

STUCK IN THE MUD: AN HERMITIC VIEW OF ART IN A NUCLEAR AGE

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Life on the river had a timeless quality. A half mile across the farmer's field, dusty in summer, or muddy when it rained, then you enter a thick forest path and wander through bracken ferns, salmon berries another half mile coming out behind Fishtown. Fishtown was a collection of old shacks that stretched along the base of a hill at the mouth of the Skagit River. That cabin among the trees up there on that rock to the left, that's Steve Herold's place –

*The wind is up tonight,
Hissing in the firs
& rushing through the cottonwoods.
Sitting by my light
High in the storm
I write
the wind----.*

Steve Herold'

By the time you got to Fishtown the world was far behind you. Television, telephones, cars, electricity, advertising, a thousand pressures and temptations all back there, in town, in the city, comfortably far away. On the river people had time for one another.

I arrived with the snow in January, I think it was 1974. My unemployment had run out. I was tired of the world and I wanted to get off -- the river seemed a good alternative.

The river metered the time, and the time was very different from the time we know here in town. Somehow the future and the past had flowed back into the present; now was thicker. I remember once I was over at Paul and Elizabeth's, Dan'l came by for a visit. In the hour or two he was there I don't think he said four words, yet he was present and that presence was a really fine visit all by itself.

*With a good map
You can find your way to Charlie's.
Have some tea and share some silence.
Don't you ever get bored
just sitting down here
they ask.
Off they go as quick as they come
Can't stay just gotta go.
Often the thought of never
leaving this river passes
in my mind.*

Daniel Stokeleyⁱⁱ

The river would rise and fall slowly with the tide, a great breathing, and always it would sweep by in its stately fashion.

I secured a home. An abandoned duck hunting cabin on float logs. It was on Barge Island, about a half mile down river from Fishtown. I called it, Duck Hall, and carved a seal with the Chinese characters of its name. I moved all my possessions aboard, books mostly, and set up my life on the Skagit flats. I went through a long period of self-examination. Mostly, I wanted to reassert my commitment to art. I needed to find out who I was and where I belonged, and I was determined to be an artist even if I had to starve to death. I learned how to live without money.

Out on the river you can be yourself. You can get pretty crazy and there is no one to get upset about it, except yourself. I began to give myself permission to be a human being, a natural human being, and to follow my instincts rather than my guilt. I began to do those things I needed to do just to be myself. I remember, for example, that I would return from a trip to Seattle, frazzled and weary. I would just feel like staying in bed all day long, getting up only to fix a meal, otherwise just reading or dozing the day away. I had nothing else pressing to do, so I allowed myself to do it. In the back of my mind, though, I would think little things like, "Suppose you never want to get up again?" "What about the firewood?" "Shouldn't you be doing something about the roof?" But, then I would just say to myself, "If I really want to lay in bed all day I'll go ahead and do it. I'll worry about the rest of this stuff another time." The next day I would go through the same thing and sometimes the third day as well. I guess I just served notice to my overactive conscience that I was going to let myself be myself and it could just get used to the idea. The conscience relaxed and about the third day I would get up, full of energy. I would end up doing more in a day than I might do in a normal week! And I did it freely, naturally and with joy -- not under the pressure of guilt. It was almost as if the work did itself.

The quality of time that I came to know on the river was very important in my art. I guess, like Thoreau, I began to hear the beat of my own distant drummer. I remember becoming aware of the changing seasons. As winter moved slowly into spring I would see the slow change on the hillside face of Bald Island. It started one day as I watched it out of my window. It was still totally brown, but it seemed to have just acquired a very slight green tinge. As the days passed I was acutely aware of the changing color, each day just a little greener than the day before. Soon my own little marsh island was shooting up fresh green cattails and skunk cabbages. The movement into spring was an irresistible force of awesome power, and I was a part of it. And all the time the river flowed by as calmly and serenely as ever.

*Tonight I sit in the old shack,
a cozy fire to dry myself
of the rain
alone, I think of the summer
ahead & smile to be so lucky.*

Daniel Stokelyⁱⁱⁱ

*Persimmons & pears:
sitting with friends in autumn
watching the tea kettle on the glowing coals.
Darkness slowly comes.*

*We sip tea and talk -- hours pass.
Oh, who desires more than this,
to have the fruit of the earth
& the bright cavern of the mind?*

Steve Herold^{iv}

About every fifth day I might go into the town of La Conner to check my mail or whatever. Every three or four weeks I would hitch-hike down to Seattle. To row up to Fishtown, to me, was like going downtown. I became aware that it took energy to be with people, you had to smile and be sociable. One day when I was working on some drawings I was feeling a little lonely and sorry for myself out of habit. I thought it would be just swell if someone would come and visit me, visitors to Duck Hall were fairly rare, and I looked out the window and imagined a boat pulling up with someone aboard. Suddenly I realized that I really didn't want to see anyone! I'd have to smile and be sociable, what a bother! It was then that I realized that I had always been emotionally dependent on people. In Seattle or San Francisco I would often go to coffee houses or restaurants to sketch out ideas or doodle, just to have other people around. I think that being around people really didn't do much to make me feel less lonely, but at least I wasn't alone! Now I had, without realizing it, become quite comfortable with my own company. I had discovered the difference between solitude and loneliness.

