



FOLLOWING
WHERE THE

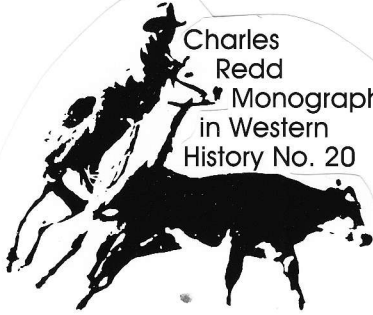
RIVER

BEGINS

JAMES C. WORK



Charles
Redd
Monographs
in Western
History No. 20



**FOLLOWING
WHERE THE
RIVER
BEGINS**

JAMES C. WORK

**A PERSONAL ESSAY ON AN ENCOUNTER
WITH THE COLORADO RIVER**

Colorado State University
Department of English
Fort Collins, Colorado

Brigham Young University
Charles Redd Center for Western Studies

The Charles Redd Monographs in Western History are made possible by a grant from Charles Redd. This grant served as the basis for the establishment of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University

Center editor: Howard A. Christy

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Work, James C.

Following where the river begins : a personal essay on an encounter with the Colorado River / James C. Work.

p. cm. — (Charles Redd monographs in western history; no. 20)

ISBN 1-56085-059-0

1. Colorado River (Colo.—Mexico)—Description and travel.
2. Colorado River Region (Colo.—Mexico)—Description and travel.
3. Work, James C.—Journeys—Colorado River Region (Colo.—Mexico)

I. Title. II. Series.

F788.W875 1991

917.91'30453—dc20

91-36526
CIP

© 1991 by Charles Redd Center for Western Studies,
Brigham Young University. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

Distributed by Signature Books, 350 S. 400 E., Suite G4,
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

Contents

Introduction		1
PART ONE	The First Day of Class	3
PART TWO	The Continental Divide	15
PART THREE	The Canyon of Wooded Glens	27
PART FOUR	Windmills, and No Wind	35
PART FIVE	Scoping the Ark	43
PART SIX	The Stumbling Runner and the Slender Buddha	55
PART SEVEN	The Mighty River to Moab	67
Epilogue		81

Introduction

Although I make my living as a teacher and scholar, this is not a scholarly work. It is not about history, nor geology, nor psychology, nor the social relationship between professors and pupils. This is a journey through one man's inner landscape, a ramble from the valleys where the shadow of doubt seems perpetual to the heights which seem, like the mountains, to be imperceptibly shrinking each year.

My aim is only domestic and purely private, as Montaigne wrote when he penned the first specimens of the essay genre. Montaigne offered his to his relatives and friends so that, when they had lost him, they might "recognize in my essays some characteristics of my habits and humors, and thus have a way to keep their knowledge of me more complete, more alive."

To those who know me and those who do not, I offer this essay along with a professorial admonition: go and find your headwaters, but do not dwell in them; anticipate confluences, and rejoice in them; and wherever you are on the river, make that your river of most moment.



“In 1976, . . . the Big Flood scoured a wide, two-lane asphalt highway—*this* highway—completely out of the {Thompson} Canyon . . . here in the Narrows.” *Photographs courtesy of the City of Loveland (CO).*

The First Day of Class

Glacier Basin Campground, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Perhaps I'm just anxious to get into more remote wilderness, perhaps I have just seen too many of these government-operated complexes, or perhaps I am experiencing that old familiar first-day-of-class cynicism; whatever the cause, I don't feel particularly thrilled to be here. A system of tidy gravel streets divides the meadow and forest into one hundred and fifty-two individual, family, and group "sites." When you drive in, you do not need to set foot on the ground. You just roll down your window and tell the seasonal "ranger" that you made a reservation through Ticketron; from his window he hands you a map and a brochure and you are on your way to your site.

Loop B (One Way), Site 12 (Groups Only). Sitting in proper pre-determined optimal locations you will find your dining table and your cooking grill, anchored in concrete. The choice of where to pitch your tent is up to you. This is a tent site area. Recreational vehicles have their own site area elsewhere and must park where the recreation engineers have decided that they must park. They must park in exactly the same place as every other RV before them. But with your tent you have a choice, and you will choose the level, rectangular spot, the place where the pine needles and pebbles have been swept away by hundreds of tent-pitchers who have slept there before you.

Your site is also within sight of the restroom, with its flush toilets (Please Do Not Wash Dishes Here). Every site, as a matter of fact and considerate federal planning, is in view of the restroom. No site is sighted. When I was a mere lad among these mountains, we called them "outhouses," or something more graphic but less euphonic; but when they have running water and flush toilets and skylights and ventilation fans, they deserve the filling station—excuse me, the "service" station—designation: restroom. There are even photosensitive cells to turn on the lights at dusk and snap them off again at dawn; the National

Park Service determines the minimum amount of daylight needed to define "sunrise."

You may stroll on the trails here, or walk the campground's gravel streets and inspect all the other tents and recreational vehicles. Perhaps you would rather get a group together for a turf-ripping game of volleyball or football. Your playing field is a delicate glacial meadow; it is like the oval arena of an enormous coliseum, and the stadium wall is a million-year-old moraine.

You may listen to an evening lecturer deliver a canned all-audience, all-purpose, nonpromotional slide talk at the rustic amphitheater; or you might want to just kick back and listen to some music. Well, it is actually cassette cacophony in stereo, emanating from Group Site Number 11 (tonight featuring a nasal engagement with Willie Nelson and live accompaniment—a spoon drumming a garbage can, and someone trying to beat out a bongo rhythm on a picnic table). If Willie's wailin' doesn't fit your musical taste, tune into Group Site Number 12 instead, where the tape player is presenting low-fidelity punk rock accompanied by a live percussion section of Dubble Bubble.

It occurs to me that if all the Walkmen and stereophones and Hitachis were ever to get together and agree on a single pitch and a common rhythm, that whole vast moraine wall out there might, like Jericho's, come tumbling down. What would we do if that immense range of rock began to roll down through the meadows? Jump into our vehicles, of course, limber up the cameras and videocams, and drive closer. A traffic jam of shutter-snappers would soon block the path of the avalanche. Kodacolor kamikazes. Charge into that photo opportunity! Damn the light values! I have not yet begun to compose my shot! Do I exaggerate? Have *you* ever seen a tourist with an Instamatic shooting a picture of a deer that is standing at least three hundred yards away? Or the guy with the 500 mm lens, who is walking up to a bull elk in rutting season?

Climb any hill where you can take a peek over that high moraine of unstable stone, and you will discover another picture: the topless granite pyramids of the Rocky Mountains beyond, unseen from the campground. The Winnebago trekkers are confronted by that stern mass unexpectedly, as they round the end of the moraine; they stomp the gas pedal and hurry like little hard-shell insects to get up the Front Range passes, through the shadowed canyons, and back out into the safe, flat, open country beyond. Their haste will be silent and careful, like Hannibal's legions quietly sneaking through the looming Alps.

But the Winnebagos and Sportsmen, the Airstreams and Good Sams will not be underway until morning. Right now, their doors are closed and the cold blue-grey glow of television sets can be seen at the windows. It is near twilight. The restroom lights will soon come on. The moon may come up. Stars may come out. The evening interpretive program will definitely be held.

And now the sun slides down atop the Front Range, glissades along one shoulder of Longs Peak. Incredible intensities of light, the kind that happen just before sunset, make brilliant corridors through the forest. Streaks of light, nearly horizontal, shine past stone spires, through narrow aisles in the trees. Bright stripes and long shadows cut across the wide moraine meadow. This day's final sunbeams, thin and pale, sneak between the trees to infiltrate our camp. They become a backlight for wisps of smoke rising from my after-coffee cigar.

This is a camp of youth, here on the lap of the Front Range. Broad and level before me, a green gleam in that last ray of sun, the oldest moraine park in the Rocky Mountains takes its evening rest, free of those millions of tons of ice which formed it. But why is it, I wonder, that I sit here remembering the ice? From some primordial corner of my subconscious there has come a dread of that ancient perpetual cold. I feel it when the night breezes come off the Continental Divide carrying that chilly scent of old icepacks and snow. Once at a lake well below timberline, in a month well into summer, my wife and I paused in our evening walk; a change in the wind, hardly noticeable, introduced a new smell to the pine forest. We looked at each other. "Snow," we said, and stood there sniffing at the air with flared nostrils, like a couple of Neanderthals. Tonight there is a teasing, fleeting hint of that same old smell. But the ice age is gone, and it is as if this open park will never again be under the burden of glaciers.

At our group site, young people are strumming guitars, glad to be free of whatever ancient pressures have formed *them*. "Abilene" is the song this evening. Folks down there don't treat you mean, in Abilene. Where, none of them seems curious to know, *is* Abilene?

That much, at least, seems consistent. They are not curious about anything, as far as I can tell. Perhaps if they were from flatland farms, or from small towns, they would be more intrigued by these new surroundings. But they are from urban centers where life is restless, always moving from one surrounding to another. They "watch" music on videos, their finger on the remote control button ready to change channels. They spend hours aimlessly cruising in cars, looking for each other. They gather in

the mall. If they find themselves alone, they reach out to touch — anyone — on the telephone. When they find themselves away from malls and cars and television, where they could make their own solo discoveries on a Rocky Mountain moraine, their reaction is to avoid being curious about it. Instead, they stay clustered together near the camp and near the bus. The problem is that they will do the same thing intellectually when we get down to our lessons. If they have curiosity, I can teach them: if they do not have curiosity, I can only occupy their time.

For the sake of a little distance, or perhaps for the sake of a little symbolism, I remove myself further from the guitar crowd. I assume my pose, my attitude of contemplation. My seat is a patch of meadow located between the ancient mountain moraine and the recent youths — a bit closer to the youths than to the mountains, I am amused to notice.

From here, I can look them over. From here, some of them begin to look less like urbanites and more like individuals. But they are still strange individuals. One kid's haircut looks like a wig made out of used pipe cleaners; another student is wearing enough leather and chains to harness a team of carriage horses. They appear to be crying out for attention, but they are actually mainstream residents of large cities, just ordinary youngsters trying to look like somebody. Somebody on MTV, most likely. What the heck: I used to try to look like Roy Rogers.

Not one of them wants to walk over here and start a discussion with me; I don't see one of them that I would walk over to talk to, either. It's a bad sign for a teacher to resent having students nearby, a sign of impending "burnout." Maybe I need a sabbatical. Maybe I should get into some other business. What would Roy Rogers do?

It is a welcome evening, at least. As soon as the sun is gone, the mountain cold drops down on us like someone opened a freezer door. It was a relief to get out of the big bus and out into some air that was not "conditioned." We spent the day driving from our Colorado Springs campus to this campground on the east side of Rocky Mountain National Park. It would be more accurate to say that we were driven: Harold is the ex-army driver of the college's venerable bus, a Trailways castoff. Sitting behind Harold, we hurtled north along the interstate highway and amid the foothills to Denver, then through the city's Chinese-puzzle traffic routes and out into the farm country, then turned west into the valleys of the foothills, heading for Big Thompson Canyon.

Along this route into the Rockies, the first sign of the mountains comes in the form of a long hogback sliced in half where the highway engineers

excavated their right-of-way. It is known locally as Devil's Backbone, a name which is very accurate. In a process of unimaginable duration, an ancient sea floor of lime-rich sediment rose more than a mile above the level of the sea. Hardened into rock, this section tilted and tilted until the old sedimentary layers were vertical. Wind, rain, frost, and tremblings of the earth then carved it into a shape resembling the vertebrae of some incredible monster — or demon.

The highway zips through the man-made gap in the Backbone, follows the level flood plain for a few miles, then starts to climb again, up around the shoulder of a sandstone uplift, and then drops down once again to cross a troughlike little valley. On the far side of this valley, the slopes become steeper. The highway has to turn and head into a natural cut in the slope, a gap between the cuestas. On the other side is Triassic Lyons Sandstone — bright pink. Further on, the stone becomes brick red: the Pennsylvania formation, 135 million years old. Roughly.

Joe Gordon, the institute director, turns on the speaker system and hands me the microphone. Through a gap in the cuesta, the bus rolls on over the Triassic, picks up speed, and zips down the Pennsylvania formation. Directly ahead is the *really* old stuff: Precambrian granite. How long ago was it? — a billion years, perhaps? — this grey wall in front of us was molten, a thick liquid layer oozing over older layers, building a thicker mass, trapping crystals in itself, making weird shapes like folded cloth that would be there when it cooled, becoming denser and denser.

Harold aims the bus at the Narrows. It is a V-shaped gouge, barely wide enough for both the highway and the river. In 1976, it proved wide enough only for the river. Overnight, the highway was gone. In a single weekend, one hundred and forty-five people died here, my brother put himself at risk in order to save others, and I had one of the stranger experiences of my life. Joe wants me to tell the students how the Big Flood scoured a wide, two-lane asphalt highway — *this* highway — completely out of the canyon. Joe can be a sadistic son-of-a-gun at times, and this is one of those times. Here we are, trapped in a steel casket on wheels, heading up the river into that deep slit where more than a hundred people died, and he wants these kids to hear all the details.

It's not often that I get an atmosphere like this for my lectures: the walls of the Narrows are grim and gray today, seeming to hold the pavement prisoner. Even in sunshine, this drab gray stone feels oppressive. With overcast sitting overhead like a lid, it seems almost malevolent. In Major Powell's Grand Canyon diary, written during his exploration in 1869, the

scientific-sounding tone changed to pessimism and gloom each time his tiny group entered walls of granite. When the boats were plunging downriver between walls of marble or sandstone or even lava, the group took heart; each time they ran back into the granite, the strange depression set in again. Here in the Narrows of the Thompson, I feel hints of the same dread.

The river today is a boiling brown soup of spring runoff, and dark storm clouds make a roof over the granite slit. In 1976, some even darker clouds formed over the upper canyon. It was during the late afternoon and evening of July 31, a Saturday; unusually large masses of moist air arrived, and equally unusual was that they came from both the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Adding to the potential for disaster, a Canadian cold front arrived on that same day, which was also out of the ordinary. The moist masses and the cold masses met, directly above the Thompson River watershed. There they mixed, and the mixture began to rise like bread dough. The wet air went straight up, climbing until it had formed a soggy thunderhead more than sixty thousand feet high.

There was one more odd thing about that Saturday's weather. The wind was blowing lightly from the east, holding the moisture against the Rockies. In the winter, this would be an indication that a heavy snowstorm was coming. The saturated, stationary thunderhead hovered over the Thompson drainage, gathering more and more moisture, becoming an airborne reservoir sixty-two thousand feet deep. And then . . . it let go. In Colorado, the average annual rainfall is roughly twelve inches. "And last year," a state joke goes, "we got our twelve inches on August 5." On this July 31, it was no joke. In the four hours between 6:30 and 10:30 P.M., twelve inches of rain came down. More followed. Much more.

Back to our geology lesson. The highway enters the mountains by way of the Narrows, a V-shaped slit in the granite. If the ancient glaciers had flowed through here, I explained to the students, these "narrows" would be U-shaped instead. They would be wider and straighter, more like a long valley smoothed out by glacial grinders of ice and rock. Up where the July 31 thunderburst came to earth, the narrows open out into just such a valley. Up there, the ancient ice and subsequent erosion have created flat gravel "parks" with very little soil in them to absorb water. They are veined by a system of wide, shallow drainages.

The flat parks and the U-shaped canyons gathered up the deluge. When the resulting wall of water got to the narrow, V-shaped part, it was twenty feet high. It made kindling out of cabins, motels, wayside businesses; it

took automobiles and trucks and tossed them in a churn with boulders ten and twenty feet thick, hurling the whole muddy, deafening mass out onto the flat land between the *cuestas* and the hogback. It ground up the highway, with all of the asphalt and all the fill rock, and washed it away like sand. It scoured the whole canyon clean. It killed 145 human beings, some of whom were found miles beyond the mouth of the Narrows. Six were never found at all.

I point out the high-water mark to the students. It is hard to see from a bus, because in the narrower stretches it is thirty or forty feet up on the wall. I tell tales of seeing twisted, unrecognizable debris that used to be homes and fences, cars and utility poles; I talk about the dozens and dozens of battered, sodden bodies that came down on the flood. I relate accounts of people who were trapped in absolute blackness with the rain and the flood howling like a holocaust around their cabins; I tell how some people clung all night to steep hillsides where they had climbed to safety, there to tremble in the dark with that inescapable roar all around them, punctuated by the unearthly sound of huge granite boulders thudding together in the water. Often, somewhere below in the blackness, they would hear propane storage tanks floating the flood, hissing and banging. They could smell the gas. Some heard victims calling for help, never to be heard again.

Our students watch the canyon walls go by, staring through the tinted bus windows with indifferent detachment. Joe looks at them, looks at me, and shrugs. We have a long way to go.

I slouch back into my seat, more depressed by these students than I am by the gray walls of stone. My thoughts are focused on the flood, reliving the story I did *not* tell. At the time, riding up in the bus toward the anti-septic campground, the story seemed unrelated to this group. But later, down near the Colorado River, it would take on a spooky significance.

I have to begin by saying that my older brother and I have always led lives whose courses rarely intersect. If I saw myself as Roy Rogers, I usually cast him in the role of John Wayne. While I got along well with our high school teachers, Al seemed to live under the constant threat of suspension from school. He went to Alaska: I went to college. I became a professional student: he became a union electrician and businessman. While I was driving a Volkswagen bus and wearing a beard, he drove a Jeep and became captain of the sheriff's four-wheel-drive posse.

In 1976 he was living up in Estes Park. I was living in Fort Collins, forty-five miles away. On July 31, that fateful Saturday afternoon, a light

rain was falling in Fort Collins and I heard on the 5:00 news that a "stationary front" and "rain cells" of unusual size were hanging over the eastern slope of the Rockies. On the late-night news, I heard the first fragmentary reports of a flood in the canyon. None of the news people seemed to know what was actually going on, other than that the state patrol had closed the canyon and that the telephone lines were down. But by that time, one victim of the flood was already a dead man: State Patrol Sergeant Hugh Purdy, driving up the flooded canyon to assess the situation before sending his men into it, had been trapped and drowned. Others were dying. Volunteer rescue groups, including the sheriff's four-wheel-drive patrol, were being assembled. I went to bed and slept, but woke up several times during the night with the peculiar feeling that someone had been talking to me, there in the room. Each time I awoke, I lay there expecting the phone to ring. I did not know why it *should* ring, but I had the feeling that it would.

On Sunday morning, the size of the disaster was becoming apparent. I ate my breakfast, read my newspapers, and started to go about my Sunday routine. Something still bothered me, and I could only pace the house. Somebody, I felt, was trying to call me.

I tried the telephone several times but could not reach either my parents or my brother. The lines were all down to Estes Park, but radio operators had assured the media that all was well in Estes. No flood damage up there. There were rumors of damage to the dam, below town, but no danger to residents upstream. Somehow I wasn't reassured, and that feeling persisted that somebody was trying to call me.

I told my wife that I was going downtown. As I drove, this odd "signal" became stronger. Two realizations hit me simultaneously, right at the intersection of Shields Street and Mulberry Avenue. First, I suddenly knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was Al who was trying to contact me. Second, I knew that I had to drive to the Fort Collins sheriff's office. On Sunday? With a county emergency going on?

I don't remember much about the deputy I found on duty, except that he, too, was worried. Yes, he had met Al on a few occasions but didn't know him too well. Yes, he imagined the patrol was out in the canyon. No, the radio contact was poor, and no personal messages were being sent. Between the various state emergency groups and the national guard and ham operators, the radio frequencies were jammed. He hadn't heard any messages about the patrol, but there might have been some.

At this point I still knew next to nothing about the details of the flood: logically, I should have gone home and let the matter drop. But that "call"

was still coming through. I walked around the desk and put my finger on the big county map above the dispatcher's desk.

