



## *floating in the riparian*

KATHRYN WINOGRAD



I FLOAT ON A PADDLEBOARD CONVERTED TO A kayak with a simple web seat and O rings. Decades ago I vowed never to bring my children, or me, to this reservoir again, dredged out of the floodplains that mark the confluence of Plum Creek and the South Platte River below the foothills southwest of Denver and my suburban home. And yet, here I am, my daughters long grown and living two mountain passes away and me a good decade past menopause. Cool reservoir water, the same water from when I was a young mother, or possibly, worse, drips across my thighs as I paddle, smoke draping itself along the hogback to the west—another summer of fire to weather. This is not the first time I have floated here behind the warning signs to alert pleasure boats and ski jets of the dangers of submerged objects.

“A creek,” my mother, a transplant from Ohio who mourned for the sprawling deep river arteries she left behind to be near me, always pronounced the South Platte. Early Spanish explorers called it the Rio Chato or “calm river,” a moniker that did not quite describe its propensity for flooding. And the Indians warned the white



image info



settlers who displaced them of “bad medicine.” In 1965, before the construction of the Chatfield Dam, this behemoth of concrete and steel that stoppers the river, the bad medicine erupted: epic storms engorging streams and creeks from their banks, all bearing down onto this riparian basin, where sits this reservoir, where I float.

“A knife of mud,” one photographer described the flood waters, which unleashed a battering ram of abandoned cars, refrigerators, and broken appliances junked for years along the riverside, and smashed twenty-eight bridges and innumerable houses between Littleton and Denver, the destruction lethal and pervasive. Despite fifty-seven years of progressive riverside beautification and the sweet spring buzz of crabapple blooming like choreographed parasols, I can sometimes smell the smoldering garbage pits beyond the charming wood bridges and the bike paths and the ducks that pinball through the kayak shoots.

For years, in summer, Chatfield reservoir has periodically been sealed off from bather and boater because of high *E. coli* counts. Poop. This was the water hazard I discovered myself, long before I happened upon the official newspaper warnings. I took my young daughters to wade with friends near the mouth of Plum Creek where it empties into the reservoir, and waded, joyous as my daughters, barefooted across the creek’s lunar bottom until I scraped my leg on a jagged raft of saplings. *Beaver-gnawed*, my friend pointed out in alarm as a trickle of blood sent me to the emergency room when I called a nurse asking if I should be worried.

“Nobody knows how filthy this water is,” she said those twenty-five years ago, and I spent four hours on an emergency room bed, the tiny puckered wound on my leg systematically flushed clean and injected with antibiotics, some that I swallowed, my leg finally so muffled in gauze and ace bandages and a splint that it looked broken.

*Never again*, I said.

There are few warnings when we enter bliss. When I first floated here, it was spring, late, in the trickle-down of a lavish monthslong spate of rain and snow unrecorded in Denver for some eighty years. I had borrowed a paddleboard from Juliet, my ex-colleague from the community







college where I was now an “emeritus professor,” awarded the perks of free parking and, perhaps, coffee at random events. It was the tag-end of that first year of dying and grief, the word, *pandemic*, triggering images of the Black Plague and the carrion-beaked masks that the doctors in the 1300s stuffed with lavender and camphor, aromatics that they thought dispelled the stink of disease and its certain death. By that spring, we were vaccinated and maskless, but Juliet and I had both lost mothers, hers in the summer before the first winter tweets of pangolins and secret labs and mine in that apex of panic and quarantine when I found myself banished to the asphalt of a hospice parking lot. Eight years I had taken care of my mother and, now, because I offered to name my visiting Kansas sister the “designated” visitor, I discovered I was allotted just fifteen minutes every twenty-four hours to sit at my mother’s side. And an extra fifteen to catch her last breath.

The year had been long and lonely. Juliet and I said we would not despair. How is retirement? friends asked me early on. Perfect, I would say, but already guessing then how fleeting that would be as I grasped at some happiness, the nudging of real life subterranean and persistent that I wanted to ignore, even before the pandemic—my then aging mother weeping at the shopping mall food court because she could not see, and my husband icing a bad knee in the family room after surgery, complaining of stomach pains and nausea he wanted to ignore as much as I did, as if a stationary bike and a bar screwed to the basement rafters for pull-ups could somehow wheedle him out of anything permanent, any disability, any fraying of the body that might one day leave him gasping with

my mother on the shoreline of the mythic rivers we had both taught for years to our students.

