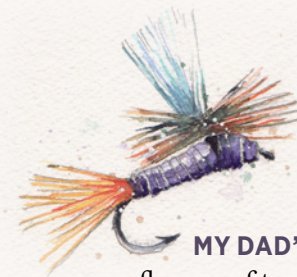




BONE JAM

Two anglers find a surprise half-submerged in a creek, carrying lessons in life and death.

By Noah Davis. Illustrations by Gary Palmer



MY DAD'S PURPLE HAZE FLY lands at the confluence of two currents near the top of the run. The left flow fights the right for a moment, giving the threaded hook an insect-like skitter. In another beat, the pink cheek of a cutthroat flashes where the fly was, and Dad lifts his rod to set his small hook.

After giving the fish a quick thank you and compliments on the orange slash under its chin and fine black spots on its tail, the trout is back in the run and Dad and I move up the creek.

The stream flows through thick willows. In late June, visibility extends mere inches into the wall of thin leaves. There is no path to follow other than the course of the water, so our feet remain wet and cool. We've fished this stream for more than a decade, long enough that our memories paint our expectations. Each year we recognize where spring runoff has changed some features—a root ball, a flimsy log, a short beaver dam. Yet the true pools, the bends dug out by a century of high-water seasons, endure.

I aim my cast at the bubble line along the far bank. There is just enough depth to hide a trout's dorsal fin, and the grass curtain hanging over the water offers enough security for a fish to linger. Half-way through the drift, the wind shifts downstream, and a putrid smell of rotting flesh assaults my nose.

My eyes water. I turn to blow the stink from my nostrils. As I do, I see a trout splash my fly, and I half-set knowing I am already too late.

"You smell that?" Dad asks, wrinkling his nose.

"I bet whatever is dead is in the big bend."

I know the spot well. The creek makes a sharp left turn at the base of a large ponderosa, a drastic shift that pins logs at awkward angles even spring floods don't often dislodge. Stones the size of my head are trapped in the jigsaw of wood.

The aquamarine pool downstream of the jam tends to hold a few cutthroat ready to rocket from the depths to take the ants and beetles that slip off the wood. Bull trout wait in the deep, slow water above, hoping for a struggling fish to flash and betray fragility. Most cutthroat keep to the shallows where riffles chop the surface.

I spot a moose leg spearing out of the lower pool, hoof cupped toward us like an outstretched hand. As I draw closer, I see the creek has stripped the hair and some of the skin off the hindquarters. Red, purple, and blue meat shimmers beneath the water, and the hide ripples like the flaps on a wall tent.

Pinned against a log, the half-submerged ribcage buzzes with bees and wasps. Underwater, the sinewy scarlet muscle stretched over the ribs looks like stained glass.

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I climb onto the logs to examine the top half of the moose. Its bald neck looks extra-long without any hair, and I can see now it's a bull with tall pedicles but no antlers attached to them. It must have died after its paddles had shed but before the next set began to grow. With those protruding posts on its head and skinny neck, the carcass looks more like a sunken giraffe than a moose.

The eye sockets are empty and most of the flesh is gone from the nose, so the bare hide undulates around thin bones. Fish shadows dart under the logs and the breadth of the carcass. I see no bull trout.

"I think he's been dead for a few months," Dad says, inspecting the hoof.

"Must've died higher and was carried down in the melt," I reply. "Water was cold enough to refrigerate him for a while."

"Do you think he broke a leg and fell in one of the beaver ponds?"

"Or broke through and drowned under the ice."

"This creek carried a whole moose down. That's something."

"By the end of the month he's gonna be mostly dry. Water's dropping fast."

I've found the scattered remains of dead moose while hunting grouse around brushy seeps, massive

femurs prehistoric in their heft. The long ribs like the legs of a giant spider. Yet it's strange finding a moose submerged halfway between a full animal and a skeleton, the softness of hide and muscle still present and moving in the flow.

My gaze drifts along the arc of the jam, searching for what else its rigid net might have caught. Under the surface I see the shimmering leaves of willows where the bank gave way, and at depth, for a brief moment I mistake the shaved lengths of beaver cuttings for bones.

Then I do see bones.

"There's a deer skeleton over here, too," I call to Dad, who is starting up and around the jam to fish the riffle.

"A deer? Must've been a deadly winter upstream." He drops down onto the sandbar above and begins to false cast. "Maybe we should turn back. Could be an omen." I can see him wink as he lays down his fly, then hear the splash of a rise and Dad is again tight into a cutthroat. I guess the omen of bones means more trout.

I lie on the wide log to look closer at the deer. The bones are older than the moose's; no flesh remains. It was a mature doe, based on the skull. I can see no leg bones, and the ribcage is settled on the bottom.

What other skeletons are hiding here? I have no macabre feeling seeing these creatures in the log jam. Since everything living needs the dead, since every step we take is on the past lives of others, this is a brilliant scene to witness. What a gift to mark this chapter of plenty for the creek.

Climbing off the jam and back to the moose leg, I pinch my nose and look close at the flesh still hanging to the hip. Mayfly nymphs cling black and stark against the cream bone, their thin legs obvious even through water. On the meat itself, two crayfish have found the lee side of the muscle and feast in their luck. I imagine that as lengths of flesh give way, bull trout below have swallowed the manageable morsels. I hope when my life ends, my body can in some way provide similar benefit and bounty. What better celebration than to be enjoyed? To help others through a few more meals?

"Let's keep fishing," Dad calls.

"I'm coming."

Above the jam, I look back and can't see a single bone through the glare on the water.

Three days later, Dad and I return. We both say out loud that we'd like to wade a bit farther up the canyon than the last visit, but silently we know we also want to check on the moose.

Water carries so much into itself, flowing over grains of sand that once were mountains, then boulders, then stones, then gravel. Or bears, and elk, and trout, and osprey, and herons that began as wet fur, feathers, meat, then bones, then shards.

There is no longer a strong stench as we fish up the creek. Here on the steep backside of peak runoff, the water has already dropped significantly and there are fewer places to cast. We quickly reach the jam and step across the gravel looking for the remains.

A single foreleg is wedged between two logs, but the rest of the moose is gone. Drag marks broom the sand toward the willows. Black bear tracks and a beaten path show the way toward the rank meal.

"Hey bear!" Dad and I both call as we back our way downstream, hands on our bear spray. We quickly round the corner then stride through the shallows, discussing what creek is close enough for us to fish the rest of the afternoon.

Once we make the trail and the threat of surprising a digesting bear has passed, I think back to the leg still pinioned in the jam.

"At least the bear left a little bit of the moose for the mayflies," I say.

"Wonder if that leg will be there next year?"

Dad questions.

"Bits and pieces, I bet." 🐻

