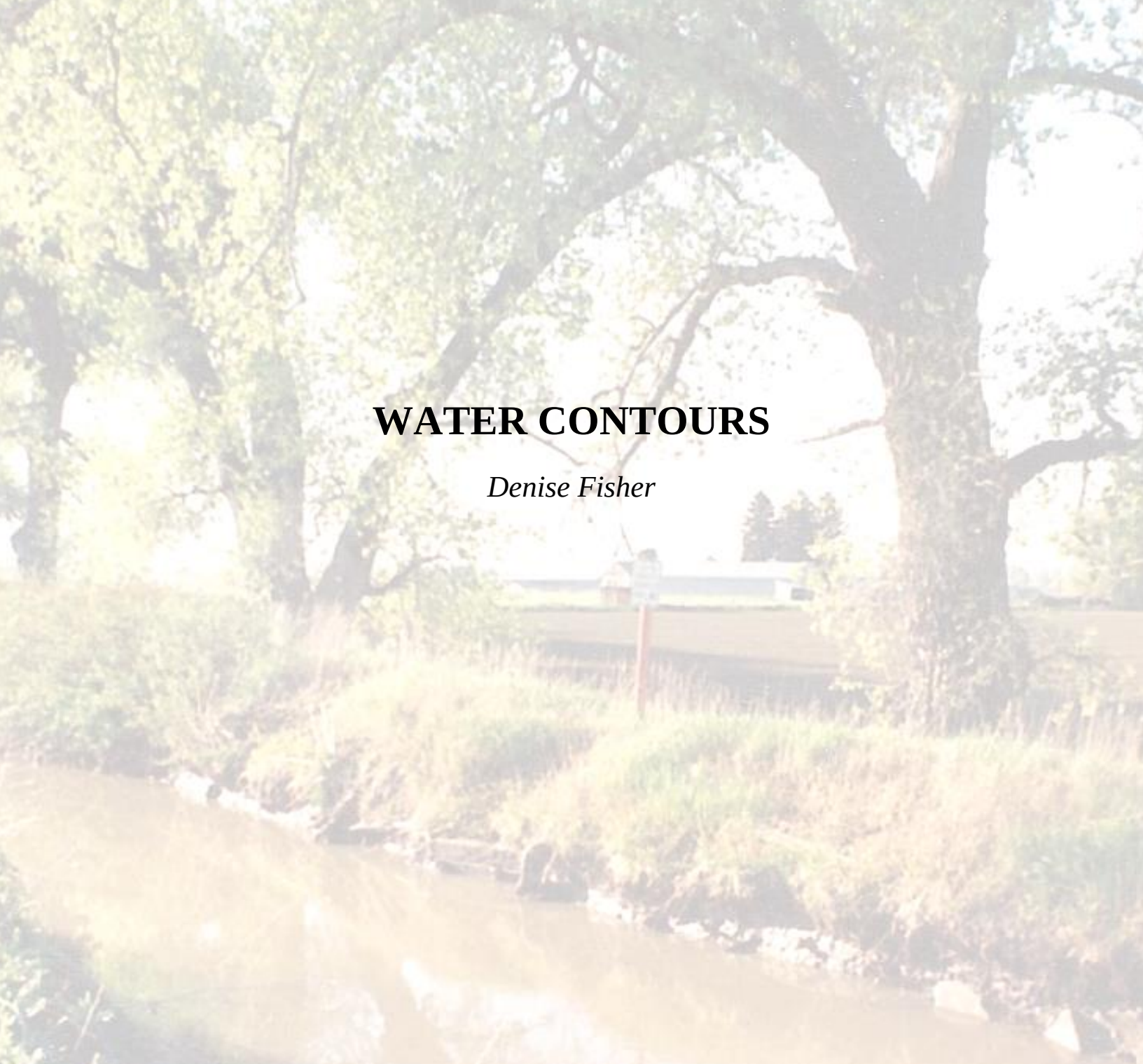

WATER CONTOURS

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(Cover Photo: Lake Canal Ditch near the Fisher Lateral. Photo taken by author.)

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INTRODUCTION

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There is always a landscape behind an idea: a context, a history, a set of circumstances that brings it to the fore. I trace the origin for the topic of my thesis to the landscape of a sun-drenched December morning, me sitting in a rocking chair in front of my bay window, my head throbbing from the aftermath of my first full-time semester as a graduate student in English. My mind was swimming in a stew of theories and concepts, a medley of voices from classes I had just taken: History of Literary Criticism from which I heard the voices of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud; Rhetoric of Difference, where I heard Edward Said, Sandra Harding, and Gayatri Charavorty Spivak; and from Form and Technique: The Essay, I heard Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, and Aldo Leopold. I had covered ground that shifted margins to center and back again, had listened for the Other in the silences and gaps of narratives, and had become intrigued with the possibility of giving Nature a voice.

That morning, rocking along and feeling decentered and deconstructed, it was to a different voice I turned. So it was that I found myself with Alan Watts', The Watercourse Way, in my hands. In the introduction, Al Chung-Liang Huang offers Elsa Gidlow's (Watt's longtime neighbor and friend) explanation of Watts' understanding of water and its use as a metaphor for the Tao, or The Way:

> The stream does not merely move downhill. The water, all moisture, transpires from the earth, streams, rivers, the ocean, to the upper air, a "breathing out," and then there is the "breathing in" when the moisture is returned downward as dew, as rain – a marvelous cycle, a living interaction: nothing controlling anything, no "boss" yet all happening as it should, *tse jen*.[1]

Perhaps it was the centerlessness of the image of water in this passage, centerless, yet whole; perhaps it was the suggestion in the passage that water has an autonomous life of its own, a

view that is quite different from that of water mechanized and controlled: rivers dammed, effluent flushed, and canals and ditches that divert water from its natural course onto middle class lawns, golf courses, or crops grown for fast food beef; or perhaps it was the heat of the sun through the window, but in a moment of epiphany, I knew I wanted to write about water.

When I told John Calderazzo of my idea to write about water, his response was brief: "Sounds like you'll need to narrow your focus. Water is a big topic." He sensed what was to be my stumbling block right up until the final pages. As I explored different focal points for my thesis, my roamings took me across territory too vast for a masters' thesis. I felt wonder at my topic as I contemplated the general relationship that humans have to water. After all, we are all composed of 70 % water. We are all conceived in moisture, spend our first nine months of life sloshing in embryonic fluid, our lungs full of liquid, drinking breakfast, lunch and dinner, knowing no dryness, hearing sound, dampened, muted by water. We are then born into a world with the unique and precious characteristic of a water cycle of rain, snow, glaciers, rivers, springs, clouds. Matthew Fox expresses this wonder well in his book, The Coming of the Cosmic Christ:

> "In all our probings of the frontiers of the universe, humans have yet to discover water on any other planet than our own. To the best of our knowledge, water is a unique creation of our planet. How are we treating this holy and essential gift – this original blessing without which there is no life?"[2]

But from these general musings I needed to move to more specific territory. Over and over I found myself orbiting around the region where I grew up: the northern Front Range of Colorado. I didn't yet know what would become clear to me in the process of writing this thesis: that water has nearly always been my entry point into a landscape, beginning with the farm I grew up on. My world centered on the waterways that defined the landscape: reservoirs, ditches, drainages, rivers. And so it seems natural to me that water would also become my entry into the landscapes of academic explorations and of creative writing.

Since my center of gravity for treating the topic of water is the northern Front Range of Colorado, my essays are specific to this region. And yet, through my stories of water, I feel that I have given the more abstract theoretical and political notions of water a place, sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly.

In "Water Contours," I have explored and examined the development of my own consciousness of water on the northern Front Range landscape. I have strived to convey a sense of place through the stories that intersect my life and this region. Since I did not simply appear full blown upon the landscape in northern Colorado, in "Prairie Water" I have done a genealogy of sorts – of the landscape, my family and of my ideas – a lineage that locates the author, me, specifically in time, place, and within a rich texture of constructs. "Ditch Culture" is just what it says. It offers a look at the culture that is uniquely ditch-centered. "Float Trip" offers a variant on the idea of ditches from the perspective of the dangers of modern canal systems as opposed to public waterways. "Water Wisdoms"

continues the idea of constructs through the analysis of images of water in the Allen True murals that hang in the rotunda of the Colorado State Capitol Building.

In The Island Within, Richard Nelson, while surfing off of the Alaskan coast, muses that he never watches a wave without studying it, trying to understand the forces that shape it. I, too, have studied the subtle waves of water that break across this landscape in northern Colorado. I cannot look at a ditch, a reservoir, or a river without wondering at the natural and human forces that shape them. But, in the words of Nelson, "...I've only begun to learn. Perhaps there is too much difference between the human mind and the mind of water.

"Or perhaps I haven't watched long enough."[3]

ENDNOTES

1. Alan Watts, *The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), x.

2. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988) 16.

