Travelogue from a Drowned City

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There's a discarded bread bag blowing towards town. Ringed by 25 miles of reservoir shoreline, Stout, Colorado, climbs from the muck. They are doing a draw-down, they must work on a dam, structural things, when that happens. Sets of foundations. (School, boarding house.) Mounds of debris. Stout.

Satanka Dike plugs the north end of Horsetooth Reservoir. At 5,420 feet above sea level, this impoundment holds 156,735 acre-feet of water. All of it trying to make its way down. Down to its own level. Down to the ocean. Huge piles of rocks, stacked up in the draws between hogbacks, where the creeks used to drain from the last fold of foothills onto the plains, hold back the water behind giant walls above Fort Collins.

It's a fact that, before all these streams were impounded, snowmelt from the Rockies would pour off the slopes down the canyons in muddy roaring blue sky floods that would sweep out onto the flatland east into the rising moon, into the midsummer night; camped in the Platte River valley, wagon trains of settlers would waken in the dark to the ominous sound of water surging forwards. The mules would begin prancing, then they would bolt. Shouts would ring out from the upper reaches of the campsite, then water would be everywhere, bringing with it ungodly payloads, drowned stock, gingham dresses, men's shoes, snakes, snags, cradles, kegs, dogs swimming sideways as they were swept downstream. Buffalo carcasses would roll and bump through the wheels of the wagons, then the wagons would tip over and the ruin would stretch out a mile downstream caught in thickets, hung up in trees, flattened against sand bars, buried in silt.

The reservoir was finished in 1949 by a government agency called the Bureau of Reclamation. The Bureau of Reclamation was created in 1902. On June 17, if you'd like to know. Which is, more or less, the date today. (Let's say that it is.) The full moon this month is called a Strawberry Moon. Most people think it's because of the color. It is not. It's what many of the Algonquin tribes called the full moon that appears in the part of summer when the wild strawberries, which were a prized staple among northeast woodland indigenous people, ripened and were ready to be picked. The strawberry harvest and the Strawberry Moon if I am not mistaken marked for these people the commencement of a new year.

The rarity in this year's (let's say it is this year's) appearance of the Strawberry Moon is that it coincides with the summer solstice. Across Great Britain, throughout much of Europe, in the old tribal way, the call of the body to the body, the mid-summer-night's eve watch fires are kindled, and celebrations of fertility and regeneration are engaged. Across much of Europe, this summer moon is sometimes called the Honey Moon, or the Rose Moon. Again, not because the color. Though it fits. Bonfires blaze on hilltops, specks of brightness that deepen the night. Beaconing us to this world. The honey, rich in the supers. Roses fully in bloom.

The Colorado-Big Thompson Project diverts western-slope water down the eastern side of the Continental Divide. What this means is almost none of the water in Horsetooth Reservoir is "supposed" to

be there. If of course you believe things like that. Long term, of course, forget it: water wins, always. Every drop of water inside you and me has been on this earth since the earth began and it's probable that some of the water inside you was at one time inside the body of numerous other great and fantastical creatures from the deep past, and if you ever go swimming in the summer in Lake Superior near the mouth of the Two-Hearted River you'll feel it, how the water wants to be inside you again, at molecular level; to dissolve means to disappear, disband, disintegrate; from L., to solve, and dis- apart. To solve apart.

Satanka Dike is the name of the adjunct structure at the north end of Horsetooth Reservoir. Like the four other dams that the Bureau of Reclamation built to complete this piece of the western-slope-water divert-and-reclaim project, Satanka Dike is an earthen-fill dam. Horsetooth Dam, Soldier Canyon Dam, Dixon Canyon Dam, and Spring Canyon Dam contain among them "more than 10 million cubic yards of earthfill." 10 million is a lot of anything. 10 million cubic yards (3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet) would be enough earthfill, or dirt, to build a dirt wall three feet high, three feet thick and 5,682 miles long. That's about four round trips from Cleveland to Denver. The outsides of these dams are clad in a skin of red sandstone boulders.