"Look," I said, "I've been all over those hills around the Big Thompson Canyon. The highway is gone" (how did I know that?), "but a guy with a Jeep could go clear over to the Carter Lake road, up the Pole Hill road and . . . right here . . . drop into the canyon. There's an old access road there. And another one up here, by Waltonia. I can do it. If it's open, I can guide some rescue guys in there."

I pleaded with the deputy. I argued. I begged for a four-wheel-drive, anything. I would borrow one somewhere. I could help.

What I wasn't telling him was that my whole head, even my guts, were being twisted up like dry rawhide knots. Al needed me, and I didn't know why.

In the end, the deputy persuaded me to just go home. He took my number, in case the sheriff could use me, but told me the best thing to do was to wait and see. They had plenty of help. More would just be in the way. So I went home and pattered around in my workshop, my mind still registering my brother's need to get in touch with me. There in the workshop, it seemed a good idea to get my carbiners and piton hammer together and put them in my pack.

I never did get up the canyon, not until a week had gone by and we drove up by the longer route to see my parents. And that was when I learned that my brother had been a hero of the flood. Responding to the mobilization call, he and Jim Graffe had climbed into his Jeep and started down the canyon in a heavy downpour. Their job was to warn residents to evacuate. The river was already churning, but the main surge was yet to come.

Not far into the canyon, at about 7:00 P.M., the two men spotted a cabin afloat in the river; it had jammed up against some rocks on the opposite side, but could drift off again as the water continued to rise. They could see two women inside, the younger one waving hysterically toward the beam of the Jeep's headlights. Lacking ropes, Al and Jim commandeered a nylon clothesline, tied one end to the bumper, and waded through the chest-high water to secure the other end to the cabin porch. Jim was hit by a floating tree and knocked off his feet, but recovered. They worked together to bring back first one woman, then the other, trusting their lives to that fragile rope and hoping that the cabin would not shift again before they got back to the Jeep. In recognition of this act, the men were awarded lifesaving certificates.

Later, further down canyon, my brother had to watch as two people drove off the eroding highway and into the floodwaters, never to be seen alive again.

The posse worked all through the evening and into the night, searching for survivors, seeing bodies that they could not recover. Finally, they were trapped. All the routes of escape were washed out or blocked by landslides, and Al found himself in charge of thirty wet, frightened people. The water rose. The Jeeps were no longer safe. Reluctantly, he directed the caravan to the last bit of solid ground where the water was only up to the axles and ordered the group to abandon the vehicles. As they struggled up the steep, soggy mountainside in pitch blackness, Al made a last radio report to the dispatcher. He was more than half convinced that his own death was waiting out there in the dark, and his mind was full of final thoughts of home and family. His frightened wife overheard that radio message, saying that they were abandoning the Jeeps. Moments later, my wakeful night began.

The bus growls over the last hill, and we get our first view of the Estes Park valley with Longs Peak standing sentinel in the background. Everything looks peaceful and still. The clouds have broken, and those blue Colorado skies are opening up for us. Joe hands me the microphone.

"Want to tell them the history of Estes Park?" he says.

"Not particularly," I reply.

* * *

The cigar burns short and goes out. My eye happens to fall on a dim blur of blue tent that I can see over there at the edge of the trees. My tent. Evening air chills my neck and arms. An overpowering urge suddenly hits me, a desire to get my shivering body undressed and into my bedroll. But not to sleep. I want the feeling of solitude I get when that thin fabric is surrounding me, keeping warmth and sounds inside, and I want my little metal jigger of brandy warmed over my candle lantern. I want pillow talk in a sleeping bag.

That same night breeze that is putting goosebumps on my arms is also brushing the treetops and talking to the moraine and meadow. In five minutes, the very last bit of dim light will be gone. It will be too dark to write in my journal—but writing pages in a journal is the nearest thing to pillow talk that I have tonight. I could go on writing, in the tent, with the candle lantern; but if I go into the tent, I will have to face the fact that she

is not there, and in my present mood I do not want to admit that. So, instead, I walk toward the campfire, thinking of another time, of a high-country camp where she and I were alone. It's finally time to join the students and the singing and the guitars.



“The Continental Divide . . . is the rooftop of the North American continent. . . . The air at twelve thousand feet . . . chills the curve at the back of your mouth and even makes your teeth hurt.”

The Continental Divide

The music of the evening guitars becomes softer and the tunes become more mellow, and one by one our campers rise and drift off in the direction of their tents. This pattern, at least, is the same every year. The harsh music is silenced; the loud laughter and smart remarks subside as the night grows darker, deeper, and colder. The last few students who stay up are grouped close together, speaking in muted voices. Then they too are gone, and the black night is full of silence.

Within the space of an eye-flick, it seems, it's morning again.

Most of the year, I sleep indoors and find each morning duplicating the one before it. Each morning I rise and wash the sleep from my eyes, then wander toward the kitchen. Going past the door to the den, I see my desk and the ungraded papers from the night before, next to the pile of unanswered letters, next to a crusty coffee cup. In the kitchen, the cat is usually waiting for me to open the back door. She knows the routine. Night came and went while I slept, and I have once again awakened without even noticing that nothing has changed. It doesn't occur to me even to think about it. Everything is just as it was, and the new day of life starts with a comfortable sameness. It is not particularly interesting, but it is comfortable.

Sleeping out of doors, however, whether in the mountains or out on the tall-grass prairie, I always wake up with the feeling that the morning has taken me by surprise. Some mornings I am almost amazed to find myself there. Somewhere during the night, during those six or eight hours of my unconsciousness, the mountains seemed to go away into the blackness, or the rim of the prairie melted into darkness: when I first open my eyes in that sweet early dazzle of day, the landscape seems to rush back to me again.

The feeling reminds me of being at the ocean on a morning when the fog is low and thick, and all I see of that vast ocean is the narrow band of water lapping the sand at my feet—and then the fog burns off and

vanishes, and I stand transfixed by the sight of all that ocean stretching toward a boundless horizon. It was always there; yet somehow in the fog it was *not* there.

And here on the front range of the Rocky Mountains, on the first morning of my trip with these students, it has happened again. Through the open flap of my tent I see the mountains, which have just now returned from some nighttime chamber, fresh green under a columbine-colored sky. They seem brand new, ages old. The air is fresh and new and cold, and there is no breeze at all. Today something new will begin, I think, because yesterday's world went away with the twilight mountains and this morning the mountains have returned without it.

I pull on my pants and shirt and windbreaker, drag my sleeping bag out of the tent and lay it open to the dry, fresh air, and then I stroll toward the breakfast table.

Breakfast is student-group style, which means grabbing anything within reach, shoving it into the mouth as fast as possible, and grabbing for more. More than a dozen people crowd toward one end of the table, snatching what they can. The student trio responsible for arranging today's meals has decided to fix breakfast by simply opening the food lockers and yelling, "Breakfast!" The effect is similar to what it would be if the city zoo decided to feed the animals by dumping all the food in the middle of the park and opening the cages.

Hands shoot out and grab oranges, apples, cans of juice: they snatch milk cartons, cereal packets, instant coffee. Above the din of this feeding frenzy I hear individuals demanding to know why they can't find plates or utensils: obviously they ignored our list of required personal equipment. Some cannot wait for the water to boil, or are afraid that someone will beat them to it if they do, so there is a rush to pour it lukewarm onto the instant oatmeal and powdered coffee.

I stand at the back of the mob, arms folded, holding my tin cup and aluminum plate. Gradually, the students drift away with full hands. None has taken notice of me. Not one has thought to say, "Oh, professor. Please, go ahead. Can I get you anything?" No respect for rank or age. So, I think as I stand there watching and waiting, this is the way we shall play the game this trip. I can insist that they treat me with deference; I can demand some respect and I will get it — as long as I am face to face with them. Or, I can become part of their group — a buddy, a pal, a good guy. Or I can accept the real challenge and earn some respect for myself.

Finally, the herd has its food and has dispersed. Among the wreckage I manage to fill my Sierra cup with dry shredded wheat cubes and find a bruised banana. I walk away from camp to break my fast in peace.

As I sit on my rock, munching dry cereal, I begin to brood. I've made a serious mistake in not bringing my own cooking outfit and some food. Perhaps in some town along our way I can stop and buy some basic survival munchies for myself, so I won't have to deal with these mass-meal situations and a bunch of rude adolescents. "Next trip," my notebook says, "bring backpack stove, coffee, hard fruit, and gorp. Bring cheese, brandy, and crackers." "*Someone* you go camping with," my small interior voice says, "has spoiled you, hasn't she?"

There is a heady aroma of fresh, real coffee coming from the group camp across the road. I wander over there, pretending that I am in search of a water spigot. Unlike ours, this camp is a model of efficiency. There are two portable kitchen boxes on legs; next to them, two gas stoves hiss under coffeepots, and frying pans sizzle under scrambled eggs and pancakes. This seems to be a group of young women—either scouts or a church group, I suspect. One young lady nods politely at me and smiles. This is what I should be doing, I think to myself, teaching some sort of disciplined group. I always envy my friends who teach at the Air Force Academy, with their students who march in ranks, never miss class, and say "Sir!" to every suggestion. Various officers who teach at the academy have told me that it is not like that at all, but still I cling to the fantasy of a truly respectful student body. It's the "Mr. Chips Syndrome," a classic foreshadowing of professorial burnout.

In spite of the young lady's friendly smile and my own despicable longings, I find I have too much pride to beg for a cup of coffee and a pancake. Instead, I slouch back past Frenzy Foods, swipe an orange, and go to my brooding-rock. West of here, the mountains wait. From these mountains flows the river of my childhood and of my youth. How different were the mornings then! I would sit in a warm kitchen, gorging on mother's pancakes or waffles or scrambled eggs and bacon, looking through the window and down the hill at the river. Sometimes a trout would rise, and breakfast would be forgotten. I had to sit still and eat everything that had been set before me, but in my boy-spirit I was already outside, running to be there before the trout-ripple faded downstream.

Today we are going to where that little mountain river takes its head; we are going to drive Up Top. "Up top" is a common colloquialism in western mountain towns. Almost every town in the mountains has a highway leading to a pass, or to a mountain top, and when someone says they spent the day "up top," that's where they were. My hometown's "up top" is the twelve-thousand-foot summit of Trail Ridge, a road two miles high where you can find the clearest atmosphere on this continent.

Three routes cross Trail Ridge, none of which could be built in today's West. First, there is the faint remnant of the old Ute Trail, a migratory route pre-dating the appearance of Europeans in the region. Somewhere in long-distant ages, even the Ute Trail was once a new concept, an idea in the mind of some primitive leader. But such trails will be seen no more. If a contemporary group of Native Americans set out to walk across a national park, they would need a parade permit, a series of wilderness camping permits (providing that they had reservations in advance), and liability insurance, and they would probably have to post a bond to insure that they would do no ecological damage. Trails—new trails—are now known as "impact," just as any contemporary pictograph is considered vandalism.

The Ute Trail impacted the tundra with a yard-wide groove through the thin soil and several fire-rings where the Indians camped. The wheel-inventors came along next and showed the Indians how to make an impact that would be more resistant to weather and to vegetative reclamation. The first automobile road to go "up top" was laid out in 1911, and soon the engineers of speed and progress were happily dynamiting switchbacks up the ridges, slashing through the forests, and filling the valleys with crushed mountains.

When construction began on the Fall River side of the Divide, it was done by convicts. Warden Tom Tynan took his crews—called "Tom Tynan's boys"—into the national park, where their first job was to cut down trees and build themselves log cabins. When I was a boy, I could hike to the remains of those cabins, and today I ski and hike through that same clearing that the convicts cut. In today's Rocky Mountain National Park, such a camp would be unthinkable. Today's work crews live in cabins outside the park and are bussed to work each day. Trees are cut only if the proper impact statements have been filled out.

Convicts could not be used today, either. Human rights groups would see to that. Breaking rock, hauling materials by hand, shoveling gravel at ten thousand to nearly twelve thousand feet of altitude? Cruel and in-

human. At the time, apparently, it was not human rights but politics that put an end to the use of convict labor crews. Colorado penitentiary wardens, not too many years ago, were big political figures. So was the controversial superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park. The state was paying for the road, which would become U. S. Highway 34 in the course of time, but park administrators insisted upon saying exactly where and how the road should be built. The question of who would get the contract, and from whom, and whether commercial transportation within the park would be freely competitive or monopolistic, almost kept the road from being built at all.

Fall River Road eventually opened in 1920. It linked the towns of Estes Park and Grand Lake, Colorado, and created new vehicular thrills for the tourists while it boosted both towns into the vacation business. Fights over control of the road continued, and in earnest. Enos Mills, who had been instrumental in establishing Rocky Mountain National Park, now found himself fighting against a park administration that wanted to issue a monopolistic license; under their plan, *one* transportation company would be allowed to run busses on Fall River Road. Enos Mills died in 1922, but the jurisdictional battle went on and on. When Colorado's political winds shifted, the new state officials finally gave up; in 1929, the state turned the governance of the road over to national park authorities.

The effect was immediate: the Rocky Mountain National Park superintendent's office announced plans to build a better route. "Better," in this case, meant more capacity for traffic. Today this highway is known as Trail Ridge Road, and it is an ecological scar of such costly proportions that today's national park officials admit that it should never have been built. Given our concern for environment nowadays, and the cost of building a highway under ecological impact rules, Trail Ridge would be a political impossibility.

* * *

Our bus leaves the campground and begins the long uphill crawl toward the Continental Divide on Trail Ridge. Professor Tom Lyon, one of my two colleagues on the Wilderness Experience, is eager to get the students out onto the tundra, but we balk at using the usual tourist spots, those places where rangers have built redwood walkways and have erected metal signs which "interpret" the flora. This is a nature writing class, and we are not here to read our lessons from government plaques.

Joe Gordon sports a baseball cap emblazoned with his administrative title: "El Jeffe." He keeps leaning across the aisle of the bus to show me a dotted line on his souvenir map of the park. The old Ute Trail. When we get to it, he says, we'll stop and let the students out so that they can hike the trail. We will meet them further up the road at the visitor center. I keep trying to explain that while there *is* a trail, up above timberline it fades. In many places, there are only stone cairns indicating where the rangers think the original trail was. Tom and I vote down the idea of turning the students loose up here with only a sketchy map to follow and several miles of tundra to negotiate. Joe hired us because of what we know about mountains; and we know, from experience, that this tundra only *seems* benign, with its tiny flowers and cushion tufts of grass and outcrops of storm-softened granite. There are crevices in it; its distances are deceptive; exhaustion comes easily at two miles above sea level, and so does hypothermia. Tundra offers the inexperienced enthusiast a dozen ways to vanish, to die.

If El Jeffe wants to lose the students, he will have to do it elsewhere. I can't have all those breakfast-bloated cadavers rotting away on the watershed of my childhood river.

This is the rooftop of the North American continent, where no trees grow. The summer, which is only eight weeks long from snowmelt to snowfall, brings lumpy patches like faded bulges of velvet in between the hard-cornered granite rocks. They are miniature rock gardens, struggling reservations of extremely vulnerable vegetation. So, before letting the students out of the bus to run amok, I start exercising my professorial authority. First, I instruct them to stay on the rocks and off of the vegetation wherever possible. We are going to hike up a small peak behind the visitor center, but there is no "official" trail and so we have to protect the tundra as we go. I warn them not to run, although I don't really need to bother: the air at twelve thousand feet seems devoid not only of all pollution, but of oxygen as well. Running a few steps makes the lungs burn. It is also air that is refrigerated: a sudden huge gulp of it chills the curve at the back of your mouth and even makes your teeth hurt.

In defiance of my professorial wisdom, or as a joke on me, nature has placed the tundra rocks much too far apart. It has been a wet and early spring, so the moss-pads and the islands of flowers have turned into a virtual carpet. It is impossible not to step on flowers. The students begin mocking my instructions as they spread out to go up the mountain.

"Watch out there, Fred. You stepped on an itsy flower!" "Maybe we were supposed to bring rocks from the parking lot."

I find Tom and we finish the climb together, separating ourselves from the chattering clusters of students. He points in excitement at the number of flowers that are here and can name every one of them. A dozen species are in bloom simultaneously. We carefully step around flax, phlox, sky pilot, alpine daisy, miniature violets with heads smaller than shirt buttons, alpine clover, and king's crown. King's crown displays shade after shade of lavender, the lavender giving way to brilliant whites and hypnotic blues, which blend with regal shades of purple and soft moss green. The whole plant would make a perfect cushion on which to display emeralds. It has thousands of perfect lilliputian blossoms in a patch no larger than a tea-saucer; tiny green leaves and flowers ranging from pink to deep purple transform it into a living nosegay. This particular specimen is probably a hundred years old, with a taproot reaching down six feet into the cold granite crack.

Lie down. Get yourself nose-close to the fuzzy short grass between these elfin bouquets of jewel-flowers, and you will see that there is also a whole world of animal life on the tundra. This half-moon depression in a spot of glacial sand is the track of a young elk who crossed over the divide early this morning. The dew was still on the soil, making it soft enough to take his imprint. Over here are some droppings of the little pika, and over there are places where the grass has been neatly nipped off at the base and carried away. So! The tundra rodent is busily harvesting his hay to stockpile against winter. Here you see his little crop of grass spread on a rock to dry; that white mark next to the pika's food is the rude splatter from a raven's digestive tract, dropped here as he stood clutching this granite outcrop, leaning streamlined with squinting eyes into the cold wind. He is a true raven, this black giant of the tundra—bigger than any mere crow, and a predator as well as a scavenger. Next to you there—that topless tunnel, that groove in the grass, is the architecture of the vole, a kind of mountain mouse. When the snowpack was heavy up here, the voles cut tunnels in the matted grass, with the snow as the roof. The tunnels led from the burrows to the foodstores. And then the snow melted, leaving these troughs where tunnels used to be. In this particular trough, we see a sharp set of little tracks, but not the tracks of a vole: a high country weasel (an ermine, before May came) has found the route and followed it with hungry enthusiasm.

You found the ladybug eggs on the underside of that flower leaf, did

you? The ladybugs feed on gnat's eggs too small for you to see, even with a field lens, and on the microscopic larvae of minuscule ants. In turn, the pretty little horned lark who lives up here, that lovely bird with the lyrical morning song, feeds upon ladybugs. Bring your magnifier over here. Look at this dead horsefly. The body is scissored neatly in half, bisected, dead evidence of a horned lark snapping at a fly in midair. If you don't believe me, just watch the larks awhile as they devastate the horsefly population.

The body of our unfortunate insect—or this half of it, at least—lies amid mushrooms. Want to duplicate a mushroom this size? Take an eighth of an inch of orange spaghetti. Hollow one end of it and flare it out into a goblet shape, like a fairy thimble. Stick the other end in the ground. Now, add a hundred or more like it, and you will have a little mushroom jungle about the size of a quarter. These mushrooms are so small that a hundred of them cannot conceal half of a dead fly.

If you lie there long enough in the sun-warmed tundra, you will feel the granite mountain breathing and will hear its eternal heartbeat. You may not feel it in the sense of being able to call to a friend and say, "Come here! Listen to this mountain!" But if you remain there long enough, the beat of your own heart will match pace with the mountain's tempo, and your breathing will mimic the rising and falling of the tundra breeze. Stay until your body temperature is the temperature of the plants. Lie there; give yourself to the breathings, to the pulse, to the spirit of that place. You will begin to sense that our species did not rise from some steamy ooze; it did not crawl out of the sludgy glop of a long-since fossilized swamp; the man-animal realized its essence on a tundra slope two miles above the sea. Up there, higher than the topmost trickle of my river, you can begin to feel that the beginning happened only yesterday, and could happen again today.