3. Richard Nelson, *The Island Within* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 45.

WATER CONTOURS

Back

(Originally appeared in *Camas Magazine*, Summer 2013)

It had no name I ever knew. When we told stories, it was just "the lake," as in, remember when the fire department rescued Alan from the lake? Or remember that story when the Nazi prisoners swam in the lake? They were thinning beets on our Colorado farm. At noon break, they asked our grandfather, in German, to convince the guard to let them swim. He did. Or remember when I was four and packed a swimsuit and a half-eaten package of graham crackers into an old brown suitcase to run away to the lake? My mother was washing a mountain of freshly cut spinach at the barn sink that day. Without looking up, she said, no, you can't run away to the lake. I went anyway, or tried, lugging my suitcase down the driveway, getting as far as the county road before fear won out over passion.

The pull to the lake was powerful for reasons that come together in pieces. It was where I first saw a family of Canada geese, the mother leading her yellow puffs to the water's edge. It was where, in a rare moment of whimsy, I spent an autumn afternoon after school dancing a steady Indian shuffle around an overturned watering tank, my feet drumming a hollow metal rhythm up into the cottonwoods. It was where I tried to connect with the God I was hearing about on Sundays. God: a wordless world apart from my own, but if I listened hard enough that world would speak to me. I had watched the ripples catch the orange light of a sunset. I had escaped house-chores mid-morning on a summer day and

experienced wet lake sounds, birds' flights, cottonwood leaves tapping against each other above me, breeze on my face, as poetry: bird-flying-sun-ripple-air-flash-breeze-ripple....

The lake could also be moody, unpredictable. The same summer I tried to run away, my brothers, Gil and Alan, then eleven and eight, went fishing on a raft. A thunderstorm whipped up blowing the raft halfway across the quarter mile lake. Then the wind stopped, leaving them stranded. Gil told us later they screamed for help, but no one came. With lightning threatening, Gil swam for shore. He crawled and backstroked until he felt the silt bottom of the lakeshore on his hands and knees, too tired to drag himself out of the water. A neighbor, who heard them yelling, ran up and pulled him to shore.

That was the day the fire department rescued Alan. I remember the boys coming home afterward, their faces ashen, Gil's wet jeans plastered to his skinny legs, his bare torso covered with goose bumps. I overheard my mother telling them, her voice low and stern, the words measured and even, "*Never* do that again. The lake is dangerous because it's man-made and has deep holes in the bottom."

For some time after, I pictured the bottom of the lake as an oversized peg-board – a muddy bottom punctured by cylindrical holes that plunged to an unimaginable depth. Often, after church, my older sister, brothers and I peeled off stiff suits and dresses in exchange for swim gear, then bounced painfully on the wheel wells in the back of the pickup down the pasture road to the lake. I dog-paddled through the greenish-brown liquid, my chin thrust stubbornly above the surface and thrashed my feet and legs to scare carp lurking nearby. If I swam out too far, I was sure those deep holes would suck me in.

On some Sundays, Dad said, "No, we're not going today. The clouds are rolling in." I hated him for saying it, blaming him for Colorado thunderstorms. And for *always* being right. By midafternoon the clouds blackened, the temperature dropped, the air rumbled and flashed with electricity, sometimes giving way to hail that would pop off the roof or shatter windowpanes. Once, by some miracle, we went to the lake even though the clouds were moving in. We swam until the last possible moment, until the wind shook the surface of the lake into white-capped waves and the cottonwoods joined the chopping water in a frenzied, swaying dance.

Rarely did my father swim, even though he could. I remember him in his light blue swim trunks, standing in water up to his waist, tossing us balls or splashing us with water. I was always surprised when he explained he didn't like water, that bathtubs held about as much as he could appreciate, and the only boat big enough for him was one that reached from one shore to the next. I wondered if he had always felt that way. I knew he had been on a boat when he was in the Army, and gotten seasick. I now know the ship was on its way to Japan when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Because of my father's aversion to water, it was surprising when, one summer, he confiscated a little rowboat some trespassers had stashed in the tall weeds on the lakeshore. Playing trickster on the intruders, he re-hid it. Perplexed, my mother asked him, "What are you going to do with a rowboat?"

"Row in it."

And he did, on a moon-lit night after climbing out of bed to change the irrigation set. He told us the next morning. I imagined him pulling the boat out of the weeds, slipping it into the dark water and rowing out onto ripples that stretched and jostled the moon.

I, too, wanted to know the lake in the moonlight, to sit shadowed in its secret life. One full moon, I camped the night in the front yard under a brand new tarp tent strung between two trees. When I crawled out of my sleeping bag and pushed back the tent flap, I moved into a magical grey and black world. The luminescent road extended deep into the dark before me, a grey ribbon tapering into the night. It contrasted with the dark weeds at the side of the road that seemed to grow and press toward me. The roar of frogs, toads, crickets, vibrated the air.

A hundred yards down the gravel road, I looked at our white clapboard farmhouse shining in the moonlight and it seemed miles away. Across the fields and ditches, the dark branches that marked the lake edge looked like strangers. I turned back toward the house and willed my bare feet numb to jabbing gravel until I reached the soft clipped grass of our front yard.

I never saw the summer lake in the moonlight. When I was fifteen, my parents sold our farm and bought a cattle ranch in British Columbia. That summer before we moved I went to the lake nearly every day. After they signed the final sales contract, I drove our Chevy pickup to the pasture gate and found a padlock barring my way. I sat in the cab, my hands paralyzed on the steering wheel. I put the gear in reverse, turned the pickup around, and slowly drove back home.

Our ranch in British Columbia had ponds and springs and lush grass pocketed within stands of fir, spruce and pine. I spent the first year roaming to find a spot that would take the place of the lake. During my wanderings, I saw moose behind our house and bald eagles sitting in the dead snags of old pine trees. A small river, the San Jose, meandered through open meadows and tumbled through forested sections.

In the evenings, I would disappear into my bedroom, sit at my desk and recall the lake, closing my eyes and turning memories over, and turning them finally onto a page I filled with bad poetry that earned me Bs from Mr. Hart in high school English.

Twenty years later, I have moved back to Colorado and return to see the lake again. I look out my pickup window onto what used to be bare pastures now spotted with huge houses. I turn down a familiar lane. The fields that used to grow my father's alfalfa and silage corn are now a sod farm operated by Turf-Master. I drive slowly past pallets of grass strips, cut, rolled, ready to carpet suburban lawns and parkway medians. An old cottonwood that grew on the ditch is gone.

Two pairs of great blue herons, several pair of mallard ducks and Canada geese, yellow-headed blackbirds, red-winged blackbirds; fish jump, toads roar, and something lower, the sustained bass reverberation of bullfrogs rises from the cattails. The place seems more alive than I remember. Or maybe I am more aware.

On the western shore, more than thirty cottonwoods stand sentinel. Two are uprooted, their tops chain-sawed off. The roots, uplifted on edge, reach into the sky, twice my height. I count the rings of one trunk: more than eighty.

Eighty years ago, Old Man Kern owned this farm. My father told us about a visit George made to the house in the late forties when my parents were newlyweds. He asked to see the house where he had been born and raised. As they walked him through the rooms, he cried.

Loss. Was his like mine? I think back to when my grandparents were alive, how their presence in stories, in this place, gave me a sense of who I was. The ditches that measure distances across fields, the asparagus, the old cottonwood, and the lake have been here forever, or so it seems. They are the landscape of my childhood – the water-shaped contours of my consciousness. I know that my grandparents walked the same ditch banks, picked the same asparagus, and watched the old cottonwoods shattered by lightning back in the thirties. I think of all the people who have died – grandparents, neighbors, people whose funerals I never attended, those I had, who seemed like they could never leave. But they did. And I will.

Birdcalls, drones, hums, roars, fill my ears – and yet it is quiet. I hear the breeze, the distance across the flat fields, the mountains. The lake has gone on with its story. Before I leave, six pelicans circle in formation, the first one flapping, then the rest in sequence. Their white bodies flash in the dim light of the evening, and land on the far side of the lake.

THE HOLLOW

Back

Perhaps an Arapaho hunting party sees the hollow turn boggy in the spring from sleet and snow storms. A few inches of water pool in the lowest part, filling a confusion of hoofprints. A small ridge curves around the hollow a quarter of a mile to the northeast. A slope rises gently to the southwest. Elk, deer, and antelope graze here; the grass is more lush than on the surrounding hillsides. Occasionally, a herd of buffalo pass through, eating, drinking, and wallowing, their hundreds of hooves churning the spring run-off into brown soup and pounding the clay-like soil. When there is water here, they needn't trail the mile and a half to the river that winds both west and south of the low spot. On the low rises surrounding the hollow, yucca and prairie dog towns pock the surface of the earth. Eagles fly from their nests in the cottonwoods along the river to hunt in the dog towns. Red fox, silver fox, coyotes and wolves nose out hares and badgers.

By June the hoof prints have dried and the elk, deer and antelope go to the river to drink, although they return to graze the thick, tall grass. In the summer months, water still occasionally collects over the hoofprints from the afternoon thunder storms that come in dark clouds from the northwest over the mountain range, watering the yellow sunflowers and the prairie grass.

