

Of Nudity and Violence, Waking and Water

by Tod Marshall

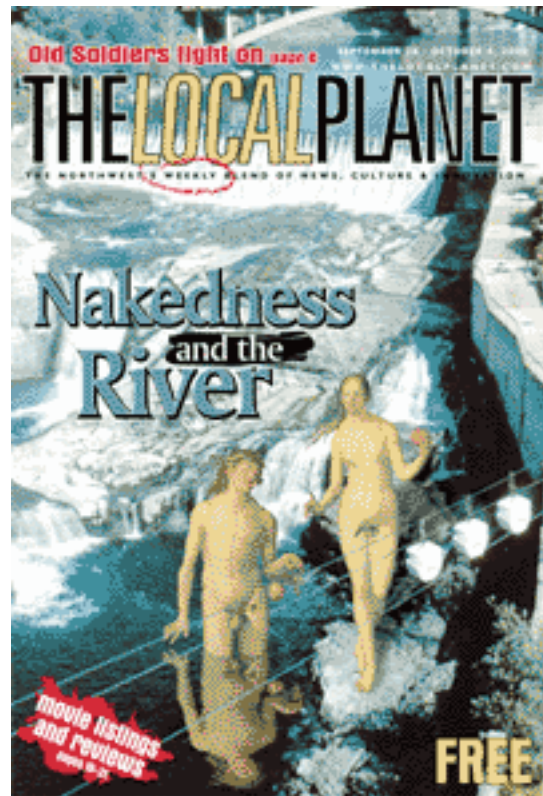
I know that the best way to start this essay would be with a consideration of naked bodies slipping through cold, clear river water, but you'll have to trust me; the nudity comes later. First, the graphic violence.

The river as we know it today began with a flood, which means that, figuratively, Spokane began with a flood, a violent wash of water. Lake Missoula during the Glacial Age: 3000 square miles, 200 feet deep. All of it dammed naturally by ice. At what is now the Idaho/Montana border on the Clark Fork, a huge icy cork kept back 500 cubic miles of water. Theoretically, as the glaciers began to melt about 750,000 years ago, huge icebergs broke off into Lake Missoula; these made the water levels rise and overflow the ice dam; this erosion began to eat channels into the ice. Huge icebergs would have pinballed through the channels, breaking the dam into nothing in a matter of days.

Perhaps no flood ever, anywhere, has been as violent. The water flow has been estimated at 400 million cubic feet per second; the Amazon, by the way, flows at 6 million cubic feet per second (cfs). The Spokane Falls tumbles water at about 6800 cfs. The force of Lake Missoula pummeled the landscape. The Spokane River, the smaller lakes of the region, the surface of earth: all was altered. The water lashed out across the land, scouring, tearing, rending the earth.

What was left? The scablands, basalt columns, deep channeled ravines, the Palouse, and the river valley where Spokane would one day erupt as a frontier city. A changed earth. Of course, the great Missoula Lake's wash of water wasn't the first violence wrought upon the region. Nor the last.

In late summer, walking the many hiking trails along the river—trails that thread their way from Riverfront Park all the way to Riverside Park, you have to pick up your feet to keep from kicking up clouds and plumes of dust—the leaves and bunchgrass layered with dust, a fine film that almost seems to cling to the plants. Although the temperature usually isn't Houston-hot or anything like the southwestern desert, the sun can beat



down with a relentless yellow heat; if it's August, then maybe the last rain was in June; if it's September, then maybe the dull dryness of June and July have been eased by a shower or two, but perhaps summer has returned for one last flash of ninety degree weather before October's chill. Regardless, your shoes are dusty; the sun burns your neck; you can feel those rivulets of sweat begin in your hair. Just to the North of where you walk, you can hear the distinct rhythm of moving water. Listen. Tell me that you're not interested in swimming, in taking a dip in the energetic current.

"Frontier mentality" means many things, different things to different people. For some, the adventurous spirit of Conestoga Wagons and Westward Ho! expansionist attitudes-recast images of the Puritans' billowing sails-are yoked to the word "frontier," as well as the consequent politics of violent exploitation. Another defining thread articulates the profoundly American impulse to seek that isolated space away from the "madding crowd." Still another implies a wilderness on the edge of civilization, lawlessness in which the renegade can thrive. Regardless of which conception is most accurate, aspects of all of these are ingrained in our country's sense of identity. For instance, in literature from brave Natty Bumppo's cavorting about Fenimore Cooper's Catskills (look out for that twig!) to ee cummings' "defunct" Buffalo Bill's ethics of death, the isolated individual intent upon wending his way through the world and altering it as he goes is a recurring figure.

