Suzanne Billhymer
Ace Boggess
Orman Day
Len Fohn
Phil Harvey
Daniel John
Jan Johnson
Jeremy Lespi
Lyn Lifshin
B.Z. Niditch
Joel Nisleit
Simon Perchik
Susan Richardson
Stephen R. Roberts
Mark Saba
Patricia R. Schwartz
Rosalind Palermo Stevenson
Jennifer G. Stewart
Irei Taguchi
Janet Thornburg
Ashley VanDoorn
Catherine Senne Wallace
Elizabeth Keller Whitehurst
Amy Day Wilkinson
Karen Wunsch
Wang Xiao Ying
Lisa Zimmerman

Phantasmagoria

0 74470 56216 0 01>

Volume 2 Number 1 $9

Phil Harvey

Roberta's River

It was dawn. Roberta stood on the riverbank and stared at a quiet pool upstream. Gentle rapids tumbled into the head of the pool and eddies swirled quietly near the bank. There was mist on the water but no trout were rising.

She stooped, reached inside her tent, and took out her waders. She walked to a fallen log and sat. She removed her boots, wrapped her trousers around her ankles and pulled her socks over the trouser bottoms to hold them snug. Carefully she slid first one leg, then the other, into the waders, pulled them up over her thighs, then put her wading shoes on over the stocking-like feet of the waders. The wading shoes were bulky, like big basketball shoes, with felt soles so they would not slip on the mossy rocks of the river bottom.

Her fly rod was set up. A sandy-colored elk-hair caddis fly was attached to the leader, the hook stuck in the cork handle of her rod. She clipped off the dry fly with clippers, then cut three feet from the end of the leader. Now she pulled a palm-sized box of flies, divided into six compartments, from another vest pocket, opened the box, selected a dark nymph imitation, not fluffy, this one designed to sink and imitate the early forms of insect life along the river bottom.

She began walking upstream along the riverbank, her eyes moving over the surface of the water. Her rod caught on a balsam branch. With a sudden movement, she stripped the branch from the tree and freed her rod.

She would fish nymphs today, little bits of feathers and hair tied on a number 14 or maybe a number 12 hook.

Less than half an inch long, the nymph patterns immitate insects as their lives begin on rocks along stream bottoms. The start of life, she thought. I will fish with infant insects.

She waded, knee deep, into the river. Carefully she began casting the nymph, dividing the water—near upstream, far upstream, across—searching the water as one might grope through a bureau drawer looking for a penny.

As the nymph drifted downstream she squeezed the heavy flyline gently in her fingertips, feeling for the slightest change. Occasionally she cocked her head, as though listening to the line, as the nymph bounced and drifted along the bottom.

* * *

She had been seven years old the first time her father took her fishing. She had fished with a worm and caught a small catfish. Her father was fly casting for bass nearby, using a balsa bass bug that popped along the surface of the water, putting up a little spray as the line was jerked and played. He had caught nothing that day, but Roberta watched for a long time, sitting by the edge of the river with her pole and hook and worm, watched as her dad's fly line moved forward and back over his head in long smooth loops, the little balsa bug bouncing onto the water at the end of each forward cast.

When they got back to the car, he gave her a can of Coke. He drank from a shiny metal bottle that he kept in the glove compartment.

* * *

After fishing a half-mile of river Roberta stood up straight, flexed her casting arm, and looked up. Steep green hillsides layered into a mountain, cut by a stream of shiny water. The water ran like a ragged zipper on the mountain, carrying away the last of winter's snow, a gentle cutting tool, making the mountain open up a little, exposing its

composition, showing its rock and dirt before reaching a stand of trees which had clustered around the cut, garnishing and hiding it. This rivulet joined others, entered the pines and became the river she stood in.

She fished on. She concentrated on the reflexive rituals of each cast, focused on her line, became conscious of the sensations in her casting hand, heard the pleasant hissing, gurgling sound of water tumbling over rocks, and smelled clean cool air.

There! Her line had stopped. She struck, raising her rod tip quickly, gently. A small one, she thought, feeling the tugging and gentle bumping on her line. But the fish got into the downstream current and stripped out three rod lengths of line before she turned it.