In the center of the low spot, the animals can't see the bluff to the southwest with its eroded ravines dropping sharply to the river. If a buffalo were to graze out of the hollow up the rise to the southwest, he might see the bluff in the distance and perhaps a hunting party

of Arapaho or Cheyenne silhouetted on its crest. The bluff makes an excellent look-out over the valley below and a clear view of two peaks to the west that serve as their reference point.

Nesotaieux, the Arapaho call the two peaks to the west – Two Guides. The river valley below them they call Jaaianahaw – Game Bag. The river valley and the basin east of it were almost certain to fill their food bags with venison, elk, antelope, or bison. Jaiano, they call the basin – Food Sack. The hollow is part of this basin, the Arapaho's food sack.[1]

On July 3, 1820, perhaps a party of Arapaho saw from their vantage point on the bluff a cloud of dust rising to the southeast. The cloud moved slowly but steadily up the southeast bank of what the Arapaho called the Nenananachu River.[2] The men in the party called it the South Platte.

The cloud was produced by a group of about twenty men with horses and pack-mules loaded down with supplies which included crude surveying equipment. The party was led by a thirty-six year old man named Stephen Harriman Long. There was also a twenty-three year old doctor and zoologist along who had diligently been keeping notes and records of the expedition. His name was Edwin James and he hadn't been enjoying the country they had been passing through. Two weeks earlier he had written in his journal, "The monotony of a vast unbroken plain, like that in which we had now traveled nearly one hundred and fifty miles, is little less tiresome to the eye, and fatiguing to the spirit, than the dreary solitude of the ocean."[3] One week later he complained again saying they travel through "the same uninteresting and dreary country."[4] Finally, on the thirtieth of June, James and Long saw what they thought to be cumulus clouds floating on the western

horizon. It was only when they saw that the clouds did not move that they realized they were seeing the Rocky Mountains and the peaks the Arapahos called Two Guides. They were cheered by this relief in the monotony.

Although the expedition was considered to be scientific, the original purpose was to secure the northwestern frontier from the British. The U.S. Congress decided the money wasn't worth the effort and cut the funds for the expedition. Exploring the Platte was the alternate and less costly plan.[5] They were charged by the United States War Department to go to the source of the Platte River and then back to the Mississippi via the Arkansas and Red Rivers. Long's party would never make it to the source of the Platte and would mistake the Canadian River for the Red River. Later, in summarizing his impressions and those in general of Long and the rest of the party, James would reflect that "The traveller who shall at any time have traversed its desolate sands, will, we think, join us in the wish that this region may for ever remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackal."[6]

James words were published in 1823. Based on the account of the Long expedition, maps were printed with the words GREAT AMERICAN DESERT arching across the expanse from the Missouri River to the Rockies. Children in school learned from their geography textbooks about the great desert in the west. The hollow was included in this area.

The hollow hasn't been changed by its new name. The deer, elk, and antelope still graze on the grass and drink from the hollow. Eagles still feast on the nearby towns of

prairie dogs. The buffalo herds seem smaller, but still return in hoards to wallow and eat, packing the soil tighter and tighter with their hooves. The Arapaho still look out from the bluff and hunt in the Jaiano. But now white trappers can be seen along the river trapping beaver. And three miles to the west of the hollow, the Arapahos along with other tribes, trappers, and traders meet in groups under the shade of a gnarled and massive cottonwood tree.[7] They share food, and make deals on buffalo robes and the pelts of fox, wolf, and beaver. The Arapaho occasionally place their dead in the branches of the great old tree, and at times hang enemies from its limbs.

It is noon, July 12, 1842. Another cloud of dust becomes visible from the bluff. It approaches the valley of the Jaaianahaw. Perhaps a fox loping through the prairie dog town sees a party of five men appear on the crest of the bluff. They descend down to the river and rest and eat under a grove of cottonwoods. The leader of the party thinks the stream beautiful. After crossing the river, they continue their journey to the northwest. They pass just to the west of the hollow.

The twenty-nine year old topographical engineer that led the party called the stream the Cache a la Poudre. Like Long, he had been sent by the United States War Department. He was crossing the Cache a La Poudre on his journey northwest to Laramie where he and his party would meet up with the other half of his expedition. His name was John C. Fremont.[8]

He was an aggressive, sporting man who, with two of his men, had charged herds of buffalo along the way and shot lead into the herd for the sheer exhilaration of it, sometimes

killing a cow or bull, sometimes not. They left the bodies to rot. And yet, only days later, he and his men had seen a pack of wolves separate out and kill a young buffalo calf. Fremont later wrote that if they had been closer, the calf would have fared better.

Fremont made no bones about his purpose in this country. Four days before Fremont crossed the Cache a la Poudre, he had spent time in an Arapaho camp along the South Platte. He told the Arapaho, after he had eaten a bowl of buffalo meat and smoked a pipe with them, that he was here to see about setting up military posts for white emigrants. Fremont could see that this information excited them, but he was struck by their continued courtesy, even after he had given them this bit of news.

Like James of the Long Expedition, Fremont had described the country after leaving the forks of the North and South Platte as "a country alternately clay and sand, each presenting the same naked waste."[9] On July ninth, Fremont caught his first glimpse of the Rockies, "looking like a small cloud" on the horizon. He called the highest peak "Longs Peak" and was pleased when he heard from trappers along the way that they also called the peak Long's.

Fremont would return to this country next year, although he and his men would not travel quite so near the hollow. They would follow what they called Thompson's Creek west from St. Vrain's Fort to the foothills, and then follow the foothills north to the Cache a la Poudre. From there, Fremont would split his party, taking a small group of men with him into the Poudre canon to look for a passage west. The tight canon walls of the Poudre would make it necessary to detour away from the river, and he would later have to cross the river

so many times that he gave up the idea of a route through this region. The Oregon pioneers would have to stick to the northern route through South Pass in Wyoming.

Less than a year earlier Fremont had married the daughter of a western expansionist senator. Her name was Jessie Benton. He had left her back in Philadelphia during his expedition, but she would later use her literary skill in helping him write an account of all that he was experiencing. His account, which included descriptions of the Platte valley as fertile, would be used by Senator Linn of Missouri to introduce a bill to protect emigrants going west.

On Fremont's second trip, he picked up a man on the trail named William Gilpin. He was a lanky, six-foot twenty-seven year old former editor of the Missouri Daily Argus who had a way with words, moving people to passion, and even to violence.[10] Not that he was always reliable in his use of words, for he had already described this region and others west of here in his editorials even though he had never been here. He argued with accurate first hand accounts that lands in Oregon resembled a desert. He wouldn't hear of it, and began challenging the notion of *any* desert in the west, especially the Great American Desert, and began instead to call it the Great Plains. He was seeing his Great Plains for the first time. He would later call pioneers the new military, called to warfare "wielding the weapons of husbandry" in carrying out the destiny of his democratic utopia.[11] Gilpin would write pamphlets and emigrant guidebooks touting the grazing and agricultural capabilities of the Great Plains. Gilpin would later become the governor of what they would call the Colorado Territory.

The hollow would be included in this new territory. It is no longer part of the Great American Desert, but of the Great Plains.

June, 1852. Despite the publication of Fremont's expedition and his conclusion that there is no passage route to Oregon through Colorado, a group of emigrants come up the South Platte in search of a shorter route. When they get to the Poudre, it is noon and they decide to camp. On the hills that slope to the river, the grass is thick and green and intermingled with bright wild flowers. They see trout in the river and are able to catch some. Each day on their trip up the north bank, the sky is clear of clouds and of the bluest blue. They see herds of buffalo, deer, elk, and antelope. And they see a group of Indians looking down on them from the bluff. The Indians follow at a distance. They fortify their camp at night and the Indians attack in the morning. The fight lasts only ten minutes. The emigrants watch the Indians carry off their dead.[12]

By 1852, the hollow sees even fewer buffalo passing through. In Fort Laramie to the north, buffalo robes and buffalo tongues become two of the biggest trade items for markets in the United States.[13] Even the Indians begin hunting the buffalo more intensely to trade with the whites. Although wolf pelts bring less than beaver, trappers start poisoning them by dragging a chunk of buffalo meat laced with strychnine across the ground.[14] The hollow sees fewer wolves now too.

A few years later, a couple of log cabins appear along the banks of the Poudre – gold seekers who have decided to stay and farm the bottom-lands of the Poudre.

Still, the hollow has changed little. Although it sees less game, the water still collects after spring snows and after mid-summers thunder storms.

Little Atta Kern was only five years old when she came with her Ma and Pa Kern, brother Edgar, and Uncle Peter to the Great Plains. Her Uncle Peter had grown thin and sick back in Hartford, Wisconsin, and the new Colorado Territories would help him get well. They were told that the sunny days and dry air of the Colorado climate had healed tuberculosis patients. They would have come earlier, but there were no trains to Colorado. Finally, the train reached Denver in 1869. They came to Colorado in August, 1871. There was a spur to Greeley, where the Union Colonists had settled, so they went there. From there they decided to go northwest into the Poudre Valley.

