

Mud Woman Rolls On, a Roxanne Swentzell sculpture
The Whisper of the Land, a Page Lambert narrative

Sometimes, a city has been silent for too long.

Finally, she raises her voice to us through the men and women who walk her streets and who feel, through layers of concrete and asphalt and tar, the stirring of her soul.

The land, too, feels this stirring and can stand to go unheard no longer. She reaches out to us through centuries of silence and begins, once again, to tell us her story.

Sometimes, we listen.

We are born from the dust of dying stars. All of us. Two-leggeds. Four-leggeds. Winged-ones. Crawling-ones. The land, the rivers, the animals, the people. Yes, even the cities. We are all kin to that primordial, subatomic boiling bouillabaisse that began the universe more than ten billion years ago. We are reminded of this kinship through an inborn memory—an electromagnetic afterglow of creation, radiant waves of invisible light that travel through us and everything we know. We are the offspring of stars whose explosive deaths still vibrate deep within our souls. We are the embodiment of the Creator, the quickening of the creative spirit.

Listen. To the depth.

Do you feel the reverberations? Do you feel yourself moving backward in time and space even as you push into tomorrow? Do you seek to understand your universe so that you may begin to know yourself?

Listen.

The universe is talking.

She is the whisper of the land, the shout of the people, the sorrow of the city. She is us.

To understand the cities we love is to begin to understand the universe. To travel through the layers of memory that form the inner consciousness of these cities is to move through time.

These memories spiral inward from as far away as the milky galaxy which cradles the earth and this very continent, yet from as near as the most recent rains which fall on our city streets, rains which fill our city's rivers and creeks and ponds.

Denver's memories are seasonal; all her winters lay piled upon one another like snowy strata—all her springs lay like landscaped tiers of tragedy and triumph. Let us return to these seasons, trace them backward in time. Let us start with spring.

Go further back than even Denver's first spring, back to when the land that stretches from Denver to Colorado Springs was the bottom of a great inland sea. Her beginning is our beginning, we are intrinsically linked to her foothills and layers of sandstone that form the hills and hogback ridges upon which we have built our homes.

Let us move slowly forward, to when crustal uplifts began forming the jagged peaks of the rocky mountains upon which we have built our ski resorts and highways. The rains that fell then were able to slip down the sides of this new and great divide, linking the rivers of Colorado to the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Let us return to these quaking mountains, and to the heart of this city. Let us flow through her watery soul as the blood of all creation flows through the rivers of the trembling earth.

Do you see the layers of soft Dawson arkose begin to form, alluvial deposits from Pikes Peak granite? Watch as the foothills turn moist and temperate, a semi-tropical environment where fig trees, palms, magnolias, poplars, willows, and maples grow, where crocodiles and turtles wander among the triceratops. Smell the humidity. Hear the land rumble as volcanic eruptions break through the ancient Precambrian and Cambrian rocks, piling up breccias and tuffs—stratified layers of ash and cinder—more reminders of our link to the creation stars. See the rhyolite rivers of lava begin to flow.

A glacial age comes to the land and the winds and waters form gently rolling, eastward sloping hills through which the waters of Cherry Creek and the South Platte will someday flow. It is at the confluence of these lively, ever-fluctuating and temperamental waters that the People have always come; it is here that the city of Denver will be born, and upon their shores that she is destined to grow.

Elephants, with giant tusks and grinding teeth, once roamed the banks of Cherry Creek. Folsom hunters followed the foothills and scoured the plains in search of giant-horned bison, leaving beautiful leaf-shaped flint points for us to unearth when spring rains washed the earth away. On bluffs overlooking the vermilion creek, in caves formed from the natural contours of the land, the Early People left skins and bones and pottery.

Further north, in the Platte River basin, the People camped near First Creek and left chalcedony flakes from the making of their hunting weapons, and quartzite from the forming of their tools. They ground grain in sandstone metates and stored water in pots of hand-fired clay.

To the south, near the land of the gods, the Blue Sky people followed the antelope and deer in their southern migration, warmed their winter-weary bodies in the sacred spring waters of Manitou. Here, at Medicine Fountain, the waters of the earth bubbled forth and the Arapahos made offerings to the Man-Above. Carcajous, the cougars that now prowl through the yards of our mountain homes, once hunted the flocks of wild mountain sheep that congregated at the springs.