In the middle of this travelogue, a teenage boy appears. It's my brother. He holds a small hash pipe in one hand. From his jeans he withdraws a lighter. He lifts and holds it, steady-handed. He hits the hash pipe, hard. Ronald Reagan is about to sell arms to the Contras. The flame from the lighter bends as my brother sucks in a long lungful. He straightens. He tips his face up, blows a thin stream of smoke in the air. It keeps streaming for hours, ages, marriages and children. My brother begins to hand the pipe to someone nearby, then stops. There is no one. Watch closely. The sun is coming. Shadows run up the east flank of Horsetooth Mountain. Into the rubble, among the chunks and blocks of Permian sandstone, shadows pool and deepen. The sky lifts. High on the hogback across the water, the first rays of the sun light up the tops of ponderosa pines. If in the area near those trees now the hulk of a bear were to lift and face you, it will be like seeing the ghost of Satanka, whose name in his Kiowa language means Sitting Bear.

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Sidewalks as far away as Omaha are made from red sandstone, which in the years after the Civil War was mined from shallow quarries around Stout, Colorado. In Spring Canyon, at the opening of which, between hogbacks, in 1949, the Bureau of Reclamation finished the Spring Canyon Dam, miners and their families lived in a filthy boarding house, and the children ran uphill to the filthy school, and filthy donkeys hauled slabs of stone mined from the quarries up, out of the pits to the railhead. Stout was a ghost town by the 1920s. Periodically, when the water level falls, the lost town emerges, moaning of bank failures, and the Panic of '93.

The U.S. Geological Survey says the formation known as the Satanka red shale bed lies between "beds of Forelle limestone and the Casper formation extending hundreds of miles north, in the Laramie region," in Cheyenne territory, far from where Sitting Bear lived. Sitting Bear was a member of an exclusive warrior society. Within the Kiowa tribe, as within some other Plains tribes, members of this elite society pledged their lives to fight to the death; they painted their faces black; they tethered themselves

with ceremonial sashes to lances, which they drove into the ground. Around 1870, prosecuted by the government for stealing 41 mules from a wagon train, which he definitely did steal, and who wouldn't, Sitting Bear refused to be sent to Texas—anywhere but Texas. His name wasn't Satanka. It was Set Angia, or Set-Ankeah. Sitting Bear.

My brother that summer around solstice day went to look at a '49 Ford, the For Sale sign in its window, parked under cottonwoods on the west side of Fort Collins. He came back and got us, his older brother and the young mechanic who lived in the detached garage where he slept on a pallet of blankets next to an older model Jaguar painted ghost grey in primer. The three of them went back to look at the Ford together. They started it, but something was off. A loose piston rod, or bad rings. Something made the engine sound like a lame, like a sore-footed mule stumbling under a heavy load. How far could they drive it? To Ohio? What if it didn't make it past Julesburg? The mechanic nodded: '49 Ford. That's a sweet looking truck. Then he shook his head. "It's bad," he said. The seller stuck his head out the driver's door. "Whaddya think?" He was only a little older than us, but he seemed grown up, of a different order of existence. "Well," said my brother, making it a question. "We're gonna talk about it," I said. "Maybe call you back."

You can't not wonder though. I know, I know. You'd have drove that truck down as far as you could, the exact same road, all the way back. But would you have? Sitting Bear died staring up through the branches of a pecan tree. On his way to prison, he'd made a last desperate move to escape, shooting one guard before being shot. Blood pouring out of his mouth. One of Sitting Bear's sons had gone east, gotten a white education, converted to Christianity, became an Episcopal priest. One of Sitting Bear's sons had been killed on a raid Texas. Sitting Bear risked everything to recover that son's remains, which he kept bundled with him wherever he went thereafter. Pictures in the Kiowa calendar histories show a bear sitting next to a skeleton.

