

B O B C R O F U T



Headin' Home ~ oil on canvas ~ 28" x 36" ~ Wilderness Journey, 1877

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flyfishing

By Todd Tanner



PAINTING BY ROD CROSSMAN

The music of the West Fork played soft and sweet. Happy it seemed, but perhaps a little nervous about the future. Yet maybe those were his emotions rather than the creek's.

I drove over to the West Fork late this afternoon. Molly was gone for the day, off to Idaho with her friend Elizabeth, and I'd been holed up in the house with the doors and windows shut to keep the heat – low 90s in the shade, 102 outside in the direct sun – at bay. I never used to think of Montana as

hot, but Lord, this was our fifth or seventh or tenth or some such outrageous number of consecutive days where we'd hit the century mark by mid-afternoon and I didn't want to contemplate my withered brown lawn, my heat-whipped dogs or a forest that looked like a match poised for the strike. You wouldn't ever guess that Montana would be like this. Not way up here on the Canadian border.

Damn, it was hot.

I slipped out just before six, figuring I'd better head down and get the mail. On my way back, with dust clouds welling up in my rear view mirror, the West Fork started calling my name. I knew it would be,

if not cool, certainly cooler, and the overhanging cedar and larch would cast little reservoirs of shade on the water, offering some slight respite from the heat.

The creek, as you might already have guessed, was low; not much more than a trickle. In fact, a raging torrent I couldn't cross back in early June had been reduced by a rainless month to a thin, wet veneer over river cobble, maybe a foot deep in the little pools and plunges, and half that where the riffles glistened and sparkled in the soft golden sunlight. Golden even in that early hour because forest fires off to the west lent the air an ethereal, sensuous glow; a glow that came from smoke and dust and the vagaries of thermally-induced winds mixed with the

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oh-so-bright blue skies of July.

Beautiful, even stunning, but a bad omen nonetheless.

I wandered up the north bank, heading upstream towards the sinking sun and pausing here and there to take it all in – the huge boulders sculpted and formed by Mother Nature’s watery touch; the cedars, ancient sentinels who’d stood guard over the creek for centuries; the moss, the ferns and the mountain maple, all of whom seemed far too dry for this time of the season but who were still holding up, standing firm, just as we all do when our only other choice is to give up the ghost to a blast furnace of a summer.

I looked for fish, of course, but I saw not a one. The West Fork holds rainbows, brookies, even a few cutts, but they all seemed to have vanished downstream into the big river or upstream into that huge, deep pool at the base of the falls. For just a second I wished I had brought my fly rod – in my mind, fly fishing is an infection, an affliction, a cellular-deep genetic imperative that haunts both my days and my dreams – but the desire passed as quickly as it came.

Many things would have been appropriate at that moment – tearing off my clothes and soaking naked in the cool water, sleeping, meditating, even praying – but fly fishing, in that heat, under those conditions, was no more the thing to do than pouring gasoline over my head and setting myself on fire.

In all ways, in all things, we need balance. Thankfully, I’m finally starting to realize this particular truth.

After a long time spent wandering the bank, I ended up sitting on a flat, midstream rock with my feet dangling in the water. The music of the West Fork played for me as it ran past, soft and sweet, and for a while I felt blessed. Happy, that water seemed, even joyful, but perhaps just a little nervous about the future. Yet maybe those were my emotions, rather than the creek’s.

At some point conscious thought gave way to thoughtlessness, which is a wonderful, luxurious thing indeed, and then, slowly, eventually, to the dawning awareness that something, some unknown thing, had changed. All of the sudden, pretty much out of

An advertisement for Turner Sculpture. At the top left is a circular logo featuring a bird. The main text reads "TURNER SCULPTURE" in a large, serif font, followed by "WILDLIFE SCULPTURE IN BRONZE & SILVER" and "BY WILLIAM H. & DAVID H. TURNER" in smaller text. The central image is a bronze sculpture of an elk's head with large, detailed antlers, mounted on a dark rectangular base. To the right of the sculpture, the text says "ELK BUST", "11"l x 10"w x 17"h", and "EDITION OF 150". At the bottom left, the address "P.O. Box 128, ONLEY, VA 23418" and phone number "(757) 787-2818" are listed. At the bottom center is the website "WWW.TURNERSCULPTURE.COM".

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nowhere, I had the powerful feeling that I was being watched.

I didn't know who, or what, had awakened my subconscious defenses, but in a wild land full of griz and cougar it's not wise to automatically attribute such feelings to a jay or a white-tailed deer. The foliage down on the creek is thick; plenty heavy enough to lend cover to a predator come down off the mountain for a drink or, perhaps, to explore the possibility of an evening meal. And as much as I like sharing my home with the coyotes and the wolves and the bears and the mountain lions and the ravens, I have no desire to assuage their hunger. Consequently, I stood up, looked around for a few wary moments and then made my way back downstream to the spot where I'd parked my truck.

As I drove away from the creek, I started thinking about my fly rods and long bows. With summer galloping past, it won't be long before the elk start to bugle and the fishing perks up; it won't be long before my retrievers beg to go bird hunting and the deer polish their antlers on aromatic cedar saplings. In fact, it won't be long before the frost settles and the leaves turn and the days savage my emotions with their poignancy, their too-short autumn perfection. But even with fall just over the horizon I'm going to concentrate on living in the moment. And that means embracing the dust and the fires and the heat. My rod and my bow will just have to wait.

I do think that tomorrow I'm going to drive back down to the West Fork. I'll park my truck and walk upstream and jump from rock to exposed rock until I decide that it's time to stop being so damn hot. Then I'm going to slip into the water and get an otter-eye view of the world.

Afterwards, I think I'll just sit there and luxuriate in the wildness of this place. I'll listen to the creek flow past, and keep an eye out for trout and bears and lions, and, if the spirit strikes me, I may pray for rain, which we really, truly, need. Most of all, though, I'm going to shed the hot, sticky skin of civilization and surrender to the cool waters of the West Fork. It's funny, but that little creek just won't stop calling my name. 🦋