Earlier in the year, in the avalanche season when the mountains nonchalantly shrug off the crusty cornices of winter, you might put your body to the earth and hear and feel a rumbling like the beginning of distant thunder. Thomas Hornsby Ferril, Colorado's poet laureate, wrote that it is the sound of the mountains falling down, that grain by granule and block by cliff they are destined to crumble and float down the snowmelt rivers to become forever seashore on some far-off sandy coast. But I have listened to this sound of the mountains rousing themselves in spring, and I believe it means that they are reaching for the sky.

The students gather again at the parking lot, having taken their snapshots and bought their candy bars and souvenirs at the tourist center. Loaded once more, the bus faces away from the tundra serenity and starts backfiring its way down the western slope of the Rockies like an old grouch plagued with morning flatulence. Down we roll, back down past the lower limit of the treeless alpine zone, down through the ship-mast stands of subalpine firs and spruces, back down into the gloomy green montane zone of lodgepoles and ponderosas. We catch a glimpse of the infant Colorado River, like a trickle of poured mercury shining across open beaver meadows and melting again into deep forests. I watch from the bus window until I can't see the river anymore and make myself a silent promise to come back, later, alone, and walk clear up to the headwaters of the river, to see for myself a place I have heard of. Up at the very top of the headwaters is a region of oddly-shaped ocherous rock formations marked on the map as the "Little Yellowstone."

The bus squeals and wheezes to a stop at the Rocky Mountain National Park Visitor Center. Riding along thinking about a solo trip into the Little Yellowstone, I have developed a sudden case of cartographic fever. This ailment, common to many who want to be anywhere but where they are, is marked by a fascination for maps. Sufferers like me can spend hours staring at little wavy lines and exotic place names, endlessly interpreting each contour. When the sickness hits me, I hunch over a map for hours, tracing unknown rivers from headwaters to confluences.

I head straight for the visitor center bookstore to buy a "quad" map of the park. I also inventory the selection of guidebooks and texts on flora and geology. The students, meanwhile, head straight for the restrooms. They glance disinterestedly at the displays on their way out of the building, buy cans of cold pop from the machine outside, and climb back aboard the bus to relax.

On the road again. Once we are past Grand Lake Village, the temperature begins to rise to uncomfortable levels. Soon we are beyond the deep ponderosa forests and out into sagebrush valleys bordered by rounded hills. From here on, the only tree zone we will see will be the "P-J" region — piñon and juniper.

El Jefe tells Harold to pull off the road and stop. He pulls out another of his free maps, a torn relic from the days when service stations actually gave them away. He and Harold study a thin blue line that crosses a rip in one of the folds. Tom and I lean over and try to get a look at it. The blue line appears to be a dirt road offering us a shortcut. And in keeping with

the announced plan of this trip, the road also follows the Colorado River. More or less. It could be too narrow for our bus, in places. "One place would be enough," growls Harold. There could be bridges of questionable load capacity. How much does the bus weigh, anyway? "Too much," says Harold. The road could have steep grades in it, and we recall only too well how the old diesel engine had to strain to get the bus, the passengers, and the luggage up to the top of Trail Ridge Road. Shall we look for this cutoff and take it, or not?

Go for it.

And so, near the village of Kremmling, Harold wheels the bus off the blacktop and onto a narrow dirt track that leads along the side of a treeless, sage-covered hill. Heavy with fuel and students and packs and supplies, the bus grumbles up and up and up the dirt road, shouldering itself between sagebrush thickets and slopes covered with Indian paintbrush. Near the top of the ascent, the road hangs on the side of a cliff. A couple of the guys lean out of their windows and reassure the rest of us that only the *outside* tires of the duals are hanging over the edge of the roadbed. "Saves the rubber," Harold says, through clenched teeth.

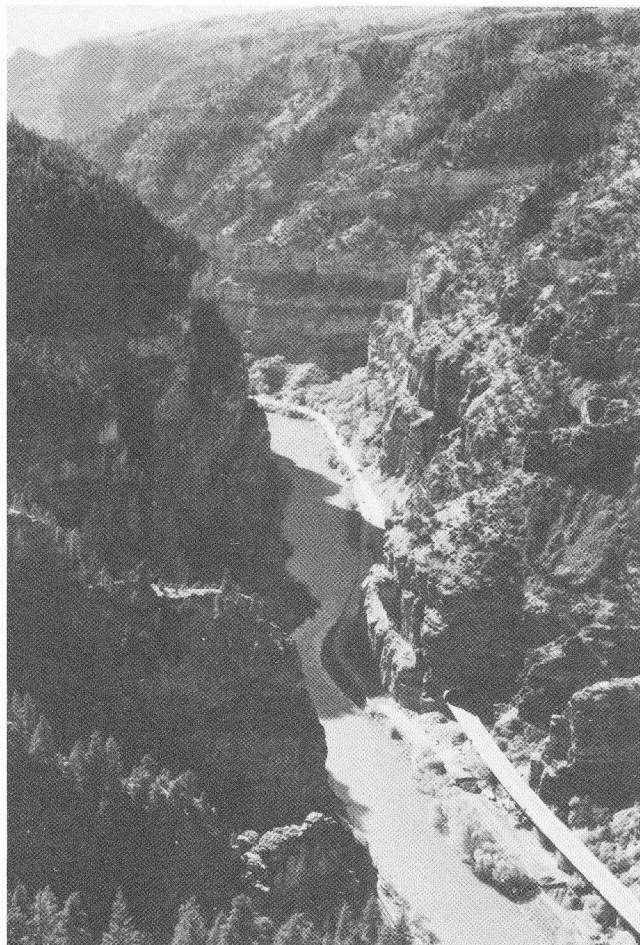
A general sigh of relief breaks out when the road gets around the last corner of the precipice and the land opens out onto the Colorado River — broad, more silver than blue under the columbine sky, calm, quietly flowing. Inviting. The road leading down to it is wider and less steep; we all sit back, release our death grips on the armrests, and listen to the sound of the bus grinding along in second and third gear, heading for a place that Joe's road map calls "State Bridge," where we will intersect the wide and paved highway that goes to Glenwood Springs.

I like this river. I have invested thousands of hours in the pursuit of trout, standing in icy rivers throwing away tiny steel hooks, expensively decorated with feathers and tinsel. I still know next to nothing about trout, but those hours have introduced me to the unique personalities of many and sundry rivers. The Snake River seems deep and ominous, not a comfortable river in which to wade. The Hoback is light and friendly, almost warm. The Poudre is "offish," as my mother would say — a disinterested river if ever there was one. With the Colorado, I expected to meet a belligerent river, a river that has been insulted with dams and wounded with irrigation gates and built upon and leveed into channels. A river with every reason to dislike the man-species.

Until this trip, the only part of the Colorado River I had known was the upper part, from the point where it meets Trail Ridge Road downstream

to Grand Lake. Along that stretch, it is a clear mountain stream fed by alpine snowfields and numberless little springs that flow out of countless aspen groves. In its Rocky Mountain valleys, the Colorado surprises you with sudden trout pools. You step into what looks like a solid barrier of high spruce and fir trees, and suddenly in front of you is a flat and shining surface embossed with rings from the rising trout. At such moments of discovery, the Colorado seems like an actress dramatically sweeping open a dark green curtain to reveal an exotic stage setting. Step close to the edge and let me dazzle you, she seems to say to the fisherman, or stay where you are and my perfume will seduce your senses.

Down by Kremmling, on the way to State Bridge, it is different. This is a Colorado River that I have never fished. It bounces over hundreds of stretches of small rapids, reminding me of a girl laughing as she skips a slow-turning rope. A kid on an inner tube could play in this river, or could just sit on the bank and throw sticks into the current. Along the calmer portions, the water reflects a cornflower-blue sky in a mirror framed by silver hills. It is not the angry river that I was expecting. Where it parallels the paved highway to Glenwood Springs, it is confined by the cliff and the roadway, but it still has an open and personable quality to it. Further downstream, way down there in sandstone canyons where it boils and seethes and works itself up into an excessively assertive state, where its face becomes mud-brown from eating whole mesas, the Colorado River still seems to welcome its visitors to float along it in rafts, or stroll along its steep sides and look into all the various theaters of living geology and petrified botany. It would be a mistake to label this river benevolent or polite or even genteel. You might say that it gives an impression of being open-minded, and you will not often meet a river more candid than the Colorado.



"Glenwood Canyon is less than fifteen miles long. In most places it is barely wide enough for the river, a railroad bed, and the highway." *Photograph courtesy of Colorado Department of Transportation.*

The Canyon of Wooded Glens

Two days and one hundred fifty miles from the scene of the Big Thompson flood, we find ourselves at the entrance to another narrow gorge through the Rockies. The Big Thompson Canyon is less than fifteen miles long and drains less than three hundred square miles of watershed. It is a small river, by river standards. In Estes Park, at the top of the canyon, the Thompson's flow is controlled by Olympus Dam.

Glenwood Canyon is less than fifteen miles long. In most places it is barely wide enough for the river, a railroad bed, and the highway. The river is not small. After leaving Rocky Mountain National Park, the Colorado River steadily acquires an increased water flow from countless small creeks along its way. More than a thousand square miles of watershed slope toward these creeks, with no significant dams to prevent them from funneling their floodwaters into the Colorado.

The dirt road we followed from Kremmling joins the main highway below State Bridge, and once again we are riding on asphalt. And once again we are approaching a narrow mountain canyon that was once the sole province of a powerful river. Below State Bridge, still in relatively open country, the Colorado picks up Antelope Creek, then Elk Creek and Sunnyside Creek, Big Alkali and Posey creeks, Alamo Creek, and Poison Creek. It absorbs the waters of Red Dirt Creek and Willow Creek, Horse Creek, and the Sweetwater. At the town of Dotsero, the Colorado is joined by the Eagle River, which drains the snowmelt and summer rain from the mountains around Vail. Both rivers run unimpeded by major dams for dozens of miles, and at Dotsero they combine forces, pause at the edge of the plateau, and plunge together down Glenwood Canyon. The river picks up Spruce Creek, Cinnamon Creek, Devil's Hole Creek, the Deadman, and the Grizzly. At the town of Glenwood Springs it will be joined by combined contributions of the Crystal River and the Roaring Fork River, which bring water down from Aspen, Snowmass, and the Maroon Bells wilderness.

The Colorado River is now a serious consideration. She has that same open personality but seems candidly dangerous as well. One thinks of an attractive, charming western lady smiling at one across the sights of a cocked Winchester.

* * *

Between the entrance to Glenwood Canyon and the town of Glenwood, it is not the river that seizes your attention. It is the canyon, and what has been done to it. It is a winding canyon which the river has cut through rugged granite, leaving wild rapids which throw spray onto delicate mosses. Undoubtedly there are also silvery trout and daring water-diving ouzels living in it. Once there were even glens of wild-wood trees: cottonwood, river birch, aspen, and conifers. But the canyon's primitive beauty does not capture your imagination. What captures your imagination and commands your attention is the highway that the humans have built. It, and not the river, now dominates the canyon. How did it happen that these two forces, the falling water and the engineered concrete shelf, came to use this narrow cleft in the mountains?

Centuries before there was any measurement of centuries—eon upon eon unmarked by the human animal—the melting snow and the falling rain drained across the immense plateau, cutting downward into the strata as the plateau continued to rise upward on the continental uplift. Icy waters from the high country and hot mineral waters from the canyon springs slowly wore away the rock. Frost came. Water in the cracks froze into ice, expanded, and cracked the granite. Tree roots went deep and then grew and swelled, keeping up the pressure, opening more faults for the icy waters of winter. The freezing and thawing and the heat of blistering summers worked away at the walls, and, whether millimeter by millimeter or a thousand tons at a crash, the granite mountain was undercut and fell into the rapids.

And the rapids pushed stone downstream for more endless centuries. It shoved barn-size boulders here and there and split them and erased them, ground them up and tumbled them. The canyon deepened into a gorge. Above the river's reach, the upper heights of the walls became calm and safe; the blowing dust of ages found places to rest among the cracks and tiny ledges; flower seeds and grass seeds found the pockets of dust; birds came and left tree seeds, and the lichen and mosses grew, and soon—oh,

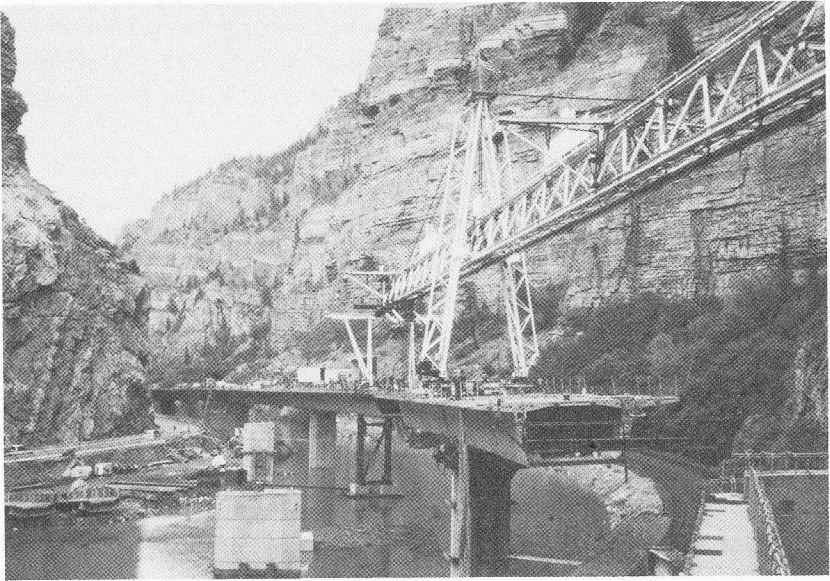
within a mere thousand years of time—the canyon was landscaped. A rock garden.

People with copper-colored skin came quietly in moccasins to walk along the river; the last of them were the Utes, who came this way each year to use the cleansing mineral waters at the mouth of the canyon. When they came to the narrows and saw the fractured granite ledges poised high above them, they walked quickly and with hushed voices. After the Utes came a race of louder people, people with blotchy pink skin, people wearing boots and riding on iron-shod horses, following the moccasin trail.

The first road they built, these booted humans, had to stay down low in the canyon and remained open only at the whim of the Colorado. After a time it seemed to fit into the scheme of the place. Then the first asphalt road came, and after a time its jet-black surface mellowed into a dingy dark gray, and even the glaring yellow highway signs became camouflaged by willow bushes, and it was a beautiful drive. "Let's take that beautiful drive, up Glenwood Canyon," weekend travelers would say. "Let's open the windows and roll back the top and drive along listening to the water and listening to the echo of the canyon walls. Let's stop along the way and turn off the engine and listen."

Inevitably, these people who liked to drive themselves to different places found that they were more interested in getting to the places than in the process of getting there. Getting to Aspen. Getting to Vail. Getting to Glenwood or getting to Grand Junction. Getting on over to the Coast. Getting the heck out of the twisting canyons. And so they air-conditioned the cars and welded the car tops solid so that the passengers would not need to have the windows open or the top down. No longer would they hear the water or the echoes of the canyon. And since they were in a hurry to arrive somewhere, and since they could not smell the air or listen to the wild sounds, they decided to build a Better Highway. Four lanes, not two. Straighten the curves where you can. Bridge the river here, cut the cliff there, fill this bend, and you can make it four lanes wide. With four lanes, everyone can pass anyone, on their way to the place they told the passengers they would want to go. "You'll be wanting to go to Vail. We can get you there quicker than this. Four lanes!" "You'll be wanting to go to Utah, Nevada, California, and you want to hurry. Four lanes! Sixty-five miles per hour!"

For a few years, the canyon posed them a problem, because it was too high and too narrow to fit both the river and the four lanes (and of course



"Between the entrance to Glenwood Canyon and the town of Glenwood, it is not the river that seizes your attention. It is the canyon, and what has been done to it. . . . What captures your imagination and commands your attention is the highway that the humans have built." *Photograph courtesy of Colorado Department of Transportation.*

there had to be wide shoulders, although it would be illegal to stop on them; the median strip must be wide, so that travelers on the way down would not recognize the travelers on their way up). What to do? The engineers considered putting the river—the *Colorado River*, if you please!—into a tube under the roadbed, and then they could have the whole canyon floor to themselves. But the threat of flood—the cocked Winchester pointed downriver—frightened them. A huge and expensive series of dams would be needed to control the flow into the tube.

* * *

Our bus is compelled to stop for a flagperson while some earthmovers rumble across the road in front of us. We have come to the point where the new construction is going on. I glare straight ahead at all the displaced earth and rock, at the monstrous yellow machines tearing up and down with loads of mountain on their backs, at a pitiful little pile of trees that has been bulldozed into a thin side canyon. I look at Tom, who shakes his head. I look back at the students. Some are sleeping. Some are reading. The rest are staring through the windows, their faces expressionless and bored. They would like to get moving again; they are looking forward to an afternoon swim in the hot springs pool at Glenwood.

I turn to face the windshield again and study the structure of the new highway, the engineers' obscene alternative to a river tube.

They knew as early as 1957 that there would be a four-lane road through this canyon. It was needed so that Interstate 70 could run without being interrupted by scenic bottlenecks. Moreover, it was a challenge and an opportunity for the people who build such things as highways and tunnels and bridges. And so it was inevitable. The Colorado State Legislature, the Highway Commission, and the Citizen's Advisory Committee talked about routes and talked about impact and talked about finances throughout the sixties; on February 20, 1976, A. J. Siccardi, division administrator for the Colorado Division of Federal Highway Administration notified the chief engineer of the Colorado Division of Highways, E. N. Haase, that he could turn the earthmovers loose: Glenwood Canyon was to be the route.

One of the first things Haase's department did was to begin publication of a newsletter, *Canyon Echo*, in order to "keep everyone informed as to the events and progress." The newsletter promised that there would be

no obnoxious visual impact made by the highway. It outlined schemes for including bike paths and boating facilities throughout the canyon; it showed photographs of the vegetation that existed along the old highway and explained how it would all be restored; it reassured "everyone" that, while "some rock cutting of cliff faces will be required," the rock cuts would be "as natural looking as possible."

In a 1976 issue of *Canyon Echo* there is a cross-sectional drawing showing where the supports for the elevated highway would be placed. The canyon, in this picture, is U-shaped, with the river at the bottom; T-shaped figures represent the supports. Two are in the river, one on the left and one on the right. These are crossed out: not feasible. Another T is high up on the south wall of the canyon, which is the steepest wall. It is crossed out: too expensive. On the other side, where the slope is somewhat milder, there is a T near the river, called the "lowline" support, and one further up the hill, called the "highline." Each has two lanes. Each elevates the highway far above the river and the treetops.

That is the solution I was looking at through the bus window. How do you install four wide lanes of fast traffic in an earth-crevice barely wide enough to hold its own river? To begin with, you raise the first two lanes on T-shaped supports high above the river, far from the canyon bottom, very far from the willow glens and the shiny bright pebbles of the stream, so high that you cannot see the water from the roadbed. Now stack the opposite two lanes on top, like the multilevel elevated highways in the canyons of big cities. But do not make it high enough for travelers to see up or out of Glenwood Canyon; just set it high enough to get the cars quickly to the places where the people want to be.

And now when you need to go somewhere on Interstate 70, you will be able to stay behind your tinted glass with your air conditioner (for heaven knows *what* condition the real canyon air might be in!), put your Sarcophagus GTL into "drive" and drive safely to . . . where? "Safely" is the key concept, with four lanes. Before there were four lanes, Glenwood Canyon saw more accidents than most other two-lane roads. Between 1970 and 1976, there were two hundred and forty-five accidents, with fifteen deaths. These accidents were the fault of the canyon.