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The redbuds were blooming along Michigan Avenue in Chicago, complementing the color of the sandstone in the sidewalks, cut from the Spring Canyon quarries, which was also used in the buildings at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, known as the World's Columbian Exposition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus to the New World.

Swami Vivekananda is said to be the first teacher to bring to the western world the knowledge of the practice of yoga, although the American Transcendentalists, including Emerson, then Thoreau, then Whitman, were familiar with "Hindoo" philosophy, and in particular, the sacred text of *The Bhagavad Gita*. "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea," Vivekananda began, in his address to the First Parliament of the World's Religions. "[T]he wonderful doctrine preached in the *Gita*: 'Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.'" The rest of that address is available on Facebook.

The sandstone is red from iron oxides. Arapaho Indians loved it around here. There are tipi circles on ranches from Berthoud to Owl Canyon. On a given summer morning, gazing east as the sky lightens, the plains between the St. Vrain River, the Big Thompson River, and the Cache La Poudre River,

would stream with buffalo. Picture it. 300,000 bison, grazing under a dead flat stillness of fading stars. Feel it. The massive weight and motion of all of their huge bodies, like a tide making the ground under your shoes quiver.

There are buffalo jumps on the tops of the hogbacks. One locally famous one is near the Bellevue Fish Hatchery. Before the Spanish *conquistadors* brought the Arab-bred horses known as Mustangs to the New World, before Springfield rifles were procured by the nomadic Plains tribes, bands of hunters killed buffalo by stampeding them off of cliffs. When the fall didn't kill, more hunters rushed in, clubbing and spearing the animals where they lay, gasping and writhing on the rocky slope. It was hot, treacherous, slippery, bloody, dangerous, exhilarating work. The sound and the smell would have been horrific. Enormous bodies thudding violently down, bashed, broken, end over end on the rocks.

But the hunt up top was even more incredibly wild and dangerous. Particularly for the runners, the fast, brave and crazy young men who, draping themselves in bison hides, decoyed the rampaging herd to the edge, then over the edge. The most fantastic feat had to be performed here, at the last possible instant. The runners, having run for their lives, literally straight to the edge of the cliff, duck below the edge of the cliff at the last possible second, allowing the bison running hard behind them to crash over, just barely missing them.

The sandstone escarpment burns red, a winter-sun color set permanently in its summer coat. The moon springs off the reservoir water like a strawberry breaking through vines of clouds into the mouths of the two bears, the greater and the lesser, mother and cub, as they shuffle at the edge of an ocean of stars. The cinnamon shoulder of Horsetooth Mountain scrapes magpies off the crowns of Ponderosa Pines. Everything's getting restless. "Tell us what you want," says the mountain. "Who are you?" ask the magpies.

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I want to understand this place and what it meant to me then and how that meaning, that relationship, changed. I want to understand what it was that I really felt when, at eighteen, I left home to attend the college here, sight unseen, happy, amazed. I want to understand what I lost or left behind when I moved to Colorado, and who I left behind, and what resulted from that. I want to find who I lost here.

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The bread bag slides along the bathtub-like rings, the high-water marks along the shores of Satanka Cove. Decorated with red, yellow, and blue balloons. Not bread. Buns. Hamburger buns. "What is that?" the teenager asks, squinting. Boxcars of smoke chug from his mouth. Smoke fills the canyons to their rims and crests over. Beyond Stove Prairie Road, up towards Rustic and Red Feather Lakes, the mountains are burning again.