Many Spokaneites, indeed Inland Northwesterners, seem to pride themselves on living a life built from the ideals I've just been discussing. As the posturing of the recent political primaries and the ongoing elections indicate, the rugged, self-reliant individualist is certainly a typecast many in the community embrace, although picturing Slade Gorton or John Talbott on a Conestoga Wagon is a hard sell. Regardless, this characterization spawns many things, from individualist free spirits to rugged entrepreneurial types to nude bathers-the man or woman at home with his or her ideals is probably comfortable with his or her skin. Or so we might hope.

The most significant downside, though, to such radical emphasis upon the isolated self revolves around how this emphasis can affect one's view of the surrounding world. That is, when the individual becomes the nexus and the individual's needs become tied to a materialistic culture, then things can go askew (dead buffalo, dead horses, dead salmon, death period). Everything outside of the self is seen through the lens of use. The results have frequently been ghastly. Unfortunately, in Spokane, rather than a mere, laissez-faire "live and let live" dynamic, the individualist bent has often emphasized such exploitative utility.

Allow me to conjure the ghosts of a founding father. As he romantically relates in his memoirs, when James Glover spent an entire night listening to the din of the Spokane Falls, he found himself moved. Toward rapture? No. He decided that the puny, mule-driven sawmill on the river was wasting energy, cash, and possibilities, and so he bought the land, built a larger mill which spawned larger mills, and the rest is the beginning of Spokane history.

What does it mean to listen to tumbling water and hear something useful?

Floods. The Missoula Flood transformed the region; the flood of settlers followed suit; the last fifty years have seen the creation of other "features" besides basalt columns and pioneer towns—industrial waste, suburban sprawl, the great rivers of Division and Sprague like two sluggish canals buoying the slow poisons of exhaust and consumers intent on the next bauble. All are the result of a short-sighted vision driven by the demand of use.

You're hot, so why not take a dip in the river? Why not walk to the river's edge, near the confluence of Latah Creek and The Spokane. The sand will be soft beneath your feet. The sheer sides of the ravine rise to meet the clear blue sky; the water chants and whistles and sings. Oh, why not shed those clothes and swim in the river? Look around. Others are naked. Several men, a few women, three or four frolicking children. Pull your shirt over your head, squirm out of those shorts or pants; kick your underwear into the air—watch them hang against the sky like a silly kite. The sun on your butt feels good; the sun on your genitals and the inside of your thighs feels warm and soothing. The sweat on your scalp trickles down between your shoulders. The water, the water, the water: why not embrace it in the only way you can, why not take a swim?

There is little need to recount in detail the litany of misuse. The 19th and early 20th century emphasis upon utility and the lasting impact of such attitudes wreaked havoc on the planet; in this region, the results range from a befouled river to land so radioactively poisoned that few can grasp the long-term implications. We have all read about, heard about, or seen the results of utilitarian management of resources. I need not belabor such holocaust nor the reasons behind it.

Some specific instances, though, may speak toward understanding the profound implications of this corruption of vision. I'd like you to think about dead horses. Colonel George Wright was a despicable character. Or, as a product of the early 19th century, perhaps it would be better to think of him as a utilitarian with a particularly severe disposition. In 1858, in order to achieve the ends which he needed to achieve, he believed that certain acts had to be performed. Threaten the execution of Native American women and children? If it works, sure. Engage in the slaughter of about 700 horses and ponies? If the result justifies it, then sure.

But think of one horse. An impossibly graceful creature, the horse's balance astonishes. Consider the musculature at full gallop, the shimmer of each flexed tendon, extension of bone. Oh think of one horse and tell me that the blood of those animals, the ghosts of their bones, aren't in the land, on the shoreline, inhabiting the current's threads and twists. Stand at the river near the Washington and Idaho border—"Horse Slaughter Camp"—breathe in the autumn air; think of one horse. Wright achieved his desired ends. So goes utility.