Fifty-five accidents were caused by rocks that had fallen onto the highway. The twisting of the canyon prevented drivers from looking far ahead, and so a dozen accidents were caused by "improper passing." In thirteen accidents, the driver was apparently asleep (but not while passing); in sixteen other accidents, the driver was intoxicated; in thirty-five, the driver

was speeding. Eighteen were rear-end collisions. Twenty-nine were side-swipes. Nobody knows what caused the rest.

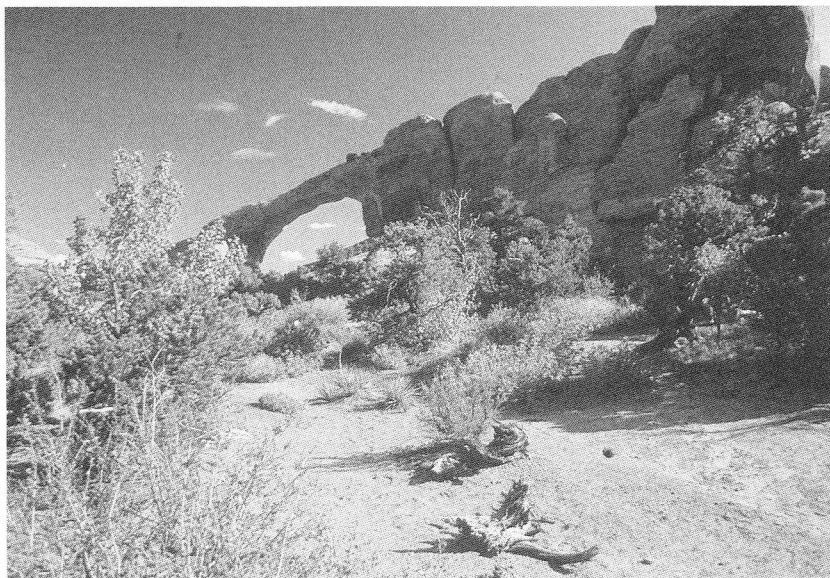
Could the people be protected from Glenwood Canyon's many dangers? State Patrol Chief Wayne Keith estimated that to do so would mean increasing the patrol in the canyon from four officers to fourteen. This, he said, would reduce accidents and deaths to an "acceptable" level. But it would cost an "unrealistic" \$250,000 per year. Therefore, the legislature allocated money to rebuild the road and avoid this unrealistic expense. The 1978 allotment was one million dollars. The 1979 allotment was eleven million. Twenty-five million in 1980, nineteen million in 1981, and twenty-four million in 1982.

The canyon will no longer be responsible for accidents, with the new highway. Rocks will not fall into the path of cars. Animals will not be seen on the road. Cars will not run into cars. People in cars will not offend people in other cars. Anyone who is out of his car will be questioned by the Highway Patrol, whose job it is to see that you are not molested on your way to . . . where was it?

The traffic will move. It will move at a minimum of forty miles per hour, and a maximum of sixty-five, unless the government moves the limit back to fifty-five. I am told that the new, straight, high, stacked four-lane highway will enable the average person to get to Glenwood Springs in eight minutes less than on the "old" highway. However, with a higher average speed, it is more likely that each accident will cost a human life. More patrol officers will be needed, but at an acceptable cost. The life of the canyon, everything that goes into making it a community of living things, will also suffer a predictable cost: it cannot be computed on the available software.

What is *not* predictable is what the Colorado River will do if some hundred-year storm floods its far-reaching watershed. The new two-layered highway has done nothing to widen the canyon, nor to control the river. The T-shaped supports *are* impressive monoliths, anchored in bed-rock, and are said to be flood-proof. However, one remembers seeing television footage of collapsed two-level highways in California—highways that were earthquake-proof. Even if one does not remember pictures of collapsed highways, there is still a feeling of relief when the bus leaves the canyon and the shadows behind, when the bright late afternoon sun suddenly fills the windshield.

Tonight we will sleep in a Glenwood Springs hotel. Tomorrow night we will sleep at Arches, in Major Powell country, Abbey country.



“Even without the heat . . . there are still the synapse-numbing distractions of Arches itself. . . . The heat rises in visible blue waves, . . . [and] some of the trees are so loaded with cone-berries that they look blue instead of green.”

Windmills, and No Wind

Enos Mills was the pioneer advocate of Rocky Mountain National Park; John Muir was the patron saint of Yosemite; Arches is Abbeyland. Edward Abbey rangered here, back in the dirt road and low-traffic days; in 1968 he published a book about it, called *Desert Solitaire*. It is a truthful book, an on-the-spot book, and a book that comes from Abbey's intimate association with the landscape. His farewell thought, at the end of his season with the Department of the Interior, is part of a long, last look at the arches, the plants, and the sand canyons. "How difficult to imagine this place without a human presence; how necessary."

It was after I had taught *Desert Solitaire* several times that I learned that Abbey claimed to have written it in a bar in Hoboken. All the imagery, the atmosphere of desert and mountain, the immediacy of his experiences had been, in Wordsworth's phrase, "recollected in tranquility." This was difficult — if not impossible — to believe.

I have an irony to share with you: I once wanted to understand just why Willa Cather wrote about the Southwest, wanted to understand what she found there; therefore, I spent weeks looking for places she visited in New Mexico. But not once did I consider the most obvious fact about her Southwest fiction: she didn't *write* it there. By the same token, I always wondered why Abbey had written *Desert Solitaire* in Hoboken rather than at Arches. Without looking for an answer, I found it. *Nobody* could write in a place like Arches.

Trying to write my journal here, I have a visible fog of no-see-um gnats swirling in my face. I take each breath through clenched teeth, trying not to inhale a swarm of them, and my scalp crawls at the thought that the little black demons are searching for blood among my hair roots. Back in Moab, a druggist sold me a special potion, a local formula guaranteed to keep them off. It smells like a weasel's armpit. It keeps the gnats from landing on my skin, all right, but it only attracts thousands more of them who hover an inch away from my face, trying to see what kind of creature

would give off such a putrid odor. My sweat mixes with the insect goop and runs down my forehead, detours around my nose, runs a line of bitter vomit-acid taste across my lip, and drips onto the pages of my journal. Oddly, I don't care. When the pencil skids on a splotch of greasy sweat, I just write the next word anyway; in a minute I will even forget the word that should have been where the blotch is.

My mind is in slow gear. It is after 6:00 P.M. now: the air temperature is 104 degrees.

No wonder that Abbey played his games of *Solitaire* in that saloon in Hoboken, far from the sand fleas and stir-fried air. And even without the heat and the sweat and the slowing down of the brain, there are still the synapse-numbing distractions of Arches itself. Take, for instance, what I can see even in the limited vista that this campground offers. Better yet, join me. You'll have to excuse the smell. I've chosen this solar-heated redstone boulder to be my seat and my desk; tonight it will be my dining table and, with luck, my bar. Sit here. Close your eyes and imagine nothing but the color blue. Make it really deep blue, translucent plastic blue. Desert sky. Unrelieved, monotonous, bottomless blue arching overhead for — what? — a hundred miles in any direction you can look? Even downward. Stare at that blue void until it starts to turn black (it will, because you will begin to black out from staring at it), then look down at your feet in the sand and the sand and everything will still be blue. The heat rises in visible blue waves, at a hundred degrees of hot.

We can see some ranges of blue-gray mountains away off in the shimmering distance. They seem to have white tops. The map says that these are the La Sal Mountains, more than twelve thousand feet in elevation. Easily high enough for those white tops to be snowfields. But that must be a lie. Those snowy-looking summits must be mirages; today, the entire world is a hundred degrees. How could there be snow when there is such heat? My mind is convinced that the entire earth has turned into an oven; there cannot be a place that is not burning up. Snow cannot exist. Snow is just a dim, primitive memory.

The view from my stone desk includes mesas and monoliths of Navajo sandstone, piled up and blasted apart and cracked and wind-scoured into mesmerizing futuristic landscapes. Over there, about a half-canteen of water away from me, the shimmering pink sandstone formations are shaped like four mixing bowls overturned side by side on the land, touching each other; they stand four stories high. I would not want to see them in full moonlight: they might be giants from the furnace of hell, hiding

their faces away from daylight in the earth, waiting for the night to come. Closer to me is a massive red sombrero made of stone, lying on the land. Not too much further away, I can see a weird collection of monoliths, resembling all shapes of mushrooms—tall ones, stubby ones, crooked ones. All stone, all several buildings high! Other monumental monoliths have odd caps, like petrified foreskins looking wrinkled and impotent. A sudden fantasy: I could be my own Dr. Frankenstein and assemble a living rock Colossus from the scattered bits of sculpture out there. Shelley's "Ozymandias" whizzes suddenly into my mind, unbidden, unexpected. "I met a traveler from an antique land," I begin to recite, and the gnats swarm away, startled. This human not only stinks, but he makes offensive noises as well.

There are feminine shapes in the sandstone, too. You do not notice them at first, but they clearly dominate the landscape. For each of the thrusting, assertive masculine formations there is the quiet, soft background of beckoning shadows. Everywhere, if you look for them, you will see elongated mounds that suggest the shape of a resting thigh; they lie there, hot and glowing in the evening air. The low light of late afternoon throws shadows across secret crevices. Shadows also accentuate breast-shaped formations, some as large as a mesa, some small enough to cup in my hand. Here and there you see light-colored sandstone that lies flat, swept clean of sand, and you again see the feminine form in the smoothness of it. There is one such shape below me; it looks like golden skin against the red sand and has a rise and fall like a woman's belly, even down to the gentle little indentation that looks like a navel. Then the light fails, and the shadows blur away. It is evening again.

From up here in the rocks, my mountain tent looks too small to hold as many memories as it does. It looks like a small shard of late afternoon sky, left behind by the retreating day heat. It seems to shimmer, like a mirage of a blue pond. Actually, it is too hot to have nylon walls, so I just put up the fly. It is pitched tight and staked out taut to catch the shade and let the breeze slip under the edges. Tonight in the desert dark those winds will be like warm breath, like dry breathing coming through my shade-shelter, and I will be sleeping on top of the sleeping bag, using it to insulate my body from the kiln-top sand. In the coolest part of the night I will wake, and be lonely again.

My tent site is in the stingy shade of a pitchy piñon pine, which at human height is the tallest piece of vegetation around here. The other midget trees are juniper, which give off a clean smell of gin and pine in

the heat waves. Salt brush, a delicate light green like a junior prom taffeta, huddles in the depressions between sand-drifts, sharing the meager windbreak with the fierce little cholla and the militant sharp Spanish bayonet—yucca. Sagebrush here seems aromatic and gentle; the bushes of mountain mahogany have a kind of somber dignity to them. The juniper are in season, heavy with those tiny bluish cones that look like berries or seeds. Some of the trees are so loaded with cone-berries that they look blue instead of green.

* * *

Each day at Arches brings a brief period of time when, perhaps, a person could concentrate on some writing. Most of the day is too sun-hot to think, but an hour after sunset, just before it gets dark enough to sleep, there comes a time of relief. You seem to be able to let your breath out for the first time that day. And, at least if you are like the people in our group, this time of day somehow makes you want to be alone. No Frisbee or Hackeysack games, no gossip groups.

The students have scattered. Like me, they have gone to their individual rocks. The heat and the still air seem to have an antisocial effect. They have crept out of the shady spots where they were loafing, and they have moved up onto the rocks. Some are just sitting or lying there, and they resemble a colony of lizards come out to watch the last light of day die. A half-dozen other students are sitting on individual sandstone formations, dutifully doodling in their journals.

One particular rock at a distance from any of the lizards or doodlers has a thin Buddha sitting cross-legged on it, meditating in the classic position. Must be Tom. He's from Utah and a veteran desert-trekker. Tom has a strange double effect on me: on the one hand, he is one of those people who makes me want to hike and explore places; but he also has an addictive, quieting effect on my mind. His is a spirit in which there is an omnipresent enthusiasm running in a slow current of gentle intensity. One of those genuinely gentle men you sometimes find in the world. One evening at Arches, a couple of the students asked Tom to teach them to meditate. Since they had an hour to spare between eating and sleeping, they thought it would be amusing to practice some transcendent wisdom. Not that they needed it. Tom coached them into a simple beginning position, and they sat there dutifully staring off into space. Later, some wrote in their journals that it had been a truly religious experience, float-

ing off into the ether of the pure mind and leaving the dross of the body behind. It's amazing what young people can accomplish — or imagine that they accomplish.

Joe "El Jaffe" Gordon, by comparison, exhausts students. I can see him now, walking toward the bus down there. Joe strikes me as a man who is always going somewhere, always on the move to do something, arrange something, check on something. I have shared his living room with him and have seen him sit there in front of the television, a beer in his hand and the paper on his lap, and I still had the distinct feeling that he was about to get up and do something. Hiking with him is a surprise, too. He starts off at a quick pace, like an inexperienced walker who begins at a gallop and soon is shuffling along, all tired out. With Joe, the gallop just goes on mile after mile, all day long.

He's a physical man in fine shape. On a trip such as this, his treatment of the students is linked to the physical aspect in many ways. Tom will sit and listen to them. Joe will listen, but he is more likely to make them walk with him while he does. He goes around while they set up camp, throwing out bits of insight regarding the reading assignment or facts about the local flora and geology, questioning them while they work. Tom accepts student chatter with quiet encouragement; Joe ridicules stupid remarks, challenges almost every generalization, insists on solid logic and genuine insights from them.

Intellectually, Joe is like Thomas Huxley's metaphoric steam engine, with all parts in order and able to turn to any kind of work. One moment, with dogged, ponderous power he is working away at some big decision. A moment later, with his mental gears set on "fast whiz," he indulges in verbal fencing-matches. Then, back in second or third gear, Joe sorts and turns the day's routine matters into neat piles. I love to watch him pick his way through an hour-and-a-half lecture — he works basically without notes — and I *really* love trying to sidetrack him with irrelevant ideas. When I deliberately introduce a tangential topic, Joe will take out around me, set up a few open switches or roadblocks just down the line, and then throttle back to where he was going to go in the first place.

* * *

As for our students, they are — well, young. Awfully, awfully young. Their youth is probably why I dislike having them call me "Jim" rather than "Professor." It's a campus custom, but I could do without it. I dislike

the way they talk about all the experiences they have had, all around the world . . . not because I'm jealous, but because I resent how very little they have made of those experiences. Most of them are intellectually soft, with minds like a soft avocado. Their conversation is lackluster, limpid, uninteresting; they have been philosophically spoon-fed and emotionally pampered all their lives. I want them to get overenthusiastic, or despondent, or irate, or *anything*. To call their usual state of mind "apathy" would be to dignify it.

There are two students on this trip — just two — who have some idea of what emotion means. They have both been through emotional trauma recently. I don't know if I like them because they confided in me, or because they are different from the others in at least one regard, or because I'm just anxious to justify my role as teacher. They came to me in regard to the journal assignment. One had witnessed the automobile death of her best friend and couldn't be alone with her journal without flooding its pages with grief. The other had surprised his fiancée with another guy — in bed. He couldn't think straight enough to write *anything* in a journal. He couldn't stand to be alone with himself that long.

As I said, I don't know exactly why these particular students got a response out of me. Like me, I suppose, they have trouble reconciling their situation with their needs, their responsibilities with their impulse to run and hide. Before I knew about these two cases, the class was discussing the use of simile and metaphor. Several had used the equivalent of "I was thrilled" or "I was happy" in their essays, and I challenged them to *show* it, to make the reader feel thrilled or happy. "Grief," I said. "What is grief *like*?" We came up with a simile. "Heartbreak sounds like the ripping of blood-soaked gauze." These two students, I was later to learn, did not find the simile exaggerated.

The four students who irritate me most — if one can actually be irritated by trivial people — are all slightly overweight, slightly overdressed, slightly vain, and slightly too cool to be with the rest of the group. They hang out together to share cigarettes. They talk in phony voices and without looking at each other. The conversations are ritualistic round-robins of high school stories. One girl looks at the tip of her cigarette, or up at the sky — not at the listeners who are not looking at her — and tells how she, like, really like totally *trashed* her parents' new car; then the next one interrupts with her tale of how — wow — these totally awesome dudes had like even a cooler car than *that*, and took her and her really close, y'know, girlfriend on a totally bogus road trip. Wow, she used her parents' plastic

and they like got a bill for two *thousand* dollars from like Visa? and were *totally* bent. Totally bogus event. Bogus, in their dialect, means "fine."

Ego filling is fine with me. Who doesn't do it? But I hate the way these kids will switch on their feigned sincerity all the time. With me, for instance, they switch it on to try to find out "what I want" on the essays that are due. They lean toward me and look at me earnestly and let me know how totally great it is to get alone and like experience the wilderness and how much, much, much they want to learn about themselves and about nature. Their writing is junk generalization and cliché, but they try to convince me that they have had all sorts of religioecological revelations on our encounter with nature.

By the time this class ends and our field trip is over, each one will have had several mandatory conferences with me. And each one will feel they deserve a good grade even if they can't finish the required essay. They have been brought up to believe that confession means automatic absolution, instant cleaning of the slate. Everything in their world can be "made up." When one of these misses a test or doesn't get an essay assignment written, the question is invariably the same: "How do I make it up?" If they are absent, the question is the same: "How do I make it up?" The question is never "*Can* I make it up?" and often the answer is no. "No, I will not give you a make-up test. No, I will not just forget about the paper assignment when I figure out the grades. No, I will not repeat the entire hour's lecture for your benefit." Life, they will find, can't be "made up" when it is missed.

And so I sit in the twilight, seeing Freudian shapes in the sandstone. In just three days, I have already made a bad job of it. Two students need to be forced to look at our surroundings, need to be coerced and badgered into some therapeutic writing. But I am too aware of their problems to do it. Too sympathetic. With the others, apathy is the problem. Or anti-pathology. Sometimes this job has more challenge than it really needs.

I take a last look at Abbey's country before turning in. I had an idea for a T-shirt design once: it would have had Abbey on the front of it, caricatured with armor and a lance and looking like Don Quixote. "So many windmills," it would say, "and so little time." A few months before his death, I received a copy of *The Fool's Progress*; inside, Abbey had written, "To Jim. You're right: there are a lot of windmills."

Maybe each lizard-student of mine is a windmill. And not a breath of wind to be had. Any sign of movement would be welcome, here in the hot night country.



“The real illusion of Delicate Arch is in its size. From a distance, . . . one leg seems to be perhaps the size of an average automobile, or smaller. When you get close, it turns out to be two stories high: a person standing by it looks like an ant standing next to a pomegranate.”

Scoping the Ark

The two-mile walk to Landscape Arch is best taken at sunset. At that time of day, the shadows will be growing long and the heat will still be intense. The sun will be directly in your face as you go up, and the trail will be dark and hard to follow as you come down again. But it is the best time to go, because it is in those closing hours of daylight that the desert can make an acute observer out of you.

You are going to feel overheated and thirsty even before leaving the trailhead and starting up the trail. You will feel the skin of your face shrinking and roasting under that horizontal solar broiler; the sensation makes me think of those barbecued chicken carcasses that turn on spits in supermarket delicatessens. This feeling that your face is turning into a crispy entrée is good: it makes you attentive to the trail. It is the desert's way of getting your attention. Before venturing into the narrow sandstone alley at the very beginning of the trail, you will probably take careful notice of where you are and how far you will be going and in what direction you intend to go. Back at home, when I walk out of my house, I habitually pat my pocket to see if I have my keys. At Arches, I shake my canteen to see that it's full and take a bearing on my surroundings.

The narrow alley I mentioned is a redstone passageway, easy to confuse with a hundred others. The floor is sand, and the walls curve gracefully inward, overhead. There are a few clusters of sage and cactus and juniper, huddled close to the base of the wall.

