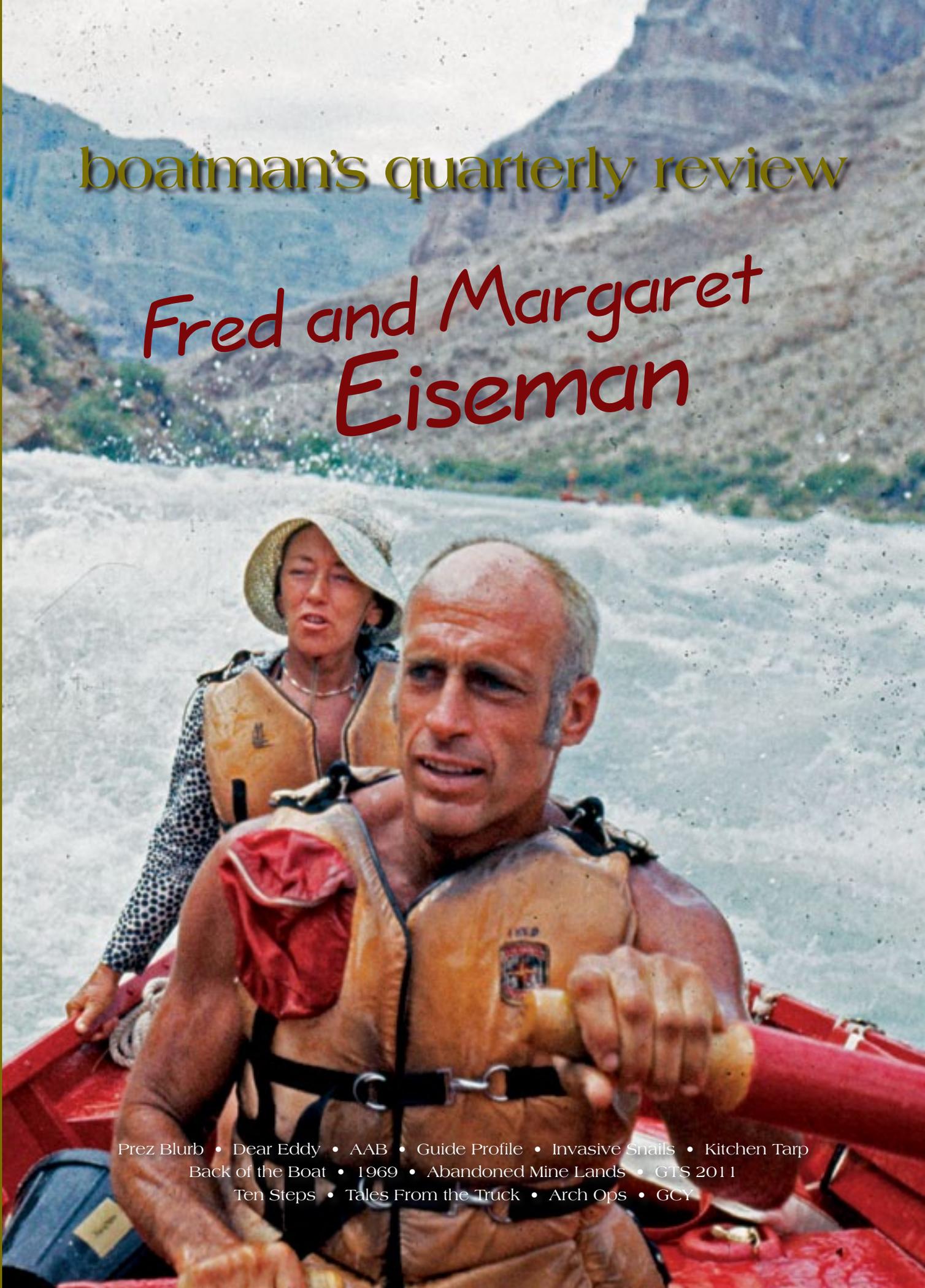


# boatman's quarterly review

## Fred and Margaret Eiseman



Prez Blurb • Dear Eddy • AAB • Guide Profile • Invasive Snails • Kitchen Tarp  
Back of the Boat • 1969 • Abandoned Mine Lands • GTS 2011  
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# Tales From The Truck— It Goes Downhill Fast: A Crash Course In Rowing Lava Falls

