

Jan Zita Grover is a former AIDS worker who moved from San Francisco to Minnesota after she became exhausted by her intense relationships with friends who were dying. In her essay collection, *North Enough and Other Clear-Cuts* (1997), Grover explores the similarities between the bodies of her dying friends and the north country woods devastated by logging. *Northern Waters* (1999) describes what happens when she submits herself to “the tutelage of waters” by learning to flyfish. She now lives in Duluth, Minnesota, but the “Minnehaha Creek” essay from that book describes her unique Zen fishing experiences in Minneapolis. The essay engages the reader through an instructive paradox: how fishing these fishless city waters enabled her to acquire a deeper understanding of place and urban nature.

## ☉ Minnehaha Creek

*Jan Zita Grover*

My home stream for four years was a Zen fishing paradise: a mazy, meandering tailwater that ran twenty-eight miles from dam to mouth, most of it beneath a pleached archway of elms, ashes, cottonwoods, and poplars. Kingfishers, green-backed herons, great blue herons, white-breasted nuthatches, tree and barn swallows, swifts, hooded mergansers, goldeneyes, and Canada geese rode its waters and dived from its streamside trees. A few warm days in winter opened up channels broad enough for casting, and in summer the water was usually high enough to provide two to three feet midstream, and often more along the grass-lined outer bank.

But a Zen stream? Well, yes. This creek offered fishing, but no fish—a daily ritual of casting, feeling the water eddy ’round my legs, noting the changes in water level and temperature, the progress of seasons marked by vegetation,

insects, and birds. But as for fish, those were few and far between—according to the DNR’s metro manager, a few sunfish, bluegills, the vagrant bass or pike who washed over the dam far upstream.

In any case, the creek’s few finned beings were wholly safe from me. I not only didn’t seek them, I didn’t even cast a fly. But I was nonetheless gratified when I ran into fish—or rather, when one of them ran into me. One late spring morning, for example, I was standing midstream, casting against the current, when something with the resilience of an inflated inner tube bumped hard into my left calf and briefly wrapped itself around my leg. A dark shape glimpsed, then gone beneath the hard-running water. My first and only thought was a pike—several years ago, a child angler had caught a respectable eighteen-inch snake, as small pike are sometimes called locally, in a pool just upstream of where I now stood. But before I could further puzzle out the fish’s identity, rain began dimpling the water, and the crowns of the creekside trees fanned open beneath a heavy northwest wind. A late May storm was coming on, thunder predicted, so I reluctantly reeled in and left the water for the morning. Five minutes later, when the storm broke, I was already at home in southwest Minneapolis.

My homewater was Minnehaha Creek, which is fed by Lake Minnetonka and regulated at Gray’s Bay Dam by the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD). The creek may have been fishless for all intents and purposes by the time it reached Fifty-second Street and Xerxes, where I faithfully haunted its waters each day, but it was in every other way an interesting stream.

Before it was dammed for lumber, furniture, and grist mills in the 1850s to 1870s, Minnehaha Creek swam with pike, bass, sunfish, and suckers. In 1852, Colonel John Owens, publisher of the weekly *Minnesotan* (St. Paul), wrote about an expedition he and his party had made to Lake Minnetonka, during which they “caught fish enough to feed all twelve hungry men” from Minnehaha Creek. “Fishing for about twenty minutes more, they brought in more than a total of about forty pounds.” Even the first generation of dams on the creek apparently didn’t destroy its fish populations; Coates P. Bull, whose family farmed alongside one of the creek’s tributaries around 1900, recalled pickercel, bass, sunfish, and other fish in great numbers: “Suckers and Redhorse each spring swam from Lake Harriet through the outlet into Minnehaha. . . . They ‘paid toll’ aplenty; for settlers, even from Eden Prairie and miles to the west, brought their spears to harvest bushels of these fish to eat and to feed pigs.”<sup>1</sup>

