

FISHING IN SNOW ON THE MADISON

BY VERLYN KLINKENBORG

I am kneeling in the silt at the edge of the Madison River, halfway down the Madison Valley north of Yellowstone Park. The afternoon light is dropping, and the clouds hover just above the asphalt on the highway across the river. Snow is coming down hard, skidding upstream as if it were falling in horizontal threads. I am casting a trout fly no bigger than a snowflake, letting the wind carry it above the fish—rainbows and browns—that are feeding in the shallows in front of me.

Surely the brain should shut down at a time like this. My fingers stopped working a while ago. I've been on my knees for an hour, inching forward, catching and releasing a fish now and then. Stealth made sense when I started, when there was still light in the sky, when it was possible to imagine a creature from one element—water—being spooked by a creature from another. But now we are all one element—snow, river, me, fish, wind, cold, even the road-killed deer up on the highway, where the ravens and magpies, and a lone coyote, have settled in for a feast.

I have come again to the why moment. I suspect it may be the reason I fish. I cast, and yet I hope I won't hook another trout, because it would mean even wetter, colder hands and the trouble of drying the fly and, probably, tying a new knot. Fly-fishing means eliminating all the variables—what fly you choose, what cast you make, how you approach—until you solve the single, irreducible event that is happening in front of you: the head of a trout taking a mayfly from the water's surface. For me there are no variables left. I am no longer up to problem-solving. The cold has reduced me to a single hypothesis, which the trout are now rejecting.

That's when I wonder, why am I here? Is there a more

pointless act than catching a fish I intend to release as quickly as I can? I do my best, in the rest of my life, to keep the question of pointlessness at bay. But here on my knees in the mud and the snow, numb to the bone, it's safe to let it fly. Almost safe, that is. In the afternoon light the river is as black and white as the bald eagle I saw sitting on a fence post down the road. The trout slash at the surface, big trout. And yet for a few minutes the only thing in the landscape that makes no sense is the angler. I've lost the thought that brought me here. There's a vertigo in the snowstorm, and I've somehow let it inside me.

The snow has muffled the roar of the trucks on the highway, but the sound of the river is as clear, as liquid as ever. An hour ago, the grasses on the river's edge were bright as lichen. The snow falls thicker and thicker still, and I remind myself that the weather could not be better for fishing. The dark sky, the snow, the time of year, the hatching mayflies—they all do a better job of explaining my presence than I can. They posit an angler and, for better or worse, that angler is me. My reasons make no difference. I am part of this irreducible event, and that will have to be reason enough.

After a while, the river does what it always does. It wears my thinking away to nothing. The vertigo lifts. I stop casting and sit back on my heels and watch the Madison fret itself to pieces and then reunite in a single flow. The angler is supposed to be one with the stream, but in my experience he never is. He is always caught in the human comedy of self-justification, always opening the philosophical space that no other creature seems to require, toting around his reasons.

I suppose I go fishing in the hopes that one day I will fish as intently as the trout that is even now rising to the mayfly. But then I am just supposing. 🐟

Verlyn Klinkenborg, who lives in upstate New York, writes for many publications, including the New York Times, in which this essay originally appeared. Used with permission.