

## **Steelhead, Steel Heart**

Cast. Mend. Drift. Strip. Step.

Despite the bluebird desert sky, the rich sage air, the gorgeous red sun rising over the canyon rim—in spite of the prospect of a perfect river day—I am angry. Angry at myself. Angry at my fishing buddy Steve.

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We chased steelhead up and down Oregon—the Clackamas, the Sandy, along the Deschutes. Fished stripers in Sacramento, shad in the North Umpqua, smallmouth bass in the Willamette. Today I'm swinging a Skykomish Sunrise through runs I know as well as my backyard, as little as my heart.

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I launched while the stars were still out, rowing hard to warm up. Dropped the anchor in Trout Creek, stepped into the river, the same river once. Rigged the rod with a Green Butt Skunk. This much I know how to do.

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I'm angry because I don't know how to feel. Steve has brain cancer and all I can do about it is walk in the water, lose myself in the thoughtless rhythm of the wading, the rhythm of not thinking at all. What I'm most angry about is that I don't know how to tell Steve I love him. This isn't something most men say to each other. "You're a mensch, Steve" is as close as I come.

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We froze our asses off on winter runs in the Sandy River, broiled in July on the lower Deschutes, got blown out by winter rains on the Trask and the Nehalem. He was there for the first August fish I hooked, the four-pounder on the short Scott rod I loved so much I sent it back for repairs to the factory three times. The startled power of that fish is eternal in my muscle memory—I dream it sometimes, though I didn't know enough to steer him across current and lost him.

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By choice and necessity, I fish alone today, laying out the graceful casts a spey rod gives me. The leaves on the hillside are the burning yellow I love. The breeze shoving down the canyon—a true headwind later in the afternoon—carries the faint cold breath of winter coming.

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I turn my back to the river to watch a train on the opposite bank and only then comes the tug on my fly, that racing, muscular, unpanicked run.

"When I pursue happiness, I never find it," Yang Wan-li says. "Then suddenly, when I'm not looking, it appears." I release the fish—I want to kiss it goodbye—and flick out a long snap T-cast cross-current.

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Steve tells me over the phone he lost his fear of dying in Vietnam. What I haven't lost, apparently, is my own fear of losing—losing fish, losing friends, losing life. Ave, Steve. I love you, brother.

Cast. Mend. Drift. Strip. Step on.