But as the wetlands adjoining Lake Minnetonka and the creek were drained

for farms, roads, and homes, the creek's water level began to drop and to fluctuate dramatically. There were years when the creek almost dried up. By 1928, when Otto Schussler published his *Riverside Reveries*, Minnehaha Creek had "almost ceased, for a great part of each year at any rate, to be a stream." Finally, in 1963, the MCWD was formed to regulate water levels and water quality in the creek's 169-square-mile watershed. At the Gray's Bay Dam on Lake Minnetonka, waters above a set minimum level are released into the creek. Creek levels are also increased during peak canoeing/tubing season (July to August) unless there's a drought. In 1979, the Creekside chapter of the Izaak Walton League cleaned up the creek from Gray's Bay down to Minneapolis; the garbage they collected filled two dump trucks.

Living about twenty-one miles downstream from Gray's Bay Dam, I witnessed the creek's almost daily and seemingly fickle fluctuations. In early May, despite snowmelt and ice going out on Lake Minnetonka, the creek was usually starved for water throughout its Minneapolis course. Even the old mill pond below East Minnehaha Parkway at Thirty-fourth Avenue receded from its usually brimming banks. Farther upstream, every storm drain leading into the creek hung suspended three or four feet above the usual water level. Ducks waiting for open water crowded into discontinuous puddles like so many commuters pressing onto rush-hour trains.

And then, just as inexplicably, sometime during the night near the end of the month, the water would begin spilling over the dam again. The next morning, the creek was a good three feet higher, its muddy flats vanished. Buffleheads and mallards floated contentedly on winter-cold pools beneath the naked trees.

Most of the Minneapolis miles of Minnehaha Creek provided great opportunities for everything that makes fly fishing gratifying *except* the likelihood of hooking fish. The creek's width varied roughly between ten and twenty-five feet when the water was running 150 cubic feet per second or faster. Its structure was classic: runs, riffles, pocket waters, pools filled with many of the same aquatic invertebrates I had learned to expect to find in trout waters: stonefly, mayfly, and caddis-fly nymphs colonized the rocks that dotted its sand bottom; black-fly larvae clung there, too, swaying by silk threads in the current. Winter and summer, fine blooms of midges lifted suddenly into the air at twilight, followed in summer by great cartwheeling hoards of swallows and swifts, who picked them off as quickly as they arose from the water. In late June and July, iridescent blue damselflies courted and mated

in midair, on the surface of the water, on the yellow flag and cattails at the water's edge.

By foregoing the opportunity to cast for fish, I was able to sample other pleasures in a focused, relaxed way. No two and a half-hour drive, no burning of hydrocarbons to get my conservation-minded self farther and farther out of town; no night driving. In exchange for an absence of fish, I got everything else that made small-stream fishing worthwhile. Need I add that the creek was uncrowded? The only time I found anyone else casting there, it was because I had told Sam and Kim about it. But I did not see them on the creek again.

Plenty of people stopped their cars alongside my stretch to ask if there were really fish in Minnehaha Creek or to comment on my casting. After I told them that the creek was practically fishless and pulled my line from the water to show them the yarn at the end of my tippet, most of them just stared at me, bemused or disgusted, shook their heads, and climbed back into their cars. I, in turn, was bemused by sidewalk anglers whose view of fishing was so instrumental that they were flummoxed by my admission that I wasn't even rigged to catch anything. But I savored the company of others who stopped to reminisce about their favorite streams, try a few casts with my rod, or comment that midcity, midstream casting looked like a great way to unwind after a day's work.

The last year I haunted Minnehaha Creek, I was occasionally tempted to tie on a fly, *just in case*. Like the boy in Dr. Seuss's *McElligott's Pool*, how did I *know* what I might find swimming in those clear rushing waters below the roadway? But I didn't really want to connect with any of the creek's few fish via a hook. Life in that creek of wildly fluctuating temperature and depth was hard enough for them; why add to their stresses? I had come to value the creek for itself and for the complex community of creatures who populated its banks and streambed.

Occasionally, as if stringing me along, the creek presented me with fishy surprises. I found the little pike floating head down in the shallow water of the creek one late July evening, his V-shaped lower jaw pointed toward the sand, his tubular body stiff with muscle—or was it with death? I filled a plastic bucket from the car with the water he had died in and took him home.

