

# ROCKIES and ROLLIES

## Fock 4: The Fabulous Dancing Cows of the Curecanti.

At Timbers, as is the norm in such stops, I brought the Notbook in with me so I could do a little blinging about the ramack so far, but, as often happens, something happened. Maybe it's the beer and the social good nature of bar patrons. Maybe it's a sense that if I wanted privacy, I wouldn't sit at the bar. But my scribbling away always evokes comment, and almost always leads to good conversation.

So, as I sipped on my second Flying Dog Ale, a large, sturdy, mid-20's guy who had sat down next to me, said amiably, "Whatcha writin'?"

Sometimes the interruption is an aggravation. Sometimes it's an obnoxious drunk who wants to tell me all about every goddamn, freakin' word that he ever wrote. Sometimes, the words are flowin' outa my pen like beer from the tap, and I just don't want to rock the roll.

But not this time. The Colorado karma was too good. Timbers had too much feel-good goin' on. I put down my pen, hefted up my beer with a smile, and replied, "Absolute crap." He got a hearty laugh out of it, and the conversation flowed.

Ron was his name, and he was the new wrestling coach at the local high school. We talked coachly talk for a while, swapping complaints about athletic directors, unreasonable budgets, dedicated athletes, and the other highs and lows of coaching a low-on-the-totem-pole sport. We hit it off quite well, and had a couple more beers together as we talked, and he assured me that Black Canyon would be a much better experience than The Royal Gouge had been.

And, as often happens, the Notbook was left hanging in mid-sentence: whatever train of thought had been running just plummeted into the abyss and was washed away by bibulous sociability. All of my Creative Writing professors in college – I milked that one good, taking the course six times, and getting three credits each time -- had admonished all of us aspiring writers that we would have to become slaves to our pens if we wanted to succeed: if a thought hit at 3:30 a.m., the writer had to get up and run it through the ink, get in onto paper, and chase down all relevant threads lest they be gone forever when the sun rises. However, none of them ever mentioned sacrificing a beer for the sake of an idea.

Spirits soaring from the clean mountain air, and from Timbers' input, Blue Man and I resumed westering...for all of about nine miles. Shortly beyond the town limits, Highway 50 began to rise above the plateau, and as it did, the water appeared: a large, blue, shimmering pool of sweet Rocky Mountain run-off. A couple of sporty powerboats zoomed across it, with wetsuit-clad skiers in tow. A few sailboats lazily rode the summer breezes near the far shore.

It was Blue Mesa Lake, a fat, deep, fjord-like basin where the Taylor, Tomichi, and Gunnison Rivers settled down together to create the Curecanti National Recreation Area. It's surface elevation is 7519' above sea level, and it is Colorado's largest body of water.

Having not seen a legitimate lake since crossing the Mississippi, and not seeing a legitimately clean-enough-for-swimming hole since Loch Raven Rez in Mary Land, this lake seized my fancy. It didn't just tickle it, it seized it. And if you've ever had your fancy seized, you know how compelling it can be.

Before I knew it, Blue Man had crossed the road and pulled to a stop on the wide dirt shoulder. Pocket-shorts off, runnin' shorts on. Runnin' shoes off, Aquasocks on. And I didn't even bother with a towel.

The tall, steep bank required above-average clambering skills, but I managed without much sliding or tumbling. The air was warm, the early-afternoon sun was fantastic, and the blues of water and sky clashed in perfect accord. And the water was **COLD!!!!**

Holy shit!! New England beaches did nothing to prepare me for that level of stimulation. My four Flying Dogs had lowered my defenses, I reckon, because when I plunged into the chest-deep water, I had none of the bracing or tensing that should accompany a frigid dunk. The Flying Dogs did, on the other

hand, provide me with the fortitude to actually *stay* in the bone-chilling water with a devil-may-care “Cold? This isn’t cold!” demeanor.

Duhhh, stupid me, though: if this was 7500 feet, and water runs downhill, then the water in my shorts might well have been the snow on somebody’s skis just a couple months before.

I splashed about recklessly, keeping my blood flowing and my heart rate up. I threw my body upwards and came splashing down again and again, reveling in it more and more with each thrash. I paused and looked up at the rising ridge where Blue Man was aimed, and bellowed a long and loud “AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!” for no reason whatsoever.

Stepping out of the lake, I let the warm sun and steady breeze dry me. It was the cleanest I had felt since Brevard. It was the most awake I had felt since about 7 a.m in New Orleans. But this was a much better context for an adrenalin rush.