Lewis built his family a little frame house a mile northeast of the Poudre River. He dug a well and planted wheat. He talked to other settlers and Union Colonists and found out that his crops would fare poorly unless he somehow brought water to them. Unlike the Midwest, there wasn't enough rainfall in Colorado to keep the crops watered well enough. The Union Colonists had dug their own ditch a year earlier and were watering land above the river. Lewis could see he also needed a ditch to bring water to his new land. Already there was a hollow to the east that collected water. The ditch could bring water from the Poudre, water farms along the way, and whatever was left over could drain into the hollow and make a little pond. It wouldn't be anything like the lakes back in Wisconsin, but it would be a body of water.

Atta found her new life very different from the one she knew in Wisconsin when her father was a carriage builder. He labored hard to grow his wheat from this soil. He planted trees in neat rows, twenty to thirty of them, in the yard. A couple of times, a few buffalo wandered by and once or twice a few Indians traveled up the river. When they put up their hay, antelope came in herds to eat at the loose stacks. At night, Atta thought she heard things outside her window, but it was usually the wind. Sometimes the wind blew so hard she was afraid it would blow their whole house down.

It became Atta's chore to take the few milk cows they had to the hollow. The grass was tall and lush there and the cows could get plenty to eat. One day, Atta took a switch from a cottonwood tree and stuck it in the ground. To her amazement, the switch grew and became a tall and straight cottonwood.[15]

The Frenchman couldn't be called a stream or a river, for both of these flow consistently, and the Frenchman did not. It begins in the middle of open prairie just east of Phillips County Colorado, a network of eroded channels that are dry most of the time. The creek gets its name from two French trappers who were, not surprisingly given the surroundings, looking for water and, surprisingly, found it. It must have been after a rain. The Frenchman is a watershed that is "closed," which means that there are no springs that bubble into it, no streams of glacier melt pouring in. Its only claim to being a water-way is having the characteristic of being the lowest spot in Phillips County, so when it rains, that's where the water goes, usually with a vengeance. Perhaps some settlers first saw the

Frenchman after a rain, because they optimistically began farming nearby. It wasn't long before a town sprang up along the banks of the Frenchman.

The small settlement of Holyoke was already on the Frenchman when John and Ida Fisher arrived in their covered wagon from Ohio in 1886. They joined a couple thousand other people in a boom that was short-lived. In New Raymer, a boom town to the west of Holyoke, a newspaper joked in 1889 to its readers, "while in Colorado, don't forget to visit the New Raymer rain belt."[16] Indeed. For those that were farming near the Frenchman, the idiom "up a creek" would have been apropos, for the situation was most often unfortunate. When it rained there was too much water, flooding the crops. When it didn't rain, there wasn't enough water and the crops withered and died. Too much water, too little water, blizzards, swarms of grasshoppers – the settlers actual experience of the region began to dissolve some of the land-of-canaan myths they had been hearing.

By 1900 Holyoke's population had dropped by 1,000.[17] John was one of those who gave up on Phillips County. He left in 1895. He had not only struggled with the climate, but had buried one daughter after another – three in a row. In 1893, Ida had a fourth daughter, but died giving birth. The daughter lived. John buried Ida beside their daughters. Years later he would return to find their graves, but would find only a plowed field. He headed for Greeley, the City on a Hill that had been settled thirty years now by the Union Colonists, and who were also having good luck with irrigation from the Cache La Poudre River. He remarried and had a son, Bill. He built a soddie along the Poudre and settled in with his new wife, daughter and son.[18]

Living along the river must have seemed like a Garden of Eden after the Frenchman. For a year, John dug irrigation ditches. With the money he saved, he rented land along the Poudre, promising his landlord not to grow corn – a surefire go-broke crop in the high, dry elevation of the front range plains. The strains of corn in existence did well in the mid-west, but not in the west. By 1902 John was able to buy his own land. He bought the farm neighboring Lewis Kern.

By 1913 Lewis and Elizabeth had grown old. Of their children, Atta and George had married and moved on and the others had died. Elizabeth's health began to fail and the farm began to be too much for Lewis. He sold his land with the hollow and the pond to John.

Twenty-eight years later. A young man sits beside a rumbling Minneapolis Moline tractor that is parked on the south shore of the lake. He is John's grandson, Gilbert. Gilbert's father, Bill, has given him this job for several days now. An eight inch wide belt runs from the engine of the tractor to a pump. The belt runs the pump which moves water from the lake through a pipe up over the rise to the south onto the neighbor's field. If the tractor stops, he starts it again. Occasionally, he puts fuel into the tank. The mid-summer days are clear and cloudless. During the long hours, he studies English books to prepare for the twelfth grade; he snoozes; mostly he is bored. There is a grove of about thirty cottonwoods on the west shore of the lake. Cattails have sprung up on the northern shore where the lake is more shallow and boggy.

Further east in Colorado, farmers are abandoning their farms as grain prices drop and each year brings less and less moisture. They watch their top soil blow away in big billowing clouds as dry winds sweep across their plowed furrows. Gilbert has seen the great clouds roll in from the east; has seen his mother cover furniture and shake dust out of curtains and rugs. But while the farmers on the eastern plains go back to the Midwest or to California or to the cities, Gilbert's father is able to keep his land irrigated with water from the Poudre.

World War II comes and Gilbert will later join the army. The cottonwood grove shades the west bank of the lake and the shore has become bare and sandy from years of water lapping the edge.

Meanwhile, German prisoners are being kept in a camp that has been built up on the bluff. The prisoners are sent out in crews that labor on the surrounding farms. Bill has need of a crew in his sugar beet field that slopes up to the southwest of the lake.

With long-handled hoes, the prisoners walk the rows of beets, thinning the plants with strokes of the hoe. At noon break, a prisoner asks Bill, in German, would he talk to the guard and see if he could get him to allow the men to swim in the lake. Bill agrees. The guard carries a carbine. Fine, he says, but he will shoot to kill anyone who swims too far out in the lake or shows any other signs of escape. The prisoners strip and splash into the water.

A yellow school bus rolls down the county-line road shooting out a cloud of dust. It stops in front of the white house west of the lake and a girl skips down the steps of the bus

and up the lane to the house. She changes out of her school dress into jeans, shirt, and jacket and heads back down the lane to the east. She crosses furrows lined with corn stubble, crosses a dry ditch, and walks down a slope of alfalfa stubble to a barbed wire fence and the grove of bare-branched cottonwoods by the lake. She sits on a tree root and looks out over the water and listens. There are a few birds, a few yellowed, dead cottonwood leaves rustling in the branches, and the sound of water pushing against the shore, but otherwise it is quiet. In a moment of whimsy, the girl climbs onto an overturned watering tank on the shore, and begins to dance, pounding her feet on the hollow container in steady rhythm. She delights in the sound it makes, echoing off the bare cottonwood branches.

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DITCH CULTURE

Back

"Ah-iyaa-iyaaaaa-iyaa-iyaaaaa!" I was Tarzan or Jane, it didn't really matter which, my feet splooshing through the icy well-water as I swung from the rope tied to a limb of the weeping willow that draped over the irrigation ditch that ran through our front yard. When I tired of Tarzan and Jane I could climb the short boards nailed to the side of the trunk and perch on the planks of the tree house in the lower branches. From there I would lie on my stomach and lose myself in the gurgle and flow of the water below.

In the summer, ditches were always a good distraction from chores or boredom. They grew cottonwoods, asparagus and toads, and offered icy water to hot feet and cool mud to slap into pies. Adult conversations in the summer were often spoken in a kind of "ditchese," a language that remained largely mysterious to me: "ditch-rider," "head-gate," "irrigation set," "head of water." But in my world, ditches held adventure.

My mother used to invite me along for walks on our farm when I was growing up. Sometimes our purpose was to find the asparagus that grew in clumps along ditch banks. She taught me how to look for the straight stalks among the weeds, and how to cut the plant at an angle beneath the dirt. She explained that this would help a new stalk to grow. At other times we simply walked. On a quiet Sunday afternoon, we would go down a road, a lane, the railroad tracks, but eventually we would find ourselves beside a ditch. We would follow the Fisher Lateral, or other ditches that spread like veins from the lateral to the fields.

Sometimes we would walk along the Seep Ditch. The Seep Ditch marked the western boundary of our farm. Unlike the other ditches, which carried water to the fields,

the Seep Ditch collected the water that drained from the irrigated fields. Choke cherries grew along the banks and every August we would spend a morning stripping the berries into pans and buckets, filling our cheeks with the mouth-puckering berries, staining our hands and lips purpley-blue.

The water in the Seep Ditch was slow-moving, silent, and algae covered, and muskrats with their reptilian tails would slip off the banks into the slimy liquid. Despite these quiet signs of life, I discovered on one of my walks that my father used the ditch banks as a kind of open grave for the farm animals. I came across carcasses in various stages of decay – pig bodies bloated, covered with flies, legs protruding stiffly into the air, or calf bones, scraps of fur still clinging to the ribs and skull, matted into the soil. The odor of death clung to the moldering dampness in the air.