A few minutes later, the trout was in her net, the pink stripe on its side glistening in the morning sunlight. The trout was about ten inches long. She removed the hook, and put her thumb in the fish's mouth, bending its spine back on itself, mouth pointed to tail, until the backbone snapped. Then she waded to the shore, reached into a back pocket of her vest for a knife, slit open the fish's belly from vent to gills, removed the entrails and rinsed the cavity in the running river water. She took time to slice open the fish's stomach to see that it contained mostly insect nymphs, as she had thought, and the remains of one tiny minnow.

She rinsed her hands clean in the cold rushing water. She pulled some bottlebrush and other grasses from the bank, dipped the grass in the river, wrapped the fish in the wet grass and stuffed it in the game pocket in the middle of the back of her vest.

She found a boulder and sat a moment, held her hands in front of her, turning them over. The water roared and jumped in front of her. A few sections of the water were smooth, like moving mirrors, hard to look at with the brittle brightness of the sun.

* * *

By the time she was twelve, she had learned that when her father was fishing, at least when he was fishing with her, were the only times he did not drink. There was always a flask in the car at the end of the day, but he never brought it with him onto the river.

When they were home, sometimes even before she left for school in the morning, there was a glass in his hand, usually cola-colored liquid. The fact that it contained more than Coke had become clear to Roberta by the time she was in fifth grade.

Her father's name was Al Meeker and he was always called by both those names, even by his close friends, to distinguish him from his cousin Al Bronman who lived next door.

He did not become violent or agitated when he drank. He continued to converse, often with coherence and logic, even as the words began to slur.

He forgot things. He forgot promises he made to Roberta, and to her mother, whose name was Rose. But he was not mean to them. There was no nastiness in his slipping away. He just wasn't all there. In high school, it occurred to Roberta that Al Meeker with a few drinks turned into Al Meeker prime, or Al Meeker squared, or Al Meeker minus x, and she was never quite sure what the x was.

This never happened when they went fishing. Al Meeker would bring his piece of old screen wire attached to two sticks and push it down into the current of the Lakapechee River where they usually fished and Roberta would wade into the water in her children's hip boots and stir up the rocks just upstream from where her father held the screen. Then he'd pick up the screen and they'd both slosh over to the riverbank and carefully examine the insect life in the screen, nymphs of mayflies and damselflies, tiny underwater bits of food hardly bigger than BBs. They'd examine them one by one and Al Meeker would explain how imitations of these insect nymphs, some tied on hooks no bigger than Roberta's little fingernail could be made to fool a trout.

Sometimes, at lunchtime, they'd sit in a grassy place

along the river or, better yet, if the picnic table at the boat take-out place was unoccupied they'd sit there and eat their lunch while they scanned the river to see where trout might be rising, trout they could cast to when they finished eating.

The best times were when they brought a grill and a pan for frying trout. If they caught any of keeping size, they'd kill and gut the trout, and Roberta would look at her watch as noon approached. Then they'd put their rods aside, flies stuck into the cork handles, rods propped against a tree so they wouldn't be stepped on, and Roberta would gather up sticks and firewood. Her father made a ring of rocks and a little pit for the fire and, when it was going and had burned down a little, he'd shove the spikes of the grill into the ground until the grill was low above the flame, and Roberta would put a little butter in the pan and wait until it melted and began to bubble. Then Al Meeker would put the trout, clean and whole, into the pan, and the fish would sizzle, a wonderful smell coming up from the frying pan. Her dad or—when she was older—Roberta would cut up some onions and put them in the pan alongside the fish.

When the fish were cooked they'd put them on paper plates and squeeze lemon on them and then, carefully pulling off pieces of the white trout flesh they'd chew and look at one another and go Mmmmmm, back and forth, sharing both food and forkless finger eating which was never allowed at home.

On one occasion when she was in high school and they were eating trout at the picnic table, she looked down at her plate and said, "Dad, why can't you be like this at home? Not drinking, I mean." He did not reply.

Once, Al Meeker left home, saying nothing to Rose or Roberta. He had been gone forty-eight hours when he phoned, telling them not to worry, he was "visiting a friend." Roberta was old enough to sense the irony in her mother's relief that he was safe; it didn't occur to her that her husband might be seeing another woman.

He came back on a Friday. On Saturday morning at 5:30 he woke Roberta in the darkness and said, "Let's go

fishing." Rose got up to make them breakfast and was smiling and joking as she made their sandwiches. Al Meeker would be sober until evening. That made it a special day.

* * *

She reached for her rod and waded back into the river. She smiled at her wobbling image in the rippling water and began to fish again.