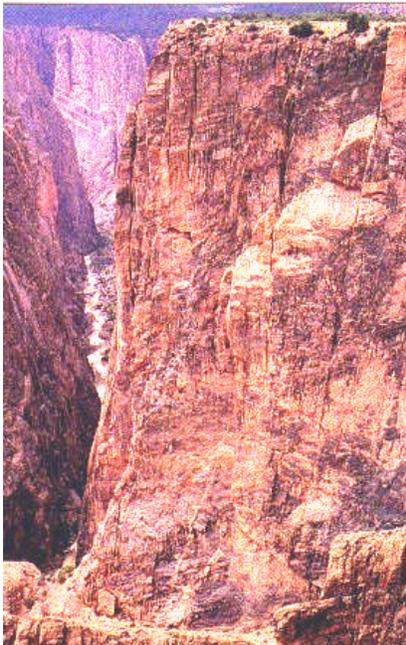
Clambering up the bank was considerably harder than sliding down had been, and I employed a piece of beige, barkless driftwood as a climbing aid.

It’s amazing how simple objects can transport you back in time and space to a place that you once visited. It’s pretty useless to get a shoehorn with “Paris” printed on it, or a lighter stamped with “Cancun” if you have never been there yourself. It’s just a taunt by Millie and Ben to say, “Hey, we’ve been to Paris and yooooo haven’t, but here’s a shoehorn for you.”

But the simplest things, like a feather-light stone from Crater Lake, or a shell from Key West, or a lighter you stole from a cool bar patron you met in New Orleans (thanks, Chris), or a tree-branch-turned-walking-stick from a remote Canadian lake -- all of those things become valuable keepsakes. You never have time to think about those places and people in your everyday life, until you accidentally fumble across that insignificant, worthless-to-anyone-else item. Then, you’re suddenly back there. Images can fly across your mind, or you can find yourself lingering in one, losing yourself in a moment that you thought was gone.

I kept that piece of driftwood. I knew I would want to come back here. (And I have.)  
The road rose upward, and Blue Man and I eagerly rose with it.

The Best Free Scenery of Roadrage2000, up to that point, came just minutes later, at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Since this roadtrip was the Go-Where-You-Have-Not-Gone-Before roadtrip, the route wound within a couple of hours of The Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Yosemite, Yellowstone, The Grand Tetons, Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, Pike’s Peak, Great Sand Dunes, Hoover Dam, and several other exquisite scenic displays, yet Blue Man sailed blissfully by with “yup, yup, seen it already” disdain. I was not out to see things **again**: I’m pretty sure The Grand Canyon still looks a lot like it did in 1990, and though I’d love to hike it someday, it just wasn’t on this agenda.



Instead, I sought out new places, and The Black Canyon of the Gunnison (BCG) was pretty much an afterthought, a what-the-heck-it’s-on-the-way kind of thing. It lay along the route from Kansas to Utah, so I made it a stop. Damn glad I did!

This place was very cool. After all the flatlands of Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and eastern Colorado, this steep cut in the solid rock landscape was amazing! The overlooks were exactly that, as you sometimes looked over the rail *straight down* a thousand feet to the rocky river bed below.

The steepness and closeness of the canyon were magnified by the roaring of the white water so far below. Pouring up from that small blueish-green undulating ribbon, the sounds of the Gunnison River rapids came through with remarkable volume.

The Grand Canyon of the Colorado River – that is, **THE** Grand Canyon, the big daddy of big holes, in northern Arizona – yawns up to 15 miles across. At the Black Canyon, though, you almost feel like you could zing a Frisbee across that gap, just like we used to try to do from balcony to balcony at Boston Garden as waited for the concerts to start.

I just about made it one time too. The ‘bee was zung with good speed and angle, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> row of the first balcony, and was headed directly for the long-haired stoner across the arena

who had signalled me with the “right here, dude!” wave. The throw was right on the mark – a perfect strike – and the pre-show crowd below was beginning to “Ooooooooooooo...” in anticipation, but in the final few feet, the disc stalled. It floated in place, tantalizingly close, and the long-haired stoner strained to reach it. His friend held his pants by the waist as he leaned waaaaay out over the rail. “Catch it” I wanted to yell, but it came out, “Dive for it!”

No, he didn't. He wasn't that baked.

The Frisbee sneered at him, smirked back at me, then tauntingly nose-dove sideways into the gallery below. “Awwwwwww...” came the collective response. There was a scuffle for it, and it got flung badly for several minutes before we lost interest.

But that's how close you felt at The Black Canyon.

And there were spires. I love spires. A couple rose up a few hundred feet, tall and crooked and solid rock. At one time, the tops of these towers were solid spots in the gushing water. Thousands of years of rapid erosion had torn away the ground around them and left them standing, becoming taller and taller as the river carved a deeper and deeper canyon.

On the north side of the BCG, the roads were not always close to the lip of the cliff. It often wandered away to wherever the topography allowed roads to be constructed.

At one such wandering, the pavement veered sharply right, and there, in the middle of the road were The Fabulous Dancing Cows Of The Curecanti.

