Well, occasionally we would have to replace the popping bugs, which led to a momentous decision: Day-Glo yellow or Day-Glo green?

We'd get up at three or four in the morning, depending on the time of year, then stop at Krispy Kreme to stock up on doughnuts and coffee (or, in my case, milk), consuming the first course at the Formica counter. Daddy sipped slowly, his eyes fixed on some invisible point twenty feet above the Winn-Dixie parking lot; I whirled impatiently on the Naugahyde-and-chrome stool. Finally, we climbed back into the Dodge and wheeled forty miles north to a familiar little lake, where we would drag someone's plain old aluminum rowboat into the water just as the sky became light enough for us to see pines on the far side of the water. (I seem to remember my dad stuffing a couple of dollars into the nearest house's mailbox, but I never dared to ask just how—what's the right word?—*unofficial* our boat-appropriation technique really was.)

Few memories from my childhood are more vivid than: the black, slick surface of the lake at dawn, with its hovering mist lifting imperceptibly as the sun grew stronger; our slow, systematic circumnavigation as we cast toward the banks where the bream tended to make the beds in which they lay their eggs; the almost amplified distinctness of a bluegill taking the bug—or the even louder slurping of a big bass vacuuming one up. Even a three-quarter-pound bluegill or shellcracker felt like a lunker on the light gear we used. A six-pound largemouth was Moby Dick reborn.

MY FATHER REGULARLY DISPARAGES bass fishing and always has (out of sheer contrarian cussedness, as far as I can tell, since he's lived all his life where the bassmaster rules the waters). But he won't repudiate anything that gets itself on the end of his line. One morning when I was still quite a novice, he hooked a hefty bigmouth. It took him a few minutes to get it close to the boat, and since we had no net—what sort of dilettantes do you take us for?—he held the by-now parabolic rod as far away from his body as he could while he groped with his free hand for the bass's lower lip. All this was happening just before me: the fish to my left, my father to my right, the taut leader quivering before my eyes. Eager to help as always, I reached out to pull the light-gauge line toward my father's hand, and, of course, it snapped the instant I touched it, the bass vanishing into the dark lake. Had I not been made to visit the men's room at Krispy Kreme an hour or so before, I would have evacuated my bowels on the spot. My father's temper was a fearsome thing, and I knew this was no mere peccadillo I had just committed. But he just stood at the back of the boat and looked down on me with a strange smile I've never seen again, on his face or anyone's. It was half-sardonic and half-pitying, though I couldn't be sure if the pity was directed toward himself for his bad luck or toward me for my astonishing stupidity.

Much later I learned that once before, when I was an infant, precisely the same thing had happened to him, but that time the culprit had been his own father. Gran certainly knew better than to grab that line, but both of them had been drinking a little too much, I imagine. No smile from my father then. As he cheerfully admits whenever I mention the event, he meant to brain his own daddy with an oar, and Gran escaped cranial trauma only by tumbling backward out of the boat and swimming fully clothed to shore. But our mornings on that favored lake were rarely so eventful. The only moments of tension were likely to occur at one end of the lake where some pine trees had stood before the local creek was dammed.

Daddy was (still is, I guess) a masterful caster, and could drop that little popping bug among the tall, dead protruding trunks with consummate ease, which of course made me think I could do precisely the same thing. My best efforts, however, invariably affixed my popping bug to a stump inaccessible to our boat. This necessitated the cutting of the line, the use of a new leader and new lure, and ultimately, an extra and wholly unnecessary trip to Kmart. All, except perhaps the Kmart visit, were accompanied by a lengthy extemporaneous cadenza of cursing. These experiences were not pleasant to me—though my father's artful profanities always fascinated—so I resolved to practice my casting until I too could settle my bug lightly, from a hundred feet away, on the coin of your choice.