Oh how easy to turn the wrongs done for the sake of use into a litany, a flood of crimes: the dams, the dumping of raw sewage into the river-the forbiddance of which was resisted by the Spokane populace until the 1940s-Kaiser's toxic drip, and more, beyond pollution, beyond the environment. Qualchan and fifteen others swaying from gibbets; Chief Garry whiling out his days in a makeshift shantytown in what is now People's Park; the crowds of men who gather every morning on the corner of Division and Riverside. The forms of violence, the results of use, are myriad. Lead in the fish, elevated levels of cadmium, arsenic, and zinc. Poison and death, compromise and pain. The great flood of the 19th and 20th centuries has not been good to the river, the land, birds, fish and beasts. But that such transgressions were frequently done in the name of utility and good use is only one part of the story. "Death is the mother of beauty," the American poet Wallace Stevens wrote. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to look at how the opposite might be true, how beauty might mother death.

There have been, of course, wonderful proponents of an ethical treatment of the river and the surrounding land. For instance, in 1908 the Olmstead plan proposed a park that would have protected nearly all of the land around the river within the city limits from the development that riddled it over the course of the century. From a 1913 report of the board of park commissioners: "Nothing is so firmly impressed on the mind of the visitor to Spokane as the great gorge into which the river falls near the center of the city." Although such efforts were doomed to capitulate to the demands of the railways, in some ways the Olmstead Plan was the seed of the great revitalization that changed the topography of downtown Spokane in the 70s-their goal of the river as public park finally realized.

Long before the Expo, though, and the transformation of the riverfront, the Riverside Park Company (a group of private citizens) donated all of the land on both sides of the river at its juncture with Latah Creek. Thus the beginnings of People's Park.

You're in the water, kicking around, blowing spouts of water up toward the sky. But self-consciousness suddenly returns like Ahab stalking you in the Pequod. You think, "Ooh, what are they thinking about my body?" You remember a friend who once commented that "some people shouldn't be naked." You wonder if a smart-alecky kid is talking about that white whale in the water. Or you worry about your thin shanks, your skinny ass, the sag of your scrotum. Or you notice that the man just forty yards away has a near pelt of fur on his back; the woman with her two children has pendulous jugs. You suddenly see that the man sitting near the beach has such a bloated gut that it nearly hangs over his genitals. You weigh and measure all of them; you weigh and measure yourself.

What does it mean to look at a human body-shred of divine dust-and be repulsed?

What does it mean when a poisoned river is the scenic center of a city?

I want to suggest an echo in these questions. Ask any gawking tourist and he or she will laud the beauty of the falls. But the dynamic isn't about tourism. Who hasn't

encountered a "scene" in the natural world and thought, "Wow, that would make a good postcard." Or "Where's my camera?" Who hasn't oohed and ahed at nature? And, of course, the Spokane Falls are powerful and glorious. As is the entire course of the river, any river-as is every intricate aspect of natural existence—the thorns and leaves, each stone and ripple. Somehow, though, we learn that gawking at the sublime is what seeing nature is all about, whether the spectacle at which we're gawking is a healthful, gravity-driven tumble of water or a sickly foam of diseased spray from over a century of misuse. The superficial splash of water is enough to forget the poison, to gloss over the dreadful accumulation of trash on the basalt, to ignore the vanished animals and struggling land.

And, strange as this may sound, the same dynamic compels the spackling of glossy photos all over every supermarket magazine. Get the beautiful bodies up there on the covers and the ante is insanely upped; the sublime glory of the body becomes equated with the "perfect body" and, consequently, the sheer delight of limb and vision and life, the life of any body, the movement of any limb, the glory of the particular, is irrevocably lost.

Look at it like this. John Berger offers two different ways that the human body has frequently been depicted. The difference is between nakedness and nudity. Being naked is to be without clothes. Being nude is a sort of stylized representation of the naked self that emphasizes the perception of the viewer; when one is nude, self-consciousness governs and the body always acts in accordance with the desires of the onlooker. The body is arranged so that the viewer can survey it, and the beauty of the human body is thus reduced to the viewer's use. To put it another way, the body becomes objectified spectacle, but the dynamic is even more pervasive because when nude, one is always subject and object. One is always scrutinized and engaged in self scrutiny. In our culture, people, especially women, learn very early that this measurement of how we look in the eyes of others is important. Such lessons lead to awful ends—from eating disorders to suicidal depression about self-image.

