

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Lee Stoops

A Bigger River

QUINN CLOSES HIS EYES. At nine years old, he is learning to listen for the near silent snap the line makes where the tiny fly he tied himself reverses direction before it zips through the air and alights on the water upstream. With a series of minute jerks and jigs, he leads it across the surface of the river to the eddy he has been told is home to some enormous brown trout. The water moves around his knees. He doesn't wear waders. His father says he needs to feel the river.

"Good," a voice, his father's, but different when they're in the water – not as kind but not unkind – behind him whispers. "Perfect."

Quinn grins, knows it will impede his concentration.

The light is fading. A gun metal gloom is settling around him. Where rocks break the surface, sound chatters. His fly, caught now in the swirling of the eddy, leaves his puppeteering reach. Quinn watches, trying to both ignore and decode the water's constant crackling. His father's words play again in his head: *The river shares its secrets in a language only few of us can know.*

"There," the voice breaks the tittering again. "See?"

Quinn hears movement behind him, feels a hand wrap his right shoulder. Over his left, an arm extends, lead by a pointing finger.

"You've got one tracking," the voice is now next to Quinn's ear. He can smell the river, familiar, on the man.

"I know, Dad," Quinn says.

The water splits. The fly disappears.

"Now." The man's hand flashes to Quinn's. He jerks the rod and the fly snaps from the water, nothing attached to it.

Quinn purses his lips.

The hand drops the rod and lands on his shoulder. It squeezes before releasing him.

"Bring it in, try again."

"I know," Quinn says.

"Don't get frustrated." The voice retreats. "I won't help this time."

Quinn pulls the slack back through the guides and lets it drape in the water around his knees. The current pulls it – bright green – downstream. Quinn flicks the rod back and forth, listening. He closes his eyes while he moves his wrist. When he hears it, he brings the tip of the rod further forward, reaches, opens his eyes as the fly touches.

He haunts the line, the pole a leash.

"This way."

"Why don't you just show me?" Quinn says. His eyes remain on the fly, nearly invisible now that the magic has run its course through the hour of dusk.

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"Only one of us can fish this hole," the voice says. "You know that."

Quinn leans over the water.

"My grandfather," the voice says. "Your great grandfather. He drowned in this river. In this hole, my dad said. It's hard to know. This was a bigger river then."

Quinn stops, waits for the voice to continue.

"Dad – my dad – thought he just couldn't wait. Your great grandfather I mean. His ashes went back into the river." The voice wrinkles. "Just like your grandfather. You remember that?"

Quinn's memories of his grandfather are thin – a images, a laugh, his smell. He, too, like he'd just come from the river.

"Dad didn't fish this hole after his father drowned. I haven't fished it since *he* passed. But this is where he taught me."

The fly moves for the hole. Quinn watches, allows the river pull more slack through the guides.

"Your grandpa really died here?"

"Dad said the fish in this hole are our kin. The same fish that swam this river when it was wild."

"The same fish?"

"Yup."

Quinn squints into the eddy. "That's kind of scary."

The voice hums. Quinn wants to bring in his line but knows his father will scold him.

"My grandfather made a deal with the river."

Quinn fidgets. He steps against the current, arches his neck, hopes he might find extra light in the obfuscating water. "But you just said he drowned."

"He did. That was part of the deal."

The reel clicks as Quinn begins to crank it in.

"Stop. Wait."

"Dad?" Quinn's shoulders rise, his arms tense. "It's too dark."

"We don't need much light for this river, these fish, to show you what you need to see."

Quinn lets his shoulders drop. The rod nears the water.

"Tip up," the voice says.

"I don't even know if I like this."

"I know," the voice says. "It's important. The fish need us. And we need them."

"Why? We can't keep any."

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"When you fish this part of the river, you're letting the fish teach you."

Quinn pinches the line between the reel and the first guide and pulls it in a few inches, testing. Nothing but the river pulls back.

"I didn't believe my dad when I was little, but he told me our spirits, when we die, go to the places we loved best while we were alive. He said his dad always said '*From the river we come, to the river we return.*' I liked that, even before I understood what it meant. I used to think the fish teach us respect. Now? I think maybe they teach us how to talk."

Before Quinn can ask what that means, his reel starts clicking, spinning out. He grabs the line. With a sharp tug, he sets the hook. His line pulls back, cutting jagged eights in the water.

"Big one," the voice says, staying, muted through the blood thrumming in Quinn's ears.

He lets the fish fight itself out, culls small, uneven lengths of slack, one after another. His father doesn't move, even as he dips his net and scoops the thick brown from the blackening froth.

Quinn handles the old fish, careful and firm. He doesn't turn to show his father. Not yet.

In the faint glint of the fish's eye, Quinn sees his own shadowed reflection. He sees his father watching over his shoulder. He wonders if the fish recognizes him.