When you walk in the city, you see so many things in motion that you tend to see none of them. In the desert, there are very few things that move, and so you tend to notice them. It might be a little windspout whirling over the horizon, or a lizard darting up a nearby rock. Along the Landscape Arch trail, you will notice more birds, not because there are more of them here than elsewhere, but because they are more constantly in motion than anything else in the area. Many of them are daytime foragers, but at sunset the desert launches her best fliers. The nighthawk, a

little sweptwing gray falcon with white wingstrips, makes its “keeee — aaaah” cry each time it goes into a steep banking maneuver and accelerates after an airborne bug. The wings are thin, sharply bent backward in the middle of the leading edge, sharply pointed at the tip, built for effortless sustained soaring and for breathless downward dives.

The other flier is a true night fighter, getting an early start before the dim dusk turns to black. When you spot the first one of these, you will think that it is a shadow in your eye. You might see it as an optical illusion, a tiny bug flying close to your face. It sometimes makes a small, faraway noise and it is shaped almost like a housefly or a moth. Then you see more of them. Here they come, flying down the alleyway in bandit formation, pulling up as they reach you, going into a tight fast turn. Each one turns as if it had a wing tip thumbtacked to the sky. Then they dip into a free-fall and then easily rise again to the top of the alley wall. Wings like sails, like sport parachutes, only chunky and leathery. The nighthawk may justifiably exult in its gracefulness, in the sheer aesthetics of narrow-wing flight, but the bat seems more interested in being quick and effective than in being beautiful. It is quiet Death in motion — and flies as if it knows it.

The sun setting behind the slickrock shapes will burn images into your awareness. At your feet, long shadows are flat carbon copies of the stone forms that loom ahead. The horizon beyond the rocks looks like goblin silhouettes cut out of hot thin tin, backlit by an eerie orange sky. The extraterrestrial light of evening is blue-orange and orange-black. Dead juniper trees along the trail hold their desiccated branches away from their twisted trunks as if in agony. You hurry around a corner to get away from them. You come up a slight hill between sand dune and rock, and the sun hits you full in the face; this time it is as bright as a carbon-arc spotlight. It seems as if the sun has exploded at the instant of sunset.

And now you are wading in knee-deep shadows and you begin to wonder whether the sidewinders and rattlers are coming out to lie on the warm trail; you wonder if the scorpions and the tarantulas saw the sunset from their shaded dens and are now on their way out for the evening hunting. After all, the bats are already out. Do you watch the sky for bats, or the trail for the slower-moving hunters? Actually, you look for a familiar formation so that you can get your bearings, but suddenly a sunset trick of the shadows makes that formation look unfamiliar. Your mind — the rational one — knows that it is the same stone monolith as before, but some other mind of yours can simultaneously believe just the opposite.

You will also distrust your senses when you come over that final rise in the sand and see Landscape Arch there before you. You must have strayed onto the trail to another arch: this soaring sliver of curved stone, this pink thin rainbow arched over the debris-choked canyon, is probably called Delicate Arch, or Fragile Arch. But it is Landscape Arch, which is a way of saying that names matter very little.

Almost three hundred feet from base to base, this is the longest known natural arch in the world. To imagine how thin it is, and how graceful, start with a picture of two tall Egyptian obelisks, standing three hundred feet apart. No, first you have to imagine three hundred feet. Think of the largest football stadium you can remember. The football field there is three hundred feet long, so this arch would reach from one set of end bleachers into the other end. It would soar above the grandstand.

Now imagine those Egyptian obelisks again. Imagine what they would look like if they began to melt in the desert sun, curving toward each other until the thin tips meet. The bases have slumped but are still square at the bottom. Stand here and imagine yourself climbing up there on the arch—it is a hundred feet up there—and the thought will make you dizzy.

I find myself almost hypnotized as I stand at the base of one of the legs. I am inside the arch, leaning back against the warm flat face of the arch rock, and the rock stretches upward from my heels, along my spine, and curves over my head; it continues the same curve, up and over and up and over and on and on to the center of the span, and it grows narrower and narrower as it curves, and narrower and narrower still, still flat-surfaced and still soaring, and becomes an optical illusion.

The problem I have is that I cannot make my mind register the fact that the rock tapers toward the span's center. It is something like looking down a long railroad track and not being able to believe that the two parallel tracks do not converge out there in the distance. This illusion is just the reverse of that: the long span of rock does *not* taper, says my head, and therefore the slim center of this reach of stone is the *same* dimension as this block against which I am leaning, and *therefore* the structure is so long that the base of the other leg must be perched on the nether edge of eternity.

Call it vertigo, or tell me it is only a phenomenon of failing light. The mind can do odd things with perspective. Falling down through the thin sky in your disabled airplane, watching your altimeter unwind at a rate of fifty-eight feet per second, it is possible to have the sensation that the

earth is moving away from you at the same speed and you will never reach it. I was in a mystery house once, where the rooms look plumb and square and everything looks level — until the guide drops a ball and it rolls quickly *up* the floor and out the door — or until you turn the tap at a sink and the water runs out sideways. I have seen it, can explain it, and know it is an illusion. Maybe my mind sees an extra dimension sometimes, or is short on one dimension. Whichever the case, I am content to let others see that Landscape Arch actually tapers toward the center, if they will be content to let me see it touching down at the margin of eternity. What *we* see doesn't matter: the stone knows where it touches earth and where it touches sky, and what its name is.

I said that "Landscape Arch" seems like a pretty tame name for this ossified red rainbow. Over a year after being there, I dug into my old copy of Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* and found out that the name is less of a misnomer than I thought. "Arch," according to Skeat, has Latin origins that have nothing to do with curving bridgelike structures. In Latin the word *arcum* means bow-shaped and gives us the word "arc," which people confused with *arca*. The latter refers to a box or coffer, an "ark" used to carry things in, like the ark of the covenant. "Landscape" comes from two Middle Dutch words. *Land* means "region," or "area": the *-scap* part means "condition" and is a collective suffix. So, if we put the words together, we have an ark which safeguards the condition of the collective region. And that's true.

Like everything else in the desert slickrock country, Landscape Arch has ancient origins and is in the ages-slow process of metamorphosing into other forms. All the material that has fallen away from it has become sand again and may become sandstone again, given time. Like everything else out here, the aging effect is very visible in the rock because there is no overgrowth to hide it. Like everything else in the arch and canyon region, it has taken a form that seems to have no natural function. If it is a bridge, it is a bridge over the wind. Will any humans be there to hear it when the arch's end comes, or will the arch be alone again in the thunder of its final collapse?

It amuses me to hear some arch-watchers speak about "falling" and "collapsing" and to read the ranger-written signs that use the words "erosion" and "decay." This is the short view of things. The arches are not eroding — merely reforming. There are more arches waiting to take the place of the fallen ones, unborn and buried in the sandstone mesas. The sand of former arches is going down the Colorado River right now, into

the sea to be ocean-pressed into stone again and thence once more into arches. The rain washes tiny grains away from cracked blocks that mark the place where an arch used to span a gorge; those grains are the arch being taken to the seabed to become arches again on some other side of eternity. I suppose it reassures us, we who have such short spans ourselves, to smugly tell one another that even the rocks are in a state of "decay."

Time to go. Some of the students are disappointed because this arch was so close to the camp, and because we saw only one arch on this hike. Although none of us has sufficient philosophy to comprehend the miracle of this single arc of stone, they are ready to go "look" at another and another. They want to go "arch-bagging," the way some mountain hikers like to "bag peaks" at the rate of two or three a day, or the way tourists like to take in a half-dozen European cathedrals in a week's time.

Perspective again, I guess. They want quantity of experience; I want quality. Those two special students, the ones with the special emotional states of mind, have become blended into the group. From where I am, I see several bunches of students and can't distinguish anything but the colors of their clothes. I can tell myself that they are all individuals with individual needs and inclinations and thoughts and souls, but from here I can't see them. My interest in them fades; from here, they are finite and short-term features on an ageless landscape. Whatever I teach them, I realize, inevitably will turn to dust and will be gone.

As we make the walk back from Landscape Arch, the sunset-fire has burned down to embers and is safely banked behind a devil's backbone of phantasmagoric stone silhouettes. The bats and nighthawks are still veering and diving up there in the darker sky, and a little breeze from a side canyon carries the scent of piñon pines . . . the fragrance is coming from soft beads of yellow resin standing like droplets of perspiration on the heat-cracked bark.

* * *

Now, as I lie on top of my sleeping bag, I mentally review the trip, trying to figure out why I feel so detached from it. Thanks to all the years I spent studying the British poets, some lines from Wordsworth come to me and seem appropriate:

And, more than all, a strangeness in the mind,
 A feeling that I was not for that hour,
 Nor for that place.

The Prelude 3.79–81

And that, in turn, leads to thoughts of Byron's frequent feelings of alienation from "the race of men," and I suddenly have the answer. The river. Byron habitually associated his blackest moods with deserts or mountains, seeing in the arid climates a metaphor for desiccated inspiration. Conversely, he wrote his most joyful verses when he was beside a river or sailing a lake or ocean. The ocean storms were "delightful terror" to him, and "clear, placid" Lake Léman tempted him to "forsake Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring."

So far on this trip we have not touched water. We have driven beside the Big Thompson River and followed the Colorado River. Some of the students even swam in the filtered and concrete-confined hot springs of Glenwood. But we have never got down next to the rivers to feel them. All my life I have been fascinated by the rushing rivers; as a boy, I used to hold sticks in Fall River just to feel the power of the current. Later, as a fly fisherman, I came to know the way a fast stream can swirl around the legs and the sensation of a trout on the line fighting both the water and the elasticity of my rod.

Perhaps I need to see rivers once in awhile just because I am a native of the West, where the annual rainfall is fourteen inches or less and where water takes on special value. Perhaps rivers have become expressions of my life and determine what my mood will be. I finally drift into sleep, wondering if my dry and barren mood will become a thing of the past once we get back to where the Colorado River flows.

* * *

See if this sounds familiar. You go to bed and lie there wide awake for two hours. Then you get groggy but keep twisting this way and that in an effort to get comfortable. Finally, the deep and quiet sleep comes. And the next thing you know, somebody is shaking you by the shoulder to wake you up.

I come out of a dream and expect to see early sunshine with the slickrock and mesas starting to glow against a blue sky. Instead, I am staring into a black sky punctuated with stars. Some of them are blotted

out by a skinny silhouette leaning over me. Tom has struck again. Flashlight. Wristwatch. *Four A.M.* He walks away from me just as I begin a vociferous speculation as to the legitimacy of his birth and goes on through camp, waking everybody. Before any of us is fully awake, we are in the bus and headed for Delicate Arch trailhead. He wants to get there before sunrise.

And get there we do. Long before the sun streaks the tips of the highest mesa, we are on the trail. I am carrying an orange that I have managed to purloin from the food box in lieu of breakfast, a canteen for the thirst to come, and a notebook and camera. It makes me feel overburdened as I scurry along alternately trotting and striding in my attempt to keep up with the lean prophet in sandals. I never could walk fast or jog early in the morning: I think I have one of those bodies that can't exert itself without an hour or two of warmup.

Not that I don't enjoy a morning stroll; it's a pleasant experience to gradually awaken during a walk. I like the sensation of suddenly realizing where I am. Can't remember much about getting there, but there I am. Once in awhile it does me good to discover that I don't really need an elaborate breakfast, and I don't really need to wash my face and brush my teeth and attend to all the other little silly duties before being able to "start" the day. I can just get up and do the main event and skip the ritual of preliminaries.

I usually spend an hour getting myself ready for the day — while the day has already started without me.

Tom talks excitedly as we climb up the sandy trail and over the stretches of slickrock. I try to make it a conversation, but he is setting a pace that pretty well prevents it from being a two-way talk. We stay ahead of the students, and when we finally pause to let them catch up we see that they have split up into two different groups, going along two different routes over the rock. Tom goes after the nearest bunch and herds them off to rejoin the other group. I volunteer to stay behind and take pictures and round up the strays. And maybe catch up on some breathing.

Have you ever hiked on slickrock, long-sloping slickrock? Wonderful vast expanses of slickrock? Most of it isn't slick at all; it's more the texture of fine red sandpaper laid out on easy contours. Distance on it is awfully deceptive: I look up a long slickrock slope at a line of cairns marking the trail and think "what a waste of labor to put those markers so close together." But, in actuality, the distance from one pile of stones to the next is long and tiring. In another place, I find an opposite phenomenon.

Seen from across a deep draw, a redrock formation looks high and inaccessible. But it takes me only a few minutes to climb up to it, and the walk is as easy as a staircase. Below this rock formation there is a natural amphitheater that looks as if an ice cream scoop has been used to gouge a cave into the rock. I call to it, just to hear the echo of my own voice. "Heyah eeeh!" Nothing comes back, at least not immediately. Then a faint "yah eeeh" comes from somewhere far away. What I had thought to be a modest-sized scoop in the rock is actually an immense cavity, more than a half-mile from me.

Slickrock. Slickrock is walking upslope and downslope, jumping down small ledges, putting hands to the warm stone to boost up over the ledge's edges, letting go and running like a kid down smooth stretches, marveling at a single bonsai juniper rooted in a rain-hollow, walking sideslope until the ankles begin to burn, circling all the way around gargantuan redstone shapes, shapes like marshmallows, like bread loaves, bootheels, sombreros, half-buried baked potatoes, fallen frankfurters. Slickrock makes you realize something very profound: an orange is not enough breakfast.

Up a slope you walk, loafing along the inclined level broadness of it, and suddenly you are above a whole maze of minor canyons, looking down into pure erosion. You make up names to fit the sizes and the shapes of these places, and each of the places seems awfully inviting to you — as if it has something unique and special to offer that none of the other little canyons has. What do you call them? Slots, valleys, slits; canyons, arroyos, fissures, crevices (one looks like a crevasse, sitting between two plump mounds that are like melted red ice); holes, amphitheaters, breaks; depressions, dips, washtubs, channels, alleyways, avenues . . . any name you can imagine, you can find slickrock to fit.

On the high places, the sandstone formations look as if they have been made with a giant's Jell-o mold.

It is exhilarating to run across the slickrock in the cool morning air. The feeling reminds me of when I was a kid and got new tennis shoes and could run like the wind. The mood changes quickly, however, when I get into the silty sand down in the bottom of the draws. I slog through the fine sand powder, and I get tired of it. Quickly. Little twinges of fatigue hit those muscles at the back of my legs, and I become aware that sweat is soaking my shirt. My mood is in tune with the terrain, which means that it is oscillating between a sort of deep elation and boyish buoyancy. The elation comes from the running and the easy walking and letting the quiet early morning desert act on my soul. My body feels light and sharp. I have

no wad of soggy breakfast sitting like a bowling ball in my paunch. I have no caffeine short-circuiting my nerves, no sugar "high," nothing in my mouth except the sweet taste of the warm orange.

What is causing the sadness that keeps falling across me like a shadow?

Some of it might have to do with coming around a corner of a monolith and discovering a few of the students walking in a bunch toward Delicate Arch, chattering their idiot gossip and joking with each other. They have walked almost an hour, and yet they have sensed not even the tiniest suggestion of the spirit of the place. Or maybe they *have* felt it: maybe they huddle together and talk in jokes because they do not want to confront Something Out Here. I want to tell them to shut up and split up and grow up. I want to see their faces enraptured. (A grim-faced priest in a praying cathedral takes a whispering boy hard by the ear and jerks him away from his companions — but does he do it out of reverence for the place, or out of irritation with youth in general, or does he just do it because he *can*, being the public conscience with a personal ego?) I stride around them, remind them to make notes for their journals, and walk on.

* * *

Oh, the arch. Delicate Arch. Another ocular illusion. The class arrives and sits down all in a line, facing the arch, looking like a cackle of blackbirds on a wire. Some are taking pictures, some are taking notes, some are taking a rest, and some are taking a smoke. The arch is about a hundred yards away and looks no larger than the arches at McDonald's. It is not at all symmetrical: one side is shaped like a fat rainbarrel bulging upward and breaking into a clumsy curve. The other leg is thinner and stands on a rounded rock, like a thick log balanced on a squashy basketball. It's narrow and high, like a small letter *n* sitting on a redstone platform. Landscape Arch soars across a gorge and has a pretty rise in the center, like a woman's upper lip when she slowly pronounces "bourbon." Delicate Arch just stands on the slickrock like it might suddenly decide to walk away down the slope.

The real illusion of Delicate Arch is in its size. From a distance, the flat basketball rock at the base of one leg seems to be perhaps the size of an average automobile, or smaller. When you get close, it turns out to be two stories high: a person standing by it looks like an ant standing next to a pomegranate. From the vantage point where the trail suddenly turns to give you your first view of the arch, you might see a person already down

there. But the human-height (which you *know* to be six feet or less) and the arch-altitude simply do not jibe. Your mind rejects the possibility of the arch being that huge and begins searching for some logical explanation.

The sun rises this morning, just as advertised in Utah tourist brochures, but after it has made a brief, white strobe flash across the sandstone through the canyon and arch formations, it vanishes behind thick low clouds. The brightness that remains behind seems not to throw any shadows. I had moved to a high place just to see it come up. But it is all right. Down in the wide sandvalley below me, across a dip in the hills east of Delicate Arch, another natural amphitheater catches my attention. It looks like a concert shell, a perfect stage.

In a spontaneous fantasy, I imagine an actress rehearsing her monologue in that cavernous chamber. At center stage—a little to the left—is a pool, a rainwater pool, a little mirror reflecting two bonsai junipers that the wind has twisted dramatically. Front stage, left: a bushy juniper and two or three piñons have grown into a low curtain. And how that curvature of the back wall would throw her voice! What a worthy platform, what a fitting theater! I thought of climbing down there to try it myself. Just as I am beginning to remember a few lines from Shakespeare that I might recite on that titanic stone stage, a voice from the real world announces the departure of the group. Ah, yes. The group. I return to the trail and follow the group back toward the bus. Back through drifts of red silt we trudge, back down the gravel paths that lead through damp desert watercourses, back across slickrock space, back into bus-scheduled time.

I catch up with Tom, and we talk about students while we walk. He has been listening to a few of them during the Delicate Arch jaunt, helping them with ideas about their papers. Have any of them talked to me about those papers yet? Oh, I guess a couple of them have. The rest don't seem interested, I tell him. "Well," he replies, "sometimes you have to go after them and make them talk to you. Sometimes they don't know what really good ideas they have until you give them that little extra boost."

Maybe when we get to the Colorado and its running waters, I think. Maybe I can get in touch with the students then. There is one hopeful note, at least: I envy Tom for the easy way he has of making them do their work.

At this point, I wish I could say that those lines of Shakespeare I was thinking about earlier had some special significance. But all the significance they contained was Shakespeare's water metaphor:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Julius Caesar 4.3.217-20

Our affairs now take us to Canyonlands, and then on to the floods of the Colorado River.



“Canyonlands National Park is, in fact, mostly off the roads. . . . Beyond the trails, you find empty canyon upon canyon, mesa upon mesa, and over it all the vast empty sky.”

The Stumbling Runner and the Slender Buddha

Congress did well when they chose the name "Department of the Interior." The department preserves an amazing array of big and little places where you can come into contact with your interior, where you can get down into your own mental viscera and see what you have digested from life. Canyonlands is interior country. It leads you inside yourself to move slowly, to think, to wonder. This kind of landscape makes it easy to teach writing: you simply send the students out with notebooks and pencils and tell them to sit still and make notes. The quiet of the place will do the rest.

The trick to it is to sit. And keep sitting. If you must move, move slowly and walk upon the earth as if you held it sacred. Give up the madness that says you must make mileage. Our campground at Canyonlands is half-full, or half-empty. This surprises me, since we are there at the height of tourist season. But then I remember that the average American tourist is a sensible fellow. He looks in his AAA guidebook, or his mail-order park pamphlets; finds the List of Available Facilities (See Key to Symbols); and sees that Canyonlands has no swimming pool, does not offer scheduled naturalist programs, lacks souvenir shops, and does not have an air-conditioned museum. Or any museum. The logical traveler next studies the Weather to Expect section of his material: the temperature to expect is near the Fahrenheit century mark. The Canyonlands ranger tells me that he has only one reservation before September and that October is the best time to visit. By October, however, the summer tourists are back in the city, back in their *own* land of concrete canyons, busily making what they call a living.