Juliet drove us to an old rock quarry south of the reservoir. Crushed stones deposited millions of years ago by glacier and water had been mined decades past for buildings and roads, until, finally, the pits were allowed to flood deep and cold and sky-struck. I liked it, I did, the paddleboarding and my body’s rickety unfolding above the spine of a sinking board I must balance. Ringed by pop-up shelters and signs for sunrise yoga, the gravel pits offered a wedge of sand at the edges, a velvety platform we could knee-off onto our paddleboards, our paddles trailing dazzled wakes while swimmers in wetsuits stroked alongside a line of buoys, and small shouting boys teetered wet and glistening on their ankle-cuffed boards.

The boats’ constant plowing and circling jostles me. Their motor buzz cascades and recedes like the cicadas’ I heard beneath a wild tree in a midwestern zoo once, seventeen years the cicadas like buttons burrowed beneath the black soil, ghosts of themselves pinned bubble-eyed to the bark, the tree swelling and receding like a heart in the tick of their desire. I have not been out on water like this since I was a girl, dog-paddling in midwestern ponds and old cow holes, once water skiing on a slow Ohio river, decades before we learned to fear what can spill into one, its gas and its oil leaks shattering iridescent beneath my child skis. And one star-chipped night in college, I skinny-dipped in the black pitch of a quarry after a late-night party, none of us knowing each other but shedding our clothes outside of our cars’ high beams to race drunk and laughing through the midnight air until we floated, moon-scoured and alone.

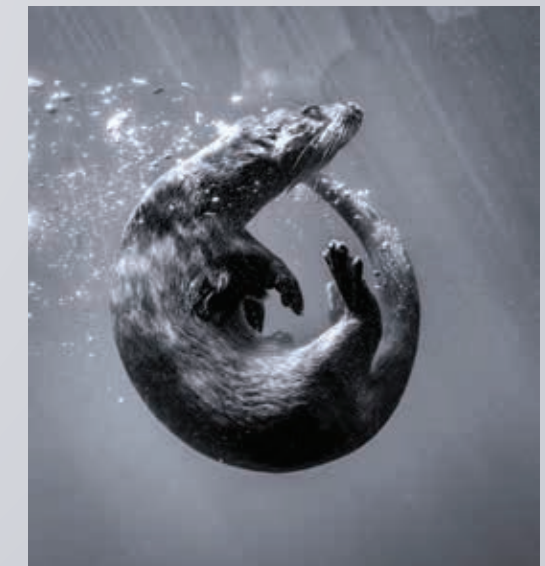
I don’t know exactly why this “clean” quarry wasn’t enough. I don’t know why I decided to not heed my own decades-old vow to not venture into a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. I do know that my father’s pond where I sometimes swam secretly naked had been green and spring-fed and that I had floated above the blue gills and the red ears hovering, just beneath me, over their eggs in the fin-brushed shallows.

I am one to linger over the wild geranium sunlit against the blue storm cloud stacked against the

sky. I think a lot about faith, sideways. I remember when I was a small girl, pinned with the pilot’s pin that the airline stewardesses gave out to children, when we were allowed to roam the aisles smoky with the cigarette butts of our unbuckled parents, how I stood at the seat of a stranger as he pointed at dark troughs of clouds beneath the plane’s wing tip.

“The footsteps of God,” he said. “Do you see them?” And how I keep trying.

Grief is a web. Or not. It untangles itself. Or not. Perhaps this quarry was just more public pool than anything else, a respite from a pandemic for oblivious children and the young mothers in bikini bottoms and tops who ferried them. Not for the aging who grieve, I thought, mourners in long-sleeved hiking shirts and floppy sun hats, suspiciously like my mother’s, shoved down to protect our faces as we search for something. There is a moment in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* when Raskolnikov murders the elderly pawnbroker and her sister and realizes that he has damned himself to a place of no return, of no redemption, no hope. I listened to that audio scene on my car radio, sick with doubt and guilt over my mother’s death and what I did and did not do, anything I had ever considered to be faith or god gone. There was my mother, who died blind and alone, in a room not her own that I could never enter long enough. And there was my father, too, dead so





long ago now that I had almost forgotten this: my father, an almost humorous figure, then, retired from medicine and sitting by himself on a stool in a deep rain-damp basement, trying to piece together a child's plastic boat.

"He just couldn't do it," my mother said, and I am ashamed to say that I did not understand what that must have meant to my father. Even as I write these words, I feel the old ache as if my mother and father and I were walking still in the green dark of a woods, each of us alone, holding out our hands to catch like small blue plums the fleeing bird shadows.

"The trees will die," I said to Juliet, death my go-to assessment for anything that year. Across the road from the quarry, the back inlet of the actual reservoir, muddied by fishermen and cobbled by goose poop, had flooded into the green belt of the riparian I float on now. Watermarks waist-high slashed the cottonwood grove water-buried from what the local weatherwomen had called "unprecedented" early summer storms, that same grinding rain against our basement windows that had swelled beneath the baseboards, my husband and I forced to clatter down the basement stairs and mop out the rising garden dirt. But Juliet and I could see leaves lemon and green, snowy egrets and pelicans stippling newly formed islets, and paper-thin heron stalking the water. In a cottonwood rookery, double-crested cormorants, leashed a thousand years by fishermen in far countries to night dive for silver fish, preened in the sun. I thought it beautiful.