It was on the banks of the Seep Ditch that I learned to hunt ducks. My brother, Gil, loaned me a sixteen gauge, showed me how to creep up to the bank, crouched down or crawling on hands and knees. Then we would stand up and take aim as the startled ducks' wings beat the air to fly out of the ditch. The first time I hunted, I shot blindly at the whole flock, too excited to take aim at a single duck. One fell dead from my shot anyway. The second time Gil took me, I was still too excited to take a clear aim and my shot only wounded the duck. It fell on the bank, quacking and flopping its wings helplessly until Gil caught it and wrung its neck. It was the last time I hunted.

It was also on the banks of the Seep Ditch that I found our eight year old Doberman, shot by a hunter, one bullet in the stomach, and one bullet through the head.

One dry fall, the Seep Ditch became empty of water, leaving hundreds of carp rotting in the bottom. The stench lay like an invisible fog over our farm for months.

I didn't think then about where the water in the ditches came from. When I waded into the Fisher Lateral, I didn't know that the water swirling past my legs had come from a bigger ditch, the Lake Canal, and that the water in the Lake Canal came out of the Cache La Poudre River, and that some of the water in the Poudre had come all the way under the continental divide from the Colorado River.

* * *

Roy Roth hates trash – pallet wood, tires, tennis balls, volleyballs, racquetballs, *any* balls, sandals, shirts, housing insulation, detergent bottles, tarps, two-by-fours, a Peace Tabernacle Apostolic Church sign, dead mice, branches, weeds, cottonwood leaves. Trash is the most persistent irritation of Roy's job, which is to keep the water flowing down the twenty-one miles of the Lake Canal ditch, from its twelve foot wide headgate at its diversion on the Cache La Poudre River near the foothills of the Colorado Rockies to its two foot wide tail on the plains. (Ditches are like that – rivers in reverse – instead of gathering momentum, speed, size, they get smaller, weaker, disperse through laterals, and peter out.) The trash collects in headgates and check dams, and Roy spends a good portion of his morning tour as ditch rider pulling it all out in order to keep the water moving. The balls he

One of Roy's piles of trash along the Lake Canal.

keeps and he says he has a whole slug of them at home. The rest of the trash he throws into piles on the banks. The ditch is marked by Roy's heaps of trash.

The Lake Canal has been pulling water from a quiet nook of the Poudre River for over one hundred and twenty years. Back in 1872 someone took a look at a bend in the river and saw how easily the water could be tricked into flowing east onto the bench lands of the Poudre Valley. With teams of horses pulling Fresno scrapers and the smaller slip-scrapers (pre-engine front-end-loaders), ditch diggers slogged into the river dumping pile upon pile of dirt and rock, squeezing the river into a smaller and smaller channel, which often washed away the dirt as fast as they could dump it. When they got the channel blocked, the river would pause and pool behind the dam, a quiet moment except perhaps for

the voices of exhausted men and the swish of wet horsetails. The rising water, seeking an outlet would spill into the Lake Canal.

Today, the diversion structure is a concrete lip that stretches from bank to bank on the Poudre. The river, which tumbles its way from 10,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies to 5,000 foot elevations on the plains, becomes lethargic here. The water pools behind the diversion dam just as the river curves from east to southeast, then wakes with a splash as it slips uniformly over the cement wall and on down the river. Some of the water keeps going east, still asleep to the fact that the river has turned. This water is jostled by bars that are meant to keep out trash, then swirls, trapped in a stew of algae and foam before it drops through the headgate and into the Lake Canal Ditch.

It was a hazy morning in August the day I rode the ditch with Roy. The sunrise looked drab and polluted as I drove east down Harmony Road, bounced over the twin bridges over the Cache La Poudre River east of I-25 and under five geese that lifted off the river and flapped to the north. I was late; when I pulled into Roy's driveway he was waiting by the driver's door of his two-tone blue Chevy pickup.

Roy went to school with my mother and my aunt, and as we drove back west toward Fort Collins to the Lake Canal headgate Roy reminisced about my Mom and my aunt's hair. "They had the prettiest dark hair. When did your mom's hair start turning grey?"

"I don't remember it ever not being grey."

He simply shook his head.

"I always feel a little nervous at this stop," Roy said when we pulled in beside the head-gate of the Lake Canal. Every morning, Roy checks the headgate for trash or to raise

Roy pulls trash out of a check dam on the Lake Canal.

or lower the gate. Back in 1872 the land adjacent to the Poudre and the head-gate of the Lake Canal was made up of farms and open fields. Today the Lake Canal leaves the Poudre in a public park only five blocks from downtown Fort Collins. On summer mornings, men trickle out of the wooded fringe of Legacy Park and the neighboring Martinez Park, some with army surplus backpacks and bedrolls, some with tattered, soiled jackets for makeshift pillows and blankets. Occasionally one will stop to chat with Roy, but mostly they trudge wordlessly past. The fragmented group of stragglers plod up the ditch toward College Avenue and the Open Door Mission, a day shelter for the homeless.

Possibly, Roy hates development more than the trash. He sees the houses spreading along greater and greater stretches of the banks of the Lake Canal as the source for his daily irritations. Can't keep all those kids, who are especially apt to throw things in the water just

to watch them float, away from the ditch. They use pallets for rafts and then abandon them in the ditch. "The ditch doesn't talk and I never see 'em."

And then there's the lawsuits. All those people build their homes along the ditch and then sue because water is seeping into their houses. "The ditch was here before the homes, and they *still* bring law suits! There's a guy lives over next to the graveyard, and every time he thinks the water's too high he's calling me saying them bodies are floatin' right out of their graves!" Roy would like to see the ditch moved away from all of these nuisances. Fill it full of dirt and dig it somewhere else.

Perhaps Roy wishes the Lake Canal were like the Hansen Canal.

* * *

"You're on private property!"

Although I wasn't close enough to see his eyes, I could feel them glaring. Twenty yards and a cattle guard were between my biking companion, Rose, and I and where he sat on top of his horse. I knew we weren't supposed to be here – we had passed numerous signs that read "KEEP OUT! Certain death if entered!" But I also knew we weren't on private property.

"This isn't private property." I didn't know where this would get me, but I said it anyway. I had nervously defied the signs all morning, and I wasn't yet to my destination of the Poudre River.

"Yes it is, and you're trespassing."

"This is private property?" I asked incredulously pointing at the ground at my feet.

"That's right. Now you just turn around and get on out."

Rose, strode toward the horseman. "We have permission to be here. We're doing research."

One of many warning sign on the Lake Canal.

Oh jeez, I thought. I was willing to bicker about the private property business, but I'm not good at lying, and although I *was* gathering information on the Hansen Canal, I certainly didn't have permission to be there.

"You got your slip with you?" he challenged.

"No," I said with the relief of honesty.

Rose took a few steps closer. "We don't need a slip. We have permission from the Conservancy District."

I cringed. "Rose, let's just *leave*."

"He's bullshitting," she said as she turned to me. "He doesn't own this. He can't tell us to get off."

"The hell I can't," the horseman growled. "I'll just go call the sheriff and let them settle it. I'm going to run bulls through here and you better be gone."

I almost took my camera out of my backpack to get a picture of a rancher who would run a bunch of bulls down the corridor of certain death, but I didn't. "Let's *go*," I said to Rose.

"He can't keep us out!"

"Just *leave* it! Let's go!" I straddled my bike and peddled away.

If I was going to be run off the canal, I would probably have a better chance of seeing it if I got permission. I called the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District (NCWCD) two days later to ask permission to see the rest of the canal. Roger Sinden, the equivalent of the ditch-rider for the Hansen Canal north of Horsetooth Reservoir, invited me to ride along with a group of engineers who were going to tour the canal.

The next Saturday I found myself squeezed into the back of a van with six engineering students and Roger. Roger, although approaching middle-age, reminds me of the boys back in junior high that I thought I should go steady with – boys Mom and Dad would approve of. He wears tight Wrangler jeans, cowboy boots, a down jacket and a white Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District cap over his graying hair. He's friendly and folksy with lines like "They hunker down like a jackass in a hailstorm" when he talks about Boulder city's water quality problems, and "Water goes out of here like a big ole toilet"

when he describes the amount of water that goes from Horsetooth Reservoir into the Hansen Canal just before the fourth of July. I like him.

Roger Sinden explains a flushing mechanism to engineering students.

The water in Horsetooth Reservoir doesn't originate in the Poudre River watershed. In fact it doesn't even originate on this side of the continental divide. Roger explains how the water gets pumped out of the Colorado River while it is still a small mountain trout stream, siphoned far under the continental divide, through electrical plants, pumps, canals, more siphons, before it pours into Horsetooth Reservoir. It sounds to me like an army obstacle course for water.

A view from inside the cement lined Hansen Canal.