As it happened, we lived right next to East Lake, a little man-made public lake in Birmingham where people often fish, if with little success. But the long backcasts of the fly fisherman were impossible on the gravel path that circled the lake: too many passers-by, at any time of day. Quite nearby, though, was a little stream, Village Creek, which offered more possibilities. No stumps in the water, but plenty of rocks and crannies and little bends that would amply test my abilities. There were even a few little fish that might be fun to catch, and—to give the whole enterprise some piquancy—there was the constant likelihood of stumbling on a ticked-off water moccasin. So one afternoon after school I was down at the creek practicing, trying to drop the bug as silently as possible between two rocks, and feeling pretty good about my marksmanship. I paid out the lime-green fly line gradually, casting back and forth in the rhythmical motion that people who fly fish enjoy for its own sake, snapping the bug up and back before it touched the water, getting ever closer to the right distance, when suddenly on the backcast I felt something catch. Got too close to the catalpa trees back there, I thought, and turned around only to see two little boys who had apparently been watching me. One of them was hunched over, clutching his left eye, with my fly line visible between his hands.

My heart thumped as I rushed toward them, and I wish I could say that the little boy's safety was the only thing on my mind, but it wasn't. The boys were black; this was Birmingham circa 1970. Most of the people who walked around East Lake were also black, and I was possessed of the irrational fear that one of them might think I had hurt the boy on purpose—as if someone could intentionally bury a fishing hook in a child's eye—and would then take vengeance on me. I pulled the boy's hands from his face and saw that the hook had embedded itself in his eyebrow. Removing it proved to be far less difficult than calming the boy, who was crying and shaking so hard that I couldn't do anything for several minutes. When I finally got him still, I found that the skin of the brow was loose and thin enough to make extraction quick. As soon as the bug was free, both boys took off running as fast as they could, as though I were chasing them. I looked around and saw that the lakeside path was unusually quiet. No one had seen. I walked back down to the creek bank, wound in my line, and went home.

MY PASSION FOR FLY-CASTING PRECISION, indeed for fly fishing itself, declined precipitately from that day forward. It

doesn't really make any sense, and maybe my loss of interest can be attributed to other factors: puberty, say, and the changes that it can bring in the bonds between fathers and sons. But nowadays, when I note the spread of fascination for fly fishing and consider how many years it's been since I got out my rod, I always find myself thinking back to that boy grasping his face and the long, neon fly line linking me with him.

In *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*, Howell Raines speaks disparagingly of "the redneck way of fishing," which basically involves trying to kill as many fish as you can, any way you can, and then getting your picture taken amid the carcasses. I don't think my father and I ever fished that way, though I don't suppose we ever caressingly released a fish back into its aquatic habitat, either. We caught as many as our family could eat, with maybe a few left over for the neighbors, and then we went home. But I suppose you could say that with our cheap equipment and "borrowed" boat we practiced a kind of low-rent, white-trash fly fishing—certainly in comparison with the elegant and expensive pursuit favored by Raines and the clientele at those new fishing boutiques.

Maybe all I am doing here is attempting to out-pure the purists, to argue that their primitivism is false while that of my childhood was genuine, authentic—all the things that modern, urban people who have grown wealthier and more comfortable than their parents so desperately want to be. And indeed, I really believe that my daddy and I, on those dim, still mornings at the lake, drew closer to something sweet precisely because we had so little paraphernalia encumbering us.

In part, then, I reject this sophisticated fly-fishing culture because I'm convinced that it's going about things in an altogether misbegotten way. But that's only one part of a whole complex of ideas and feelings.

Yes, I remember the distinctive pleasures of my fly-fishing life; but I also recognize that those pleasures are no longer available to me—and, further, that the termination of those pleasures was an entangled thing, having to do with the general agonies of growing up, but also with a particular history in a particular place. What connection can there be between a modern fly-fishing boutique and a black boy crouching at the edge of a lake, holding his face in both hands, a length of fly line preventing his escape?

In my mind, there is every connecion. We love some things and hate others, lose some things and retain others, but the causes are never simple, and rarely can we make them lucid. As somebody once said, there's no such thing as an unmixed motive. ★