**L**AVA FALLS IS A NEFARIOUS, hydra-headed beast. She loves to embarrass me. She has tried to maim me. She has tried to drown me. I've come within an inch of flipping in her V-Wave. She has pinned me in her Corner Pocket. She has washed me off my oarseat and nearly off the boat, laughing, as I held on to the oar tower for dear life. Lava Falls hates me. I am a Capulet. She is a Montague. She is a stick. I am her piñata. But sometimes, I think just to mess with my head, she lets me pass through cleanly, safely. You never can tell what you're going to get with Lava Falls. Lava Falls is like a catholic priest: Sometimes it's forgiving. And sometimes it bends you over and...well... you know.

We first hear Lava Falls when we are still a half mile above it. When we're a quarter mile above it, it sounds like a tarmac full of 747s revving their engines for take-off. The sound rouses us from the tranquility of what has otherwise been a peaceful day.

We all look downriver to see the source of this nuisance noise but it can't be seen. Not yet. Lava Falls is a blind rapid, meaning it has such a steep, sudden drop you can't see it until you enter it. All we can see from our perspective from 200 hundred feet upriver is an occasional splash of whitewater tossed into view from below the sightline, like a pitchfork of hay.

We pull our rafts into the shore, river right, and hike to the overlook to scout it.

Lava Falls is an impressive bit of hydrological mayhem. The Guinness Book of World Records lists it as North America's fastest navigable rapid. It's a steep little bastard, dropping thirteen feet in a distance of less than a hundred feet. Lava Falls is the Grand Canyon of rapids.

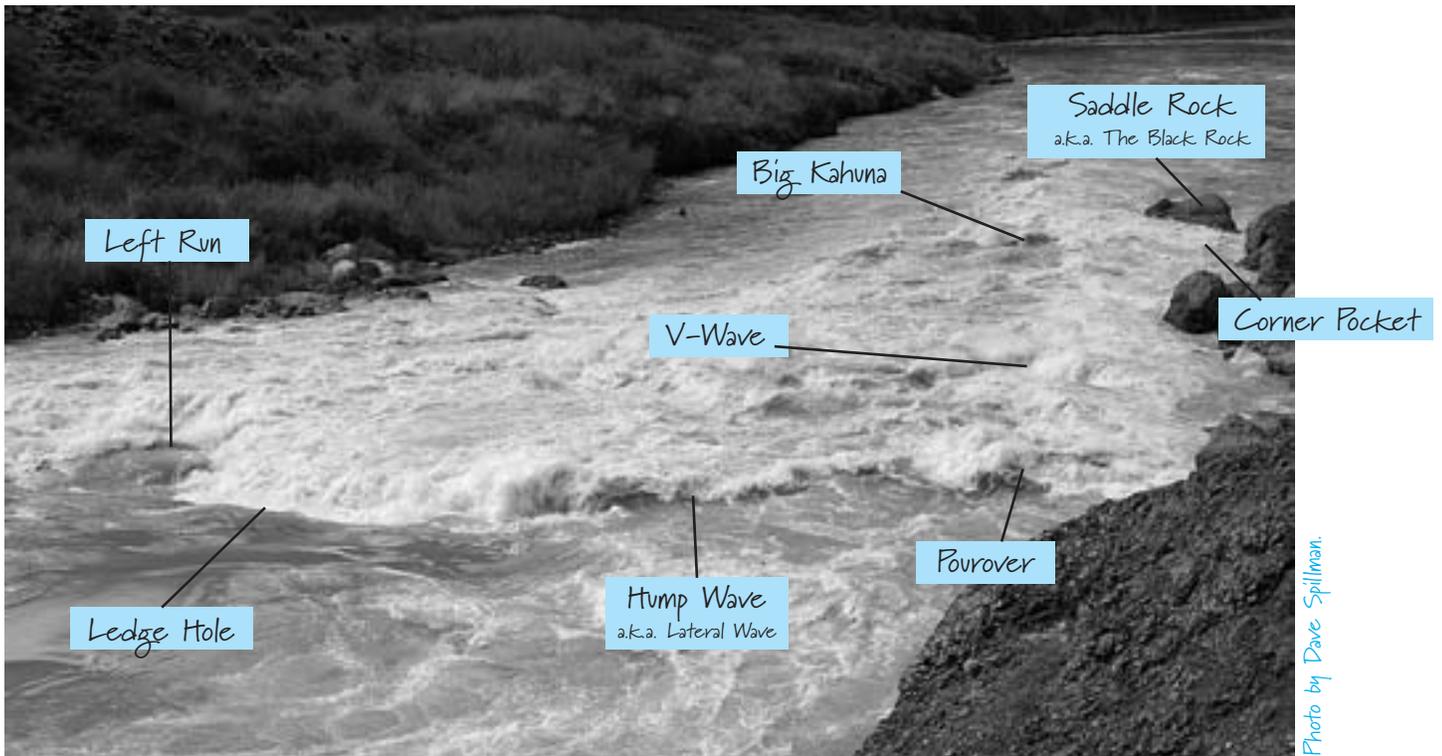
For those of you uninitiated in the anarchy that is Lava Falls please allow me to describe her to you. The river above it is very calm, and today, it's the color of a 1970s Coke bottle. At the spot where the river pours over the debris dam that is Lava Falls, it is instantly churned into white foam, a mixture that looks like equal parts air and water; a Cuisinart that whips and aerates the river to the density of champagne foam. From the scout point some of us speculate about how much flotation our lifejackets lose in this highly aerated foam. "Life jackets, after all, don't float on air," we say. "You may as well expect your life jacket to keep you afloat on a cloud," someone postulates.