Yesterday I read that scientists have perhaps "proven" that birds and animals, even down to the dung beetle, read the night sky for direction, the Milky Way a line straight across the curved universe, a roadmap in the cosmos that something the size of a half dollar, an inch across at my feet, rolls its dung balls purposefully beneath. There is something wondrous in this. Perhaps one moment we will be here in this world, thinking about children and bills and books and what we have loved and lost, and in the next moment, if we are lucky, the world will rearrange itself, or we will rearrange ourselves and paddle slowly beneath a lit and knowable sky, our shoulders pushing down toward the green earth in bliss.

"What's wrong?" Juliet asked. We had returned to the reservoir, to tiptoe through the stink of its mud with our inflatable paddleboards clamped beneath our arms. Juliet settled down quickly and pushed off into the backwaters with one smooth glide of her paddle. But I hopped one-footed back into the muddy suck—the first quick bite. The feint of a fencer, I thought. And then the second bite scraped like steel wool along the delicate arch of my foot until I jerked my board free and belly-flopped after Juliet.

Riparian comes from the Latin noun *riparius*, the same root of "river." To be in the riparian is to "exist alongside the river." Only three percent of Colorado is made up of the riparian zone, the wet marshes and grass meadows that follow, here, the bends and shoals of the South Platte River past cottonwood and box elder. Yet ninety percent of our amphibians live in these green swaths of deep roots and vegetation, what are considered "natural corridors that help sustain subpopulations within a constantly shifting landscape."

That "constantly shifting landscape." How freely metaphor comes, in the same way that rains create floods, float us into remembrances, into rivers. I remember my mother's guilt, years after she had sent her own mother to a sanctuary run by nuns, my mother arguing with her sister one afternoon outside the glassed mother-in-law flat my aunt had arranged for my grandmother in the basement of her home. I don't remember what was said, but I remember my mother rigid and firm and my aunt crying at the leaving of my grandmother, warranted, I am sure, in my mother's mind by practicality. But what my mother did not know until much too late was that this was a sanctuary of silence, of unspoken prayer, my bewildered grandmother, who had untethered the ties of Catholicism for us all decades past, lost.

I don't remember what all Juliet and I saw, unafraid of us that day: a cormorant gold-masked and bobbing out of the water next to our kayaks. Dozens of blue heron. A bald eagle white-tailed over the water. A snow of egrets, pelicans motoring silently past. And then the green river we could paddle up, deep enough only because of this one spring, these last few weeks, this rolling thunder, quick-flashed, and the rain in torrents, and the



acrid smell of the asphalt rising from the streets like a small fever burn and driving us to this reservoir.

I have never ridden the water like this, eye-level to the shore, buoyant as the paper boats my husband and I folded for our daughters to drift down tiny fissures of water. It feels right to float over this place of the riparian now, temporary as this flood may be, to feel the reservoir water wash over me, my paddleboard slash kayak a place of refuge beneath a sky of smoke. A middle-aged woman, a mother, stout, paddleboards past me into the wind like a statue off the prow of a sea-vessel, her husband and gaggle of kids shoveling the water after her. Then silence drops and I thread my paddle through the lily pads and their pink flower knots, silence, here, a gift, the still center like the eye of the hurricane I once rode out with my mother in a tiny garage apartment, my mother and I newly arrived to this city where I would last for only three years, the elderly homeowners staring at us through their closed car windows as they drove down the driveway to safety, leaving us, my mother sleeping through the push and pull of the wind while I watched

over her, watched the night ticking through the leaves of a banana tree outside my window.

I am remembering the wisps of cotton drifting from the trees. And the river's light. And the dripping line of a fly fisherman. The riparian takes you in softly if you think to float a river, to follow its hollows and gaps, its detritus and fish eggs, its loam and gasoline. It is the felt green, the alluvial soil at the cleft of rivers where we die or we forget or the dead into whose mouths we placed our coins like bread are ferried from us to live changed and eternal, blessed or not. Our Eden before the forgetting or the woe or the fire.

A friend, who carries cancer within her, told me once that bliss was a moment stilled: her playing the keys of a keyboard she silences for the neighbors. My mother and father and I carrying my daughters to see a flurry of prehistoric footprints, my daughters' shoes unbroken yet by the earth, and my father, afterwards, in a small Italian restaurant singing a song of tiny spiders.

"Like drops of heaven," Juliet said—the goldfinch on the riverbank bathing small shining seconds. 🐦