One March afternoon--after five months of fishless winter--I slipped into my neoprenes, drove to a certain brown-trout spawning stream, hiked down to a certain logjam, dropped a fly in the eddy behind this jam, lost sight of that fly when it drifted behind some willows, heard a slurping sound behind the willows, raised my rod at the sound, watched the rod slam downward, and felt the angry head-shakes of a solidly hooked fish. These head-shakes excited me for many reasons. First, it had been five months since I’d felt any such sensation, and I am, as I said, an addict. Second, I recognized them to be the head-shakes of a brown, my fry pan favorite, and after five months of no fresh fish, I was raring to devour one. Third, judging by the slow authority of these shakes, this Brown was sizable. I pictured salmon-sized filets sizzling in the Le Creuset. Fourth, it was an IMBY (as opposed to NIMBY) brown, in that it was hiding in a logjam that I had built myself the previous summer by
chain-sawing and dismantling a dry-docked jam and walking its logs a quarter-mile downstream to this deeper site.

A big brown in summertime, hooked in the very same place, would have bolted into the logs and snapped my line in a second. But this was a spawning-run brown shooting directly away from the logs into the snagless center of the run, where nothing good could possibly happen; it proceeded to veer from side to side, not as if looking for escape, but as if looking for something to attach and kill. I walked down to the tail of the hole, forded the little river, waded back up to the pool and waited for the brown to come up with a new idea. It had none. It had sexual desire, sexual anger, beauty, size, and that was it. After five or six minutes of veering, it tired. I led it down to the tail-out and eased it in beside me.

I looked at it. It looked at me. I saw by the oversized, totemic jaws that it was a male. I took him in my hands, turned him on his side, measured him against the marks on my fly-rod: 22 inches. Fileted, quartered and fried with slivered almonds, he’d sate my entire family. Released, he would create his own.

The little stones in the stream were bronze in the March sunlight. The brown, against those stones, was brilliant yellow, white and gold. His pelvic fins, translucent amber, were the size of silver dollars. The orange spots scattered down his side shone, as Richard Hugo once said, “like apples in a fog.” He was so old he’d developed a gaze. One does not capture an animal like this every day. I was able to pluck out the fly, right him in the water and keep my grip loose so as not to harm him. I was not able to make myself let go.

I dropped to my knees in the water beside him, my waders fending off the cold. The current swirled around half of me and around all of the brown, coming in small, uneven surges that gently rocked my body. It felt like riding a quiet horse. Though I held him captive, the brown stayed perfectly in rhythm with this horse.
Since he faced upstream, I turned that way, too. It was an eastward flowing stream, and it was evening. The sun hung right before us in the west. Snow-topped mountains veed down toward the water, the timbered left ridge green with pines, the barren right ridge yellow with last summer’s grass. As the stream flowed and rippled toward us, reflected sun turned its surface into a blinding sheet of silver. As the same surface came closer, reflected sky turned the silver into broken shards of blue. Closer yet the blue vanished, the water went clear as air, and the sunlit stones beneath us became a bed of shining gold. All that beauty, all those riches—and I was still not sure what I would do with my brown. Then I noticed, in the bed of gold right in front of us, a freshly dug, trout-length hole.

It was his redd. Or hers. His paramour’s. And as I stared at this redd, this impossibly cold gravel womb, I realized for the first time in my life just who the animal in my hands was making love to. Not to his mate. She’d dug the redd, had laid her eggs. But he would never touch her. All he would ever touch was this water and these stones. He was making love, as was his mate, to the stream itself: to the blinding silver, the broken blue, the shining gold.

I touched his side with my finger. A drop of milt spilled from his vent and vanished downstream. He was in the throes, even as I held him. I saw why I’d considered these fish stupid. I saw that it was I who was stupid. I saw that, at a certain time of year, the rhythm of the river becomes impossible for brown trout to resist; that the mere act of swimming, mere caress of cold water, becomes a long, slow copulation; that their entire upstream journey is an arduous act of sex. This dip in the gravel, nest of eggs, spraying of milt, was just the culmination of that weeks-long act. I looked upstream. The current flowing past us was made of melted mounds of snow from the mountains. The gravel beneath us was made of fragments of those mountains. The brown trout was making love to the mountains and the snow.

I realized that, in consuming this fish, I would be consuming part of everything that made him. I realized that everything that made him was
precisely what, or who, he was making love to. I realized that this same everything is who we, too, are made of; who we, too, are submerged in; who we, too, daily eat; and who we, too, seek to love and honor. The trout in my hands let me feel this. He was, through no intention of his own, a spiritual touchstone. And one takes such stones not to stomach, but to heart.

One doesn’t want to kill beauty, one doesn’t want to kill a dance partner. But one doesn’t want to let them go either. I held that brown way longer than I should have. Held him till my hands began to burn. To 30 miles of river, to the mountains on both sides, to frozen lakes, slowly thawing, he just kept making love. There is a fire in water, a hidden flame that gives not heat, but life. I held a trout, and my own hands, in that fire. The cold flames ran through us and past us. And I was fed, I was sated, I’d had all the fire and fish I needed when at last I opened my heart, opened my hands and let my beautiful brown trout go.