



Paul Gentry and Henry Hughes talk art and life at Gentry's home.



Salmon Rising

# AGAINST THE GRAIN

AN ARTIST, FURNITURE MAKER, FOSSIL COLLECTOR AND MORE, PAUL GENTRY IS A BONA FIDE ORIGINAL WITH AN EYE FOR FISH

The image shows tail-churning waves of sun and river, as a salmon meets a swinging fly. “Look at those loops — that’s a poor mend,” I tell Paul Gentry in his disheveled studio as we sit drinking vodka and flat 7Up from smudged glasses. Gentry lifts a cat off his lap, gets up and eyes the moist print hanging from a grungy clothesline. “Yeah, he might miss that strike,” Gentry says. “I’m rooting for the fish.” *Salmon Rising* is one of a dozen images Gentry engraved and printed for two collections of angling literature that I edited for Knopf’s Everyman’s Library series. His work as a furniture maker, potter, photographer and painter have earned him local attention, and his wood engravings are national treasures. Several universities and institutions, including

the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City and the Library of Congress, hold his artwork; Montana State University recently commissioned a set of prints for its famous Trout and Salmonid Collection. Gentry and I had been friends for years when I approached him in 2009 about a series of angling images. We had been drinking most of that afternoon, first in the sticky, furry clutter of his living room — my pants covered in cat hair — and then at the River Gallery in Independence, Oregon, where he is a partner. “What about a pike?” he asked. “Like in that Ted Hughes poem, under the lily pads.” Although Gentry dropped out of high school, he is extremely well read. Most important, he has a feel for what makes a winning picture.





Boy Fishing with his Dog. (Right) Yellowfin Tuna.

Gentry began sketching his own perfect pike — a powerful predator hovering in a weed bed, arching slightly toward something, perhaps a fluttering spoon or shivering bait. The pike’s narrow, horizontal form contrasts and complements the vegetation’s verticality, and the rays of the fish’s fins are mirrored in the veined lily pads above.

Back in his studio, he refined the drawing and transferred it through carbon paper to a prefashioned block of end-grain maple. Like an old-time dentist, Gentry switched on a bright overhead lamp, strapped on spattered magnifying goggles, and selected a gleaming instrument: a pointed graver that lifted a ribbon of maple. Leaning over his bench, which

is festooned with old lures, books and tools, he removed more wood along careful lines. The work was slow and meticulous. I left him alone. A few days later, a tiny relieved wood chip added to the pale brickwork of the fish’s flank; a week later, finely incised lines highlighted the lower jaw and fierce eye. After three weeks of engraving — a glass of white wine by Gentry’s side from morning until late afternoon — the wood block was ready for inking.

“Grab some newspaper,” he said, pointing to a pile of assorted debris.

“Found a fish,” I announced, holding up a fossil unearthed beneath a heap of *The New York Times*.