Over the sink, I took the pike out and turned him over and over. Sheathed in a transparent film like human snot, he slid through my fingers speedily, as if even dead he still wanted to get away. His scales were so embedded that he

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seemed scaleless, suited instead in a shiny green lamé cape that paled where it descended his sides to an opal white belly. Pale yellow-green jottings fretted his back as if he had been stippled with a Magic Marker. His eyes were still clear, a large luminous yellow, and flat. He would have seen well to the sides but perhaps not immediately ahead.

I admired his head: long-billed, like a fishing duck's. His gill covers were bright green, and behind them bristled rows of short, thick gill rakers, waxy-white prison bars of bone. I pried open his mouth and ran my fingers lightly over the dog teeth in his lower jaw, the volmer teeth crowding the roof of his mouth like stalactites, and those that heaved upward from his tongue, the teeth of a predator who clamps down on his prey and shakes or crunches it to death. (It is not uncommon for anglers to catch pike with the tails of their most recent prey still protruding from their bills.) On his belly I found the tiny anal opening—an innu like a child's umbilicus—and dorsal and anal fins riding his body far to the rear, faintly red, just like in pictures. I held him up to my nose and sniffed: *Fresh*. He smelled of fertile water and the creatures living in it.

Next I laid the pike on his back on my cutting board and sliced him open from throat to peduncle. This was not an easy task; his skin was a sturdy tegument, for all its slithy suppleness. In the end, I used my kitchen shears below the first inch of incision, cutting rather than slicing my way toward his tail. It was like cutting through particularly thick felt or leather. His skin and muscle lifted away from the bones beneath and parted like an open shirt beneath my blades. The bones were transparent and delicate, almost weightless: they had none of the gravity and opacity of mammal bones, having no need to support the animal's weight in his weightless medium of water. Instead, they merely wrapped and secured his organs, provided anchors for the muscles that attached his fins.

Within him the scent of creek was stronger and more distinct than without. I smelled water, dust, decay, mold, green bottom grasses, elodea, and algae, as if the incision I made had torn open the creek itself. They were pleasing, pungent smells, ones I knew I could not easily erase. They bloomed into my kitchen, which became odorous and charged with the smell of water and dying. The dogs gathered at my ankles and cocked their heads, beating their tails softly against the linoleum, questioning, hoping.

The pike's liver was long and pale. Over it hung his swim bladder, a deflated balloon. Behind and below the liver I found his heart and kidney, dark glowing

stones, and farther down, his testicles, creamy and elongated. I took these out and returned them to the bucket of water.

His stomach and intestine were what I was after. Like his predator cousin, the human, the pike has a sizable stomach capable of expanding or contracting dramatically with the fortunes of feeding, and a simple intestine—a straight-shot tube for absorbing flesh. I removed the stomach and intestine and opened them. They were pale, glassy organs, almost vitreous in appearance, shining and clean. Both were empty, untenanted. They hardly seemed to be doing the job of absorptive organs: they had no apparent work.

Had the small pike starved, then, or had he simply died after absorbing his final meal? He was about sixteen inches long from the tip of his snout to mid-peduncle, and in girth no more than five inches. He would have found few creatures other than bottom-dwelling nymphs of mayfly, stonefly, damselfly and caddis fly in the creek's low waters, and few of them at this time of year. I had found him twenty-one miles downstream from the dam where he would have entered the creek. Only the first four miles below the dam are rich with crustaceans in the muddy bottoms; only those first four miles and the mill pond farther below are deep enough to provide a coolwater fish with the temperature range his kind prefers.

He had appeared, already dead or dying, in less than three inches of warm downstream water, the dam at Gray's Bay having been mysteriously closed for over a week, sending others, I am sure, to a similar fate.

