

## Above Lyman's Riffle

◆ **T**HE OLD MAN'S HOUSE WAS FALLING DOWN ten years after his death; twenty-years after, the whole south face of Lyman Mountain and Ernie's place by the Rogue River, was divided up and there were expensive homes built at various river viewpoints, and no notion of Ernest Lyman, was in anyone's mind. However, one year after he'd passed, on a hot August, dusky evening that was beginning to cool, I waited for the red glow down river and Vaux's swifts darted through warm air and willows along the river. Swifts in the day glow off in the west and evening light!

That evening I could see to my right, the hundred-year-old black walnut and cherry orchard across the road, and up the hill the road that would take you to Ernie's hard rock mine, and below the mountain as it turned north, Sam's Creek was trickling in through the willows upstream from where I was standing.

Once I had seen a specimen nugget come out of Sam's Creek, which was as big as your thumb and weighed over an ounce. The nugget had come from a small inner tube dredge, sucking gravel off the bottom of the creek for gold fines that settled after the gravel rattled across a shaker board. The dredger came up with a frogman mask and then showed Jack and I the nugget of that day's find. Ernie let the guy, Jack's friend, dredge the creek. The man had tried to offer Ernie half of what gold he dredged. Ernie waved him off, despite living in the old falling-down house; he'd invested well and had no need for money.

This evening, in front of Ernie's house, I'm watching the brick chimney, that juts upward from its tin roof at the bottom of Lyman Mountain. Ernie's parents built the house when he was four in 1900, when their gold mine began to pay. He was born across the road not far from where Ernie let me tear an old apple packing shed down two years before his death. The apple orchard had been gone since shortly after the Second World War. The shed was full of early

twentieth-century artifacts, a “Coolerator,” with only three bullet holes in it—I took the old upright icebox home and kept food in it on the porch in the winter, and would throw in a block of ice in the summer and it would cool beer for three days, despite the bullet holes.

As the packing house deconstructed, behind the siding on the inside wall, written in penciled-in childlike scrawl, an adolescent scribe from 100 years ago had written, “Amen, Brother Ben, shot at a Rooster and hit a hen!” Later, from a ladder, I sided my house with those old Douglas fir lap boards, which were brown and richly weathered with reds, and gray and gold hues—while my own children, my real wealth, squealed and ran across my own side hill seven miles away.

That years ago, evening, the Table Rock Blacktail deer were waiting for the near darkness of after dusk for a drink of river. Then the swifts begin to draw close. For one minute, they came together in ever tightening circles, closer and closer together. Then as one—they swirl into a whirling black-funnel-down-cloud fifty feet in height above the house; and then they are into-the-chimney—in one second, or two.

This vision is what I had waited for, and *suddenly* it had happened, as it did every year, until the chimney fell. The little birds came on a good number of late August and early September evenings before they headed south. I’d watched it before with Ernie, and the old man said they’d used the chimney every summer as long as he could remember. This was the last time I saw this.

An hour before, I had taken a ten-pound summer steelhead trout in the riffle above the falls, on a wet fly, a Teeter’s Weighted-Woolly-Worm. Ernie had told me ten years before—it was an evening riffle.