

# CHARLES LINDSAY

## Photographic Angling



Cutthroat, Montana, 1996

*By Michael L. Sand*

A few months into her pregnancy my wife and I decided we didn't want to learn the gender of our baby until he or she sprang out into the world to let us know in person. There are so few real surprises left in life, a friend had said, and that made a certain amount of sense. So few surprises, so little mystery, in an age that has seen the discovery of the tau neutrino, perhaps the elusive ur-particle of all matter, and the sequencing of the human genome.

Everything about modern life discourages mystery and everything about the way we live now is constructed to alleviate the burden of solitude, to foster the appealing

fantasy that we are all connected in an electronically hyperlinked global village. Don't get me wrong, I'm no technophobe. Far from it. I suspect I spend more time on the Internet than I do watching television and reading the newspaper combined. But I am also certain that we are all, ultimately, alone, and that we must make our final peace with the world as we came into it—alone.

In his recent photographs for *Upstream*, a book done in collaboration with writer Thomas McGuane on the meditative pleasures of fly-fishing, photographer Charles Lindsay celebrates solitude, or rather, man's solitude within nature and the cosmos. The square format of the 2 1/4-



Brown Trout, California, 1996

inch negative produced by the twin-lens Rolleiflex (Lindsay's camera of choice for the project) reaffirms the tone and content of these images. The rectangular frame, we are taught in Art History 101, is alive with energy, thrusting diagonals, movement, tension inherent in the very form of the window through which we are presented a slice of the world. The square, on the other hand, is an expression of stasis, of equilibrium. Short of a circle, a square is about as resolved a form as one could ask for.

Within the square of Lindsay's imagery a riot of activity unfolds—at water's edge, underwater—but there is an ineffable assurance in the constancy and symmetry of the

frame. A brown trout leaps skyward at the end of Lindsay's line, its curved arc a crescent moon falling from the sky, and yet we view this tumult with a sense that it is, will be, and has been thus for all time. This is no typical sports action shot. Rather, it suggests an archetypal representation of the tension between predator and prey, between water and air, between action and inertia.

*Mimicking religion, angling sets out the steady movements of prayer meant to end in the vision, a captured fish. I wonder if the thing captured is the mercurial bond with nature, the need for which lies in greater or lesser measure in all of us.*

—Thomas McGuane



Blue Sky, High Sierra, California, 1996

Some seek society in sport. The angler, at least the angler of Lindsay's inclination, seeks its opposite. Taking off from his busy life in New York City for weeks or months of fly-fishing in Montana, Colorado, and Idaho every summer and fall for the past six years on this project, Lindsay has sought lone immersion in the out of doors, in woods and rivers and open air. Asked what motivates these excursions, Lindsay says, "A connection with nature is what I suppose I'm after. I've always loved the woods . . . found them comforting and mysterious."

How does that mystery express itself in Lindsay's photographs? Through the direct expression of awe at one's