Question begins the possibility of answer so I begin with how, driving home from Colorado it grows late and I grow tired and drive into a rest stop in what seemed to me at the time and what surely once was the wilderness of western Nebraska. I pull out my sleeping bag. Who knows how anything

eventuates. With my bag under my arm, I lock the car and walk past the restroom, way back, ignoring the "NO CAMPING" sign, and in the dark beyond it, I come into a space that held a sculpture. Before I check, I can't say for sure whether it was "Erma's Desire," by John Raimondi, at the eastbound Grand Island rest stop, "Memorial to the American Bandshell," by Richard Field, at the Platte River eastbound rest area, or "Arrival," by Paul Von Ringelheim, at the Blue River eastbound rest area. I look it up, the so-called "500-mile sculpture garden," which was created to celebrate the bicentennial. Clicking among the photos, I eliminate "Arrival," then "Memorial to the American Bandshell." It has to be "Erma's Desire," at Grand Island. An abstract sculpture, "Erma's Desire" consists of angular shapes of steel. It looks a little at first glance like pieces of farm implements left to rust under the high plains moon. It looks a little like a Cubist realization of a sandhill crane performing its courtship dance. I remember stepping out from under the arc light of the rest area parking lot. The wetness of the grass, the long slow sigh of overnight trucks ghosting through the night. Suddenly, forms. A sculpture. Having been slightly anxious about sleeping under the stars in a rural rest stop, upon recognizing the sculpture for what it was—a huge art installation, next to nothing else along an empty midnight highway, I felt immediately safe. I remember smiling. I remember feeling really happy—that I'd guessed right about something, had ended up exactly in the right place. Next to the right-of-way fence way back in the back of the rest area, I spread out my sleeping bag and lay down.

Things get a little jumbled.

The front range of the Rockies begins with a ridge called the Dakota Hogback. If you look it up, you'll find diagrams that show the hogback actually is a whole stack, pancaked, of layered formations, sediment beds laid down over eons, some as old as when all of eastern Colorado, most of Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas, too, were under water, a huge inland ocean that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to I don't know where, way up, all the way through Canada. The continent was cut in half, back then. It was the Cretaceous period. All sorts of animals swam around in the huge lagoon that is now the Great Plains. Almost everything was different. The air smelled different. The water, well, the water was the same. But.

In a four-hour period on a summer night in 1976, the rainstorm that flooded the Big Thompson Canyon dropped over a foot of rain. It rained so hard, people who were there said, that it was hard to breathe. A torrent of water eight feet high pitched down the narrow canyon from Glen Comfort through Drake; at the mouth of the canyon, the flood destroyed the high-water gauge; eye-witness observations and high-water marks pegged the top of the crest at just under twenty feet. A witness near Drake described floodwaters lit from inside by the headlights of tumbling cars. Thousands of tourists were in the canyon. The flood ripped out houses and rental cabins tucked against the canyon walls, smashing them into bridges, flipping them upside down, splitting them open on trees. Drivers who had stopped on Highway 34 in the canyon because it was raining too hard to see, scrambled uphill for their lives as the dome lights of their abandoned cars illuminated the rising water until the road itself washed away. Then more cars swept by, with people inside. Propane tanks banged and rattled downstream, and the funk of LP gas hung so thickly and heavily in the air that it made the recovery work difficult later that night and through the next day. Boulders the size of two-car garages thundered underwater down the riverbed at wrecking-ball speed. It rained so hard in Estes Park you couldn't hear yourself speaking. The noise of the flood was like thunder. The canyon roared. Some of

the victims were never found. Some of the drowned turned up miles and miles away, way out on the sunrise plains east of Loveland.

Setting the record straight, then, let me say that this particular night in this rest area in the shadow of "Erma's Desire" was—is—one of the happiest moments of my life. In the den of my secret, inward life, I think to myself that I would like my ashes spread there, in that rest area, back behind the free-form sculpture. When I pick my way back through the drowned streets of Stout, trying to catch the bread bag that is always blowing away, this is one night that feels like—and here my syntax contorts to get the meaning—this is one night that feels like I was me.