River and earth, shrub and sky do not experience the violence of such self-consciousness. However, when our main interaction with the natural world is to marvel at it only as spectacle, then we perpetuate a related sort of violence, a violence of reduction in scale, essentially pretending that the flow of a river, the arc of an osprey, the dexterous leap of a frightened squirrel, and the scintillating spray of a waterfall are there as part of a useful diversion from the mechanical grind of our everyday lives. The beautiful becomes entertainment, and any ugliness, any blemishes can be cropped out. Forget the litter; forget the poisons; forget everything.

A glacial flood tearing across hundreds of miles of stone and earth differs from a tide of settlers inflicting their desires upon a land. From James Glover to the present day helter-skelter development and "revitalization" of our city, visions have frequently been yoked to short-sighted goals. Grumpy editorials and adversarial city council meetings,

though, are only a small part of the problem. That is, perhaps shortsightedness is only part of the dynamic.

The ways that we see the world and the ways that we see each other affect how we treat the world and how we treat each other. An exploitative vision eclipses the mysterious, the ineffable, and the ecstatic. When the earth and its many bodies are not seen with eyes able to be astonished, then the scale of the possible becomes reduced; to put it another way, if we are unable to see other people and ourselves as embodiments of holy dust, if we are unable to see every natural thing in the world as part of a mysterious and unknowable blossoming of life, then we will continue to inflict dreadful violences on the world-and each other.

We must see the river anew in order to live with the river anew. I am interested in a new kind of creative violence, one that blinds our learned ways of seeing, one that allows us to understand how we have been acculturated to see the world as ours to use and use and use. How can we learn to look at something-whether it is a person whose appearance differs from those false ideals of fashion magazines or a raucous river-and see it as us? Je est un autre: "I is someone else" or "I am an other." The French poet Rimbaud wasn't talking about the natural world exactly, but in his declaration of polyphonic existence, of our unique ability to recognize the strangeness in others and the strangeness in ourselves, and to somehow respond to that otherness with empathy, he gives us a route toward a creative violence which could allow us to see the Spokane River and the naked bather in a vision of embrace rather than use.

The water beneath your body is clear. You can see the rocks of the river bottom. Maybe a rowdy jay lifts up from a nearby pine. Maybe a child splashes you with water. Your body is naked and with the naked water and with the naked sky: all are beautiful. Next time you're hot, next time the world is sticky on your back like a wet shirt, why not shed those threads, toss that self-consciousness. Next time, why not take a swim?

Our vision of the world has always put the human species at the center of things. Whether compelled by the rugged individualist eking a life out of the desolate West or some biblical mandate that the earth exists for human use, this conception must be revised; we are a species among many others, and we must learn to see ourselves within a complex and contiguous web of life. Nothing exists solely for our exploitation-whether that exploitation is with river mill or through idealized ogling. Such re-"visioning" is not specific to any given culture; if the dynamics of jeopardy have escalated particularly in the West, we need only survey the rest of the inhabited world to see similar sites of environmental and inhumane disaster.

The human ability to transform the world, as well as the ability to perceive the sublime-one that we assume most creatures are without-these are not licenses for wanton abuse. They are both remarkable gifts, forms of grace. To hinder ourselves from seeing the sublime that is in every moment of a river's course, every bud and

branch and bug and bird, as well as every bald head and bloated belly, is to shrink the world, violently bring it down to the size of a postcard. We must dismantle this hierarchy as surely as we must dismantle the ethos of utility.

750,000 years ago, the Missoula Flood radically altered the landscape of our region. Every waking moment, each of us has the opportunity to begin a similar sort of alteration. In Spokane, we claim to value the individualist. Good. Such valuation speaks to residual threads of the transcendentalist spirit that sings the song of the self both because of particularity and because of connectedness to the natural world. Unfortunately, the great hum of machinery that has filled our ears over the last century-and-a-half has dulled the more celebratory aspects of this idea and left us in a slumbering nightmare of vision emphasizing use.

William Stafford implores us "that awake people be awake." No more slumber: see the river as neither useful nor spectacular. Avoid such reductions and maybe a new vision will empower our connection to both the natural world and to each other. Perhaps such a new way of seeing will allow us to be of the river, to feel anew that chilly current and those slick stones. And perhaps one day we will be like new settlers; perhaps we will be pulled to the river's edge not to gawk or scheme, but to listen, to listen for more than the ghost of Glover's exploitation, for more than an empty beauty that may foster death. To listen even for more than the elegy of pain, the horse cries bleeding into the current. Maybe one day we will listen, without hope or expectation, and we will hear that we are part of the water's reply.

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