Roger loves cement and says it is the best material for canals. Cement makes Roger's job easier. It allows canals to be built with a smaller cut for a faster channel, Roger explains to us as the van rolls slowly along the no-nonsense canal. "Water is volatile," he says. The faster you move water from point A to point B, the less time given for the water to escape through the air. Cement doesn't keep water from seeping away since it is porous, but the faster you move it, the less time it has to seep away to "who knows where" like it does once the water gets into the Poudre River. As we come to a smooth curve in the canal Roger explains that not only does cement allow for a smaller cut, but it allows for sharper curves; none of that useless meandering and erosive activity like you find on the Poudre.

Water doesn't belong to the land in Colorado like it does back east and in the Midwest, he says. Water can be bought and sold, moved and transferred, like a car or a piece of furniture. "Property rights are pretty damned sacred in America," he says, and I find myself amused at the thought of owning a "piece" of water, waving it around exclaiming "Mine! Mine!"

Just before the second curve on the canal, we come to a cement ramp that slopes down into the canal. Although signs mostly keep people from the dangers of the canal, they don't help protect the wildlife. Deer come to drink, slip down the steep sides, can't climb back out, and get sucked into the siphons. NCWCD built this ramp only two years ago for

The carcass of a dead deer in the Hansen Canal.

wildlife to walk up. Dangling aluminum strips hang in the air to spook them over to the ramp.

I ask Roger if any of the water from Horsetooth is used to keep a flow of water in the Poudre River. None of the water that flows into the Poudre is *for* the Poudre. It is only for users, meaning people, meaning irrigation use, industrial use, municipal use. Cities must buy water from NCWCD to keep the rivers and streams flowing, to keep them from drying up. "Need changes views of use," Roger says. More and more, Roger says, people are against water projects "even though they are drinking the water that comes out of them." It used to be that only 20% used to be used for municipal and industrial uses, and 80% used for agriculture. Today, only 55% goes to agriculture, and 45% goes to municipal uses, which more and more includes simply keeping water in the stream, for fish, for wildlife, for habitat, for people to wade in, float down, to simply look at, listen to, or walk beside.

There are no trees growing along the Hansen, no roots pushing through the banks, no shade, no kids hanging around in the branches. So Roger doesn't have those problems that torment Roy Roth. But after the second curve of the Hansen, just before we come to the first siphon, Roger tells of a time back in the 70's when four boys tried to raft down the Hansen. Three of them got sucked into the siphon. Part of Roger's job is to educate people that they don't belong on canal.

The water held in Horsetooth Reservoir artificially becomes part of the Poudre River watershed, and hence part of the complicated ditch system in the Poudre Valley. It shoots from the base of the northern dam through two giant nozzles which spray the Colorado River water into the concrete lined Hansen Canal for its final transport. Roger's job is to

Engineering students peer down the mouth of one of the siphons.

make sure the water marches without missing a step in completing its assignment.

The water flows peacefully into the Poudre five miles upstream from the Lake Canal diversion.

* * *

Roy relaxed once he got east of I-25 again, back in the farm fields. His stops were marked by laterals, check-dams, and stories. He spent less time citing the woes of development and more time reminiscing about the people who live on the ditch. Our first stop on the east side of I-25 was the Sandyke lateral next to the Hoff's house and vet clinic. "They're divorced now, you know. He's still here, but she moved on into town." I remembered something about a baby that drowned in the ditch here and asked Roy about it.

The ditch borders the Hoff's back yard and is lined with chain-link fence. Roy waved his hand toward a point behind the Hoff's house where the ditch curved slightly. "That's why he took out that footbridge. The baby fell from there." Dr. Hoff ran as fast as he could along the ditch bank, but the baby moved faster, and the sharp edges of the ditch provided no shore from which to rescue the child.

We passed an old dead cottonwood with a tree house up in its branches. "There's another source of problems," Roy said pointing at the tree. "The kids drop nails and boards into the ditch and makes a mess at the headgates. We're going to take it out this year."

A tree house on the Lake Canal that will be removed before the next irrigating season.

At Nelson's farm we came to the Reid lateral and my favorite stretch of the Lake Canal where a quarter of a mile of cottonwoods line the ditch non-stop all the way to the

Fisher lateral. Virginia and Lyle Nelson are both dead now. Sonja took her inheritance and started a small horse farm east of here, Roy said as we drove through their yard. Rodney still lives here in the house he grew up in. The cottonwoods start in the Nelson's farmyard and reached up like a row of gnarled hands holding up this piece of sky.

The Lake Canal shaded by cottonwoods near the Fisher Lateral.

We came to the Fisher lateral and the farm that my great-grandfather bought back in 1902. Roy slowed down as we drove past where the Lake Canal water tumbled into the Fisher lateral. My cousin, Harold, still owned this farm. He is the land developer in the family — whole housing subdivisions sprouting on bare fields over night.

"He's got people bothering him to sell this farm, but he won't. I guess he feels kinda sentimental about the place." As I let this new, incongruent piece of information about Harold sink in, we passed a red-tail hawk keeping guard on the top of a cottonwood stump.

The water in the Lake Canal slipped coolly past the hawk, on under the great old cottonwoods, winding its way along small ridges, through farms, dispersing through headgates to water late August crops of corn, beets, beans, and alfalfa. Children would still be drawn to play in treetops, and along the banks of the hundred year old ditch. And Roy would keep pulling out all the nuisance trash, and adding to his collection of balls.

FLOAT TRIP

(Originally appeared in *Progenitor*, Spring 2014)

Back

We do not wish this,
we do not desire it,
only the water we borrow
on our way to returning.
We who are doing this
all will be dying.
Way of the water's going,
bear with us in this place now
on your way to returning.
(Ursula Le Guin –
Way of the Water's Going)

I first saw it while hiking on a spring day in April. The massive Charles Hansen Supply Canal seemed to begin out of the top of a dry hillside west of Fort Collins, Colorado. The gouge in the earth's surface, empty of water, its opposing banks bare and perfectly parallel, plunged sharply twenty feet or more to a smooth, calculated surface at the bottom. Above rested a dry field with no visible waterways flowing into the canal. Below lay a broad ravine and a trickling stream sloping away from the canal.

Since water seeks its lowest level, how could a waterway appear full-blown at the top of a ridge? I scrambled down the steep, rock-lined embankment of the canal to find out where the water could possibly come from.

I felt as if I had descended into a small canyon. The channel narrowed into a cylindrical throat, a monstrous siphon that pitched down, tunneling deep under the small valley. My own throat constricted. I walked toward the black hole, picking my way through river rock that littered the flat concrete bottom. Clean, white bones from unknown

former lives lay scattered and lodged between the rocks. My footsteps echoed loudly off the concrete walls. I stopped ten feet from the yawning hole, pulled and repelled. I backed away, turned, and fought the urge to run to the bank, where each step threatened to slip me back to the bottom.

That night, I tossed restlessly in bed, jolted by waves of adrenalin. I kept seeing that black hole on the ceiling, on the insides of my eyelids, feeling the chill of white bones and death wafting on the cool air coming out of the siphon.

When I first saw the Hansen that day, I had been researching and writing about a collection of WPA murals painted on panels of the Colorado State Capitol rotunda. The murals depict a history of water development. In the first mural, a Native American man paints the water cycle of a thunderstorm on animal hide. The images in the succession of murals progress (or regress) from autonomous nature to water mechanized in sluices, aqueducts, and dams, ending with the final mural filled with technological splendor in planes, trains, skyscrapers, and a complete absence of nature. The message is an unabashed celebration of the control of water. Two views were sparring in my head. One view: water's autonomous life cycle – it flows in streams, condenses in dew, drips in rain, undulates in lakes and oceans, seeps in marshes, amasses in rivers, erodes, evaporates, transpires. The other view: human dependence on water controlled in pipes, constrained by dams, channeled in canals, effluent flushed, mechanized to generate electricity, industrialized.

The Hansen epitomized water industrialized, but was still mysterious to me. What was it for? Why was it built? I needed to find out more. And I couldn't shake the haunting image of that black hole.

I returned to the canal a few days later to explore further, this time with my mountain bike and camera. I ignored signs that read KEEP OUT CERTAIN DEATH IF ENTERED as I climbed repeatedly down into the canal to look at other siphons, and once, to see the crumpled carcass of a dead deer.

The next week I called the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District and talked with Roger Sinden, who manages the Hansen, to see if I could take a tour. On the tour the following Saturday, I learned the water that fills the Hansen is part of the C-BT (Colorado-Big Thompson) project, collected from snowmelt in the Colorado River watershed before the river is even a small mountain stream. It is then siphoned miles under the Continental Divide to the eastern slope, then flows through hydroelectric plants, canals, and more siphons before it pours into reservoirs on the Front Range. The Hansen Supply Canal, the last leg, carries water from Horsetooth Reservoir to the Poudre River.

Long Gulch is the first of three inverted siphons along the Hansen. Long Gulch plunges 70 feet down, is 700 feet long, and twelve and a half feet in diameter. The downward force pushes the water under the valley, back uphill. The water emerges at the top of the next ridge – right where I had been standing a few days earlier.