The first thing that's going to command your attention when scouting Lava Falls is the Ledgehole. Right in the center of the rapid, there is a huge, nasty hole created by the water pouring over a huge ledge. It's literally a waterfall. What makes the Ledgehole so dangerous, so terrible is that it creates a recirculating hole immediately below it. It's big enough to flip, and destroy a five ton S-rig, if the pilot of the S-rig were unfortunate enough fall over it. If an oarboat gets pulled in there it's going to hold it under water and recirculate it several times before finally spitting it out. It's happened before and I've seen the videos on YouTube. When the raft finally emerges it has been pulled apart, destroyed—the frame bent, straps torn, the gear washed away. The guide and passengers swimming for their lives. The Ledgehole is the last place in the Grand Canyon where I'd want to take a swim. I treat the Ledgehole the same way I treat a bonfire and just stay a comfortable distance away from it. But this is easier said than done. The Ledgehole takes up the majority of the river's width.

Over there on the right is another Pourover, essentially a mini-Ledgehole. Don't drop over the Pourover. You'll get banged up and your raft could flip. And there's no room at all on the left, except for really high water. So there is one route that you can take through Lava Falls. You've got to squeeze your raft between the Ledgehole and the Pourover. But this one passage through Lava Falls puts you on a course to encounter several notable challenges and obstacles.

First you've got to bust through the Hump Wave. If you fail to bust through the Hump Wave the current is going to carry you over the Pourover. If you successfully navigate the Hump Wave you'll hit the V-Wave, which is where two lateral waves come together to form one massive wave. Imagine two snowplows, side by side, pushing ten feet of snow, but the snowplows are turning the snow *into* each other rather than away from each other. That's the V-Wave and you've got to go right through the center of it.

The V-Wave is probably responsible for flipping more rafts in the Grand Canyon than any other rapid or wave. So hit it squarely if you're able. Then, if you survive that, you'll have to face Big Kahuna which is a ten-foot standing wave, that's going break over your raft like a backcountry avalanche. Something below the surface of the river, probably a large boulder sitting



at a sharp angle, causes the water above it to form into a very steep, standing wave—a static tsunami, curled upstream like a scorpion’s tail.

But, things always get weird in the V-Wave. You can get flipped. You can get washed off your boat. Your boat can get spun around. You may enter the V-Wave perfectly square and emerge completely sideways or turned around 180 degrees. More often than not, I exit the V-Wave with my angle completely off-track. The V-Wave has sent me rocketing up onto Saddle Rock, where I stalled and nearly flipped. At least a quarter of the time I have emerged from the V-Wave with at least one oar lost from the oarlock and once I came out with both oars missing. I have been shoved into the Corner Pocket—a dangerous spot between Saddle Rock and the right shore—where we were repeatedly pushed up onto Saddle Rock—highside—and then slammed back down into the pocket, stuck. So, to state it simply, in the course of about a hundred feet, there are five or six chances for things to go wrong. Good luck!