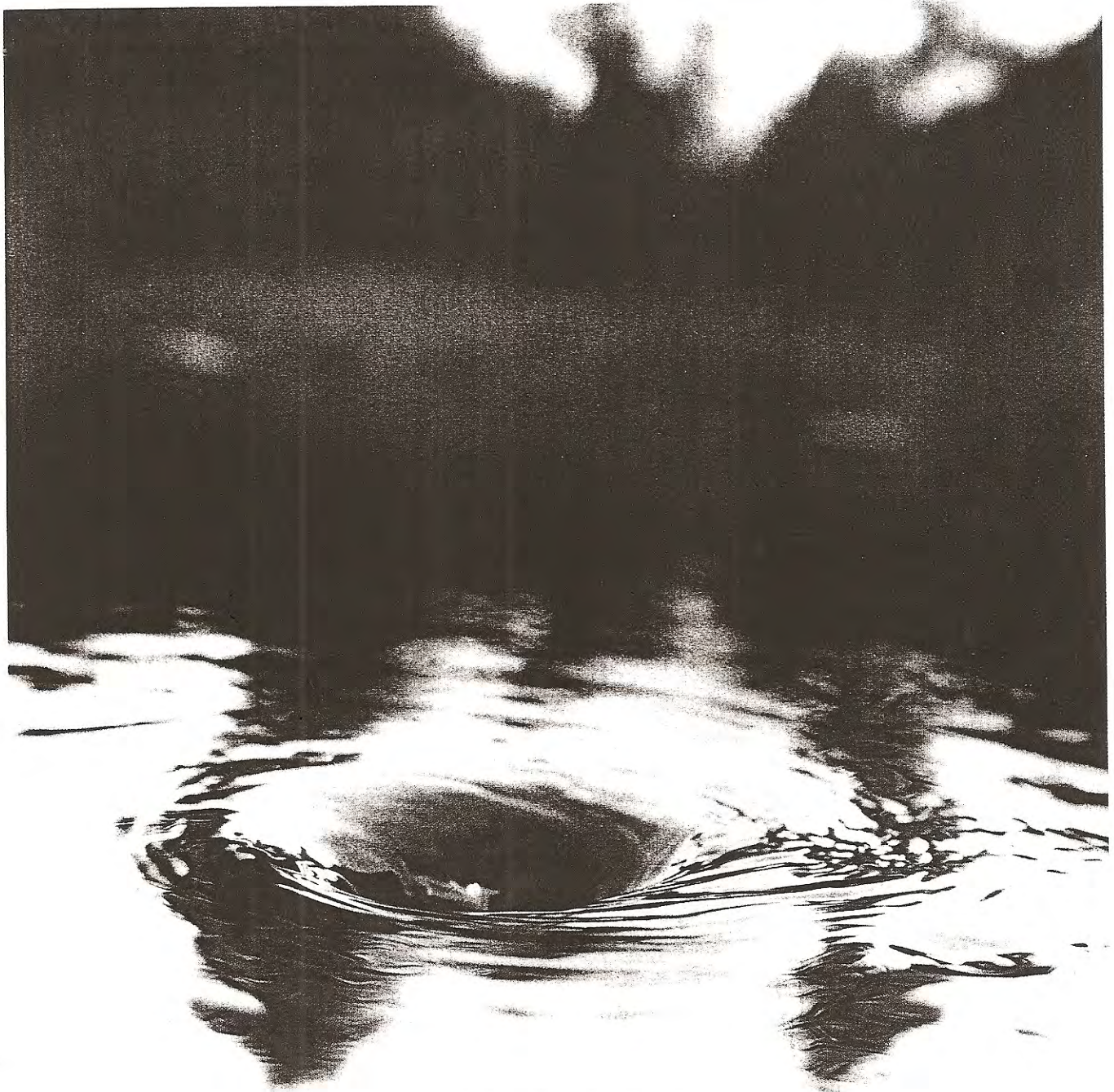
surroundings, much the way it does in some of the best of outdoor writing—Thoreau's *Walden*, or Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, for example. *Upstream* can be read as one long, lyric paean to the American West and to the art of fly-fishing, with all that it demands and offers to the human psyche.

To be sure, we see the simple tools of the sport: a reel in close-up; a fly rod arcing off into the upper reaches of the frame; a hand, Lindsay's hand, covered with salmon flies during the frenzied time that follows a hatch; fish heads and tails poking up out of the water, in various stages of capture and flight. More atmospheric imagery conveys