I wasn't alone there. My friend from back home had come out to Colorado. We had climbed and camped in the rocky outcroppings above Horsetooth Reservoir. A Friday evening in early May. Side by side we sat with our legs stretched out, looking east, out over the wristwatch of water, towards the gloom advancing from the eastern plains. Nightfall. My friend lifted a tin of sardines from his rucksack. He keyed it open. I rifled a wax paper cylinder of crackers from my pack, and we ate our Friday meal, and breathed the heady sweet smell of sage and pine, let the chill stealing down from the crags above us lift goose bumps on our arms. We fell asleep watching stars hold still. In the morning the sun slit its wrist on the horizon. My friend slid out of his sleeping bag to pee. When he came back he stopped. "What's this?" He pointed. On the spot where his head had dented the goose down, a spider looked up at him through its numerous eyes. It was shiny, wet-looking, fat like a teardrop, the color of hot tar, with eight long graceful legs. On the hump of its back, a lightning bolt of red. Black Widow. He shooed it away. Slid back into his bag.

We hiked most of the morning, then headed into Fort Collins. By dusk we were heading east out of town. Ahead in the distance we could see the distant tops of huge cumulonimbus clouds, their anvil heads thrusting up on the horizon and twilight bathing their forms in warm tones. As it grew gradually darker, the lightning flying around inside them became visible to us; the whole cloud would wink and stutter with brightness. We drove straight towards them. Dark came. The storms dissipated, cooled by the coming of night. My friend drove until we both were too tired, and then he opened the sunroof and the windows and sped up. We crossed the state line into Nebraska with the engine wound up to the red line; the music from the tape deck warbled and collapsed and stood up again and fell apart in the wind-rush. There were basically no other cars on the road, a handful at most, and about every mile, an eighteen-wheeler, which we would blow right by. A sign appeared. Rest Area 2 Miles. We pulled in.

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I say I walked back to the back of the rest area, past the structure I now know is called "Erma's Desire," and past more structures even then I could name as "picnic table" and "grill." Next to more structures, a steel one called "right-of-way fence," a vegetable one called "crop field," I say I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly, which is a line from a James Wright poem that I won't find for another ten years, and when I do, I will remember that night sleeping out under the sculpture in Nebraska, because James Wright describes standing out in the open plains near Fargo, North Dakota, feeling the emptiness of the space around him and the fullness of the moment, both. But this is the part that matters. This is the

part that, when I tell my son about it, forty years later, I can actually get him almost to smile, and not just because he's trying to be nice. His birthday is coming; he's turning seventeen, almost the age that I was then. "Caleb," I tell him. "This was the coolest part."

At a certain point after, in the middle of the middle of the middle of that night, which pauses like the period cut loose from a sentence and dropped off the cliff edge of Time, at a certain point after we stretched out our bags, back by the fence, past the "No Over Night Camping" sign, at some point after the round tunnel of the Platte valley became listenable, truck by infrequent truck pushing all the way down to the farthest end of sound at the edge where a cricket meets silence, one of those irrigation machines they have / we have / here in the west / down south / in California / turns on / starts rolling, turning its way through the sculptures of crop rows / a great, wide circle / of water falling over / the thirsty and drinking corn. The name of this machine is "center pivot." My friend turned to mention this, to remind me of this detail, but after a silence of continued listening, he turned away, not speaking, because we were stopped now, and asleep, and he was already becoming one among many sculptures called "stillness," and "friend," "distance," and "cows," and "beta waves" and "time." And we all slept in the company of each other. It would be years and years before one of us died. It would be years and years before one of us would wake up, looking for something, for someone he's lost.

"Where were you going?" my son asks.

Who will outlive this road?