Roger mentioned four boys once tried to raft down the Hansen. I thought to myself, *you're kidding*. One of the boys survived.

After the tour, I kept thinking about that black hole, the bones littering the bottom of the canal, the boys. How did they happen to raft down this canal? What happened? What was it like?

A few weeks later, I went to the library. I looked at microfiche, read the headlines, looked at photos. One headline read, "Rescue Try Fails; 1 Survives Waters." The survivor was Gary Hergert. I tracked down Gary's phone number. He had earned a Ph. D. in agronomy from Cornell University and taught at the University of Nebraska.

Nervously, I dialed Gary's number. He might not want to talk about what happened. When I asked, he said, "Oh boy." Then, after a long pause, "I still get very emotional about that."

Gary said he and his three buddies had been told by friends that a canal north of Horsetooth Reservoir was great for a float trip. The canal wound from the foothills down through the streets of Fort Collins, right through City Park Golf Course. The foursome, all students at Colorado State University, weren't exactly sure where it was. If they drove to the north end of the reservoir, they trusted they would find it.

That day in 1965 started out utterly sky-blue. For weeks they had looked forward to an afternoon of fun before finals. Warren Hatch planned to become a medical missionary. Joel Stover was in his third year of philosophy. Larry Sanderson, also in his third year, majored in English. Gary, a second-year agronomy major and a year younger than his friends, was along for the ride.

They pulled into the entrance of a right-of-way along a canal. Water flowed quickly along sharply angled cement sides. The boys parked near a sign that read "Keep Alive by

Keeping Out." But remembering what their friends had said, they ignored the sign and launched their small inflatable oval raft. Joel and Larry got in first, Gary was third in line, and Warren sat behind Gary. The four fit tightly.

Gary said from the beginning he felt jumpy. The water flowed deceptively smooth, but fast – thousands of gallons sliding the raft along at eleven feet a second, nearly eight miles per hour. He noted rebar ladders at intervals embedded in the steep cement walls.

They had gone maybe a half-mile when the canal made a smooth turn. They saw a fisherman waving his arms and yelling. But as they rounded the corner all they heard was a deep roar.

They didn't know what was ahead – a waterfall? a diversion structure? – but they knew they were in trouble. They could see a rebar ladder right before the canal made another sharp curve. They paddled the little raft hard to the left to reach it. The water picked up speed. The roar got louder. They missed.

Up ahead, the canal disappeared into a cement box that narrowed to twenty feet while it sloped downward. There they saw one last ladder. The water raced them past the cement wall, but they managed to slide the raft to the right. Joel, then Larry, grabbed for the ladder and missed. Gary and Warren both reached and missed. But as Gary's arm slipped under the water, it hooked into a lower rung. He thought his arm would rip off. But he held on while Warren clutched Gary.

The next thing Gary felt was Warren's body ripping free and the raft slipping out from under him. He looked back. Everyone had disappeared.

Gary pulled himself out of the water and up the rungs. Barefoot, he ran ahead to see where the canal went. A broad ravine lay before him, a lazy creek meandering peacefully. The canal had vanished.

Gary ran back to the mouth of the siphon and saw Warren, unhurt, eddying, bobbing, bumping the cement walls, atop the little raft. He had somehow managed to hang on, and the raft was buoyant enough to defy the watery vacuum. Gary yelled he was going for help, and ran down the ridge toward a farmhouse, his bare feet pounding and tearing across rocks, sagebrush and prickly pear cactus.

When Gary ran into the farmyard, John Tiernan, the fisherman they'd seen, had already called 911. Gary told him Warren was still alive. John grabbed his lariat rope and they hopped into his pick-up.

By the time John and Gary returned, Warren had been bouncing at the frothing mouth of the siphon for forty-five minutes. They tried to make him understand he needed to tie the rope around his waist, then tossed it to him. He missed. They tried again. He missed. Finally, he caught it. They again told him to tie it around his waist, but Warren could only clutch the rope, begging them to help him.

Because of the steepness of the cement banks, as they pulled back they lost sight of Warren, but they could feel his weight on the end of the rope. They hauled back further and knew Warren was out of the water, part way up the cement wall.

Suddenly both John and Gary fell to the ground, the rope weightless. They heard no sound, no yells, only that incessant roaring.

The newspaper article said the emergency workers found Warren's, Joel's and Larry's bodies by 5:00 p.m. A photo showed a single sandal bobbing and swirling at the mouth of siphon.

A little under two miles northeast of where the boys had rafted, another canal, the New Mercer, flowed peacefully beside the foothills, earthen-banked, occasionally tree-lined, eventually gliding through City Park Golf Course in Fort Collins. The ditch followed the terrain of the land, dropping slowly in elevation one inch per hundred feet. It would have been a gentle float trip.

Gary said he has often wondered over the years, why did he survive? He feels a sense of faith and purpose because he lived. But then he adds, "Why were we so damn dumb?"

The day I called the water district to get permission to tour the Hansen, I didn't tell Roger I had already poked around the canal. "So when do you release water into the canal?" I had asked.

"April 1st," he said. "The only reason we haven't this year is because we haven't had any water orders yet."

My scalp tingled. April 1st was the day I stood at the mouth of the siphon, where the bodies of Larry, Joel, and Warren had most likely emerged that day of their float trip. I, too, had ignored the danger signs.

In that moment, I had imagined my death, my last image on earth of the inside of the perfectly engineered banks of the Hansen. I felt the water blasting out of the siphon over my body, thrashing me limp with its turbulence, sucking me through the rest of the siphons, my

lungs filling with water, oxygen fading from my brain, leaving my carcass crumpled with the deer.

Gary and I discovered we both grew up on irrigated farms in neighboring communities only a few miles from each other. The water that fed our crops rippled through canals like the New Mercer. I spent my childhood seeking out the edges of water – banks of ditches where I slapped mud into pies, waded in icy well water, or sat on cottonwood roots at the edge of our lake. Life collected at these edges – muskrats, cottonwoods, ducks, herons, toads. They were places of contemplation and play.

Neither of us had encountered anything like the Hansen before. The Hansen had no life on its edges. Judging by the bones laying at the bottom of the canal, Gary's life may have been the only one to survive the waters of the Hansen.

TOMORROW'S WATER WISDOMS: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ALLEN TRUE MURALS

Back

Although I am a native Coloradan, I had never set foot in the Colorado Capitol Building until I went to view a set of murals painted by Allen Tupper True. Like any other tourist, I climbed the stairs through the rotunda, which extended straight up, like a huge pipe, guiding the flow of visitors to the gold plated cap that crowned the building. Plaques lined the walkway that circled the gold dome, each plaque pointing optimistically to specific glacier-lined peaks of the Rocky Mountain range, but an inversion pattern typical to Denver caused the peaks to remain veiled behind the city's smog. Ideally, the tourist is given a smog-free view of Colorado's glacier lined peaks, and then is funneled back down through the "aqueduct" of the rotunda to the ideas represented in the murals, to a view of water structures seemingly necessitated by the semi-arid front range.

It was in 1938 when the Boettcher Foundation commissioned True, a local artist, to paint the murals that would then be place in the rotunda of the Capitol building. Colorado was just beginning to pick itself up out of the droughty dust of the dirty thirties. The Conservancy District Act of Colorado had been passed the year before which made it possible for the state to get federal money to build water projects around the state. With those funds, the Colorado-Big Thompson project began in 1938 with the construction of the Green Mountain reservoir. The C-BT would be, at its completion in 1957, the biggest trans-mountain diversion project in Colorado. It is no wonder, then, that the subject of the murals would be the celebration of water development in Colorado. In June of 1940, eight murals were installed in the center of the Capitol building, each mural occupying a panel of the

circular structure of the rotunda. A poem by Thomas Hornsby Ferril and a plaque commemorating the contributions of Charles Boettcher to the settling of the west accompanied the murals.

In the rotunda, I stood in the center looking at each of the 8x4 murals that surrounded and towered over me, seeing Colorado through the eyes of someone else – someone from another time, another culture, almost. And yet, as a woman who grew up on an irrigated farm on the Front Range, I recognized my own cultural heritage in the murals.

I listened to comments from visitors and the chatter of tour guides. Boettcher had been a pioneer and capitalist with holdings all over the state; True designed the bucking bronco on the Wyoming State license plate and was hired by the Bureau of Reclamation as the color consultant for Boulder Dam (later renamed Hoover dam); and Ferril, aside from working all his life for the thirsty business of the Great Western Sugar Company, was named Colorado's poet laureate in 1975. Clearly, all three men had close associations to water issues. I took in this information and tried to see the murals through the eyes of the capitalist, the artist, the poet, through the eyes of the public, and through my own eyes, seeing the murals nearly 60 years after their inception, trying to translate into words the images before me – the aged feel, the WPA (Works Progress Administration) style, the power of the images. This is how interpretation begins: with the viewer, or the reader – someone with a particular pair of eyes, a particular perspective and standpoint.

