

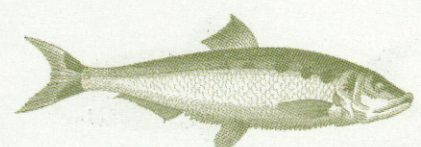
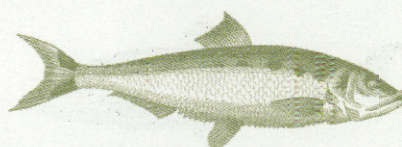
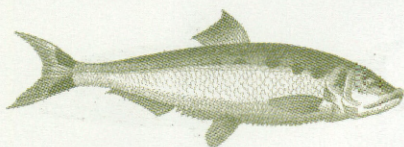


“Gone Fishing . . .”

by Nancy Hoyt Lecourt

At the end of *The Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura lies tucked into her trundle bed; outside the winds of late fall blow the brown leaves around her family’s little house. A fire warms the family, while Pa plays the fiddle. As she is falling asleep, Laura thinks to herself, “This is now.”

Early childhood seems a boundless time, unencumbered by ticking minutes and deadlines. A baby simply is, now—whether hungry or cranky or delighted—but always now. A toddler wishes to stay in the park, or build a block castle, now—until she tires of it. The mother tugging the little arm and saying, “Time to go! We’re late!” is an alien from another reality.



Sometimes caretakers of small children, if they are lucky, come to share a little in the eternal present of childhood. I remember long days with my first child, when I wasn't working and had few friends or obligations, having just moved to Switzerland. We would walk down to feed the swans on Lake Geneva, slowly, stopping along the way to visit the cows that gave our milk or drop by the hospital kitchen to say hello to the Italian cook, who often had a cookie for a tiny fist. There was nothing else to do, and watching a hedgehog cross a field was an activity worthy of our time and attention. In winter, the cows had to stay indoors, and I remember finding them in the warm wooden barn that smelled of hay and sugar beets. A little winter sun streamed through tiny windows and but for the solid earth beneath our feet we might have been in Noah's Ark.

Then comes a moment when, like Laura, a child enters time. He not only becomes aware of time passing, aware that "this is now," but also recognizes that he himself exists, in time. This is the birth of human identity, the beginning of self-consciousness. It marks the end of the spreading eternity of childhood, the moment when immortality puts on mortality, the fall itself reenacted. We cease to be like the cat purring here beside me and become as gods, knowing that we know. The clock begins to tick; we enter time; we become ourselves.

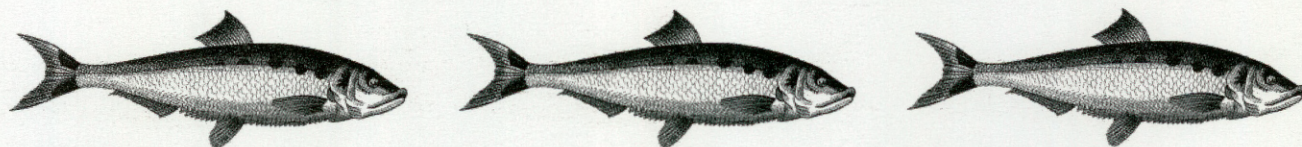
We step into the stream that cannot be entered twice, and once our feet are wet there is no climbing out again. We go to school, make friends and enemies, learn and grow and change. In what sense are we the same person we were ten, twenty, fifty, or eighty years ago? We have the same name, social security number, finger prints. But that girl in the plaid dress who swirled in the teacups of the Mad Hatter's ride at Disneyland thirty years ago—that was me? That baby whose soft pink chin I tickled—can it be the same person as the tall, dark, opinionated young man who visits me between college semesters?

Time sweeps us along, changing us almost beyond recognition, yet it also gives us meaning and structure. We plan ahead and look back, standing

firmly within the known boundaries of hours and years. We complain about our busy-ness, but I wonder if we could really bear the boundless emptiness of eternity, that vast and sublime expanse that surrounds our comfortable, predictable world.

When I was quite young I had a series of nightmares from which I inevitably woke screaming. They were all variations on the same theme. I dreamed I was in a small room with no doors or windows. Round and round I would walk, trying to find my way out. But it was endless, endless, always the same, round and round. Or I was on the platform of an underground train. It rushed by, lighted windows roaring past, but it never stopped, never slowed, a train with no ending forever flying through the darkness. I tried to explain to my mother what was so frightening about a little room, an endless train, but I could not. I was haunted by the idea of the eternal.

Finally I grew a little older and realized what I was afraid of. As a young Adventist I had been taught





that the highest reward was to live forever. I knew that if I was good, I would live in heaven for eternity. I was certainly very good; the contrary was too awful to contemplate. (Indeed, my fear of living forever was no doubt a substitute for a fear of eternal damnation. My brother dreamed about *that*.) But what of the reward? No one asked me if I *wanted* to live forever. What if I got tired? Shouldn't everything have an ending?

Having brought the fear out into the conscious light of day, I could deal with it rationally. I finally decided that I couldn't imagine actually wanting to die, couldn't really think that a day would come when I could say, "Okay; I'm done now. Tomorrow I'd like to die please," and that surely God wouldn't offer me

something that wasn't genuinely good, and the dreams stopped.

But I still remember them over forty years later, the terrible fear of timelessness. I don't want to die, but oh! to live forever? How will I recognize myself, a million years from now?

This is one of the paradoxes we live with: eternity should be our home, yet we fear it. We are more comfortable in the everyday world of longing or regretting, looking forward to tomorrow or back to yesterday. Rarely do we find the grace to live in the present moment, the tiny unfurling edge where the past becomes the future, the now, the only time that truly exists.

To live then, both in time and in eternity, to be our human, mortal selves, always changing, and yet to keep one foot in eternity, knowing that the present moment and the eternal are one and the same—this is our balancing act. Henry Thoreau expressed it as beautifully as anyone I know:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.¹

References

1. *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Atkinson Brooks (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 88.

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