

# The Oval

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Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 12

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2012

## Smoke and Ashes

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, Zachary (2012) "Smoke and Ashes," *The Oval*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol5/iss1/12>

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# SMOKE AND ASHES

*By Zachary Brown*

After hours of repetition, the rod finally bends in my hand.  
I wrestle with tension and the current and the fish,  
Until the surface breaks and a Cutthroat flies from the water in front of me.  
The tippet snaps, and my exhale heaves into a cloud of smoke.  
My hands are mostly numb, and I curse harshly in a whisper.  
That fish, this place, this God-damned cold—it reminds me of her.

My chest is heavy as my mind races backwards to thoughts of her...  
In her father's house, she burns my memories with the palm of her hand—  
It grips the back of my neck while she leans in hard and whispers  
A drop of ice water that trickles down my neck. I feel like a fish  
Gasping for water in world of clouds and dust and smoke.  
Now, as I stand among the river rocks, still she is with me.

I wade across and find the bank. Cottonwood leaves fall around me.  
A Sandhill Crane pushes her head above the prairie grass; her  
Ancient eyes remind me that Sandhills mate for life. I roll a smoke  
And taste the fiery ash in my chest. A trail of dust rises from my hand.  
I tell my friends that I come here to escape the world and to fish—  
But they can't know that I come here for her, to listen as she whispers.

In town, I'll walk the streets alone and pass our old friends. They whisper  
To themselves and avoid my gaze. It's as if a wall builds around me,  
Taller every day. People blur into sand and fog. All that's left are the fish.  
She first brought me to this place; it was where her father took her  
When she was a child. I can feel her gaze now as she leads me by the hand  
And lays my bare shoulders by the water's edge. The rest is ashes and smoke.

Now the river's surface moves across my field of vision. Mist rises like smoke  
From pools and eddies. The channel bends away downstream, whispering  
To me and the Cottonwoods. A smallish Golden Stone Fly falls onto my hand—  
I shiver as its legs tremble and brush softly against my skin. It craves me  
And my body's heat. It trembles against my skin, and I know that it's her.  
Autumn wind pushes through the prairie grass, touching everything but the fish.

My eyes chase the fly as I cast it again and again. They feel cool and moist as I fish,  
Frantically scanning the watery surface for life. For my life, or hers. I smoke  
Now because the ash warms my chest and fingers. And it would kill her

To watch the ember burn between my lips, words exhaling in a whisper—  
Like James Dean, she would say. He died early too. Did he break someone like  
she broke me?  
My eyes quiver in the Autumn light as I grip the past in the palms of my hands.

My hands pulse in rhythm, fixated upon the hope that a fish  
Will rise. Icy water curls around me, like a ribbon of smoke.  
Lips brush my ear, whisper, and become the wind—this place is her.