

Flow

Little by little they return—swim, float, crawl across and through. I do my feeble best to run cleaner. I seek to accommodate their curiosity about my museum of broken things. This arrowhead. That stovepipe hat. This jangle of gaskets and this animal rib. This triangle of a silken sail and this better half of a fractured oar, and all these window casements, light bulbs, spoons, bracelets, barrels, cartridges.

The turtles, especially, are surveyors, crawling in and out of the forsaken as if they might just hope to haul it all home under their hoods. The fish are more pugnacious, battling for the shady coves, the interiors of pipes, the hollows of empty caskets. In self-preserving hordes the insects hover.

I am inclined to feel my age. To quiet the entire ruckus come noon. To cry out in the only language I have ever known, which is flow. I had thought I wanted youth again, beauty, the powers of seduction. But in the rattle of return I feel oddly fevered, claustrophobic.

"Philadelphia," John Gunther wrote in 1951, "drinks its own sewage." It was a withering accusation, a charge that could only be dispelled over time, as a number of local and federal environmental programs were finally put into place. With the support of federal funding, the Philadelphia Water Department was able, in 1957, to employ primary wastewater treatment at all of its plants. The Clean Water Act of 1972 placed strict federal controls on point-source pollution. Then, in 1978, the Schuylkill was designated the first Pennsylvania Scenic River, initiating the removal of dams, the construction of fish ladders, and the reintroduction of American shad in the lower river. A few years later, Philadelphia's primary wastewater treatment program was supplemented with biological techniques. The environmental controls, regulations, and activism worked, as the river slowly became home again to numerous species of fish. Gunther's *Inside U.S.A.* is excerpted in Stevick's *Imagining Philadelphia*.

Catfish

How they sit all day talking—boys straight up through old men. With their lines baited and sunk in, and their stories traveling all the way and back from Vietnam to Korea to a woman's apple pie. They talk fish, mostly—walleye, smallies, catfish—and they talk Zara Spooks and Spinnerbaits, Texas-style worms and pumpkin seed. They say, *Watch me walk the dog. I've had a morning full of fish strike. Look this way for snap. Damn this sticky drag. I told my missus that I was going to church. She said I should go catch her fry.*

They say fishing in daytime is like nothing compared with fishing at night. They measure out the moon with their arms and, next, the size of their haul. They talk about stripers busting on small bait and flies that push the water and muskies no less long than thirty-five inches and the trout they didn't see coming. They say you're best off plunking for shad directly alongside the quickest current, and if you want results, don't barb your lure.

If only old Godfrey Schronk could hear them now. The things they would not boast of.

In 1999, American shad were returned to the river by virtue of an intensive restocking program conducted by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. Breaching some of the old canal dams and putting new or newly modernized fish ladders into place at both the Fairmount and Flat Rock dams made the waterways increasingly hospitable to striped bass, catfish, bottom-feeding hogsuckers, perch, sunfish, tiger muskellunge, walleyes, small- and largemouth bass, eels, and, of course, shad.

Love

He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, with his dark pelt and his well-groomed ears, the sterling glimmer of his whiskers. He was audacious, bold, spectacularly witty, and when he looked at me he was looking into me, he was knowing my heart and all the places it has been to. He was not afraid of my complicated language, not afraid of my needs, not afraid of all that sinks or floats or ends with me. The bones in me, which are also seeds. The dust of distant life. The stories I carry, the color of my dreams, the weight of my confessions.

What does it matter where he's come from? The point is: He might have kept going from river to river, but he came here, to me. He has made us his secret, given me his wide soul to keep. He has told me his stories, and in that way he has saved me from my own. He has found a stone, and it's a jewel, and he has brought it to me. I tuck it into a shell.

Maybe you have to stop looking to find your one true love.

Maybe you have to trust that he'll find you.

Not long before midnight, on March 20, 2005, a river otter made its way up the Schuylkill River toward the viewing window of the fish ladder near the Art Museum. An underwater camera recorded his arrival before he slipped out of view.