Bovine beasts are typically a sedentary lot, but not the Fabulous Dancing Cows Of The Curecanti. It's difficult to say where they were coming from or going to, because the right side of the road was a steeply rising, well-wooded, slope, and the left side plunged dramatically into a ravine.

But, there they were: four brown-and-white moo-moos, slowly walking single file up the middle of Highway 50. Blue Man immediately decelerated, and the Fabulous Dancing Cows Of The Curecanti began their performance.

As one, the bovines took a nifty step towards the right side of the road. Then, again in unison, they nimbly retraced their step, and took a cross-step towards the ravine, almost like ballerinas on tip-hooves.

Blue Man, however, upon seeing the animals, had veered towards the ravine as well, so the twinkle-toed cows sashayed two synchronized steps back towards the upslope. Then they all stopped at the same moment, and stood motionless, in identical poses, as if ready to bow, apparently awaiting their deserved ovation.

Blue Man tiptoed by them, in the wrong lane, and the Fabulous Dancing Cows Of The Curecanti turned their heads, as one, of course, to watch us pass. As I looked moist-eyed in the rearview mirror, moved by their stirring performance, they had resumed their climb, and were walking, in step, up the road again.

Yeah, OK, it wasn't very spectacular, even if you *were* there. Nibble my shorts.

The forest at that point of the Curecanti was made up largely of aspens, which are a lot like birch, and birch forests have always been a favorite of mine. The contrast that the white bark creates in those shadows is beautiful. Even in the cool shade, the forest feels more alive. It's refreshingly different. I was very much in stop-and-look-around mode, and a wide, dense batch of aspen was a great complement to the gorgeous gorge, so a wooded walkabout was in order. It never hurts to pick up a few more negative ions.

And birch and aspens are just uncommon enough that it is hard to get tired of them. Usually they appear as a pleasant surprise. They may be even more appealing on a rainy day, when their bright trunks illuminate the otherwise gloomy woods.

Evergreen forests have always been the very best, though. Their shade is deep, the ground is cushioned by discarded needles, and there is usually less ground clutter, so it is easier to walk, and to find your ball. They are also the absolute best for running. Trail running is tremendous anyway, but when you get a prolonged stretch of soft, brown, needles underfoot, and a thick umbrella of pine overhead, you just feel like running forever. Such trees shield you from both sun and rain, and give a welcome dose of green throughout the harshest and starkest winter.



My Rochester apartment was average in most ways, but what sold me on it instantly was the sight of the tall pines that stood outside the living room and bedroom windows. While most other flats at Valley Court Apartments gave uninspiring views of the traffic rumbling by on busy Genesee Street, or of the parking lot, Number Five-Fifteen took you away. You felt like you could be in Oregon. Even in the dreary depths of that interminably gray winter, the lush and dark needles offered the reassurance that life did indeed go on, even when they could only poke their tips through the daily mantle of lake-effect snow.

Highway 50 headed off to the northwest, and after a couple of hours, Utah began to feel really close. Anticipation had been escalating as Blue Man and I left more and more of Colorado in our wake.

Then, with Utah in sniffing distance, we almost were waylaid by poor trucking. As we climbed the slopes on the west side of Grand Junction, a pickup truck piled high with styrofoam slabs, about 8' x 4' each, caught the highway winds that they were not packed to handle (i.e., a rope around the *middle* of the stack, does not keep the airflow from getting under the *front* of the slabs – get the picture?), and the top few slabs snapped off in the middle and soared, fireworks-style, into the sky.

The pickup was a good way ahead of Blue Man – maybe a furlong or so (that's 220 yards) – so I got a great view of the kiting styro's, and I had a hearty laugh at the expense of the pickup's driver. Then a few of the slabs wafted down right in front of me, and I smashed headlong into them, fiendishly blasting the ruined white demi-slabs into tiny styrobites.

But the road gods have their way of equivocating, and, as the elevation rose on the road into Utah from Colorado's final valley, Blue Man began to wheeze and gasp. The temperature gauge was needling higher and higher, and there were distressing power losses as his fever raged.

Finally, like Dudley Do-Right to save the day, a small, old, red-and-black Ford pulled up beside me. It had been behind me since the initial styroburst, and had clearly made an effort on the long uphill to overtake Blue Man. I glanced to my left, and saw the driver, a man with a long gray ponytail, motioning to the front of my worthy steed, and making suffocating gestures. Certainly, this struck me as odd. Then I pieced it together, and pulled over, within a mile of the Utah border.

Sure enough, flat to the grill, and spanning headlight to headlight, was one long and solid plank of styroshit, which was stifling my radiator, and hence, my cooling system. Blue Man had been gagged!! My callousness had been punished.

I removed the offending styro, begged forgiveness from the spirits of the road (uh-huh), and rolled **into Utah!!!!**