Question begins the possibility of answer so I begin with how, driving home from Colorado one summer I grow tired and drive into a rest stop in the wilderness of Nebraska and pull out my sleeping bag—who knows how anything eventuates—and walk way back, past some roadside sculptures, an oasis of rest stop art in the wilderness of Nebraska and then strike a match slowly and lift it slowly and lie down slowly then sleep. Then, at a certain point, in the middle, one of those irrigation machines they have out turns on, starts rolling, like a sleeper-wave filling a Pacific coast cove, and my friend, who also was present, after a silence of listening, turned to mention this and then like a satellite, continued on, not speaking, and we slept, all together, within the sound of the tape loop of the highway throwing traffic noise over the wide and reaching plains, into the spaces between midnight cars that grew deeper and deeper, until, near the end, we gradually awakened to the sound of wheels, invisible inside the rattling crops, the field awash in rustling sounds, farther then nearer, we couldn't see, and what is happening with the skeleton here, the bones coming out under layers of the past to the present, back into the story, meaning that all the way down, it's the same, it's history, the one where stars chew on distance, and spit out the seeds, which are our faces.

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I'm rushing, too. I'm a sculpture called "leaving," rolling through the field. I was a huge rustling and groaning sound, a sigh over the crop rows. We couldn't see it, only hear it, and feel a shred of the water, a mist on our faces at the closest pass.

Years and years later Paul would stop and face me. Do you remember that weekend, he would ask. And I knew what he was going to say. I knew exactly. Yes, I do, I said. It was the best weekend of my life, he said. Yes, I answered. I knew then this was the last time I would see Paul alive. I knew even before

he brought it up, that that weekend, that night in the rest stop, was the clear center of our shared life, the glimmer of pure joy buried under busted marriages, estrangements, distance and time. Paul opened right to it, as though dipping his finger into an invisible book, and plucking out the exact page. I think about it a lot, he said.

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As the sun sets, everyone comes down to the water. Friends. Kids on dates. Families. I watch then like the wolf that I am come down from the mountains, when the daughter-in-law stands up slowly from the bench on the boardwalk then stops and stretches her arms in the air, luxuriating in it, in the softness of evening air, her sari wrapped loosely around her.

Coming to the water's edge, we feel drawn to it, down the generous hill from the city, from the Unitarian church, from the tattoo parlor and the ice cream shops, the Irish pub and the taquerias, the steak and lobster house, the yoga studio, the street players moaning into their six-strings the choruses of "Hound Dog" and "Hear My Train A Comin," the counseling office, the county health board building, old Little Italy that is now a Hyatt, and a Courtyard Marriott, with gleaming lakeside windows, through them, by the light from the dying sun, gorgeously soft, white bedding, rumpled from loving and watching after as the light runs molten over the water, all the way from where it begins, right up to us, to all our bodies, filling us, meeting in us the light we know when we touch and feel it jump home itself.

I'm looking for the third cottonwood tree in Bill Tremblay's book of poems, which is called *Walks Along the Ditch*. He sees "faces in the cottonwood leaves…faces staring" on p. 58, and he hears tall cottonwoods on p. 49, "the upper branches sway across / strung power lines," which reminds me of what the street players' fingers do on the strings of their guitars. The coffee has sputtered silent, which means I will have to choose: keep reading and walking, or get up from my seat, cross a room, and turn the thing off before it scalds the last sweetness off the edge of the bitter. Canada geese peer the length of the ditch. I watch Bill see a cricket chirp the wind open a door in the rain smell, then I skip quickly past the homeless lady on Church Street who with a very neatly lettered cardboard sign and a sweet clear voice wishes me "good evening." Bill learns to ride a two-wheeler in a dream and California slides off the page where Long's Peak calls over a dead boy's body for an answer to anyone's fear of falling forever into the black hole we know is inside us. Milkweed becomes flesh under willows that sway, their long branches' weeping touch, brushing the ground like someone's hair who used to love me, and sometimes used to let her hair fall across my face when we were together. Now I have to take a drink of the coffee. And consider whether to push all the way back, to where the trail begins, a parking lot in Lory Park, in 1978, where my friend is kneeling, tying his shoe, or to turn forwards, towards the abyss at the end, where the east face of Long's Peak—they call it The Diamond—plunges so steep and fast that even 2,000 miles away in a summer forty years later as I sit counting breaths on a Thursday in June I feel it take me, my breath going, then gone.