Soon, more tribal people would roam the flat-topped buttes of Wildcat Mountain, hunt and camp upon the bottomlands of the South Platte and Cherry Creek. Traders and trappers from the land to the east followed the ancient routes along these waterways. The Arapahos and Cheyennes knew these temperamental “laughing waters” could become angry and full of rage when the spring rains came and the winter snows melted. They watched the waters rise and heard the earth’s voice in the river.

Then, from beneath a deep, broad river that flowed in the faraway land of Tennessee, came tremors that shook the entire country—from sea to prairie. So powerful was the quaking, that the waters of the Mississippi flowed backwards in giant waves. So massive was the shaking that the land was torn asunder and great fissures opened in the earth. Three times, the great quakes came.

When the tremors from these quakes reached the Early People, they became fearful, for they knew the trembling was the anguished voice of the Mother-Below, rising from the grieving heart of the Great Mystery-Above. Grief belonged to all that was living. This truth the People knew. Grief flowed from spirit to flesh and blood, to earth and sky. Yet even they forgot this truth when they made war upon each other.

Soon, a new kind of two-legged came to this land of peaks and plains, where thousands of years ago pines and cedars and oaks had replaced the figs and palms and magnolias. He came to dig from the mountains their gold and silver. The mountains felt inside of them a tearing away of their gilded veins and their argent crevices. But the Great Spirit of the earth was generous, so the land, at first, did not mind this tearing of her veins, nor the sluicing of her creeks. Yet these men forgot the truth—the oneness of spirit and flesh and blood and earth and sky. And so for this reason, the land grieved.

Soon, settlers came to this broad valley of rich soil and high plateaus of tableland. Many came to escape lives of misery. Many came in hope of a better way. But they began to build their settlement upon the banks of the temperamental “laughing waters,” and this

seemed foolish to the Arapahos and Cheyennes. Men like Little Raven joked with the newcomers as their building grew upon the flood plain, but the newcomers did not heed this warning, for they were a strong people who had endured much.

The Early People became uneasy as they learned more about the ways of the newcomers. Sometimes, a leader would climb the peak of a mountain, and he would watch the great birds soar above the land. He knew the vision of the winged-ones to be greater than his, for the birds lived close to the Great Mystery. Sometimes the two-legged would dig a hole in the earth and lie in wait for the eagle, tempting the bird with dead coyote stuffed with bear tallow. The eagle could not resist the smell of the coyote, so the bird would strike. And if the man's medicine was good, if he had kept his spirit tucked safely beneath the wing of the Great Mystery, then he would be able to snatch the legs of the striking eagle, and the vision of the great bird would be his.

Many times, he looked down upon the newcomers as they built their settlement upon the shores of the river, but even with the powerful vision of the eagle, he could not understand their ways. The land understood his confusion for the coyote, the eagle, the bear, the two-legged—all had sprung from the loins of the land. All of the people were children of the earth.

Sometimes, too, the settlers—the men and women—would walk out onto the prairie, or ride their horses up into the mountains. They also searched for understanding. The land felt the trembling of their uneasy spirits, and the Great Mystery felt their confusion.

The seasons of the earth changed from winter to spring, and the settlement grew. The people were excited about their new home at the confluence, so they wrote words telling of their great joys and worries. For two days and nights the snows of April fell upon them, but still, they kept writing. Finally, the writing was done and the words were printed so that all could read about this new settlement. They named the news after the mountains of rock, which towered above them, and the vermilion creek rich with chokecherries, which flowed beside them.

The land remembers the spring snows that thawed and fed the river, and she remembers the People—for the People had not yet forgotten her, and she loved the People as she loved the four-leggeds, the winged ones, the crawling ones, the ones who clung to her with tendrils and tubers.

She remembers, even, the rare April prairie fire that roared across her grassy plains, the handcarts and prairie ship that rolled across her breast, the bison and ox and horseflesh that seeped, cell by cell, into her soil. The raw settlement grew into the city of Denver. Heavy wagons crossed the spring-swollen Platte, the wheels of prairie schooners dropped deep into the sandy bed of Cherry Creek. The land remembers the April snows that fell upon the tipis pitched among the cottonwoods, the great fire that in April burst through the roof of the

Cherokee House, burned log cabins and shingled roofs and unmilled clapboards sawed from pitch-filled pine, the spring when antelope still ran wild in her streets made of earth.