I interrupt one of my walks to chat with a young couple camped near us. They have the right idea about this place, and they have brought along two very sensible pieces of equipment: a screen tent and a pair of bicycles. The screen tent keeps out most of the gnats and provides shade during the broiling daylight hours, and it is insurance against sudden rain squalls. But at the same time, it is not noisy and claustrophobic like the

interior of a trailer or RV. The bicycles are the ideal way to see the tourist part of the park: inside an air-conditioned car is the worst way. You might as well stay home and view it on a videotape. These two people mostly sleep in the screened shade during the day's hot hours and bike around the miles and miles of paved road before sunrise and after sunset.

The moon is new tonight. As I am drifting off to sleep, I can imagine what it would be like if it were a full moon and if we—the she who is not here and I—could be gently bicycling Canyonlands' deserted asphalt paths in moonlight.

* * *

When I was in high school, I had a creative writing teacher who had us write essays that began with the line, "Come, take my hand and walk with me." Our imaginations had to supply the rest. Now that we are at Canyonlands, about which too much has already been written, why don't you come and walk with me and we will see what kind of interior landscapes we can discover.

The black asphalt road leads along a corridor formed by miles of natural sandstone walls and parapets. Among them, in the walls, we see frequent fissures. Canyons. Great gaping inviting cracks in the world! Tom points out several of them in particular and tells me that a hiker in this canyon or in that gully eventually will come to fresh water that runs through huge natural stone tubs and through green oases of pine and juniper trees in cool-shadowed gorges. Canyonlands National Park is, in fact, mostly off the roads. Maps and guidebooks describe the trails in terms of how steep they are, whether water is available, and which natural hazards exist on them. Beyond the trails, you find empty canyon upon canyon, mesa upon mesa, and over it all the vast empty sky.

True walkers, Thoreau says, are born and not made. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit*. If we were true walkers, and if we had the courage to follow those unknown canyons into more of the interior terrain, we might possibly walk right into Eden. Everywhere we go, there is always a place that we could have gone further into. Our life is marked by many incompleting journeys—the author whose books we have half-read, the city that we have half-explored, the hobby we have done by halves, the trip into our own minds that remains unfinished. Someday, we tell ourselves, someday. . . . Looking through the bus window, I carefully memorize the shadowed entrance to one certain cleft through the redstone wall. "Let's be

willing, let's come back here by moonlight," whispers my soul to me, "and walk — not run — walk backward, in this deep crack of time, to Eden."

* * *

Above our camp is this rock. Or perhaps I should say that our camp sits in an erosion below one of the remaining plateaus of an ancient seafloor. Pick whichever perspective you prefer: either we will ascend from camp until we can stand on the floor of the sea, or we will climb up, high above the valley, to the peak. Perhaps the same choice of perspectives exists when you think of going into the canyons and clefts of the spirit: are you entering some place, or are you actually leaving and going out of where you have been? You should note in your journal the difference between climbing this rock formation and climbing in the Rocky Mountains. There are no trees here, no pleasant river valleys cutting the slopes, no hulking shoulders of granite cropping up like gray warts in the woods. In the tree-covered Rockies, you need to find trails through the trees and routes up around the granite cliffs. To go up this redstone rock, however, you simply start strolling, changing course just because you want to find out where this or that way will lead you. The little ledges are like sidewalks sculptured into the sandstone. You might find yourself wandering behind the mesa — eight or ten city blocks from camp — and then stepping up a few ledges to another walkway where you can walk another direction. Up another ledge, with a few easy leaps over eroded ruts, and you find that you are "up top."

Or, if you chose the other perspective on things, you have now surfaced. A half-hour ago you were down there where the geology is a million years older, and now you are standing up here on the sediment of the present epoch. You are in the present tense. (Or, you are in the present, tense.)

Now, what do we see as we look back down into the past below us? There are some specks of red and blue and bright green below, in hues too unnatural to be associated with anything other than nylon — the tents of camp, down there on the ocean bottom a million years away. Near them sits an aluminum blob, a loaf-shaped metal thing that seems to be melting in the desert heat. The bus. From up here on our seafloor, there appears to be very little purpose in that bus being there. If it had feelings and could speak, it would probably say that it sees no earthly reason to be baking the life from its tires and boiling away its engine oil out here in

Canyonlands where buses are too ponderous to be useful and too bulky to be hidden. The large green groves you see *are* groves — piñon or cedar — and the thin little black strip, so fragile and slender, is the road. It is either the road *into* Canyonlands, or the road *out* of Canyonlands, depending upon your inclinations. Every route will lead us in either direction, until we come to the center of our own interior journey: at that point, all roads will lead out. That's how we know we are at the center of things.

Look down to where the sandstone sidewalks widen out and become sweeping cirques and spacious courtyards, rainbasins and amphitheaters. Some of them have actual pools of actual water in them, looking like a mirage. Several of the pools, hanging halfway between the top of the mesa and the floor of the canyon, come complete with a border of red mud, a patch of grass, and a few stunted trees. Bonsai arboretums. They make romantic campsites, high on the rock. One, for example, looks quite inviting. It's just thirty yards down, directly below your protruding toes. It's as large as a backyard, and just about as level. It's made of sandstone, curved and carved and sanded into smooth contours everywhere; a small pool of water near the sidewall looks inviting, luring you away from the edge of the ledge. Cedars grow thick and short here, screening one side of this pool.

If we take a sun-bearing, we find out that this particular campsite would catch the first light of sunrise, in this season. That red sun of morning would put on its pyrotechnic display for you out there over the mesa tops, out there along that fringe of wrinkled ribbon clouds that perpetually hover at the horizon line. It would be a beautiful sunrise, coming up far out there at the edge of the land of canyons.

It would be beautiful, too, to lie there as you awakened and became conscious of daylight's stealthy approach. You would be awake early and see only black sky at first, a sky spotted with stars, a sky gradually becoming more and more blue. You would waken to the darkness, but as the light grew and the sky grew more visible you would become aware that the cliff behind you is not black but deep red. Then you would see color in the shadowy cedar branches, as the light grew. Then the cool, pure morning air would strike you. Then the sun would appear like the edge of a shining copper disk under the crinkled ribbon clouds, like a bright arch starting to grow out of the edge of the sandworld. As it grew and grew, it would look like copper looks when it is heated to a glowing red — deep red, blood red, red as coals breaking into the fire, and disk-shaped with sharp edges.

And when you stood up, that hot copper sun would throw a long shadow against the cliff, and the shadow would be you. Your shadow would be born again to the morning light, brought fresh into a new day's world. Life-heat from the early sun would slap your face into life. Its insistence would become stronger as the long day went on.

Far out and all around us there are other mesas like ours, seemingly identical except that they are shimmering. If we were standing on one of *those*, of course, we would see that our rock shimmers, too. The canyons seem to be throbbing with heat waves; we have the feeling that the endless mornings have brought unchanging waves of heat to this slowly turning wilderness. Frank Waters wrote about this land of deep canyons in his book about the Colorado River. In order to understand it, he said, you must learn to think in terms of depth and of time, and then in terms of the eternal rather than of time. So stand here "at gaze," as Keats wrote, and make yourself feel Canyonlands in terms of depth and eternity. Someday, if you learn your lesson well, you may be able to gaze into the depths of yourself and see something eternal.

* * *

In the desert, the morning sun has a way of bringing you back to reality. And the reality of it is that you are a rather small and wholly expendable life form in the big scheme of things. Sometimes, just when we think we have things well centered and under control, something happens to remind us that we don't have all the control we would like.

My return to reality, I realize now, came when Krista got lost. Before then, I hadn't really thought about the potential for disaster that would accompany a field trip such as ours. It was a job, and a means of seeing some fine country, and my main concern was that I had been experiencing a growing alienation from the students. Up until Krista got lost, the trip had been without major accident; it was then that I realized for the first time that somebody—me, Joe, the Southwest Studies Program, Colorado College—somebody was actually responsible for deaths and kidnappings and poisonings, for encounters with axe murderers in campgrounds and botulism in the food, responsible for Being In Charge and therefore liable for all the thousand perils that are inherent in outdoor terrain, sunshine, rain, bacteria, mental defects, and gravity.

When they are in high school, adolescents derive their individuation from the familiar identity-markers of home and friends; each has an

individual home and family, each belongs to a circle of adolescents and has an identity within it. But in college, where "home" is a dormitory room identical to every other concrete-block cubicle in every other university and where the circle of friends has been broken, students seek artificial ways to make their own individuality known. Out here in the West, many of the males identify themselves through their customized pickup trucks, while females adopt "personal" trademarks of dress and makeup. Both sexes are also inclined to self-identify through outdoor sports: one student is not just a student, he is a "rock climber"; another is a "cyclist" complete with the costume and full equipment; still another is a "skateboarder" first and a mere student second.

Krista was a runner. It was necessary, therefore, for her to run at Canyonlands. It was necessary for her to leave camp during the free afternoon hour, when the rest of us were writing or resting, and run. Her motives were both complex and simple. Let's just say that, being a runner, she ran. Maybe she was born a runner; maybe society made her one.

Being in the Southwest desert, the Canyonlands temperature that afternoon hovered near one hundred degrees. The danger of such a climate is also both simple and complex. Heat heightens evaporation, and so does moving the body through the air; evaporation gives the illusion of coolness; the illusion of coolness leads to the illusion that the body fluids are not evaporating at a deadly rate.

Being in Canyonlands, the terrain is also deceptive. I have said that it is romantic, and it is. But it is also capable of being terrifying. Landmarks will lie to you. All of those singular-looking rock formations, such as we saw at Arches, start to look alike. Once you get into a canyon, you actually take little notice of them; you place your trust in your intuition and some kind of unconscious memory to get you back to wherever you were. But the shapes, though odd, tend to be so unlike, so consistently unique, that their uniqueness becomes commonplace; what you intended to remember as a landmark, that freak formation, gets lost in a crowd of freaks.

We had set up camp and were taking the midafternoon break. The appointed team of cooks was actually preparing a real supper; I think it was to be Mystery Macaroni Mess and Scrap Salad. Krista went out to run before eating.

Now that I think about it, Krista's adventure really sums up one of Canyonlands' dangerous temptations. You must ride in a car or in a bus, and ride a long, long way to get there. And when you are finally set loose, all you see is a desert and stone wonderland that seems to go on forever;

muscle-cramped from your long trip, you experience an overpowering urge to walk or run or climb a rock. Everyone does it: a few minutes after they leave the bus, everyone is wandering up onto the rocks, or out along the sandy flat corridors in between. Anything rather than sit still. I can picture Krista, eager to leave the campsite, stretching out, halfheartedly helping her tent-mates select a place to put up the tent, looking off down that empty road while she carried gear from the bus to the camp.

Soon she broke away; she was out on the road, alone at last; she began to jog gradually, with exaggerated slowness at first. Then as soon as she felt the rhythm of arms and legs starting to come together, as her muscles started to respond to her will with pliable elastic energy, she felt swift and light, and was off on her late afternoon run.

She ran on, runningonrunningonrunningon, breathing deeply but not laboriously, her legs losing the loping-gazelle feeling and settling down into a measured stride; when she left the blacktop for a narrow sandy road, she felt the sand requiring an extra little push at the ankle with each stride and she made that part of her measured stride and ran on across the sand. She came to a turn and took it and was running alongside a mesa that was five miles long and towered eight hundred feet above her. To the eyes of the swallow who had just ridden a rising thermal over the eight-hundred-foot parapet, she was a miniature figure, barely seeming to move. Her running took her to a straight streak of sand through clumpy brush and lumpy rocks. The swallow banked and pivoted in slow motion; below him, the tiny girl turned again. Now she ran along a narrow sandwash that led straight into another canyon. If the swallow cared to think about it, he would have been able to see where she was headed. She could run through that canyon to the other end, curve to her left and cross over a low pinkish dune, then bend to the right and cross a dune directly ahead of her, descend the wind-formed crescent sandhill by the stone outcrop, and so reach her original road again.

The swallow, from his swallow-eye view, could also have seen something else, something that Krista was not able to see from her earthbound perspective: the gorges of Canyonlands stretch all the way from one hazy horizon to the faraway purple mountains. Mile upon century they stretch, all those stone citadels and storm-washed moats, like skyscraping monoliths, like open subway trenches in the eternal gloom of stone shadows, fathoms and leagues of gargantuan mesas and gorges which gape like a person holding their breath after a yawn.

Krista's breath was hot and dry in her throat. But her respiration was

still deep and steady. Beginning to feel hot. Soon each breath would seem like the blast from a blowtorch shooting up the airtube from her lungs. The fiery heat of her breath seemed to hover at her lips; now, each time she inhaled, she seemed to be inhaling the same heat and the same air over and over. She began to think about sweat; she could feel it on her forehead and wondered why it was not running on down into her eyes. She did not mind, because she had left her sweatband back at camp and was glad that the sweat was not running down into her eyes. She did not realize the reason: in the desert heat, it was evaporating first.

Back at camp, I was sucking the juice of a pre-supper orange and writing some notes about the local geology.

By the time Krista realized that she had missed her landmark — and now had no idea where camp was — she knew that she was in a geological and physical trap. She could see the sun, now low on the horizon, and so she could figure out her directions; what she could *not* determine was the direction in which camp lay. If she stayed down in the canyon floor, she could never hope to spot any remembered landmark; if she climbed up one of those sandstone giants, she might see a landmark, but it would mean an expenditure of her dwindling energy and might be just a waste of the diminishing daylight. She could save energy by slowing down to a walk as she looked for the road, but then the darkness might catch her out there in that maze of rocks. She could go on running and thereby cover more ground, but it would be at the cost of what little body moisture she had left.

Krista was discovering something that is, in the abstract, rather wonderful. At a place as wild as Canyonlands, time, place, and personality all become insignificant. You are alone, anonymous, and unnecessary. You are never exactly sure where anything is in relation to your Self. You are never exactly sure how long you have been there, or how long you can afford to stay.

At camp, supper over, I threw a scrap of bread to a scavenging raven. He was a huge, black embodiment of darkness who had found out that it was easier to beg from humans than to circle the canyons with the turkey buzzards in hopes of spotting some doomed flesh crawling along the hot sand below. I washed down my own piece of bread with some warm canteen water and poured the rest over my shirt. I could get more water at the tap.

Krista came to a hardpacked sand road and managed to pant a smile. She even grinned a little as she stumbled. Camp soon. The road. Her

road. Looking left and right for the campground. Could miss it, back in the brush. Back in the cool of the curved rock wall. See the bus, though. Can't miss the bus. Good ol' smelly big bus. Watch for bus.

Krista labored along that road with all of her remaining energy, convinced that she was soon going to be back among friends, back where water and food were waiting. But then, before she had gone a mile, something about that road suddenly dawned on her. No footprints. No imprints of a measured stride pushing soft sand back from the ball of the foot with a slight trick of the ankle; that confident runner (had it been she who ran like that, so easily and well?) had not passed this way.

I read her journal later, and it gave only a sketchy, foggy account of her feelings at that point. She was unsure of what actually happened next, but she and I talked about it. When she didn't show up for supper, I was worried. Everyone was worried. And when she finally arrived, just as we were getting out the flashlights for a search party, something happened between us. She was no longer just another student. I was no longer the professor. She ate and drank and rested, and we talked far into the evening about her experience. I can tell you how she came to find the camp again. She gave herself up to the canyon. She stopped trying to figure out her directions, stopped worrying about exhaustion and daylight, and simply went on running.

At the Picuris pueblo a few years ago, my wife and I watched young people running their annual "race" with the sun. From the sun comes their energy: to express their respect for that sacred energy, they run back and forth on a trail laid out between the points of sunrise and sunset until all of their own energy has been returned to the sun. It is a simple and sacred and beautiful expression of how well they understand the relationship of themselves to the sun and the meaning of the sun to all of life.

Krista surrendered herself as if she meant to sacrifice all she had to the Spirit of the Place. Perhaps she could save her life thereby, but a pure surrender of the self is seldom done with the idea of getting anything back. Maybe we should say that she simply went on running, unthinking, yielding the final quivering bit of energy in her young body to the unwavering ancient power in the rock and sand; she became one with the direction of the place and came full circle back to us in the manner of the desert. All things, finally, come back in the circle.

Was it instinct? Was it a strange subconscious conjunction of mind and landscape? If you do not agree with either of those possibilities, I have

another explanation. This one might seem more logical to you, more concrete.

With her eyes dimmed and blurred by fatigue, in the dim light of dusk, Krista looked upward, but not quite high enough to see the turkey buzzards. She saw that dome-shaped sandstone formation behind our camp. It looked like St. Peter's dome, except that it has ledges encircling it. As I have pointed out, however, all of these domes tend to look alike, especially in the twilight. And this one would have looked just like any other stone dome, except for one thing: sitting upon the very summit of it, cross-legged, sitting there like a statue of Buddha facing the last bronze gleams of the dying sun, was an apparition. I saw it, too. While we were worrying about the lost girl and getting gear together to search for her, I was also worried about Tom. He, too, was missing, and this was starting to look like a crisis. Far up there on the dome, there was a slim human figure sitting in the position of transcendental meditation.

Is it possible, I wonder, for a meditating soul, sitting at guru-height on a desert rock, to know that another human spirit was experiencing fright and fatigue? As her pounding terror gave clumsy impetus to her burning feet, out there on that unmarked track of sand, could it be that some kind of intangible homing signal brought the runner back to camp?

I have stood in the gloom behind air controllers and watched green dots on a screen. The controllers send signals and the dots change direction. Blindly and without question, a pilot with two hundred people in his charge hears the signal and turns his aircraft. The signal brings him home. I have heard it said that ocean whales also hear navigation signals, coming from other whales on the opposite limits of the sea. I have felt drawn by signals coming from the Thompson Canyon tragedy.

Whatever force it was that brought her, Krista came back. Her desert lesson summed up Canyonlands for me: it is big, it is impersonal, it is deceptive, and it is beautiful. It is also mystical; I believe that it is one of those sacred places on earth, a keystone in the arch of time, where humans experience a reality that is beyond ordinary dimensions, outside known measurements of time, and above the reach of sense.

* * *

Too soon, it becomes time to walk down from the rock, back down through the geologic layers of time. On the floor of the ancient ocean, we

fold the tents and police the area and get back into Harold's bus. We settle down in our seats to be driven a measurable distance in a determinable direction. After a period of time we will be at the next scheduled stopping place.

Someday I must go back, for I failed to confront the real spirit of place in Canyonlands. I would like to become a walker there. I would like to look it straight in the face in the worst kind of weather, like John Muir confronting his Yosemite. I would like to get face to face with my own human urges and hates and loves, like Abbey at Arches. I want to sit quietly and try to see it, the way Mary Austin sat and waited for the life of Death Valley to reveal itself to her. I would like to understand how Edward Reuss entered it never to be seen again. I am not anxious: to return to a place such as Canyonlands is inevitable. Some day it will simply happen that I will be back. Like the floods and droughts in Austin's little book, each happening will find its own best season.



“The river served to reduce life to the basic simplicity of being one of six human beings willingly trapped together in a plunging raft.”

The Mighty River to Moab

My first full-time teaching position was at a small college in southern Utah, where I was one of three or four gentiles among a hundred-member faculty. The rest of the faculty belonged to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lacking most of the qualifications for sainthood, I had become, for the first time ever, a minority person. My friends back in Colorado kidded me about it: according to them, I was on a two-year mission to convert the Mormons to alcohol and tobacco. They saw me, they said, going from door to door with a box of panatellas under my arm and a can of Coors in my hand.