Some time later she looked up. Just across the river, a bird darted from tree to tree, a bright slash of red showing on its tail.

The sun was directly overhead. Heat waves shimmered from the river's quiet pools and Roberta's wrist was reddening where the casting angle held it closest to the sun. She took one more trout, smaller than the first. It had put up a strong fight in the twisting current.

She stopped in a quiet spot, the water whispering along the bank through reeds. On a hillside, far away, cows grazed precariously. They seemed miniature and immobile, as if painted. A dark shadow passed over the meadow nearby, moving slowly north. A thunder cloud. It will rain tonight, she thought.

* * *

Al Meeker had never liked Alfredo. It was not, Roberta thought, because Alfredo was Hispanic. It was not because he came from back East, or because he was "a city boy," though Al Meeker made a lot of that. "You don't like him because I do like him, isn't that right?" she teased her dad. He did not smile.

"I don't like him because I don't like him. I don't think he's generous or kind or very wholesome."

"He is generous and kind, Dad," Roberta said. "He is very kind. I think you'll see that one day."

"I don't think so," Al Meeker said.

The third time Roberta brought Alfredo home from college, they slept together in Roberta's bedroom, with Rose's blessing. At 2:45 a.m. there was a loud knock on Roberta's bedroom door. Alfredo jiggled her arm.

The knock sounded again. Through the door Al Meeker said, "I want him out of this house."

"Dad!" Roberta, in a quick motion, wrapped the bed sheet around herself, opened the bedroom door and confronted her father. "What are you talking about?"

"I want him out of this house. That's pretty clear, a simple declarative statement," Al Meeker said.

"You're crazy, Dad. You've been drinking. Go back to bed."

"OUT OF THIS— "

"Stop it!" she yelled. She stood just inches from him, pushing him back away from the bedroom.

"OUT— "

When they were well down the hallway, near the head of the stairs, Roberta said, "You have no right! You're drunk!" She saw that he could hardly stand. Quietly he said, "Out. Of. This. House."

She breathed deeply. "I tell you what, Dad. I tell you what. I'll sleep downstairs in the basement. I'll stay down there for the rest of the night. Okay? Will that make you happy?"

Al Meeker did not reply. He stood in the hallway, reeling from his daughter's onslaught and from the alcohol. Roberta guided him away from the stairs. Then she went back to her bedroom, the bedroom where she had slept as a child, whispered to Alfredo, and then marched down the stairs, the heels of her bare feet hitting each step with a bang, thump, bang. She knocked over the umbrella stand at the bottom of the stairs, slammed it back into place, and then went down to the basement study to sleep the rest of the night on the cot Al Meeker kept there for his frequent naps.

* * *

She false cast three times over her head, checking behind for trees and bushes. She was fishing a larger, heavier stonefly nymph now and casting was more difficult.

She netted two small fish and returned them to the river. Then, as she worked the nymph into deep water along an undercut bank where the river made an undulating turn, she felt a heavy strike. She struck, rod held high. The line quivered, the fish moved a few inches, then held. This was the trout she needed, heavy, her trout.

* * *

"It worries me," Alfredo said. "My great uncle was an alcoholic. A boozer, in Puerto Rico. He beat his wife so bad she ended up in the hospital."

"But Dad doesn't do that."

"No. He doesn't." Alfredo looked out the window. "But what if it's inherited?"

"It's not. Nobody knows exactly how it comes about."

"It bothers me," Alfredo said. Roberta would not argue the point. They were quiet for a time and did not speak about Al Meeker's alcoholism again.

Later, Roberta wondered if Alfredo had seen something more than drunkenness in Al Meeker's outburst, something worse. If so, he was wrong.

* * *

The fish moved slowly out into the gently roiling water, bulldogging into the river's heavy current. The fly line cut a wake and made a sizzling sound against the movement of the water as the fish moved against it, upstream. The trout would tire fast this way, and she let him have line. Now the big fish turned, heading downstream. She reeled hard as the fish rushed toward her. Her line slackened for a moment. She gasped, stood on her toes, raising the rod, arms extended high over her head. The lined tightened again

as the fish passed her position and, getting into the surging current, stripped out line, the reel zinging as the line played out. A sound escaped Roberta's mouth, part triumph, part battle cry. A tiny corner of her consciousness observed this movement, her rod held high, deeply arced, the fish tearing downstream.