*Once my eyes fell back into my head,
All around me friends went limp with boredom,
Waited,
Burned holes in their clothing
& left.*

Charles Krafft^v

Alone in Fishtown

I

*It's raining a lot so the river is soupy;
All the leaves blown down,
The far-off islands show clear.
The south wind on the firs
Moans in my solitude.
On a pillow of lost ambition
I smoke my pipe and doze.*

II

*Years ago in Seattle
I would chant the melancholy lines
Of the rustic Meng Hao-Jan
And wonder,
Lounging in a library chair,
Why he didn't pass the civil service test.
Today the door is open
To any chilly breeze,
When it's shut
You can read fine print in the cracks;
Sitting in the rocker
I've run out of schemes,
Maybe this January
I can pay my rent
In firewood.*

Paul Hansen^{vi}

About this time I was getting into my feelings. I realized that out in the middle of nowhere I had great freedom. My ex-wife had gotten involved in Primal Therapy, and the idea of giving vent to my feelings seemed worth a try. So every once in a while I would take a look to see how I was feeling, then I would let it out ... "I FEEEL GOOOOOOOD!!!" or conversely, " I FEEEEEL AAWWFFUUULL!!!", and maybe I would add a little shout for emphasis. At this point I would get terribly self-conscious. I would quick run outside and look up and down the river to see if someone was around who might have heard me! I found it was difficult to let out my feelings, even if I knew there was no one around. I began to realize that I had a whole little committee inside my head who were always ready to judge me if I did anything stupid like let my feelings out! Well, I had to deal with this little committee as I had had to deal with my hyperactive conscience earlier. And even now I have to sit down with them from time to time and work things out between us.

A WEEK AGO I BOUGHT SOME CHEESE

*It was so cold yesterday
That to write,
I had to thaw out the ink bottle
To remove the pen.
Paint brushes are frozen
To the cups
I dipped them in last night to clean.
Still I don't light a fire,
But sit here watching
Hungry sparrows pick brown rice
out of the snow.*

*A week ago I bought some cheese
And put it in the cooler.
Now I have to separate the mouse turds
From the caraway seeds
Every time I want a sandwich.*

I don't mean to go into great detail about my period of introspection of the river. I got interested in Carl Jung and studied his ideas extensively. I kept a journal of my dreams and gained some skill in dream analysis. I actually did myself some good. The ability to understand human symbolic thought has helped me to understand situations that baffle others. It has proven an interesting pastime. I think, though, that what is more important is that there is something in the hermitic experience, in retreat from the sociocultural world of modern society, that speaks to the particular alienation and loss of soul that we experience daily, and that exists in today's world of art.

Our culture is so one-sided that the spiritual side of art seems, if it is there at all, to come from another world. In an age of severe materialism, where time is only money, space is rent and profit, where everything is seen first and foremost in terms of its monetary value, the human source of life in art seems like superstition and phony mysticism. This 'other world' then stands out in opposition to matter; it is the world of spirit. And what is spirit? Spirit is all that which exists without material form. Spirit is hope, it is the feeling between friends, the meaning of things, it is vitality, it is guiding principles, it is patterns of dynamic processes, it has overtones of the supernatural, it is ghosts, memory, it is uncanny it touches the eternal and the infinite. Spirit when embodied in matter is life.

Each one of us is an individual. There is no one else exactly like any of us. We each have our own life, history and validity. Don't we often feel, though, that somehow we aren't as real or valid as other people? The President, maybe, he's more real than I am, or Picasso. The "big guys" are somehow a little out of our reach, even if we know a few. We have the feeling that we can learn how to be real by patterning our behavior after movie stars and the heroes of novels. Many of us are, on a deep level, convinced that we amount to nothing, that our world, our friends, our lives are unimportant, insignificant. Real life happens in places like New York, London, etc. We are frogs, probably frogs with warts -- toads! Ugly things of a lowly nature.

I think a lot of this feeling comes from mass-culture. This is a world where we are likely to know TV stars better than our neighbors, where our manufactured values have actually driven a wedge between the people and the earth, their natural home. We feel alienated, lost, alone, like we don't really belong here.

The experience of living on the river, in a more harmonious relationship to nature showed me the depth of the sham we take for reality most of our lives. I believe that art is a medium through which the healing power of spirit and unity can flow into modern man. In the intimate world of the willows, among the cattails and in the timeless quality of the river, with our attention and our love we can bring a contribution to a life that is richer, fuller and more serene.

*At midnight,
The river is a dark cathedral.
I row home alone
Between rows of small birds
Asleep on their feet.
Beavers slap the water with their tails.
A heron gently leaves its nest.
Ahead of me,
Off the bow of the boat,
A full moon keeps the distance whole.*

Charles Kraft^{viii}

- ⁱ Herold, Steve, In Cow Tales, the Dharma Foundation, Fishtown, La Conner, WA.
- ⁱⁱ Stokeley, Daniel, In Cow Tales.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Stokeley, Daniel, In Cow Tails.
- ^{iv} Herold, Steve, In Cow Tales.
- ^v Krafft, Charles, In Apprenticed to Mud, Bank Books 1973. The Gritty Ink Scriptorium & cet. Seattle & Fishtown.
- ^{vi} Hansen, Paul, In Rimes of a River Rat, Clifford Burke, Printer, La Conner, WA. 1978
- ^{vii} Krafft, Charles, In Near the Mouth of the Mask, Endless Despair Press, 1976, Seattle
- ^{viii} *ibid.*