But had he starved to death? Pike feed at the top of the food chain they are links of. They are versatile predators who eat insects, crustaceans, other fish, birds, and small mammals, including, if popular lore is to be credited, pet toy poodles. Larry Finnell's 1982 to 1986 study of fish in Elevenmile Reservoir, Colorado, found that the stomach contents of pike consisted of about 7 percent kokanee salmon; 9 percent other fish (suckers, bullhead, dace, etc.); 18 percent crayfish; 25 percent rainbow trout; 36 percent miscellaneous invertebrates (scuds, damselfly and mayfly nymphs). Thirty-seven percent had empty stomachs. No one knows what to make of the high incidence of pike with empty stomachs. They are opportunistic feeders, more sluggish in warm weather than in cool, so perhaps they simply weren't feeding heavily when caught. In a reservoir whose level was less manipulated by humans than Minnehaha Creek, the pike would either have been eaten or have found adequate prey of his own, not this death in what amounted to a watery desert after the floodgates had closed.

Warm, shallow water: little of the dissolved oxygen a fast-moving, ambushing predator relies on. Even to my 37° C human toes, the water had felt ripe with rot, and sun-warm. Perhaps, then, he had suffocated? Suffocated, or starved?

The underside of his jaw was waxy white, the skin over his submaxilla pierced by ten sensory pores, five to a side. The gill covers flared. His throat skin was crépey and fine as pongée silk. I sunk my index and middle fingers beneath the archway of his lower jaw, using what is known as the Leech Lake lip lock, a method for handling living pike without being bitten by them. I hefted him for weight: perhaps two pounds. Then I cut off his head and opened his gills, whose rakers promptly sliced open the palm of my hand.

You cannot look at a fish's bones and think of them as you do a dog's or human's. In fact, as I discovered when I foolishly set the pike's head in simmering water to remove the fat and skin, the skull I so coveted melted away as promptly as its casings. I have boiled frogs' and small mammals' bones for hours in brine and they only grew harder, more marmoreal; this pike instead dissolved back into the medium that had grown him.

I took him back to the stream the next morning to release his jellified bones and skin into the water so he could feed the other creatures who lived there. I stood and watched as his graying remains floated down the current, then almost imperceptibly sank beneath it, like rotten ice. In a day or so, I reflected, whatever of him hadn't been eaten might reach the Mississippi below Minnehaha Falls. The current might take that pike all the way downstream to gar country and beyond that to the Gulf of Mexico. These were fine thoughts with which to pick up my rod and cast in the direction of the Mississippi, as if I could lash the water into compliance: *Take him, take him*, the line seemed to urge.

The summer I found the small pike, after two years of faithful attendance on the mostly fishless waters of Minnehaha Creek, I woke one day and decided I wanted to fish not so much *for* fish as *in the presence of* them. I wanted to stand in waters that the DNR had designated as trout waters. This had less to do with my growing appetite for blood or hookups than with my curiosity about how fishy waters differed from what I knew about Minnehaha Creek. My curiosity had grown, as had my confidence: I thought I knew now what to look for when exploring new waters for fish. So I began driving to the nearest certified trout streams: Eagle Creek, Hay Creek, the Kinnickinnic and Rush rivers, the

Brule. And I found that what I had learned on Minnehaha Creek served me well: sometimes I found fish where I expected to, and occasionally I even caught them.

But those streams, beautiful and "productive" (as fisheries biologists call them) though they were, lacked the heart-tugging familiarity of Minnehaha Creek. I missed knowing what occurred on those distant streams during the many days when I couldn't visit them; I missed the dailiness of time spent on a nearby stream. What those fine waters offered in terms of fish per mile couldn't compensate me for what they couldn't give: the knowledge earned through daily intimacy. Was the creek up or down today? How close to hatching were the caddis flies in the riffle downstream of the big cottonwood? Had the chubs and shiners built their nests yet?

Today I am lucky enough to live close to not only two neighborhood streams but to ones with resident trout and lake-run fish. Like Minnehaha Creek, stretches of them are cool, leafy, seemingly untouched. In spring I can lie on warm streamside boulders and stare down into their transparent miniature pools at shiners and nervous little brook trout, just as I used to watch chubs on Minnehaha. These are streams I not only savor, but work to protect; I have come to see the need to fight for such precious urban waters. I doubt that I shall ever be more fond of them, though, than I was—still am—of Minnehaha Creek.

