



Matt Holloway

CATCH AND RELEASE

Photo by John Simpkin: Late Afternoon Light, left flank of Nipple Mountain

The boy rocks on his heels at the edge of the bright lake, watching his father. The man's forearms stir a figure-eight pattern through the cold water.

A cutthroat trout, the man tells the boy, pushing the fish slowly along under the surface, forcing oxygen through its mouth and over its gills. Catch and release only, the man says, as the fish snaps its tail and vanishes.

Tall mountains ring the lake, with names like Bearhat, Dragon's Tail, and Mount Cannon. The sweet smell of subalpine firs floats stark against the halcyon sky. The high carved heart of Glacier National Park.

The man hands the boy a spin rod and says that they will talk about Great Falls afterwards. Best to fish first.

The boy nods.

The man says not to worry. Nothing is one hundred percent.

The boy nods again. His eyes water in the sun.

The man says to fish here, along the beach, and that he will walk toward the outlet. Be back in ten minutes, at most.

Karen? says the boy.

Yes, says the man. She knows a lot about you. But, let's talk later. Catch and release, remember?

The man tussles the boy's hair and walks away, following a faint trail into the trees.

The boy casts a tiny spoon into the clear mountain water. He reels in nothing. He casts again. Nothing. The gray mountains lift like towers, immutable and rigid against the close sky. Next time the boy casts, a bite.

The man follows a series of small meadows, kicking through beargrass and zigzagging around clumps of krummholz. Fighting the wind, he uses streamers and wet flies on a sinking tip line, and quickly fishes himself to the outlet. Atop a logjam, he watches water flow from the lake and spill from the hanging valley, disappearing over the rock horizon. Overhead, a raven quorks, tilted and static against the sky. The man caws once at the bird, and then he retraces his path to his son.

The boy does not hear the man coming. When his father steps from the trees and onto the far end of the beach, the boy reels the line, fast.

A row of three fish flop on the gravel, crusted and twitching like skinned muscles. They suck at dry air. The man sprints up the beach. The boy neither turns nor runs.

Son. The man scoops the closest fish and crashes, boots and all, into the freezing lake. He dunks the fish and pushes it along. The fish spasms briefly, but nothing more. The man grabs the next fish and runs it through the cold water, around in circles, wiping dirt from its scales. Nothing. The third. Nothing.

Finally, the man stands, hands dripping water down the sides of his pants and he stares at the boy. The fish float near the man's knees. The boy wonders if the man is going to hit him. Not because the man has ever hit him before, but because the boy has never seen this face on his father.

The man steps from the water and kneels to the boy. He squeezes the boy's shoulders hard and pulls the boy's face close to his face. The man's breathing is quick and forceful, almost panting. The boy trembles, but does not turn away.

Nobody along the lake notices the man loosen his grip and begin to cry. Nobody feels the close sky pause, hinged and teetering, on the verge of slipping either way down the Divide. Great Falls to the east. Kalispell to the west.

Nobody notices the boy waiting. Like he would come so used to doing.

Nobody, including his father, hears him say, "Great Falls might be just fine."

Matt Holloway lives with his wife, daughter and son in Columbia Falls, Montana and writes when he's not clawing around in the wilderness. His work has appeared in *Montana Quarterly*, *Talking River Journal*, *Montana Magazine*, *Big Sky Journal*, *Montana Headwall*, *Montana Naturalist*, *A Natural History of Now: Reports from the Edge of Nature* (anthology), the inaugural issue of *Whitefish Review*, and more. Holloway is the fiction editor for *Whitefish Review*.