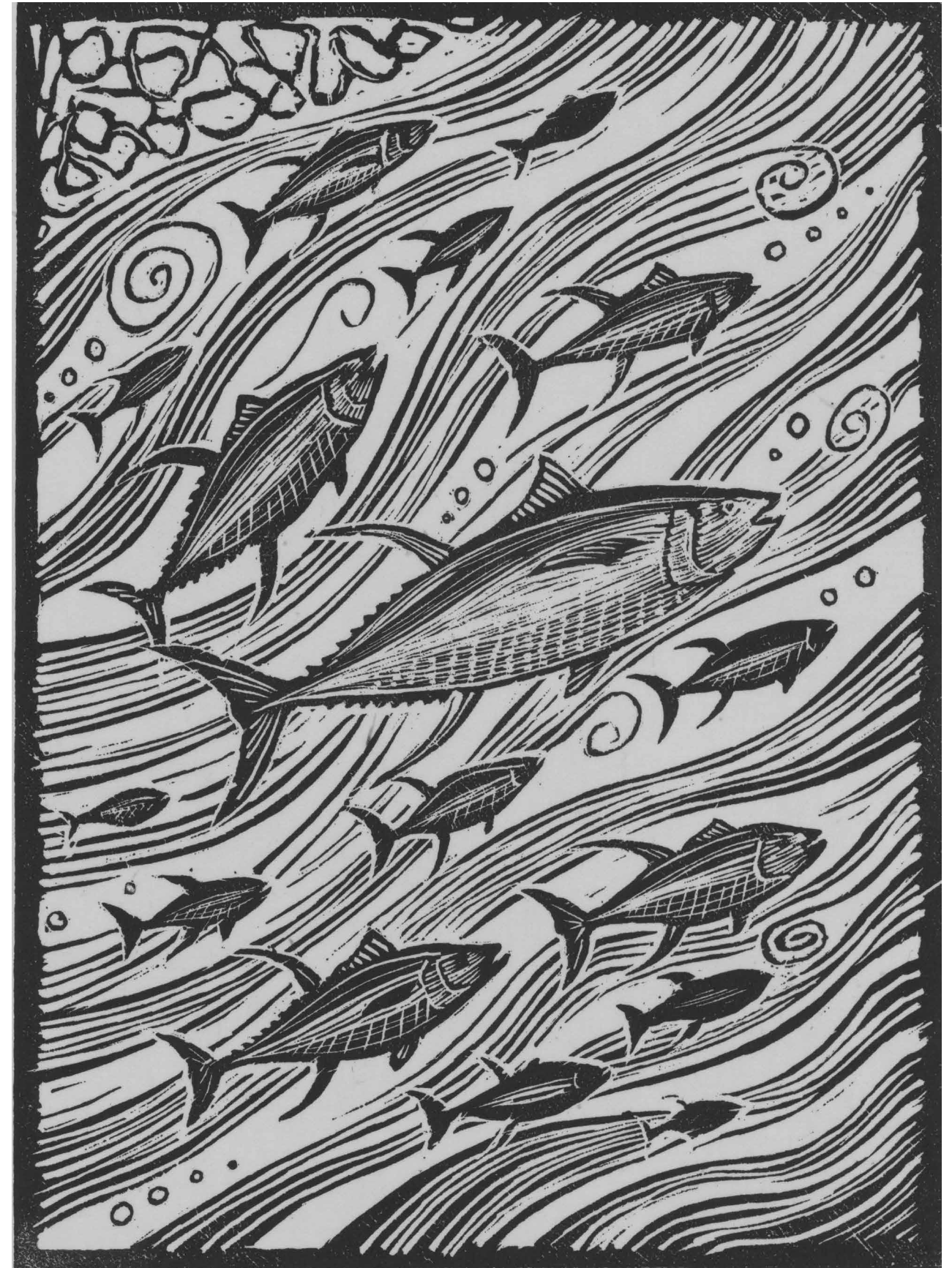
“*Mioplosus*, a perch from the Green River

formation,” he recalled instantly.

Gentry is also an avid fossil collector, fascinated, perhaps, by nature’s own lasting prints and stories.

“Forty million years old — maybe chased by a pike,” he added, laying down some newspaper and scooping a viscous glob of ink onto a glass slab. He rolled a thin layer of ink onto the engraved block and set it on his bench, carefully applying a piece of handmade Japanese paper. Unlike press printing, which is complete in seconds, this hand-rubbed method takes 15 minutes or more of meticulous pressure and motion, working a wooden spoon to the moist edges.

When he gently pulled the paper from







*A River Runs Through It.*

the block, the stunning black and white pike emerged.

As a child, Gentry made toy fishing rods and lures, playing in backyard puddles. “I was so intrigued by fishing, but my dad wasn’t the most patient teacher,” he says. “I kept getting snagged in the weeds, and he got so frustrated. It wasn’t fun.”

Gentry didn’t fish for years, but his interest in the sport’s culture continued. “I devoured Hemingway’s fishing stories, Richard Brautigan, Ted Hughes’ poems, and I loved *A River Runs Through It*.”

When Gentry found an edition of the Maclean

classic illustrated with wood engravings by Barry Moser, he was thrilled but disappointed.

“Moser is a master technician,” Gentry says, “but he can be a little tight, don’t you think?”

I agree that Moser’s engravings are technically brilliant, but his trout flies seem too much like museum specimens, and the character portraits feel overly studied and serious. Gentry aspires to freer, looser action, where forms and motions are playfully stylized. His *Surf Caster* and *Yellowfin Tuna* use softened, deco-like forms to achieve solidity and tremendous action. And where Moser is literal, Gentry turns symbolic. In Gentry’s

engraving for *A River Runs Through It*, a dead tree leans over the angler, while an eagle rises in the bright, mountain-filled skies beyond, suggesting the forces of death, renewal and hope that shape a fishing life.