From the scout point, we watch Richard, who is piloting our Motor Support raft—an S-rig—make his run. It’s a good one and eddies out river left to act as the safety boat.

I’ve had a couple butterflies in my stomach all day, knowing that I had to row Lava Falls. At the overlook, scouting Lava Falls several more butterflies show up. And now, when we turn from the scout point and

walk down the hill I have so many butterflies that my stomach feels like Michoacan, Mexico during the Monarchs’ Winter hibernation.

The guides walk to our rafts with the enthusiasm of men walking to the noose—so it is natural that our humor is gallows humor. So when one of my passengers asks me where the best place for her to sit during this rapid I reply, “Oh, probably on the underside of the raft. That way, when we’re past the V-Wave you’ll be back on top.” She laughs, and then she sees that I’m only half kidding, and stops laughing. She tightens the straps on her lifejacket.”

Lava Falls is named Lava Falls because only a million years ago lava, flowing from volcanoes on the rim of the canyon, poured into this part of the canyon. This lava eventually built up and created a dam that geologists estimate was about 700 feet high, backing up water some 180 miles behind it. That’s a good enough reason to name this rapid Lava Falls. But, in my opinion, there’s an even better reason to name it Lava Falls. The etymological roots of lava mean both *to wash* and *to fall*. The Latin root comes from *lavare*, which means to wash and we’re about to be washed like a matchbox in a car wash. Italian etymologists derive lava from the Latin *laves*, which means to fall. We are going to fall fifteen vertical feet in a distance of sixty feet—which, admittedly, doesn’t sound like much—but perceiving the experience through our hyper-loaded senses we’re going to feel like Hephaes-

tus being cast from Mount Olympus.

I untie the bowline from the tree, coil it up and strap it to the bow of the raft. “Does everyone remember the highside procedure?” I ask my passengers. They confirm that they do.

Everything is now tightened down. The ammo cans, the straps on our lifejackets, sunglasses, hats—that knot in my stomach.

Mike goes first. He pushes his raft off the shore, climbs into his seat and pulls out into the current. Jack, our swamper, waits for Mike to get a safe distance ahead of him and then he pulls out. It’s his first time piloting an oarboat through Lava Falls. Christine, an experienced pilot with over forty trips, rides with him to give him instructions, if needed.

I wait for Jack to get a safe distance ahead of me and then I push off from the shore, and climb into the seat and pull the raft out into the current. Oh man! Here we go again. My adrenal gland puckers up like a salivary gland when sucking a lime. I feel my heart rate and blood pressure increase.

Lava’s roar gets louder. It sounds like a demon grinding skulls between his teeth.

We are now only fifty feet from entering the falls and even from this short distance we still can’t see Lava Falls except for the occasional splash of white-water like a clown juggling hankies. An upcanyon breeze—there’s always an upcanyon breeze—blows mist in our faces. Lava Falls has a severe carny-tilt. From above it, as you’re entering it, you can’t see any of its features, except for the Ledgehole and even this is deceiving. Approaching Lava from river level it looks like the Ledgehole extends across more of the river than it actually does. You have to pilot your raft into a position that looks like you’re going to drop right into the Ledgehole. It’s very easy to get Ledgehole Fever, which is when a boatman, thinking he’s going to drop over into the Ledgehole, panics and digs oars hard to river right which often causes him to drop over the Pourover. I’ve done it myself.

So what do you do? How does a boatman enter a rapid full of holes that he can’t see?

He follows a set of markers that will guide him into the rapid in the right place. I start by following the bubble line. There is a large chunk of Lava on the right side of the river that juts out into the river. The river, coursing around it, produces a line that extends down river into the rapid. When you reach this line put the boat’s right side on the line and follow it. Then as you continue down river cross over this bubble line so that it’s now on the boat’s left side. This, to me, is the scariest part of the rapid. I stand up trying to get a better look into the rapid. It still looks like we’re going to

drop over the Ledgehole. I just have to trust that I’m, in the right spot.

