

Susquehanna

An old man stood alone on a high bank of a slow moving river, gazing over the water. Presently a young man approached and stood beside him. The old man did not stir. Instead, he continued to stare fixedly at the green-gray water.

It was early evening, just after supper time. Gnats and mayflies danced above the still water. Occasionally, a dragonfly zipped by in a crazy zigzag dance.

After several minutes, the young man spoke:

"What are we looking at?" he asked.

Without diverting his eyes from the river the old man replied:

"The longer I look, the more I see."

It was silent again. The young man did not stir from his position, though he was unsure of what he was supposed see.

"Just what do you see out there?" he asked. "The longer I stare, the blurrier every thing gets."

The old man did not reply.

"All I see are bugs flying around," the young man continued, growing impatient and getting ready to move on.

"And?" the old man asked.

"And...I see the trees on the far bank reflected on the water."

"And what else?" the old man prodded.

"And...nothing else." The young man strained to see more. As he could see nothing more, he

closed his eyes.

"Concentrate," the old man said deliberately.

The young man looked at the water directly below him and saw a lone bluegill kiss a submerged branch.

"There's a bluegill," the young man said pointing enthusiastically.

"There are several," the old man replied. "They've been lingering there for some time. What else do you see?" he asked.

The young man looked down at the bluegill and noticed the others swimming nearby. He let his eye wander and he saw submerged logs and branches, the submerged stocks of water lilies and water reeds. He told the old man. And the old man asked him what else he saw.

"What do you see that I don't?" the young man asked, slightly angered by the old man's serenity.

"Tell me that?"

"I see a bass over in that pool there about to jump for a fly," he said, pointing.

Near the far bank, the still surface of the water was broken.

Suddenly, the young man was able to see everything. He was aware of three worlds: the land, firm beneath his feet, tangible and hard; the shimmering world of reflection of the water's surface, where mayflies and water bugs danced over the flawed mirror image of sky and trees; and the water world, teeming with fish gracefully swimming through their silent water world.

He watched a box turtle skirt the murky river bed, and large mouth bass circling, watching the surface for flies. Other fish hovered, as expectant as commuters on a platform waiting for a train.

He saw a submerged automobile tire and a plastic bread wrapper caught on a snag. He told the

old man everything he saw, and the old man listened without words.

He became acutely aware of the sound of a rapid running downstream behind him. He closed his eyes and imagined the quick water silvering as it met the resistance of the rocky river bed.

He imagined the fish in the pool below compensating for the pull of the rapids downstream.

When he opened his eyes he could only see the reflection of the trees and the sky above.

"I've lost it," he said.

"Me too," the old man replied. "You have to start again. It takes a moment to see it all again."

The light had changed. The sun had set over the treetops. It was still quite light, but the mood of the river had changed. The water was darker, the reflections on the surface more defined.

The young man spotted a brown trout cruising the shallows. It looked like a leviathan compared to the bluegills. He was amazed by its enormity.

"Look at the size of that guy," he said, pointing excitedly. The fish started.

"He's middling at best," the old man said. "Remember water refracts light, makes things look bigger."

"Oh," the young man said, feeling stupid for having forgotten basic high school physics. "I've forgotten" he muttered.

"Now you remember," the old man said, smiling slightly. "And you'll probably forget until you've need to remember again."

"Probably," he said.

"The sun's down now," the man observed.

The river became noticeably darker an instant after the old man spoke. The young man looked

at the sky above him -- the pink glow of sunset had faded from the clouds, and the surface of the river rippled as a cool breeze began to blow upstream.

"I've lost it again," he said.

"Me too," the old man said. A fish broke the surface of the water by the far bank, and the splash echoed in the young man's ears, ringing like the concentric circles emanating from the point where the fish had broken the surface.

The old man turned to go.

"Thank you," the young man said.

"You're welcome," the old man replied with a wry smile. "But I don't know what you're thanking me for."

"Well, for..." the young man hesitated. "I don't know." "That's never an answer," the old man said over his shoulder as he started on his way down the path. He made his way through elms and willows and disappeared around a bend.

"No, I guess not," the young man said aloud, though there was no one to hear his words.