As the city grew, and the land around the city became home to even more People, a great need for water arose. The People began drawing water from the river and from the creeks which fed the river. They built ditches and canals with which to divert the water, and the skin of land began to dry and crack. Then rains would come and floods would wash from the dry land her fragile topsoil.

More gilding was stripped from the veins of her mountains—seven million dollars of gold—for the people loved beautiful things. Yet this beauty, which had come from the inside of the earth, became an outward ornamentation, and there became an imbalance in the spirit of the people. Soon, the people began to fight.

The Early People fought with each other, the newcomers fought with the Early People—all of the men fought. All over the land, there was an imbalance of spirit. Not just here, but in the far-away country to the east, beyond even where the great Mississippi flowed. Armies marched across the land, brothers fought with, and against, each other. Flags from warring citizens flew above the city of Denver. Anger, like wildfire, ran rampant, and the killing spread—among the tribes, among the towns, throughout the country. From unionist to confederate, from saloon to brothel, from Indian to rancher, from town folk to tribe folk.

For days, great amounts of spring rain and snow fell from the sky to the mountains and the divide, flowing into the headwaters of Cherry Creek. A great flood came. Sawmills were washed away. Ranch buildings swept downstream. Sheep, whose wool protected the people, drowned by the thousands. The flood rushed like a torrent of tears into the streets of Denver. The bodies of nineteen People floated like sodden driftwood with the bodies of the sheep. And still, the People's anger flowed.

Denver's fear became Running Creek's spring-time horror, and led finally, after five new moons had risen, to the tragedy on the frozen banks of Sand Creek. These waters, which eventually flow into the great sea, hold both the tears of Van Wormer's Hungates, Black Kettle's Cheyennes, and Left Hand's Arapahos. Here in this land lie the ashes of homesteads burned by desperate warriors, the bones of families mutilated by despairing men. Here soldiers trotted about with human hearts impaled on dead branches; cruel Colonels captured horses and killed women and children. But here, too, mothers held their children to their breasts and sang to them lullabies filled with the Great Mystery's love.

Nothing lives long, chanted the old warrior White Antelope, a Lincoln peace medal dangling from his chest, nothing except the earth and the mountains....

The land remembers all this, and more.

In the spring of 1864 the News pleaded compassionately on behalf of Denver's dying songbirds. In the spring of 1865 the city demanded an investigation of Colonel Chivington, and the people began to learn the truth of the militia atrocities at Sand Creek.

Fear and anger haunted the hearts of the people—haunts them still. These fears lie buried in the land beneath Auraria and Blake and Larimer; they lie dormant within the rusted workings of the first printing press and upon the painted hides of the buffalo. Yet the earth has a generous heart, and even as the Cheyennes and Arapahos were forced to leave the land they loved, even as the city grew, the land had faith in the people—even as the floodwaters poured down Bear Creek into the valley of the Platte. For the people were capable of great deeds and valiant new beginnings. Deep down, the heart of the people was good.

In mid-spring of 1868, 40,000 railroad ties floated down the Platte River, caught in a boom rigged across the river at the foot of 15th Street. The Denver Pacific Railway was in a race with the Union Pacific. The "Terriers," Ireland's iron men, rioted by night and built railway by day. Refugees from the potato famine, they marched in cadence by the dozen, lifting rails from horse drawn cars. They ate coyotes and prickly pears, made soup from putrid horseflesh salted with gunpowder. Within a month two teams of horses began plowing furrows in the earth, officially breaking the spring ground for the Denver Pacific.

In May of 1869, imported Chinese track layers laboring for the Central Pacific met the Irish Terriers. They fended off Indian attacks while wild Texas longhorns roamed the open range. Dogs rode the train engines, driving the cattle from the tracks. The longhorns moved north in a race for grass, while the rail companies raced their way to Denver. In late spring of 1870, the Denver Pacific won the race. By the following April the city not only had a railway, but gas works and water mains as well.

The people's thirst for water grew more voracious. Water rights became more precious than gold or silver. Then, that same spring, so much rain fell that the people joked that Denver's streets could be navigated by flatboats. The rain pleased the land, and it pleased the people. Three hundred horse drawn carriages passed west from the Platte up onto the highland bluffs most every Sunday morning to see the greening of the prairie. Then, in the quiet of winter, when the rain turned to snow and covered the prairie in white, a trembling deep in the earth shook the land. But few of the two-leggeds noticed.

