

DARK CHANCES *in* BRIGHT WATER

The Photography of Charles Lindsay

BY ED GRAY

The standard notion is that wild trout live in a choreographed world of colorful minutiae, discriminating with predictable reactions between the delicate ingestion of something green and ephemeral and the indifferent rejection of its ill-delivered counterfeit, something dun-colored and Orvis, each of these transactions but a delightful flutter in an otherwise grand and majestic vista of coruscated rivers flowing crystalline and pure from distant, snow-peaked ridgelines under an unfathomable canopy of endless blue sky.

Well, no.

For those doomed to inhabit it, a coldwater river is a very dark place indeed, a world where safety lies nowhere, not even under rocks, where to stop striving for a minute is to be swept away forever. As for the inhabitants themselves, not one of them has ever known mirth, will ever sense joy. Instead they will live quickly, in the truest sense of that word; events in their lives will happen only in unconsidered instants, hydraulic and predatory. For most of them, even the smaller trout, the last thing they will sense is the sudden pressure of an open mouth.

The trout themselves are nothing short of ferocious, each a fully-committed carnivore as literally cold-blooded as it is efficient. To look honestly into the vacuum of a living trout's eye is to stare into the black hole of entropy, the thermodynamic endgame of the universe itself. Maybe that's why so few of us are willing to do it. Instead we go to trout streams the way we read

detective novels or watch murder mysteries on PBS: wading in with a sunny, predisposed viewpoint, expecting a pattern, and shielding ourselves from what's really going on in the murky undercurrents.

Charlie Lindsay doesn't do that. Look at these pictures and remember them the next time you put on your waders beside the Madison, rig up at the Big Hole or even just gaze down from the Fishing Bridge, shoulder to shoulder with the other tourists. Your technicolor view, expansive and serene, anticipatory and relaxed, nuanced with meaning and seen in the long perspective of measured time, will be nothing like the one registered by those shifting shapes in the moving water. Their view is altogether different. For them every image is always the same but filled with surprise, dark with risk and bright with chance, mostly unseen and never far away. Above all, never far away.

Standing beside a trout stream—no, standing in a trout stream—how can we reconcile the two? Are we on the same planet with a cutthroat trout, or just imagining it? We'll never know; all we can do is wonder: Can a trout know beauty? It's hard to imagine any way that they can. Their view is too close, their instincts too simple, their decisions too quick. Their world is go or stop, chase or hide, recognize or ignore, live or die. Nothing is far away, nothing is colored; if a thing is important, it will be recognized, if not it won't even be seen. Like these pictures, it's what makes them beautiful. BSJ

Five years of fishing the Rockies distilled into black and white.