

Caught and Released

by Stephen Boshoff

Beginnings ...

His fly fishing origins were not conventional. Not in the youthful rapture of the Western Cape streams, the deep, silent gorges of the Drakensberg or the rolling hills of the midlands. They were rooted in the desiccation of the Little Karoo. Here, on a family farm, a dining room with a sombre stinkwood table - so big the walls were built around it - enclosed his first memories and yearnings for trout. Encased in the muted stiffness of Sunday lunch, the boy's attention was drawn to a cake tin on an open shelf, edged with zigzag cut newsprint. Turned on its side, it was not the tin's home-baked contents which attracted him, but the image on the lid - a boy of similar age with brylcreamed fringe, a simple rod, line, float, a stream and a brace of green, blue, and red speckled silver.

In the stultifying afternoons, the homestead dark with blinds drawn against the baking sun, he was drawn to the furrow - through a window, across the swept farmyard, past ostriches gaping in the heat. Rods were made from Spanish reed, cotton and safety pins from his grandmother's sewing chest provided line and hook. In the shade of a thirsty acacia he would cast his line.

He learnt to watch for signs in the sky. "Pa, gaan dit reën?" (Father, is it going to rain?): a familiar question in these parts. With the farmers he prayed for rain. Not for the veld or the lucerne, but for the furrow. After all, he had been told, many years ago, the furrow was perennial. This landscape was shaped by water. In the stone church, the preacher held forth: "Brothers and sisters, seek forgiveness; the rains will come".

Swimming freely ...

They moved closer to the mountains, the smell of streams. The first trout did not come easy. Before that he came close - the occasional silvery wink and mistimed strike. Once, a little trout flapping on a sandbar, evading an over enthusiastic grasp, disappeared into the foam leaving only tiny scales and the smell of trout on his hands. A full season passed before the moment of joy, the boy wheeling home on his bicycle to show off the prize.

Patience and hope imbued by the Karoo endured. Old skills found new relevance - an eye for a promising lie, like spotting a tortoise among the low growth of the grey veld.

For the boy there was no tomorrow. The mornings on the middle Lourens, his Big Blackfoot, afternoon jaunts higher up, weekend tubing. When his peers competed for the first team, he was on the first beat. He fished alone. The closeness of trout was enough. It was the time of the never-ending hatch.

Caught ...

War in distant Angola; unrest and insurrection at home. Most of the conscripts were

seventeen, nineteen ... a generation of young men betrayed. The soothing grip of a three-weight unwillingly traded for cold steel. A crumpled Humpy abandoned in a vest pocket.

Later, there was a career with fair beliefs. There was a wife and innocent hopes. There was a mortgage, a lawn to mow and life insurance. She dreamt of the waltz; he of the drag-free drift. She perfected the flirt; he lost his innocence.

What have we done? What have I done? What, why? The words by a contemporary songwriter tangle with the urge to be free and innocent ... "We are crazy with belief, we are mad with disgrace ... For we bore the brute disdain of the whole human race."*

Released ...

Reprieve, a pause, a flap and a flicker... a new beginning.

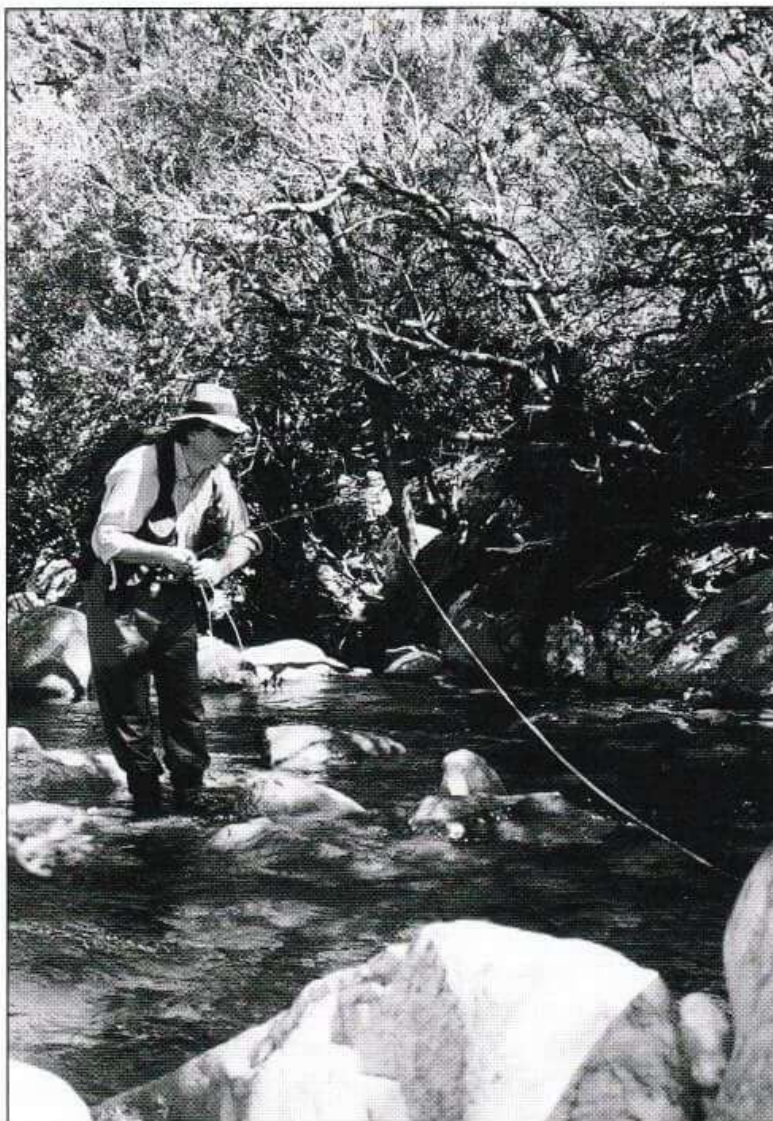
He darted away, clutching the One-ounce.

And then: "You can fish with me," the man said. But, hesitantly: "I'm not worthy." "Just fish with me", the man repeated. The man said: "I have fifteen years, while there are streams, there are trout; I'm going to fish every day."

He watched - he talked, tentative and then more and more agile and free, the sparkle of years of private thoughts come to light. The rhythm returned, he lived again. He was shown a sacred stream.

Now, the arabesque of line and gentle 7X drift. He thought, there she is, and I love her so.

(*From the song 'Duco Box Rasta' by Koos Kombuis (on 'Madiba Bay', Wildebeest Records, Polygram SA)



Stephen Boshoff ... "the arabesque of line and gentle 7x drift."