

Tacklebox: March 2020

Brock Guthrie

"Don't let the past remind us of what we are not now." —Stephen Stills

I saw on the internet people are making masks out of Crown Royal bags.
What a life. *Hell, I probably have one in my house.* Found one in my tacklebox

with three spools of fishing line inside. You spools! Go fuck yourselves!
What do you need with a velvety purple & gold bag? I figure no need.

We should sacrifice in times like these. I'm feeling sentimental about that
as I'm feeling nostalgic for these spools. I read somewhere how nostalgia

intensifies during pandemics, and could be blamed for cultural regressions
in their aftermath. I've intentionally forgotten where. You can't be sitting

around thinking about cultural regressions nowadays. But I do like the idea
of my putting these spools in this bag. I don't remember — maybe three —

three years since I've been fishing. A damn shame. What kind of life
keeps a man from fishing for three years? An infant, a toddler life. Okay.

But I bet I can put myself back there. It's only three years, but now
our daughter's almost five and we have a baby boy and the whole world

has gone insane. Who was that idiot who did this with the spools?
Did he even exist? Sure, he'd lost his mom the year before, but wasn't he

alive? Wasn't he surviving it? A father to a one-year-old, a pre-pandemic
American husband taking pride in his tackle like his grandfather taught him?

Maybe that's all as he sat somewhere looking over a precipice. I mean
the expanded trays of this old Plano. The lures in their compartments.

Spinners, spoons, cranks, jerks, jigs. Time past and time future in rows.
Not necessarily a running tab of his wins and losses. More like a record

of pleasant wallowing in previral ignorance of how quickly the world can
diminish. Moments in the unreal light of before. Or maybe they were always

tokens from the future to prepare him for the past-tense, third-person
weirdness of now. This silver shad Rapala, for instance. *Hunter Hardware* logo

stamped on its side. The one he wore, *I wore*, snagged on my 12-year-old
hand for an hour after catching a 5-lb bass and holding it high for the mailman

who'd stopped to marvel by the bend in Margaret Creek on Ervin Road.
Focus broken. Fish flopped. Jewelry for my thumb pad. In greener words

I told the mailman, "I'm fine, please go finish your route and let me blunder
through this alone," though a barb was caught on a nerve, an ugly wound

by the time I'd remove it with rusty pliers. That fish must be dead now.
Mailman, too. Over the tracks and the shorn cornfield was the big sycamore

that caught fire six years later, heartwood blazing in the night, what a sight
driving home stoned from Ashley's in my dad's gray Mazda. Lightning

struck that tree as it would later strike Ashley, hippie homecoming queen,
with a tumor in her brain at thirty-five. Benign, but too deep to treat.

Wouldn't stop growing. I'll never know how she felt when they finally
called hospice. Did she know what she was losing? Did she think she was

dreaming? Many nights I still dream of Mike Grippa, our brotherhood
of fishing and chemical meditation. We had modest success with earlier

incarnations of these rooster tails on Beechwood Lake in the time of Cobain.
Once, a footlong crappie with stripes like a hyena jumped into our jon boat

of its own volition after a thunderclap, and Grippa said dryly, "I made that
happen, so that one's mine," and since we'd eaten a bag of mushrooms

we believed it. Had that magical fish sung a song of how Grippa would die at thirty-two from the rarest of cancers, married with a two-year-old son

named Bass, it would've been unbelievable. I think about him every time I buy a steak. At Kroger's once he picked up a cut intended for a family:

"I'd eat this whole thing like a ham sandwich." He was sad the way he said it. His kid brother, Matt, thirty-four, speed. Hodges across the street, thirty-eight,

smack. If some clairvoyant redneck had pulled up to our red shed bus stop one frozen morning in 1987 on that country road they called Stagecoach,

his truck exhaust smelling warm to the four of us huddled inside, and shouted, "only one of you will live to forty and that one's mom

will be freshly dead!" then drove away cackling, honking his horn — well, a madman like that isn't so strange in Athens, Ohio. I don't know why

these lures are catching ghosts tonight but I'm familiar with this Mepp's #4 in brown trout. It's what I caught five pike with at an unlikely hour,

unseasonably hot day, noontime June in Lake of the Woods, Ontario, with Emily's dad — a good moment. This black Jitterbug I've never caught

anything with, but it's often what I'll try first early mornings because I like how it disturbs the smooth surface like a drunken, subversive dance.

These skirted tubes were the paycheck on Buffalo River that spring break in grad school with Brooke, and maybe that's when we closed the deal,

wasn't it, pulling that trip off, four days in a cabin, twenty miles in a canoe, neither finding anything in the other incompatible with a longer haul.

She showed me how to be a more available ghost and I showed her how to fish these tubes: cast across the current, let it drift and sink, reel in

slowly, tip your rod to bump along the bottom, and when your line begins to feel like a rubber band, like a two-way endeavor, that's how you know,

a singular feeling. She must've finessed a dozen smallmouth out of those pools and runs — many pictures on midriver sandbars to prove it. We were

squintingly young. April in the Ozarks. Morels in the woods. 600 miles south past New Orleans into the dissipating marshland around Lafitte

you can summon a Cajun with comorbidities and a bass boat. He'll take you four miles across Bayou Rigolettes, left or right up some narrow verdant cut,

go deeper, labyrinthine, six more cuts and the Cajun kills the motor and you stare in disbelief for a good five seconds. Hand him your flask.

This must be the place. You might could catch two-three-dozen redfish with a beetle spinner like this one, black not yellow, though it's harder

since the swamp-folk fetish hit reality TV, and so reality — tourists want to see gators, airboats everywhere, oil sheen on the brackish water.

With this rattletrap I once caught a puppy drum in Apalachicola Bay hardly bigger than this lure, and in its gag reflex to cough up the barbs,

out came a hookless and degraded rubber stickbait, nearly as long as the fish itself, onto the floor of my kayak. I mean she propelled it

from her mouth like a popgun toy. How long was that in her belly? You want to tell someone when that happens but it's a hard thing to tell.

This Wally Diver in gold perch I'd bought to troll behind the pontoon on Deep Creek Lake, Maryland, where my high school friends met

in a cabin for a long August weekend to toast our collective 40th year. But Grippa was gone and so it wasn't the same and we drank too much

and tired at different rates, so even tying lures became an avoidable chore like making breakfast or waking early enough to give ourselves a fighting

chance against the fish. It might've been a Sunday, then, that a saturated quadragenarian got lost inside a reverie about the long-gone fisherman

father of his newly gone mom that must've made the smaller boy inside him weep. So he spooled it all into a discarded Crown Royal bag,

closed this box, hugged his friends, and they went home to their families sicker than devils. Wiser? Doubtful. Yet here are the spools. This purple

gold-trimmed bag. And many other vivid hues to animate his mind.
I mean mine. I must remember it was me. I should end there. It's late.

My rate of tiring is fast. My glass is empty. How much longer
do I have? I'd better get on with the maskmaking. For a pandemic

is upon us and I am not dreaming and I'd like to catch
forty more years of memories with these lifelike lures.

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