Up until that time, I had taken my gentile religion pretty much for granted. In fact, I had gone to church mostly as a token gesture and while there had done my share of sneering at the "hypocrites" I saw in the other pews. But down in that little college, where almost all of my colleagues, not to mention ninety percent of the student body, were of another faith, I discovered that I had a defensive feeling toward my own religion. Faced with the possibility of losing it there, I began to truly examine and appreciate it. It was there in Utah, for example, where I finally learned that the Order of Worship had both a tradition and a meaning; up until then, for instance, I had wondered why we took up the congregational offering *after* the sermon rather than *before*. What if people decided that the sermon wasn't worth the money? Presbyterian logic, overruled by ritual. At Canyonlands, unexpectedly faced with the real possibility that we had lost a student, I discovered my own capacity for caring. In that brief hour of uncertainty, I let go of my desire to be somewhere else, and with someone else, and accepted the role for which I had signed the contract. I became responsible, not only for the girl's physical safety, but responsible to her need to tell someone about the strangeness of the whole experience. It is an old truth, but a truth nonetheless, that we seem not to appreciate something until we are faced with losing it.

The emergency is over, we will lose no more students, and we are on

our way to get wet in the Colorado at last! Finally, we are going to get into small boats and place ourselves at the mercy of the gods of the moving waters.

The bus hums with anticipation as we drive toward Moab, where the river guides await us. None of the students has been on white water before. Neither have I. We share a sense of apprehension, although we cover it with excited chatter about what the trip will be like. Tom has considerable experience with rubber boats and rapids, and we have hundreds of questions for him. If you are thrown from the boat, is it best to go down the rapids feet first, or try to body-surf the torrent? How many have drowned in this stretch of the wild Colorado River? What if the paddles are lost — would it be best to try to swim for shore, or let the current carry the boat toward unseen dangers below? If the last boat in line overturns, how will the rest of them be able to come back up the river to the rescue? What if you don't swim very well? Will the life jackets protect you against the rocks, once you are caught in the white water?

The answers are not elaborate, nor are they encouraging. In fact, they can be summed up in four words: Stay in the Boat. This is going to be excitement. And I do not mind admitting now that it carried with it so much that was unknown and potentially dangerous that I think I might not have gone through with it, had it not been for the pressure of the group at the time. I could remain at the pick-up point, I reason, or even in Moab, while the class goes and has fun. But when I look into a few individual faces and see there the same apprehension that *I* am concealing in myself, I know that there is no going back. With four boats of rank amateurs and one experienced river-runner, I am going to hurl myself down the Colorado.

If you ever wonder whether you have lost your youth, plan an adventure. In so doing, if a sense of fear and anticipation hones the edge of your imagination, if there is a simultaneous reluctance and eagerness, if there is a persistent curiosity about the unknown aspects of your adventure, then you have not lost it.

When you actually begin moving toward that experience, you will undergo a certain change of mind. Your imagination will grow. Back near the turn of this century, Frederick Jackson Turner listed several traits of mind he had observed as being characteristic of Americans, and he postulated that it was the presence of a frontier on the American continent that had "called forth" those traits. Among them was imagination. If you have ever launched yourself out toward a personal frontier where your

accustomed habits will be insufficient, your imagination becomes as alert and sensitive as an exposed nerve.

Take Moab, for instance. It is an ordinary small town, founded as the Elk Mountain Mission by Mormon colonists back in 1855. According to Faun M. Tanner's *History of Moab*, it then became known as Grand Valley, because it controlled access to a crossing of the Grand — now Colorado — River; then, in good Mormon fashion, a committee was formed to rename the town, preferably with a biblical name such as Enoch or Ephraim, Goshen or Zion. If you look at an Old Testament map of the Bible lands, you will see that there is a city and a kingdom called Moab, lying south and east of the Dead Sea, between the sea and the desert. In 1881 the committee came up with the same name, Moab, for this town that lies south and east of the Great Salt Lake and west of the desert.

At least one local joker will tell you, however, that the name comes from the Indian word *moapa* — mosquito. I have not seen the Old Testament kingdom, but I have seen Mormon mosquitoes, and therefore I will keep an open mind. As a matter of fact, it is in anticipation of the mosquitoes and gnats that I am going into town to find a repellent — and will soon end up with my imagination running at high speed. I am “wired,” as the students say, for this raft trip on the Colorado; even before the bus comes to a full halt on the Moab side street, I am out of my seat and anxious to be done with the shopping and on with the trip.

My imagination is really flying. Each Moabite I see going in and out of the supermarket looks like an interesting character to use in a short story; inside this small “super” market there is a smell of ripe cantaloupe and cardboard boxes. The odors hovering around the grind-your-own coffee machine seem as exotic as Persian spice. The place is filled with the low hum of humanity. I am in a hurry and stay only long enough to buy some candy bars and some film (and some cigars, in case I run into a missionary opportunity). But in those few minutes inside the store, I think it is the best, the most charming, the most intriguing supermarket I have seen in years.

One by one and two by two, our group drifts through town, looking for ways to spend an hour while Joe “El Jeffe” Gordon arranges for the rafts and guides. I need some bug lotion, and so it is that I wander into the principal drugstore of Moab — possibly the only drugstore of Moab — and step back into 1955. It has a soda fountain! An honest-to-vanilla soda fountain! The instant I come in the door, I smell that light, creamy scent of places where fresh milk is kept. I smell the sweet syrup smell of cherry

Coke. I smell malted milk and chocolate ice cream! even though I am still at the front of the store where my olfactory nerves are being assaulted by cedarwood Souvenirs of Moab and gift boxes of fruit-scented soap next to the eau de Walgreen perfume counter.

I walk back through the drugstore to see if it is true. It is. Do you remember sitting high on those wobbly revolving stools, the kind with the thick seats that are covered in sticky vinyl of a color that can never be named, and leaning forward with your elbows on the cool linoleum countertop, watching that malt mixer make your malt? The dull avocado-green motor, sort of bulb-shaped, grinding away, the long blades whirring and thickening the mixture, the stainless steel cup starting to get frosty on the outside? Did you unconsciously lick your lips when the swoosh, swoosh sound turned to swoooooooooosh as your malted milk reached the culmination of its being, and did your tongue roam the inside of your mouth, looking for the first cold flavor of malt and milk and chocolate powder?

The Moab fountain girl is pretty and young, as all of them used to be and should be, and she knows the ritual to perfection. She makes a tantalizing, dramatic production out of pouring my malt from the frosty steel cup into the waiting glass, letting it ooze over the metal rim so slow, slow, slow . . . when it has heaped up in the glass, she smiles and winks and leaves the cup there on the counter, a little malt running down and mingling with the condensation to make a brownish puddle on the green countertop. Inside the mixing cup, the remaining chocolate malt is gradually sliding down to collect in the bottom; I will slurp up that little leftover bit later, like dessert. As I sit there waiting, I even re-experience my boyhood curiosity about malted milk mixing. I have not thought about these things in thirty years. Why is it that the tall, fancy serving glasses *never* hold as much malted milk as the steel mixing cup? Why is there always an inch or so left in the bottom? Why do straws make a slurping sound? How does the mixer know to turn itself on when the cup is pushed into place, and how does it know to turn off when the mixture is thick?

It is a simple wonderment, and a precious one, as I sit passing the time at the soda fountain. It is enough wonder for me. Without doubt, I could find even more magic sights in Moab; however, I will have to discover them some other day. The hour has passed, the group drifts back to the bus, and it is time. The steel doors slam shut with an ominous finality, and, like mythical Charon casting off from the shore of the Styx, Harold

draws the bus away from the curb and starts toward the edge of town. We have twenty miles of dirt road to cover, twenty miles to appreciate the safe, comfortable seats of our good ol' Goodwill Greyhound. Twenty miles to our rendezvous with the rubber boats.

* * *

When Major John Wesley Powell and his nine companions ran the Colorado River in 1869, there was only one type of boat to be seen on the river. They were wooden rowboats, there were only four of them, and Powell's party had them all. Today you can find jet boats, airboats, canoes, kayaks, and inflatables.

There are three common species of inflatables inhabiting the Colorado. They lie dormant most of the winter months, but as the weather gets warm and the water begins to rise you can expect to see hatches of them occurring almost anywhere there is a road down to the water. They begin in clusters, then venture out into deeper water and begin their summer-long life as aquatic fauna. As the water drops in the fall, they begin a ritual of bumping and slamming into one another as if trying to mate; then, on a given day when certain rocks appear above the waterline, they return to their winter resting places.

Other than their shared behavioral habits, the various species of inflatables have little in common with each other. They tend to remain in groups of their own kind, and violent waterfights have been known to break out when one group is rash enough to venture into the territory of another. The largest (but least aggressive) type rides on enormous pontoons; the passengers sit on a kind of excursion-bus seating arrangement. This boat goes over the rapids easily: from shore, it looks like a duo of lethargic sausages tied together, panting and heaving themselves up the upriver side of a river wave and then sliding down the downriver side with a fatalistic sigh. The sausage-pontoons go through all sorts of grotesque distortions, absorbing the shock and energy of the churning water and keeping the people relatively comfortable. The people hold on and talk and laugh and take pictures. The second sort of inflatable, in order of size, is a giant life raft. It has a wooden platform across the middle; here sits the bronze, muscular "river driver," gripping a pair of long oars. From his throne-chair he rows the life raft and keeps up a monologue of clever sayings. The passengers sit in an oval formation around his feet; they grip the handropes and the rubber and each other. They laugh

nervously at the clever sayings, unless they are in the clutch of the white water. Then they scream.

Being shorter and having a flat bottom rather than a pair of pudgy keels, this type of boat does not ooze over the standing waves like a pontoon boat. Instead, it climbs up and up the upriver side of a wave until half of its length—and half of its passengers—hang out in empty air, suspended over the water. Then the raft bends at the middle, as if making a formal bow. Possibly it is just trying to look down and see where the bottom of the trough is. There is a second of hesitation, and then it decides to slip down between the mountainous waves. The sensation is like riding a hockey puck down the slope of an iceberg. The people who ride these rafts do not take pictures.

Our rafts are smaller. Three people on each side, and a steersman in back. The paddles we hold are functional, not just stage props. We have to paddle, and paddle hard, so that our raft will be driven up the back of each wave: because the thing is short and relatively light, it could stall out on the way up that incline. And if it does, its front end will be pointing almost straight up and the rear end will be stuck down at the bottom of the trough below, and the boat will do one of two things. Either it will fill with water, or it will fall toward one side. If it fills with water and becomes stern-soggy, the two people forward will fall backward into the laps of the persons behind them. Domino effect. This *will* cause the boat to turn over; when the bow is suddenly lightened and the stern suddenly gains weight, the latter is swept under the former like a kid somersaulting between his own legs.

If the stalled raft manages to rise and get its front end airborne and then falls off to one side (because *someone* was not paddling hard enough), the people who were on the high side come avalanching over the people on the low side and the raft turns turtle. If you prefer doing this maneuver rather than the somersault, the physics of it are quite simple: find the fat person who cannot paddle fast and put him on one side, then put a light, fast paddler on the other. With any sort of decent wave at all, your raft should go up, stall, angle off toward the fat person, and do the turtle thing.

In a lake this would be fun, flipping a rubber raft by filling it half full of water and overloading either the side or the stern. In a river such as the Colorado, where the raft moves away after dumping you, you find yourself in white water punctuated with granite, water against which you cannot swim. The first or second time you capsize, you tend to take it rather

seriously. As you get further experience at it, you lose the tendency to become paralyzed and can accomplish some rather dedicated screaming. After you have been dumped at the top of eight or ten rapids and have had the following rafts run over you five or six times, paralysis and screaming finally turn into sheer hilarity. Spectators watching from the shore often mistake this hilarity for hysteria.

Between dunkings, you are expected to stay in the raft and follow certain procedures. You sit sidesaddle on the puffy, pneumatic sides, with your legs inside (protruding river rocks have a nasty way of breaking tibias and pulverizing patellas). You paddle. You need both hands on the paddle to be an effective paddler, which leaves you with no way to get a suitable deathgrip on the plunging wet rubber under your butt. On one particularly sporty stretch of river, I developed a technique called "grab-handrope-balance-paddle-twice-grab-rope-paddle-grab." A paddle lost to the river costs ten bucks, and I took note of the fact that the outfitter collected her ten bucks *in advance*. The rest of the procedure (for those who choose to remain inside the raft) is simple: paddle like crazy and scream and ride the bucking oval doughnut right to the crest of each wave and all the way to the bottom of every trough. Most photographs you see of the six-person raft in action have been taken from shore.

* * *

We arrive at the launch site and find four inflated rafts and two nearly-naked guides waiting for us. Like the waters of the Colorado seeking their own level, each student gravitates toward a group that is to his or her liking. Then the groups mill around, wondering what to do next. I share the feeling: I don't know whether to go sit in one of the beached rafts and wait for orders, or to start some kind of orderly launch drill, or just to get back in the bus.

Tom, you recall, has experience with river running. Being experienced and being a responsible teacher, he quickly commandeers one of the rafts and impresses six of us into service as propulsion power. His choices make good sense (although at the time I did not have time to fully appreciate it): two professors (El Jeffe and myself), two football players named Mike and Matthew, Krista, and an equally athletic young lady named Amy. While the other raft crews mill about on the beach or struggle to get their vessel into the water, we wade ours out into the current, jump in, and start paddling. We christen our craft Prof Boat Number One.

The sole mission of Prof Boat Number One, Tom explains, is to stay in the lead. It is a race, and he explains that either we will win or he will keelhaul the entire crew. Right behind us as we push off the beach is what we call Muffy Boat Number Two. One of the Greek-god river guides sits at the helm of that craft, and for his motivating force he has an assortment of awestricken students. He has an air of command and he knows the river. But besides an experienced (and merciless) steersman, we have a secret weapon: two football players powering our bow paddles. Front-end drive. Tom places the two girls in the middle, where their light weight and quick strength will give us better maneuverability. He orders the two professors into the stern seats. I presume that his reason for doing this is to get our cool courage, our steadiness under pressure, our maturity back where it can do the most good. Later I discover that he actually did it so that the students wouldn't see the terror in our faces and become disheartened.

Number Three is dubbed the Animal Boat. It has no guide and no one firmly in command. It is paddled by a wholly unorganized bunch of ruffians, each yelling his own orders and each paddling in a different direction. Between their meandering trips from shore to shore, while attempting to keep the raft somewhere in the river, and their series of spectacular capsizings, these students see more of the river than anyone else—often from the bottom of it looking up. Finally, far to the rear of our flotilla, comes the Greenhorn Boat. The steersman takes it upon himself to stay far behind the other craft so that his crew can retrieve our lost paddles, yell encouragement to swimmers who have been thrown from the Animal Boat, and practice correct paddling technique. The Greenhorn contains one river guide, a statistically correct mixture of males and females, refreshments, dry clothing, extra paddles, and (I wouldn't be surprised) at least two waterproof Bibles.

There is a certain feeling that comes with river-running, and you might as well know right now that I cannot describe it. From the launch to the landing, your adrenalin churns up your blood sugar. I laugh hilariously. I tense up until my neck is in a knot. I relax to the point of being nonchalant. I shout, I fly.

Here comes a rapid: I can hear it coming—even over the shouts of the waterfight going on between boats—a faraway roaring as if a train is coming up the canyon. It is the big-chested laboring rumble of a diesel crawling steadily under an uphill load; it echoes like long, dull thunder against the high canyon walls. The water of the river, the surface, has

become slick. Calm. *Too* calm. Ominously calm. Stretching my neck so I can see without standing up, I can see ahead to where the rapids start. There is one strange phenomenon about this that I never get used to: I can *bear* the power of suddenly falling water as it slams into rocks and crashes over itself; but, sitting only a few feet above the river's surface, the only thing I can really *see* is a line of ripples waiting for us. Just tiny, innocent little ripples, shining serene in the bright sun. Past that deceptive little washboard, the river disappears wholly from view; I can see it again much further downstream; the part just ahead has become invisible, out of sight.

WHAT IS IN THAT INVISIBLE PART? And we drift toward it, slowly easing the boat along with light strokes, not anxious to find out. Then the edge comes closer. We all have the urge, I think, to paddle backward. I try to swallow hard, but the gulp gets hung up halfway down my throat; we have passed the go-no-go point now: even with frantic paddling, we could not angle to the shore in time to miss these rapids. Imagine it. You are facing oblivion; you are in the first boat to go down; and your safety is in the hands of a steersman who has never before seen these rapids.

I develop a routine: as we approach each set of rapids I stretch to see what is ahead, then go back to paddling and wondering which level of Dante's Hell is waiting under the rim of the water, and then I calculate the last possible moment at which I can leap out of the raft and swim for shore. As soon as that opportunity for safety is lost—forever—and the raft is committed to the rapids, I wedge one foot under the inflated seat ahead of me, get a white-knuckle grip on my ten-dollar paddle, and put my trust in Tom.

I'll say this for Tom as a boat captain: he is democratic. He offers us choices at each set of falls. The choices, however, remind me of the choice my grandfather used to offer us at the dinner table when he waved the bowl of mashed potatoes past us and asked, "Anybody *except me* want any of this?" and naturally no one did. Tom says, "Okay, shall we go down the tongue where it's smooth, or shall we head for the heavy water? Maybe take a chance that the big swell over there isn't hiding an even bigger rock? Okay, who would like to see the hole behind this next boulder?"

Have *you* ever seen a "hole" up close? From a thin rubber boat? A hole. Some hole. The entire Colorado River pounds down a hard slope, steep as a staircase, boiling and roiling reddish-brown-and-white foam and roaring, and it throws itself into collision against a boulder the size of a house. A portion of the river goes on over the top, just enough to carry a light

raft halfway across the stone. The bulk of the river splits; it goes rushing around both sides of the huge obstruction and comes crashing together again on the downriver side, leaving a water-rimmed "hole" in the river. Some holes are merely nuisances, just temporary traps that grab and hold a rubber boat in their suction. But *other* holes—Harold could stand our Trailways bus on end in some of them, and you would not see it from shore. If you fall into one of *those* "holes," friend, instead of wishing that you could photograph the experience, you can start writing out a check to cover seven paddles, one raft, and a memorial service.

Prof Boat Number One goes merrily on its way for the first few miles, pounding and slapping and bucking as Tom deliberately steers us through the most violent section of each set of rapids. As we climb the high-standing waves and tilt and careen down them again, screaming and paddling like maniacs, it occurs to me that the calm person sitting in the stern with the steering paddle *is* mostly metaphysical. That fact seems to explain his choice of routes through the rapids but does very little to reassure those of us who happen to believe that the preservation of one's physical body is pretty much essential to continued existence.

To give yourself a sketchy idea of what it is like to run the Colorado rapids, you should first imagine being absolutely surrounded by walls of water. If you are sitting in a room right now, and the room has walls—well, there's your watery prison. Now imagine that your chair is carrying you steadily toward one of those liquid walls, and that you know that you are about to actually ride *up* it—sitting down. That is our situation when we hit the rock. The river has taken a long curve toward the cliffs on our right. We have oozed over the lip of a slick stretch and down into a series of "haystack" moguls. The raft flexes and heaves as we come to the high-walled standing waves; we go over one of them at an angle, tilted alarmingly, slide down to the bottom, and are looking up at the moving liquid walls all around us.

We paddle hard, forgetting to hold on, keeping our balance in the raft by the thrust of the paddles in the water, forcing the raft up onto the steep back of the next huge wave. And it is huge, we find, because it is flowing over a huge rock.

By this time, I am on both knees in the bottom of the raft, still trying to paddle, although I have been thrown off my seat, and when the rock smacks the rubber I feel sure it has fractured my shin.