* * *

The night Al Meeker died, Roberta and her mother were sitting in the living room. They'd had a dinner celebration for Roberta's thirtieth birthday, and the guests had gone. Al Meeker stood at the top of the stairs that led down to his study in the basement and announced, "I shall now resume the pursuit of happiness." He went down the stairs and they heard the familiar sounds of ice cubes in a glass and muffled words from the television set. Twenty minutes later they heard the back basement door slam, and then the car starting in the driveway. Al Meeker's Corvair, the car he had bought, as he told Roberta and Rose, "Because I hate Ralph Nader."

Roberta and her mother looked at each other. Al Meeker had drunk too much to drive. But he'd learned to compensate.

* * *

The state trooper at the hospital told them that a pickup truck, passing another car, had slammed into the side of Al Meeker's Corvair, crushing him and spinning the vehicle around twice. "I think he must have died instantly," the trooper said. "He probably didn't feel a thing."

They were all quiet. "The other driver said the Corvair just rolled right through the stop sign at the end of Aspen Avenue."

"He must have stopped at that sign a thousand times," Rose said.

"Well," the officer said, "we'll cut some branches

away tomorrow, make it easier to see."

The emergency room doctor told Rose that Al Meeker's blood-alcohol level had been 0.26 when he was brought in. "That hardly matters, does it?" Rose said. "That hardly matters now."

* * *

She had to turn the fish or it would be gone. She leaned against the pressure and, slowly, slowly her line moved away from the white water toward quieter water near the bank. The fish went deep and held. She could feel the tremors moving up the line as the leader snapped back and forth over the fish's snout.

The big trout moved upstream once more against the current, closer to where she stood, knee-deep in the water. She could see it now, a big fish, it would go twenty inches, she was sure, its bright pink rainbow stripe clearly visible in flashes as the fish twisted. She closed on it, shuffling gently, cautiously along the river bottom, rod high. She stopped, reached behind her back for her net, missed, reached again. Her hand trembled uncontrollably. Finally grasping the net handle, she jerked it loose from the release ring, eased the net into the water behind the fish. Her taut line held the fish's head just above the surface of the water. On the first try, the fish felt the edge of the net and bolted, splashing wildly, thrashing on the surface. Stupid, stupid, stupid! She thought, I deserve to lose him. Then, she said quietly, Come to mama. Easy. Easy. She moved the net carefully beneath the fish, into the current, Now! She raised her arm, the fish was hers, played out, resting in the net, floating on the water, sides heaving.

She measured quickly with her fingers. From thumb to the tip of her little finger, hand stretched apart, was eight inches. Once, twice, almost three times her finger span measured down the fish's length. Twenty-one inches, perhaps a bit more, from head to tail.

Hooking the net cord over her left wrist, she dropped the net, worked the hook out backwards from the trout's scaly lower jaw, and held the fish with her left hand under its belly, her right grasping it just before the tail. She could feel its weight, satisfying. She turned the fish's head directly into the current. The trout's gills worked in and out and its body began gently moving. As soon as the fish seemed insistent, she let it go.

"Be silvery," she said. "Be a rainbow. Be well."

The fish moved a few feet upstream, paused, then flicked and darted into the current and disappeared.

Roberta stared at the spot where the fish had been.

She took her time preparing the fire. Inside a circle of rocks she crushed some twigs and lit them, and watched the fire start to burn. When the small sticks burned down, she added some bigger ones and they burned down, and when the embers were bright orange and the flame was low she pushed the spikes of her grill into the ground so that the grill sat low above the flame. The frying pan was black from carbon and dented. She laid the pan on top of the grill, and added butter and watched the butter as it melted and began to sizzle and bubble in the pan. Now she added this morning's ten inch trout, complete but for its entrails, and the trout began to sizzle too.

She had no onions.

When the fish was cooked, she put her cooking glove, a leather and canvas glove used by carpenters, on her left hand, picked up the frying pan by its handle, tilted it over her aluminum camp plate and pushed the fish from the pan onto the plate with a large hunting knife. She squeezed a half lemon over the fish, flicking away the lemon seeds with her finger tip. When it was cool enough, she ate the fish, pulling off the skin and the flesh with her fingers.

The dusk was thickening. Roberta heard a faint splash. She looked up. She could see several circles spreading on the water of the pool just upstream. She reached

for her rod, then walked carefully into position, keeping her profile low. As the light faded, she began to cast, taking great care not to frighten the feeding trout.