I watch Jack’s position to help me with my position. I just take the same line that he’s on. I watch him move into the calm water behind the second lava rock. I watch him turn his raft to the left and start pushing for the Hump Wave. I watch him burst through it sowing two-carat diamonds of water into the air—Poosh!—and disappear over the downslope of the rapid.

I pass a large lava rock that protrudes into the river. Here the river snags on the rock as it passes by, and the disruption of flow causes a spiral that’s visible on the surface of the water. This is the Bubble Line. The Bubble Line enters the river current and continues flowing downriver. I place the right side of my boat right on it and follow it downstream like it’s a handrail until I reach a second large lava rock protruding into the river. Here I leave the line of spiraling swirls and push my raft farther to the right, kind of ducking in behind this rock, but here, behind this rock, the water grows turbulent.

It’s only another thirty feet from here that the river drops over the edge into Lava Falls and with all this water falling and pushing and stalling it grows very disrupted and turbulent even above the rapid. This turbulence causes a very large boil and upwelling just behind the lava rock where I’m currently positioned that upblossoms like a stalk of cauliflower. My friend Nate calls it the Brain Surge because, seen from above, the upboil looks like the crenellations and folds of a brain.

I let the river carry me forward and take a few small strokes toward the right. My eyes are trained downriver, on Lava Falls. From here, we still can’t see the entry into the rapid, we can only see the water disappearing over the Ledgehole. My raft reaches the Brain Surge and I stand up to get a better look at my entry point but as I stand up something terrible and malicious happens. I can hear Lava Falls laughing as it happens. The boil, the BrainSurge, releases an extra-strong upsurge as we’re crossing it that lifts my raft and pushes us back out into the current and straight toward the Ledgehole.

F\*! F\*! What the f\* just happened?!!! We are suddenly shot off the Brainsurge, across the river and into the part of the current that’s falling directly over the Ledgehole. I drop down into my seat and start rowing like a Viking slave away from our impending doom the whole time watching the ledge grow closer and closer at frightening speed. I am making quick progress toward the Ledgehole’s right edge, the spot where we may be able to drop safely into the rapid, but I don’t think it’s going to be enough.

For every foot I gain toward the safety of the edge the river's current drags us two feet closer to the ledge. I can see that we're not going to make it. The Ledgehole has us!

Ah sh\*t! We are f\*d!

Not since Tiphys piloted the Argo through the Clashing Rocks of Bosphorus has a boatman been in such dire peril as this! Not since Odysseus was nearly sucked into the whirlpool Charybdis at the Straits of Messina has a boatman been in such grave trouble as we are this day at the gates of Lava Falls!

The Ledgehole is going to rip, split and separate my raft and everything on it into its most basic parts and pieces, like a particle of light hitting a prism.

I'm a little too busy to observe my passengers, to see if they're scared, to see if they're seeing what I'm seeing, to know if they're aware of the fact that we're about to tumble off a waterfall and die, but I mean the Ledgehole looms in front of us, like only ten feet away, so, surely they've noticed. I feel like I should give them some words of encouragement, as a professional courtesy. Perhaps something like, "It's cool. I got this," or, "Don't worry, this is normal," but, what I end up yelling is "Fuckin' hold on! We ain't gonna make it!"

As it turns out passengers don't like it when their guide yells, "Hold the fuck on! We ain't gonna make it!"

It's all reminiscent of the time when I dropped over the left horn at Horn Creek sideways; one second I was in good position, rowing toward the drop-in behind the right horn, the next second the current had me and had me good, unexpectedly quickly, and I dropped over the left horn sideways, my boat clattering and banging on the rocks. This was the exact same feeling. Except that now, when I drop over the Ledgehole, it's going to tumble us around like a t-shirt in a dryer until my boat is ripped to shreds, until I and my passengers are wounded or dead.

The Ledgehole now takes hold of Hope, the fore-runner and emissary of Success, and tries to rip it from us with the plan of destroying it upon its many rocks, but Hope is loyal as any dog and stays with me to the end.