It is the place I first fell under the spell of moving waters and came to see them as animate, storied, and plastic enough to accommodate and challenge me, no matter how little or much I knew. It is the place where I first kept faith with a part of myself I hadn't known before: the creature capable of a great, unexpected patience, a faith that I could crack the code of waters, the skills of casting and fishing. It is the place that taught me that faithful attendance on a single place—in this case, a stretch of stream no more than five hundred yards long—could yield unimagined complexity, a microcosm so rich that I am still its beginner, its postulant.

Minnehaha Creek taught me a way of seeing that enriches my life and my writing. Just now, on a visit to Minneapolis, as I sat alongside the creek's edge once again, admiring it from my truck on a mid-June morning, a great blue heron drifted weightlessly across the opaque white sky. A leaf green inchworm bobbed from his silk line beneath a drooping elm branch, and I saw both of them. Because my eyes had been opened in and by this place, I knew how succulent a surface feeding fish would find the inchworm, and how such fish would gather eagerly beneath the branch, waiting for him to drop.

The rains had finally come after an exceptionally hot, dry spring, and now the creek flowed wide and shallow. Watergrasses that wouldn't have been there most years until mid-July streamed in the current, and the heavy thickets of grasses anchoring the north bank crowded out over the water, their pale heads already seeding up.

This was a place that humans nearly destroyed and then helped to rebuild. That handsome curve on the inside of the creek just below me covered with mosses and grasses wasn't even there three years ago when I moved north to Duluth. It was a human-made structure concocted of sandbags, mesh, and soil designed to narrow the creek where it was throwing up sand and cutting back into the bank.

I felt enormous satisfaction in these evidences that people could partially heal what we have damaged, that a place like Minnehaha Creek has restorative powers of its own. I learned these lessons on an urban stream, and I believe they made me a different and a better person. The prospect of revisiting the creek whenever I travel to Minneapolis remains exquisitely exciting. Each time, I strain forward over the steering wheel, peering eagerly through the windshield, waiting for my first sight of it.

"Jeez, *Mom*," my daughter protests. "It's not like you ever caught anything there."

But I did. Fishing in that nearly fishless place taught me what I most wanted to learn: the patience, attentiveness, and submission needed to love a place well.

## Notes

1. The pickerel whom Bull refers to would have been snake or hammerhandle pike; pickerel are not native to the Upper Mississippi drainage. Redhorse are a variety of sucker.

Bull's, Owen's, and Schussler's reminiscences were collected by Jane King Hallberg and published in her *Minnehaha Creek, Laughing Waters* (Minneapolis: Cityscape Publishing Co., 1995).

Gerald Vizenor was born in Minneapolis in 1934; his father was an Ojibwa from the Minnesota White Earth Reservation and his mother was Euro-American. Vizenor attended New York University, received his B.A. from the University of Minnesota, and did graduate work at Minnesota and Harvard. He has taught at a number of schools including the University of Minnesota, the University of Oklahoma, and Berkeley. Although he began writing as a poet, Vizenor's many books include numerous novels, essays, and memoirs such as *The Heirs of Columbus* (1992) and *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (1992). This short story from his collection called *Landfill Meditation* (1991) is like much of his work in its mix of autobiographical elements with strikingly imaginative material and in its use of the trickster figure. The "feral lasers" in this story function as a "tribal pen"—a way to rewrite demeaning colonial histories and to imagine an alternative wilderness, one that can exist above the interstates and cities.

## ☉ Feral Lasers

*Gerald Vizenor*

Almost Browne was born twice, the sublime measure of a crossblood trickster. His parents, a tribal father and a white mother, had been in the cities and ran out of gas on the way back to deliver their first son on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota.

Almost earned his nickname in the back seat of a seventeen-year-old hatchback. The leaves had turned, the wind was cold. Two crows bounced on the road, an auspicious chorus near the tribal border.

Father Browne pushed the car to a small town; there, closer to the reserva-