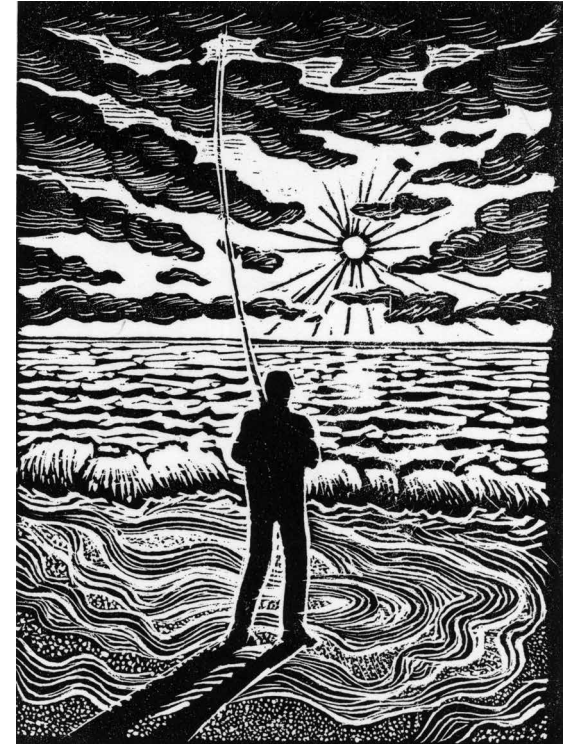
The salmon proof hanging on the clothesline will take days to dry.

“A lot of hours,” Gentry says. “Like fishing. We spend a lot of time doing this stuff. Who knows how long, right?”

Gentry has a healthy aversion to healthy living, ignoring his doctor’s worries about blood pressure and cholesterol, scoffing at people obsessed with exercise and diet.



*(Clockwise from left) Pike; Surf Caster; Lake Fishing.*



“I’m on the Jim Harrison health plan,” Gentry says of the reknown author, poet, gourmand and angler who lived to be nearly 80. “He did all right.”

There is an oft-quoted proverb, for which I’ve never been able to find an original source, claiming that hours spent fishing are not deducted from one’s lifetime. What if we could go back in time and put in more hours wetting the line? What if I had been Gentry’s childhood friend? Could I have kept him happily fishing?

Gentry’s engraving of a boy intently holding a cane pole off a pond dock, his faithful Golden Retriever asleep beside him, exempli-

fies the beauty and innocence of such reveries. Without being sentimental, the dark pond and dense foliage evoke primeval nature, while the concentric rings from the invisible bobber mark those magical connections between humans and fish. Although these connections are profound and memorable, their echoes fade over time.

When pensive clouds loom too heavily over Gentry and me, it’s high time to go a-fishing. We’ve been out a few times in my small boat, landing tiny blue gill and massive sturgeon. We always drink, and we always talk about politics, history, art, women, relationships

and our lives. Gentry likes to laugh — even when he falls backward trying to step over the gunwales — but it’s no secret that my friend’s drinking has gotten serious. Depression, anxiety and a painful breakup with a girlfriend seven years ago marked an even steeper slide that I’ve tried to slow, urging him to dry out for a while and exercise with me. He’s 64, and his health and financial state are increasingly perilous. But I also respect Gentry enough to let him do what he wants to do. He likes to make art, collect fossils, watch documentaries, read, drink, eat, stroke his cats, talk and cast a line now and then.





Gentry pulls up a print in his home studio in Oregon. (Right) Tribute to A River Runs Through It.

Last summer, we danced little white jigs through a slough off the Willamette River near Salem, Oregon. Gentry landed the first black crappie, commenting on its fanning fins and mottling.

"I don't like hurting them," he told me as I tossed the fish into our ice-filled cooler.

"But you like eating them?" I asked.

"Well, yes," he said. "I love eating them."

For the record, in the countless times we've dined together at the Arena Sports Bar & Grill, next door to his gallery in Independence, we have never ordered any food other than fish and chips. Well, fried shrimp, if it's happy hour.

After a couple of beers, Gentry settles into the fishing and talking. He's skilled at expressing himself, and is a good listener and

responder. I open up about some serious issues with my son, and he nods thoughtfully and then sets the hook on a largemouth bass that shimmies out of the water and spits the hook.

"That's a good fish," Gentry says. "I like when they get away."

We release a couple of bass and keep eight crappies, selecting one for some experimental gyotaku printing back at his studio. When we step into the kitchen to freshen our drinks, one of his cats drags the still-inked crappie across the table and floor.

"Where's the fish?" I ask.

Gentry shrugs and says, "It'll turn up."

We fillet the remaining fish on his back step amid a dangerous swarm of yellowjackets, then retreat to the kitchen,

where I am reminded that Gentry loves to cook but hates to clean. There is enough grease on the stove and walls to fuel an inferno, but we manage just the right heat to fry the delicate pale flesh into a platter of golden delight. We eat, talk and sip cheap white wine.

I always hug him when I say goodbye. I feel blessed to have him as a friend. He'll sit up for a while watching a documentary or listening to music. He sleeps on his couch, wakes early with the cats, drinks some coffee, then pours a wine and heads into the studio. He's starting a new engraving of a trout held gently in the open hands of an angler. It's a prayerful gesture, yet strangely precarious, like a blessing you're not sure whether to hold on to or let go.