It's amazing the amount of information that can flash through your mind in times of crisis and right now the YouTube video of the boat getting chundered in the Ledgehole flashes through my memory. Oh my God! I'm going to be the next YouTube loser! The title of the video's going to be called The Dumbass Who Dropped the Ledgehole and Died and Killed All His Passengers.

But, kind of a catchy title.

As I've mentioned before, Lava Falls has such a sud-

den drop-off that it hides all of its features until you are right on top of it. Well, we are now right on top of it! We are close enough to look down upon its jagged rocks and foam, like looking into the rabid mouth of Cerberus.

Ever since my first oarboat run through Lava Falls I have suspected that it might be a gateway to Hell, or perhaps one of its branch offices, and now my suspicion is confirmed. From my raft, which is only ten short—very fuckin' short—feet away from dropping over the Ledgehole, I get a close enough look into Hell to know how many demons can dance on the head of a dirty hypodermic needle (2,100), close enough to feel its cathonic breath on the back of my neck. Close enough to see the spam-mongers and Monsanto lobbyists. Close enough to see Hitler polishing Dick Cheney's waiting throne. Close enough to see Glen Beck feeding kittens to his minions of zombie clowns. Close enough to smell the acrid tang of religious dogma (and believe me, I know what acrid tangs smells like). Close enough to look into the eyes of Sarah Palin, who I believe was there having her horns re-sized or maybe she was the keynote speaker for HellCon 2010. Not sure.

My point being, we are close to the edge here. Way too close. Only a few feet away from crossing the Ledgehole's Event Horizon. An Event Horizon—if I may get scientific for a moment—is the threshold that surrounds a black hole, and anything that crosses it will be sucked into the black hole.

I have to turn my raft into a new angle, with its bow pointed a little more upstream—so I can better fight against the current that's pulling us into the Ledgehole's Event Horizon. My raft hasn't yet crossed over the Ledgehole's Event Horizon but we're definitely caught in the gravity of its frictive space.

I am at once pushing for the right edge and pushing us slightly upstream against the pull of the Ledgehole. I am surprised to see that I'm actually making progress toward the edge—glimmer of hope—when I feel the stern of my boat cross into the Ledgehole's Event Horizon and start to pull us in even as the bow of the raft catches the current that draws away from it.

So much of a boatman's success depends on his confidence. It is the cell that isolates and contains certain characteristics and emotions that can be detrimental to a boatman's happiness and success; emotions that are best kept isolated.

But Confidence is a delicate thing. Confidence has a thin shell, thin and fragile as an eggshell. And right now Lava Falls has delivered a sharp, crushing blow to my Confidence and its contents—fear, panic, doubt, confusion—come exploding out, like neurons and

electrons from a split atom.

Ah, but with fear comes adrenaline—oh sweet, ass-saving adrenaline!—here to save the day again. I thought I was already rowing as hard as I could away from the Ledgehole, toward the possible safety around its right corner, but once I got a look at the seething cauldron of rocks and death below the Ledgehole some auxiliary, secret stash, special reserve, top-shelf, meth-grade adrenaline kicks in. I am able to push those oars—Are my oars actually bending?—with the strength of eight Argonauts, and I manage to push us around the edge of the Ledgehole. But barely.

All that drama and we haven't even entered the rapid yet!

I dig in a couple more strong pushes away from the falls, just to make sure it's vortex doesn't suck us in and now we've entered the rapid, we're dropping steep and fast, looking down upon (Yeah!) even careening towards the evil V-Wave which even now look like the Devil rubbing his hands together in sick anticipation of the ass-whooping it will deliver me.

My line is good. I square up for the V-Wave. The V-Wave should be called the Foxhole, because—you know—there are no atheists in foxholes. What's it like punching through the V-Wave? Imagine a sixth-grade

kid running the football into the center of Florida State's defensive line.

I give one last push into the V-Wave and pull my oars out of the water, duck down and brace.

Ahhhhh! Boof! We hit the waves with enough impact that airbags would have deployed if we had them. The wall of water I see collapsing over us, just before I squeeze my eyes shut, could easily be mistaken for a calving glacier. The two waves converge and swallow us like an amoeba swallowing a paramecium. The V-Wave folds the raft into a shape I've only seen in the Kama Sutra.