As Thomas Ferril suggests in the poem that occupies the first panel in the series of murals, water has, in a sense, "written" the Colorado region:

> Here is a land where life is written in Water

the West is where the Water was and is
Father and Son of old Mother and Daughter
Following Rivers up immensities
of Range and Desert thirsting the Sundown ever
Crossing a hill to climb a hill still Drier
Naming tonight a City by some River,
a different Name from last night's camping Fire.

Look to the Green within the Mountain cup
look to the Prairie parched for Water lack
Look to the Sun that pulls the Oceans up
look to the Cloud that gives the Oceans back
Look to your heart and may your Wisdom grow
to power of Lightning and to peace of snow.

If this is a land where life is written in water, then who are the authors and what are they saying? How have we in Colorado "written" our lives with water, and how might they be written in the future?

Men Shall Behold the Water in the Sky and Count the Seasons by the Living Grasses

True has been recognized for his positive portrayals of Indians during a time when it was not popular to do so. It is interesting to note that True portrays the Native American as an artist, like himself. The Native American is telling a water story with his own art within the frame of his own culture. Whether it is done consciously or not, True draws a parallel between himself and his role in Euro-

American, western culture, and the Native American artist's role in his own culture. In the first mural, the Native American artist and his artistic representation of water is the focus of the image, signifying an aesthetic and spiritual relationship of Native Americans to water – a theme which is dropped immediately. Although this image is "positive," it is negated and usurped by the "progress" in the rest of the murals of Euro-American, western technology.

Of the eight murals, only two portray women, and both of these portrayals assign women to passive roles. In the third mural, a woman with two children asleep on her lap sits in a covered wagon in the background of a scene that captures the role of water in the psyches of settlers who came west. In the foreground, a man leans comfortably against the neck of one of his team of oxen and quenches his thirst from a river as the oxen do the same. The only other image of women appears in the last in the series of murals. Two generations of women lean forward in awe as they view the technological advances wrought by the development of water. During the techno-industrial phases depicted in the murals, women disappear from the scene and are seemingly absent from the formations of the structures of water.

Here shall the mountain Snows renew the Oxen here firewood is and here Men shall build Cities

In mural six, True also gives representation to African-Americans by depicting a black laborer, who happens to resemble a white performing as a black (a la Al Jolson). The Native American and the African-American laborer are the only representations of other races than Euro-American. Clearly, their role in this particular perspective in water development is marginal.

A notable feature of True's murals is the representation of nature. Nature, like water in the murals, never occupies much space on the canvas, leaving one with an anthropocentric view of nature. Nature is a voice that becomes silent in the murals as the voice of man overlays the natural cycles of lightning, rain, glaciers, and rivers. Although nature appears as an active subject in the first mural that speaks to the Native American artist in its activity of a lightning storm, the activity of lightning later becomes a servile force in the drama of anglo-human culture in mural seven with the construction of hydro-electric dams.

Deep in the Earth where roots of Willows drank
Shall aqueducts be laid to nourish cities

In some of Ferril's poetry, which underscores the murals, there is an unabashed supplanting of nature: "here firewood is and here shall men build cities," "Deep in the earth where roots of Willows drank Shall Aqueducts be laid to nourish cities,"

"Water the lightning gave shall give back lightning and Men shall store the lightning for their use." The tone of these lines echoes a biblical voice in its attitude toward nature. And in the final mural, except for some barely visible bare mountain promontories in the background, technology has utterly displaced nature with jets, boats, bridges, skyscrapers, and a futuristic vehicle that puts one in mind of the "Jetsons."

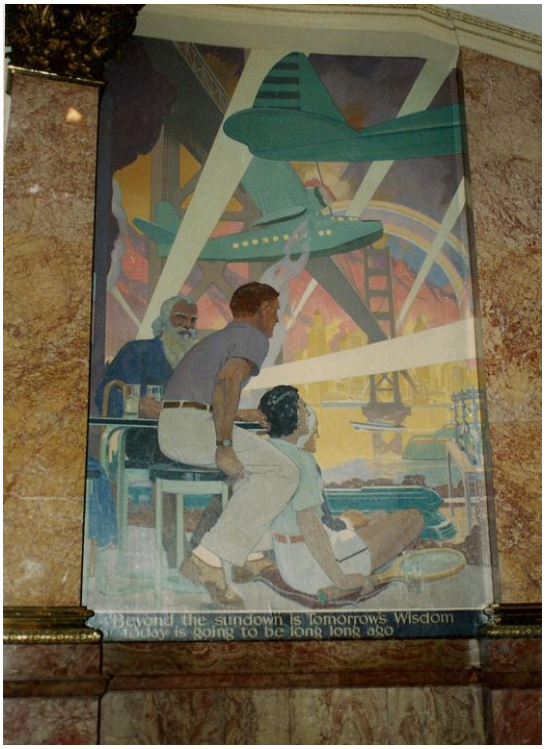
Water has its own life cycle of movement and is constantly moving under its own volition: it flows, it condenses, it drips, it undulates, it seeps, and as it amasses, it exerts a powerful pressure, sometimes eroding barriers, and if it cannot surpass the barriers, it evaporates. But in the murals, water becomes mechanized – it is constrained, channeled, "corrected," and subjugated. The ascending techno-industrial emphasis in the murals shows a parallel ascending denial of human dependence on water. One can trace a movement through the murals from dependence on water, to domination over it.

In mural one, the unrestrained power of water is symbolized by the lightning that dominates the scene. In mural two, the unrestrained, uncontrolled current of a river transports the explorers. Between murals three and four, a definite shift from dependence to domination takes place: while mural three still exhibits water as unrestrained, and the settlers have come to water, *must* come to water, to drink, mural four characterizes water as an element to be moved and controlled via a sluice box for the utility of the miners. In mural five, a headgate guides water into a furrowed field. In mural six, the technology of constraint increases with an enormous aqueduct being lowered into the ground under the supervision of three well-muscled men. A pump also appears in this mural in the right

foreground. In mural six, the technology advances to the construction of hydro-electric dams, again with two strong male laborers occupying the center of the construction activity.

Water has been transformed from subject that speaks to the artist in mural one, to object to be manipulated by technology in mural eight. As the murals progress, water becomes "obedient," and hence increases in utility. The final image of water in the murals is one devoid of the free wayward "lifelikeness" of water. There is a sense of ultimate control, of complete mechanization and utility. There is no backlash from nature, no disruption in the progression of constraint.

The interplay of dependence and domination depicted by the murals appears in the final mural as a seeming triumph over dependence as two generations of people sit drinking glasses of water in an apparent state of leisure (the young woman is resting her hand on a tennis racket). Within the context of the depression and the drought of the thirties and the suffering they caused, this celebration of technology in the final mural is nothing short of a celebration of salvation. But like a master/slave relationship, what has actually been created is a hyper-dependence on that which they have enslaved. Their lives have most certainly been written in water. In a



Beyond the sundown is Tomorrow's Wisdom today is going to be long long ago.

region that only receives an average of sixteen inches of rainfall annually, they have manufactured a technology of interdependence with water that they are now slaves to, that can only proliferate dams, aqueducts, and technologies of diversion and appropriation to maintain the hierarchy of the master/slave relationship.

As I looked at the final mural, my attention was caught by the eyes of the grandfatherly looking gentleman who, unlike the other characters, was not looking in awe at the technological wonders of water development, but was looking out from the canvas at me. I was reminded of my father, my grandfathers, and my great-grandfathers, all irrigation farmers on the Front Range. I wondered what this old man was thinking. Why was he looking at me rather than the techno-scene in front of him? There was a sense in his eyes of knowing something that the others in the scene did not know, of having experienced something that they could not quite fully understand. As I looked back at the succession of murals, I thought, this is what he is thinking – he is remembering where he's been, and where we've all, in a sense, come from in our relationship to the land in Colorado. Ferril's line under this mural reads, "Beyond the Sundown is tomorrow's Wisdom/today is going to be long long ago."

Indeed, the earth moves us in circles and cycles. As surely as the sun sets, it rises again, seasons come and go, ideas reign, then fall away. Perhaps there is an accidental truth in the positioning of the murals in the circular structure of the rotunda. What was intended as a linear representation of water development instead moves the viewer in a circle.

As I continued around the circle of the rotunda, I found myself looking again at the Native American artist. I again sensed something that could not be shared or fully

articulated. The Native American is looking away from me, away from the other murals, perhaps looking into the past of his own heritage, a heritage that has slowly been forgotten. Could these two murals provide a key to future debates on water? Perhaps the key is to remember where we've been in *all* our heritages and in *all* our diversity – in order to remember, or perhaps to discover, tomorrow's water wisdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Back

Writing can often feel as if you've been condemned to a vacuum out of which must materialize thoughts and courage that will find their way into words. It is often a lonely and isolating process, especially when the material refuses to bend to the will of the pen. But having arrived on the other side of that seeming abyss, I see a whole crowd of people who were ever-present in supporting my efforts in many ways and at many different points along the way.

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