There is no time to think about it: Amy, who was seated ahead of me, is going over the side. With more than half the force of the Colorado

River exploding against the rock and with the raft in definite danger of swamping, it does not seem to be a very opportune moment for her to leave us. Nor does it appear to be something she has given much thought to. It is like a movie moving in slow motion: I see her mouth drop open, then see her arm fly upward, sending the paddle high into the air; one of her feet is still wedged under the inflatable seat and she is falling over backward into the water head down, windmilling her arms and getting smashed by the waves that are swamping the raft's gunwales and Mike grabs for her from his forward position and I jump to grab her too and our weight should turn the boat turtle but somehow a wave catches under us *just* right and she is back in the raft.

As soon as there is an opportunity, we eddy out and beach ourselves, turning the raft over to dry it out and sprawling on the sand to catch our breath. Amy's paddle caught in the eddy, so we managed to save her ten dollars. I keep asking her if she is okay, and she describes her version of the experience. I urge her to put it into her journal and make an essay of it, later on. In her version, the surprise of losing her balance and the sudden breath-stopping fear of leaving the boat and the realization of how deadly the rapids were all came at once, and then she seemed to be flying backward and then both of her arms were grabbed and she blinked and was back in the raft. I tell her it was just one of those out-of-neoprene experiences that people have sometimes, and we laugh together until the others are ready to get up and pour water on us.

El Jaffe decides that we should wait there on the beach for the Animal Boat, the Muffy Boat, and the Greenhorn to catch up. He wants a head count of survivors, since it could affect our supper arrangements.

While waiting, I make a discovery. A little further down this beach, a sandbar runs quite a distance out into the river. The opaque water is ankle-deep there, but on either side the bottom drops off suddenly to a depth of six or eight feet. As I stand there at the end of this sandbar, cooling my feet, around the upstream bend in the river comes the Muffy Boat. The Animals have finally ended up with five in the water and one in the raft, so the Greenhorns have stopped to render assistance. Muffy has come through unscathed. Even undamp. They took the gentle routes, all of them sitting well in order, all looking dry and nicely groomed and calm. They look like a collection of yuppies posing for the spring fashion issue of *New Young Collegiate*.

I look at my crew, sprawled on the sand. Some have scrapes, most have blisters. Hats and sandals have been lost. They look sandblasted and

sunburned and disheveled. They are beach litter. Detritus. Flotsam and jetsam. I love them. I look again at the spic-and-span crew of the Muffy. We *definitely* have too much contrast in this picture. Somebody has to do something.

"Hey!" I yell. "Come on down here and throw me your line!"

They look doubtful, but still innocent.

"You'll have to get your shorts wet over there! Come on down here! Look, it's only ankle-deep here!"

They come. I catch their bowline and hold the raft tight for them. I keep it centered on the narrow sandbar. Naturally, they are all careful to stow their paddles under the seats, then carefully arrange their clothing. Then two of them step out into eight feet of water. Better yet, they grab the raft as they go down, throwing everyone else in the drink as well. The slovenly crew of the Prof Boat sends up a guffaw you could have heard in Moab: the ensuing waterfight is a joy to behold. I soon find myself among the walking wounded, a flying water bucket having left me with a red forehead stripe that nicely complements the purple-and-blue bruise on my swollen shin.

* * *

Joseph Wood Krutch once addressed himself to the question of human awareness, and that is what our short day on the Colorado River has been all about. Awareness. "The true beginnings of a self," he wrote, happen when an individual evolves to "some awareness of the world outside himself." Before arriving at the river, you see, it was I who was the Muffy. It was I who was proper and superior and living inside myself. But rivers do move mountains and have their ways of leveling differences.

The river trip was shouting and being drenched. It was drifting and marveling at the sheer canyon walls cut by the Colorado River. It was seeing a western grebe on a little patch of calm water; it was looking and looking for the bus waiting at the take-out point and sort of hoping we would miss it and be able to go on and on until after dark, and it was kidding and it was waterfights and mock battles, and it was pure excitement. The river served to reduce life to the basic simplicity of being one of six human beings willingly trapped together in a plunging raft. The best way to see this river, to paraphrase Thoreau, would be to simplify, simplify, and paddle as if you were fleeing hell in a leaking canoe.

I have said that I must go back alone to confront the Canyonlands

again. But I do not feel any need to deepen my acquaintance with this powerful section of the Colorado River—at least, not alone. There are stories of men who have so faced it, not in fun but in earnest, and have come back from it with their sanity in serious doubt. She can be an easy river, glad to give you joy in the easy rapids. But I know, too, that there are places where her strength is clumsy and enormous and can do injury. A person would do well to study places where the river has been; he should contemplate the sandstone and the schist, the granite and the obdurate, the marble and the gneiss through which the Colorado has cut, and he should remember that the preacher says we are made of clay.

I go away from the river, although I find excuses to linger near the boats as they are being loaded, loath to leave. I go away and, like all the others, let Harold ferry me across to Colorado Springs again. The bus seems anxious to get back and whizzes over the hard highway like a Friday schoolboy going home. I am going away from rivers of snow and rivers of crystal and rivers of silt, away from rivers of dry, hot sand where ancient oceans went running down the land even while the land was being lifted up. I come away a few centuries wiser.

The river, I think as we drive through the late-night valleys, the river right now is moving no faster than it did when we were watching it. It is moving no slower than it did; it is still coming down off its mountains and still shouldering the rocks aside, still moving even as we drive, moving even as we sleep, moving like time itself, “carrying the spinal fluid of the continent,” as Frank Waters says, moving no matter what we do, and moving whether we mortals pause to think about it or not, taking the innumerable sands to the unfathomable ocean and returning in shapes of mist to the continent’s divide in an infinite, incomprehensible cycle.

Epilogue

On full-moon nights, the Mexicans say, after the spring rains, when the ghost of the river is swollen and cold and the tides are running high, the river reaches the sea again.

The river and the sea rise, black and silver in the moon. A mountain of water rolls in off the Sea of Cortez, drowning the nameless islands, the barren continents of mud and sand: rolls up the channel of the old river in the moonlight. Green herons rise from their nests in the thickets, making music like dull wooden bells. . . .

And then the waters turn, and with a tremendous silver noise the river rushes out to sea again, streaming out into the Sea of Cortez.

Rob Schultheis, *The Hidden West*

Rob Schultheis confirms in his 1982 book, *The Hidden West*, what Frank Waters predicted in *The Colorado* in 1946. Dammed for irrigation and dammed for power and dammed for political power and dammed for human "recreation" and damned, I suspect, simply because there are such things as engineers and because one occupation of engineers is to dam things, the Colorado River never reaches the sea. She who offers rainbow dramas to high-country fishermen, she who opens her gorges for those wishing to see the history of her geology, she who carries lilliputian boaters on her bosom through gargantuan canyons — she is finally denied access to her mother, the sea.

The river itself, if it were capable of thinking, would probably be unconcerned about this. All water, after all, eventually becomes humidity and so finds its way back again to the watersheds, even without reaching the sea. Somewhere far in the future, the idea of river engineering — and possibly all civilization — may become only a dim memory of the empty earth, when the Colorado erodes away the concrete artifacts of our technology and goes flowing to the sea again.

Having briefly experienced, near Moab, how that deluge will feel and look when the canyon-running Colorado breaks free, I wanted to go and have a look at where this geological cataclysm will begin.

The process itself will come from a gradually developing series of events. First event: a small diversion structure will become choked with silt, and no one will care enough to clear it. A few more feet-per-minute will stay in the river. Second event: a hydroelectric dam will develop a slowly seeping leak down next to the bedrock, and the power company will quietly save themselves the cost of fixing it ("what with that new nuclear plant and all . . ."). More feet-per-minute. Decades will pass. A farm supply ditch will silt up, but the farm will be a subdivision by then and the ditch will have become an untidy habitat for raccoons, squirrels, muskrats, kingfishers, ducks, crawdads, minnows, reeds, insects, wild grass, cottonwoods, and such other nuisances that subdivided urbanophiles would rather do without.

Every little foot of water per second of time will have a compounding effect upon the flow and the erosion, and one day there will be too little demand and too much supply: one of the major dams will be breached. The Colorado will then quickly cut and smash her way through the rest of them and will find her old channel to the sea once again.

During the past few years, I have gone looking for river confluences, those intriguing spots on the map where two flows of water join into one. I followed the Rio Grande from its birth-mountains in Colorado down to its concrete ditch at Juarez, Mexico. I went across Texas, taking in the Pecos, the Brazos, the San Antonio, Nueces, and Sabine rivers. At New Orleans I headed up alongside the Mississippi to the Arkansas River confluence and took the Arkansas back home to Colorado. Along my way I would ask people where these rivers came from, and where they met other rivers.

Six miles from the Arkansas/Mississippi confluence, even the staff at an Arkansas visitor center could not say for certain where those two rivers come together. Back home, some Colorado natives couldn't tell me where the Big Thompson met the Platte, although it was within three miles of their town; in Nebraska I found similar uncertainty as to the whereabouts of the various tributaries to the mighty Platte.

People do not seem so much concerned with where their rivers lead to as where they come from. Most mid-Nebraskans can tell you that the South Platte comes from Colorado, where a proposed dam called Two Forks threatens to reduce the flow of water to Nebraska farms. But can

they tell you where the Republican River goes, after it leaves their state? Or where the Platte meets the Missouri?

Nebraska natives generally will tell you whether their family came from Germany, Czechoslovakia, England, or Poland. The majority of westerners, in fact, can tell you about their family "headwaters": what country in Europe they came from, where they first settled, where they settled after that, and so on. But ask them where the *next* generation will settle, where the second and third generations down the line will be living, and they are at a loss to answer. They came from Ireland in 1742, had two generations in Pennsylvania, one in Kansas, one in Illinois, then one in South Dakota. But where are they headed? The question is, it seems, not worth a thought.

For a minute, before our bus entered the trees of timberline, back on Trail Ridge Road, I had a glimpse of the shining Colorado as it emerged from a forested canyon. Where had it come from? What did the headwaters look like? Is it possible, after all, to return to those sources, to find headwaters and ancestors, and to know them? In going against the current, backward in hydraulic time, you encounter just as many branchings as you would by going downstream. The problem is which to choose. Which would I rather do, go questing after indefinable beginnings or make a pilgrimage to the final destination of the river, somewhere on a dry delta near the sea?

Without really knowing it, I wanted to find something else at the headwaters of the Colorado River. I wanted to find some reassurance, somehow, that the headwaters will continue to nourish the flow. Without really meaning to, I found where that cataclysmic unleashing of the dammed-up river will begin.

With such vaguely defined motives in mind, one day in early August, a month after returning from my trip with the Colorado College students, I went looking for the source. I took my son, Rob, along. For the past few years, while he had been wandering in and out of various colleges in search of the right teacher, and on an odyssey to Puerto Rico looking for himself, I had been wandering and looking for confluences. Perhaps I had been looking for the perfect student. The idea of the two of us joining forces in a search for the headwaters seemed unusual at first, since we do not exactly step to the music of the same percussionists. This is, after all, the young man who came to his sister's formal wedding wearing argyle socks with a tuxedo. But then I saw a reason for having him along: perhaps, with luck, he could be the first man in history to have seen where the river begins *and*, years later, to see it rejoin the sea after all the

volcanic garbage come to rest on *top* of itself. In other words, everything ejected had to have gone straight up and then straight down again. This struck Taylor as very odd behavior, since a volcano usually blows its magma and other junk far away from its core. There didn't even seem to *be* a core, in fact: this whole mountain seemed to be made of debris.

Some miles away from Specimen Mountain there is an unmistakable volcano; at an estimated age of 28 million years, it is fairly young compared with the uplift holocaust that sent the Rockies crashing up. It is Lulu Mountain. Geologist Taylor's theory is that when Lulu heaved up her molten ash, her molten obsidian, her boiling mud-lava flows, it all came pouring down through a deep granite trench, oozing its red-hot length along for eight or ten miles until it cooled and piled up in a long, massive, yellow mountain that people would call Specimen. There would be the obsidian, chunks of it glowing in the liquid rock mud; there would be the thick cloud of yellow ash rising, hovering for weeks, falling into thicker and thicker layers.

Neither Taylor nor I was there at the time. But at the foot of Specimen Mountain on the north side, where the Colorado River is only about a foot wider than a long-legged boy can conveniently jump, the rock *is* soft and yellow stuff, like petrified ashes from a furnace (for those who can remember furnaces that produced yellow smelly ash). In this rock are specks of black glass: obsidian. In it are also vacant holes: tufa, mudflow, bubbles of gas preserved by the cooling of molten rock. What is *not* in it is much granite, the primary rock of the Rockies. So the crumblestone is yellowish and consistent in texture. In the cliff face opposite the point where our little kamikaze creek enters, you can see sediment layers in the stone, uplifted to a forty-five-degree angle. But other than that single bit of visual variation, the valley walls have absolute unbroken color and texture, like jaundiced plaster.

Okay. That is the terrain. Sitting almost at the Continental Divide, a massive block of soft yellow stone. *Now* picture me this: titanic storms come surging and staggering up the prehistoric, barren, steaming slopes from the west or from the east, and they rage and rip and howl over the summit line of the continent. A year of cumulus clouds being broken open and spilled on the range of mountains. A rainstorm every day for a hundred years — 36,500 storms. A thousand years pass, and then a thousand more. In those thousands, how often does the concussion of hard thunder slam down on the exposed stone? How many thousands of times do we see lightning come zigzagging down and hissing, cracking into the

rock? And always there is the rain. Rain in patient, persistent, unending drizzle. Rain in masculine downthrusts. Rain driven anglewise by extreme winds. The earth globe tilts into its axis, and the rain becomes sleet and ice, ice and sleet, melting and running into cracks, invading the vacant gas-holes and freezing there and expanding. Grain by grain, one bit of sand at a time or a hundred tons in one avalanche, without the witness of a single living thing even remotely resembling man, the weather patiently removes the mountain of volcanic detritus.

What did twenty million years of weather leave behind, in the Little Yellowstone valley? Not plain polished granite such as you find in most canyons out here, or cloven and shattered cliffs such as those that are the walls of the Big Thompson Narrows. Here, it left tall ochre spires and open hallways between knife-blade-like hogbacks. It left stone formations that look like cleavers holding their edges up to the sky. It left castle turrets and skinny domes, and fragile-looking termite mounds two hundred feet high, and yellow monoliths whose hawklike faces look down along the Colorado's Grand Valley.

The ground here seems almost sterile, like fresh ash. It is loose gravel, loose scree, loose sand, loose silt. The infant Colorado River runs along through this strange soil, moving it aside or taking it further downstream. The water runs clear, and the rocks under the water look even more yellow than those which remain dry. Out in the farming country fed by the redirected river, we would see this as shameful erosion, a tragic waste of soil. Up here on the roof of the Rockies, it seems natural and at the same time almost grotesque.

Robert jumps the Colorado River and goes scrambling, alone, up one of the unstable-looking yellow fins of rock. When he is up high enough to be in some danger, I get out my telephoto lens and take his picture so that his mother will have something to remember him by. When he returns, he tries to finesse his way around my displeased scowl by awakening my professorial superiority. "So, Dad," he opens, "what do you think caused all these incredible rock formations?" "Poor range management," I reply, and we laugh.

Little Yellowstone is, as advertised, a little valley of yellow rock formations. Some look amusingly like inverted ice cream cones; others resemble massive shark fins so much that you think you could dig down at the base of them and find the whole fossilized form of the prehistoric fish itself. Here the juvenile Colorado practices her first attempts at stone-sculpturing, constantly cutting and carving and eroding and excavating.

She seems to be playing with the soft stone, practicing random and wayward shapes. A few miles below us, down in Phantom Valley and well into the thick timber and level moraines, she becomes a young lady on an outing, purring and meandering through nice mud meadows, stroking the sides of pet trout. Down there, our debutante river will move the willow curtains aside and step onto flowered, aspen-trimmed stages to sing her soft ripple songs. But up here at the foot of Specimen, where she is still finding herself, she carves away at the mountain like a kid turned loose with a shiny new shovel.

The afternoon grew older and the spruce shade stretched out toward the east, and we left the valley. Rob and I climbed (and the word is *climbed*) up out of the Little Yellowstone, shunning the trail, and found the Grand Ditch and walked back toward camp, still stopping to look back down into the chasm, stopping to examine tiny rivulets that flow from the ditch downward toward the larger stream, and we asked ourselves over and over whether we had found the headwaters.

In that we found the highest drainage of the Colorado River, yes. This place is the headwater. What we could not do is to seek out the tiniest, highest trickle of that drainage and trace it uphill until we can be certain that . . . there! *that* particular drop of water just now falling from the melting edge of the snowpack at thirteen thousand feet above sea level, *that* is the first birth of the Colorado! . . . no.

There are rivers in the world that begin when they emerge from the ground as a bubbling spring, or flow out of a lake, and therefore have easily identified origins. But the source of the Colorado is a gestalt kind of thing. The whole of it, in that high valley, is more than the sum of the tributaries. What we found was the birthplace of a river's spirit. The headwater is a valley and the range of a mountain. It is shaped like a leaf with many veins, Thoreau's basic pattern for God's organic systems. It's shaped like a hand with ten thousand acres held between its valley-fingers; the veins come down, the arteries come down, the lifeblood comes down and down and finally comes to a place where it can be named, although it can never be fully known.

In the long run of things, it will not matter that Specimen Ditch and Grand Ditch ever interrupted the Colorado River here at the head valleys, any more than it will matter that the great dams temporarily impeded its flow through the steep desert canyons. Someday, a prize-size elk will come running downhill and stumble and drown in Specimen Ditch while the ditch is running summer-full, and its body will dam it and cause a wash-

out in the dike wall. Being almost level, the water in the ditch will run backward and come to the end of the dike and then plummet down through the perpendicular forest to the Colorado. Rob knows what I mean: he has hazarded that hill and knows how a downhill-racing elk could trip and die in the ditch, and how the ditch could erode its sides and run backward through the breach, and how a freezing heavy rain could keep the ditch-rider in his cabin long enough for the water to undo the work of the laborers.

As for Grand Ditch, there will come an unusually slow-moving and unusually heavy storm. We call them "hundred-year storms," because a hundred years seems like an impressive span of time to us. Like its prehistoric predecessors, this storm will spend days drowning the whole Big Dutch drainage and inundating the Middle Dutch and the Mosquito. And when all of that overflow of life's fluid suddenly hits the Grand Ditch, it will *not* just turn like a docile demoiselle and go meekly to irrigate some flatland beetfield; instead, on this particular storm day, it will go straight on over the ditch dike. It will run down to join the Colorado in a trip toward Baja.

It will take that section of the ditch down the hill with it and leave the dirt in the Little Yellowstone Valley. An Eaton beet farmer subscribing to the irrigation company will be asked to help pay for some repairs. He'll put a spoonful of Hawaii cane sugar into his coffee, look out at his pivot irrigation system sucking up the Ogalala aquifer to spray over his corn crop, and he will reply, "I guess not."

So. The Colorado begins up here, here where we stand in the last light of a short day. Here it seems almost indifferent to man's petty thefts of its moisture for his sugar beets; none of its soul or spirit has been touched. It's still there. I was glad to discover that. It's elusive, but still there. Robert even sensed the river's spirit and mystery as we stood there looking, staring into the crystal-clear ditch water. For no reason that we could see, there were transparent oval shapes in the stream. They moved along like disks of clear oil in the water, distortions against the gravel bottom. It looked like hundreds of thin plastic lenses had been dropped there and were floating along the bottom. The water was otherwise invisible. "Watershadows," Rob decided to name these little mystery shapes.

"Watershadow," I repeated. "That would be a good name for a canoe."

"It's a metaphor," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "I know that."