All kinds of things happen when you encounter the V-Wave. The V-Wave is like a giant reset button. No matter how good your line, or how square your entry, anything can happen while you're in there and you can emerge on the other side with a broken oar, or heading off in the wrong direction, or upside down.

Our raft tilts severely to the starboard and I am washed out of my seat. I am holding on to the oars for support but since they're secured to nothing they are no support at all. It's like riding a bull with a loose rope. I am washed out of my seat, pushed across the frame and nearly off the raft. I let go of the oar handles and grab hold of the oar tower as I am be-



*An 18-foot raft is completely buried in the V-Wave. Photo by Dave Spillman.*

ing carried off the boat. I watch the raft rolling over farther and farther. And then I'm swamped by another enormous wave and this one knocks me out of the boat and into the churning, swirling river. I open my eyes to find that I'm engulfed in a chocolaty darkness. I don't know if my raft has flipped or if I've just been washed off the boat.

I kick and swim for the surface and still all I see is chocolaty darkness. Kick, swim, kick swim. Darkness.

My lungs are screaming, I want desperately to take a breath. Kick, swim. Remind myself not to breathe. Getting panicky.

Time passes slowly when you're holding your breath underwater. I have probably only been underwater for less than ten seconds but, with my lungs bursting, it feels like much longer.

Kick, kick, swim, swim.

I've been pulling for the surface forever! How is it that I haven't reached the surface yet? Why is everything still dark? Am I underneath the raft? I reach up, feeling for the raft. I don't feel the raft.

When you're drowning, when you're fighting for your survival, your senses are overloaded by a blizzard of incoming data and information. It's all too much to take in and process. It's overwhelming. But somehow, in this blizzard of information storming past me, an important snowflake of data slips in and makes itself known to my overloaded neurons. Its a little dispatch sent from a distant synaptic outpost and it says, "Hey dumbass! You're not drowning. You're not underwater. You're hat is just pulled down over your eyes."

I stop swimming and lift my soggy hat from my eyes.

*Oh! Sweet!*

I'm alive! Hell, I'm not even in the water, I'm still on the boat. My two peeps in the front of the raft are still facing downstream, slamming into the waves like good little wave punchers. I don't think they even noticed my panicked antics. But the people watching from the scout overlook must have been wondering what the hell I was doing.

I climb back into my seat, grab my oars and start squaring up for Big Kahuna. After making a few pushes with my left oar I realize that it has come free of the oar tower! It's useless to me. I look downriver to see how far away Big Kahuna is—it's right there!—and its building, lifting like a scorpion's tail, and I realize I don't have time to put my oar back in the tower. All I can do is pull backward on my right oar. I don't quite get the raft squared up enough before we hit Big Kahuna.

"Highside!!!"

I am—and this will surprise no river guide—the

only one who highsides. Big Kahuna washes over us and there's a moment where I feel the raft stall—like it does just before it flips—but we slide through the braking wave and into the tailwaves, safely on the other side. I stand and place my free left oar back into the oar lock as we wash through the rest of the tailwaves.

And we emerge exhilarated, amazingly upright, our neurons buzzing like an apiary. We can't help but scream like survivors. Spontaneous shouts of joy, surprise and life-lust are ripped from our souls like bikini-waxed hair. We're not so different than Ecstasy junkies at the height of a binge. Our skin is shivering from its cold water drenching, muscles quivering from their lactic ablutions, hearts palpitating from their adrenaline overload. Our faces are flushed. We tremble with euphoric-gasmic shudders o' relief that come from surviving a disaster.

The pulsing adrenaline scours our neurons clean of their gumminess, that gumminess that accrues from too much boredom, too much sedentary living. It is the solvent that cleans the gunk off the spark plug's electrode, leaving us hyperaware, hyperhedonic, overstimulated. We are bestowed now with increased sensitivity, exaggerated emotions. We are high on the thrill of living in the moment to moment.

It's a pretty good feeling. It feels like lightning has been churned into butter and is now melting deliciously on my tongue. Like some Hindu goddess with six arms—Kali is that you?—is massaging my id with Serotonin lotion. Rapture stops by for a booty call. I say come on in. Stay a while.

It's a feeling akin to enlightenment. Not quite there, but close enough to hear it breathing.

*Steven Wesley Law*

