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### A Celebration of Rivers: The Passage of Time

In a moment—a flash in time—a decision was made. A portion of the cobblestone streambed broke free, sprouted fiery wings, and, in a twinkling second of serendipity, broke the water's surface and engulfed the disheveled form of an olive-bodied Elk Hair Caddis that had fallen out of my vice the night before.

I look back on that moment often, never embellished, but as it happened on a favorite, medium-sized native brook trout stream in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The water was running low and slow through a thick August afternoon in Virginia. I could not have been older than 13, but a devoted and starry-eyed fly tyer and fishermen thrilled to have taken my first fish on a self-tied fly.

I have since (as I would advise all to do) made many more new memories on this favorite stream—casted to familiar rocks and plunge pools, and even found familiar fish in homey haunts. But as they say, “a man never steps into the same river twice,” for he is a changed man for the experience; and I never did.

Rivers change, too—constantly. High water and flood events, and even the daily coursing of normal water flows, alter the streambed—moving gravel, debris, stones, and sweepers. Bedrock and boulders are eroded. The Grand Canyon itself is the life's work of the once-strong Colorado River. It is the nature of flowing water.

When I look back upon that treasured memory, I can vividly recall the physical geography and divine design of the pool where it occurred. It sits at the foot of a steep bank, just a small pebble's throw from a cobblestone trail. An oak tree towers over the pool's middle, its sprawling roots creating an undercut bank that sits three feet above the water's regular height—a product of springs, rainfall, and runoff.

The pool begins as many do in the Appalachians, with two stones that split a current into four seams—the first of which runs along the steep bank, while the other splits the pool long-ways. The two run a good distance—maybe 20 feet—before converging in the tail and spilling over into the next. It is best approached across from the steep bank, on a gravel bar inhabited by sycamore saplings and mountain daisies.

That image stays fresh in my mind because the scene is revisited at least once every year, and while the rocks and the bank and the oak and sycamore trees are all still in their place—as I am when I return—the river is, alas, different. The water that grazed the flanks of that five-inch brook trout when it rose to my poorly-presented fly, and that swirled around my ankles as I released it, was fleeting.

In a flick of the trout's tail, the river water escaped with the moment, downstream, to mix with warmer water and brine, and flush the gills of smallmouth and striped bass and mackerel, leaving its gentle impression wherever it roamed.

The impression it left on me is romantic, inspiring, and all-consuming. It inspired a musing that found its way with words, which eventually served as a springboard for a writing career and a growing passion for fly fishing that have together carted me all over the East Coast in search of a similar high.

Today, I have been blessed to have fished a variety of waters in locations near and far, including many places I call “home,” where I often share the passing of time—and the riffles, runs, and eddies about my feet—with the riverbed and cobble stones. And while I continue to spout words of fish and rivers and wildernesses, the river has etched its own words into the rocks as part of the continuation of the story of creation and nature.

For that very reason, one of the places I have visited on this ongoing adventure, the Catskills Fly Fishing Center in the Catskills Forest of New York, features a path paved with stones from visitors’ home waters as a celebration of such journeys through water and time; for all of us that have known the romantic relationship with rivers and fish have a story to tell much like this one.

This summer, one of the stones from that favorite stream of mine in the Blue Ridge made its way into the Catskills to gather with others to tell a story. Such a story is not to be read, but comprehended through an intimate relationship with nature. And in that it will be known that part of that story is our own, written on our souls by the very same current patterns that touched the rocks in a moment shared on a freestone mountain stream where it all began.