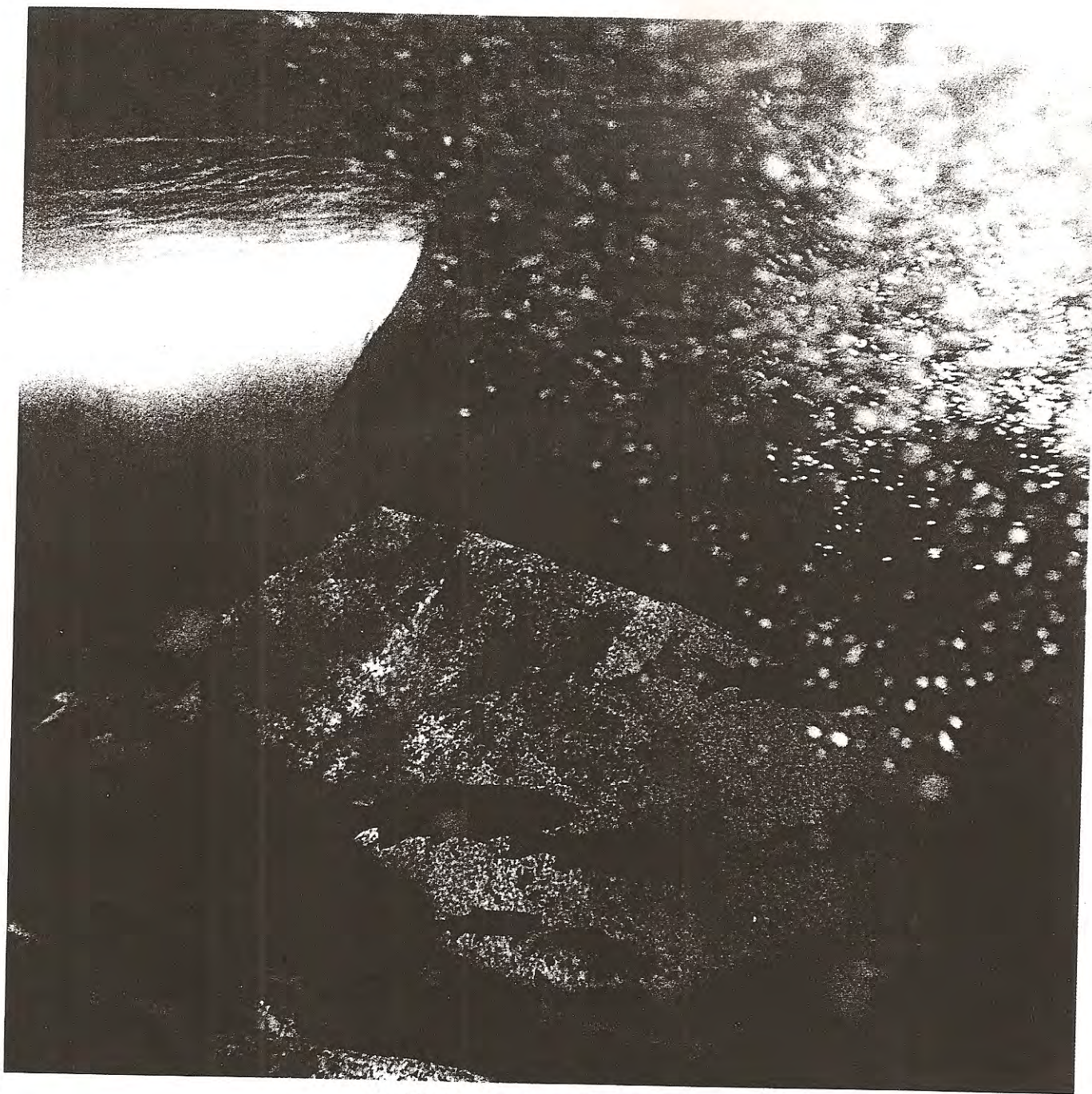
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"I have never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will." —Henry David Thoreau

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Whirlpool, Montana, 1997



Boulder River Rainbows, Montana, 1998

the crackle and hum of the natural world: the gnawed base of a tree felled by beaver, churning pre-storm cloud formations, and swirls of water over rock. And then suddenly the camera plunges into the streambed and takes us along with it.

Photographing underwater, says Lindsay "Changed my perspective in a way I hadn't expected . . . Entering that environment was so fantastic . . . I became a better fisherman almost immediately. You see how the trout feed. And they're not afraid of you once you're in. But it wasn't just the trout. The clear water and darting shafts of light entranced me. The first season I had the underwater cam-

era I fished very little and photographed a lot."

Lindsay's underwater images lean more heavily toward abstraction than the other photographs in *Upstream*. Schools of fish pass by in tidy formation here and there, but for the most part what we see and feel is immersion, as though we'd suddenly grown gills. Water, viewed from within, is animated, alive, like fire.

Lindsay began to discern sensual forms in the ferment and flow of the ice-cold rivers he entered, and as he got deeper into his work he cultivated an eye for nature's exquisite artistry.