In 1872, just as the people weighed each gram of silver and gold, they began to record monthly figures of rain as it fell on the city. To the south, where the ancient volcanoes had once rumbled, a rancher discovered lava stone—a hard but beautiful rock of pinkish gray. The people began to use horses to haul tons of this variegated stone from the mesas of rhyolite surrounding Castle Rock. The ancient rivers of lava once again began to flow—from the Rocky Mountains to the sloping hills, from Sellars Creek to Plum Creek to the laughing waters of the Platte—to the Confluence.

As always, the spring storms came. Five days of rain. Six days of rain. Twenty-four hours of snow, then rain, drenched the landscape. New gullies, some twenty feet deep, formed in the valleys of Bear Creek and Soda Creek, where the fingers of the mountains reach toward the grassland.

Then, in the year of 1882, came a quaking that rose violently from deep beneath the land. Like the anguish that exploded from beneath Tennessee's Mississippi River seventy-one winters past, these tremors shook the land, from the west where the sun sets, to the east where the sun rises. Like a great, mythical dragon, the roaring rose from the earth.

To the citizens of Denver, the politicians and ranchers and miners and cooks and hotel keepers, the quaking was a new and fearful thing. Nature has uttered a groan of anguish which caused the very mountains to tremble. This is what they wrote about Colorado's most powerful, recorded earthquake. A few, at least, were beginning to remember, as their ancestors had known, as the Early People knew, that the trembling was the lashing tongue of the Mother-Below.

The earth circled the sun nearly ten times before her rumblings were once again heard, causing the waters of Cottonwood Lake to tremble. In the decade that followed intense rainstorms again and again flooded the basin of Bear Creek, whose waters flow into the Platte. Another devastating flood struck Denver as tidal waves washed down Cherry Creek.

Then, one spring, in the year 1920, heavy wet snow fell from the sky above Denver. For fifty-seven hours straight, the snow fell and the wind blew. All the city hid inside, except for a few brave carriage drivers and horses who delivered milk and coal to the hospitals and newborns. Finally, the storm abated and the weather warmed. The floodwaters did not come until the following year, and then the year after that, and the year after that.

The time of the Great Depression brought with it more floods. Nearly a dozen would strike the Front Range before the end of World War II. Then, as if the vibrations from bombings of foreign lands across the sea traveled clear to the mountains of Colorado, another earthquake struck. And again, eleven years later, southwest of Denver, another quake. Then again, five years later, yet another.

The earth has not spoken to us with such magnitude since the 6.2 quake struck Denver in 1882. Yet she does not cease to warn us. She speaks the thoughts of the Great Mystery to us in quivers and rumblings. She reminds us when we pump toxic fluids deep inside of her, when we pull precious liquids out of her, when we draw from her lungs her very breath. Her voice rises to the surface and can be heard in the dying fish, the withering streams, the poisoned soil, the air that no longer heals. She speaks to us in the language of the land, because she loves us. We are her children; she is a child of the universe.

The waters of Cherry Creek and the Platte, which have countless times washed like a tidal wave over this city, have within them the memories of the land. Every structure built by the hands of man has within it the memories of the city. And the city, each and every street and sidewalk, carries within it the memories of the People.

When we remember the sorrow of our past, we do not have to choose our compassion. We can grieve and rejoice for all the People. We are finally beginning to understand that balance is born of opposing forces, that where there is winter, there will be summer, where there is fall, there will be spring.

Like the spherical song of the universe, filled with counterbalancing notes—good and bad memories, opposing points of view—the human heart is capable of embracing manifold truths.

The ancient Greeks believed the Song of the Spheres to be the music to which the stars danced. But they also believed the Song to be inaudible to the human ear. Could it be that we are now learning to listen as the land listens—with our hearts?

The soul of the city is here, in the heartbeat of the people. The land still stirs beneath our feet, beneath the asphalt and concrete and high-rise buildings. Creation's afterglow is still here, on the faces of all the strangers we meet.

Listen.

Mud Woman is talking.

She is the whisper of the land, the shout of the people, the sorrow of the city.

She is us.

~

~

~