Underwater photography is not why most people turn



Big Wood River, Idaho, 1998

to the Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera. A product of precision German machine making, the Rollei twin lens is the apex of a certain kind of camera-lover's camera—like a vintage Mercedes-Benz—and because the user looks down onto a ground glass rather than holding the camera to the eye, it has an old-fashioned “magic box” quality about it. Mine was my grandfather's, its sturdy brown-leather case still in good shape, the chrome fittings and exquisite Zeiss lenses still gleaming and clear.

“With the twin-lens, I didn't have to bring the camera up to my eye, which freed me to be in tune with what was going on around me. I could also adjust the neck strap so

the camera was just above the water's surface. I felt very natural with the camera. One lens, one format, black-and-white film, very direct . . . It was at once liberating and more intense.”

These machines, it turns out, can be used underwater, by setting them into a special housing once made by Rollei for just this purpose. A Rollei underwater housing looks something like the early diving suits that humans used in deep water—hulking metal affairs that recall robots from 1950s sci-fi movies.

If the cameras are somewhat hard to come by these days, the underwater housings are next to nonexistent in

the marketplace. Jose Gaytan at Ken Hansen Photo in New York City had been on the lookout for one, for Lindsay, for about four years, when a retired *National Geographic* photographer wandered into the shop one day to unload some equipment. The sought-after Rollei housing was put on the counter and Jose immediately put it aside.

The metaphor that best describes the acts of photographing and fishing, of course, is hunting. Lindsay describes photographing and fishing simultaneously, this double-hunt, as "a very zen-like process, the fishing and the photography working together. And when you're tuned in to nature, photographing with heightened concentration, you actually see with a shallower depth of field, like looking down the barrel of a gun, or at the fish on the end of your line."

He cites Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting* as one source of his thinking on the subject. For Ortega, hunting is alternately a "vacation from the human condition" and a "mystical union." Of the human instinct that drives our desire to hunt, he writes, "There is, then, in the hunt as a sport a supremely free renunciation by man of the supremacy of his humanity . . . For pleasure he returns to Nature and reenters it."

In his fishing, as in his photography, Lindsay's approach is predominantly catch and release. Unlike Ortega (who defines "true" hunting as necessarily involving death), he's not focused on the kill so much as he is on the challenge of seducing the fish.

How do you seduce a fish?

"Figure out what it's feeding on. Come up from behind, since the fish is facing upstream. Cast so you don't spook it, and put your fly out there.

"Since I was a kid I have matched flies on visual information. Unlike most serious fly fishermen, I didn't find it necessary to know exactly what bug I was matching and the lifecycle of that bug. I never wanted to be that scientific, since that approach seemed counter to magic and the intuitive approach I was after."

Lindsay claims there is even magic in the way certain pictures happen. His first roll of film shot for what would become *Upstream* (a roll of 120 film with just 12 frames), produced

three winning pictures, including the one that ended up on the cover of the book.

"I was watching the fish on my line when it exploded in the air. The fly-rod in my right hand and the Rollei in my left, I triggered the shutter without ever looking at the camera. You know, it's the beginner's mind: when you're doing something spontaneously, intuitively, you're better at it."

Magic and intuition, man and nature, are themes that run throughout Lindsay's work to date. For his first book, *Mentawai Shaman: Keeper of the Rainforest*, Lindsay spent eight winters living among an animistic tribe on the Indonesian island of Siberut, and formed a deep bond with Aman Lau Lau, a shaman, in the process. Learning to see the world through Aman Lau Lau's eyes in turn helped inform the way Lindsay photographs.

His work in Indonesia put him in contact with the traffic in sea turtles—the live sacrifice of which is a hallowed tradition in Balinese culture. Fishermen who brought them in found a highly lucrative and illicit market for the turtles' eggs as well, and the ancient creatures are in danger of being pushed into extinction. It was this story that caught Lindsay's attention and started his first forays into underwater photography. *Turtle Islands: Balinese Ritual and the Green Turtle* was Lindsay's second book, a combination of ethnography, ecological activism, and traditional documentary photography.

The continuity between these earlier projects and *Upstream* can be seen in some of the new pictures that are zoomorphic, evoking the spirits of the forest, and of course in the immersion in water. Throughout, Lindsay's work points to a duality of the human condition: our unity with all creatures and the solitary nature of our existence.

"Humans have always been afraid of the dark and in awe of nature, and I don't want to lose touch with that primitive sense of mystery." ■

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