

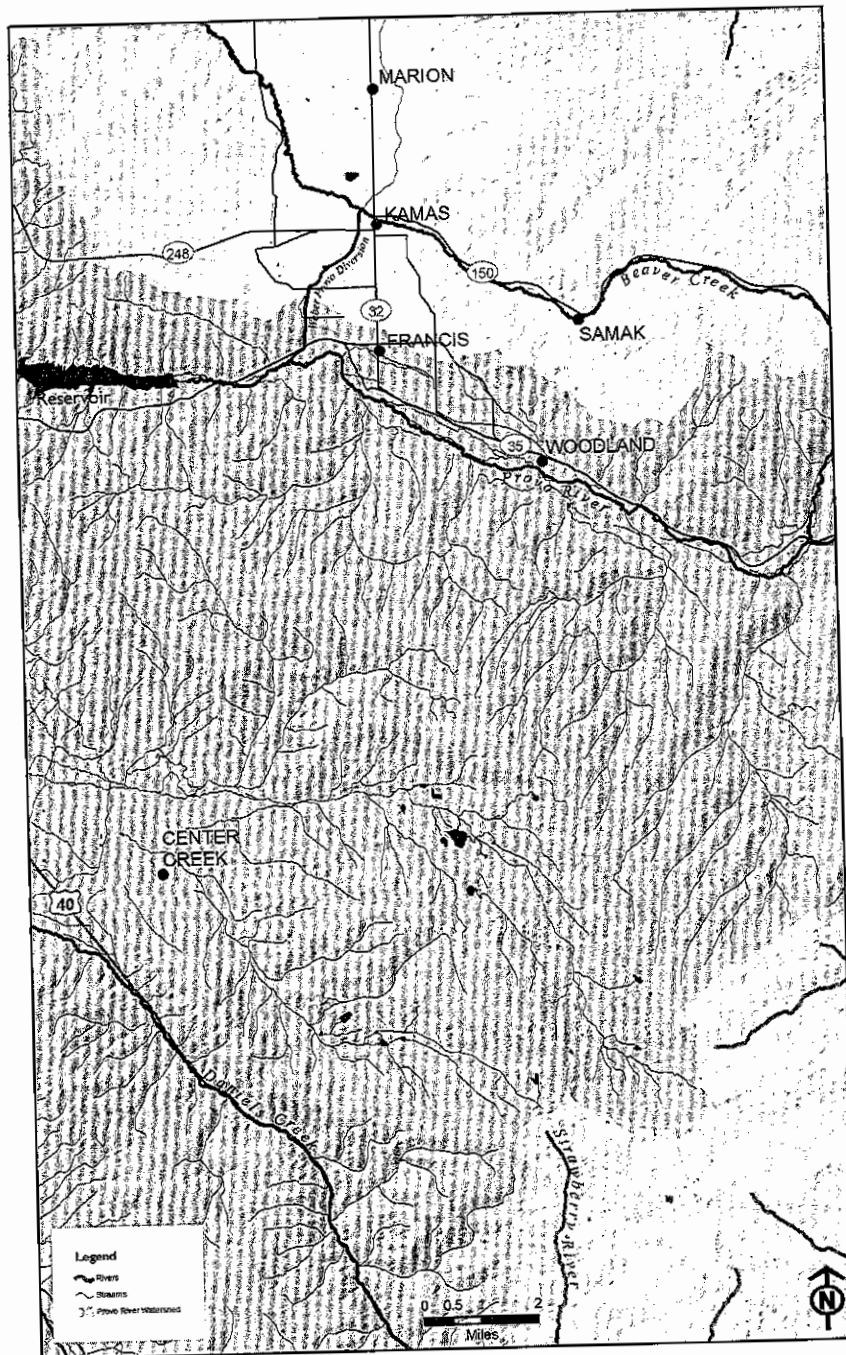
# Home Waters

*A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*

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THE UPPER PROVO RIVER, BELOW THE UINTAS

I ALREADY FEEL I MUST START OVER... DEFINE MY SENSE OF PLACE BY RETURNING again to the beginning, and then open my eyes, one more time. The greatest solace and the greatest truth begin with the rebirth of the senses. Home is apprehended, not inherited or owned. So I must refuse the peace of ancestry, family trees, and printed maps, and explore my own *terra incognita*, try my own primitive hand at cartography. As Rilke says, sensation is what one needs. These mountains have never been seen before, at least this is what I will have to convince myself if I am going to touch this earth with immediacy, with sensation.

I won't take much convincing, since the way the sheets of rain pelt the surface of the lake creates an illusion I have never witnessed, as if some commotion from below the surface were causing the water to boil some twenty feet or so ahead of me. What is most startling is that there is a clear demarcation between the boiling water and the flat plane of the lake that extends out to the shore where I am standing. I am not sure at first that it is, in fact, raining, but my nose detects the fragrance of a high-elevation squall, and the wind carries a light spray that gently laps my face. And that gray wall of water in front of me is starkly real, shrouding the gray hills and dark trees behind it, even if I have never stood so close to the edge of rain.

The voices of children call me back to my place on the sand at the edge of Lily Lake in the High Uinta Wilderness. They are my children, sitting with my wife in the car, waiting for me to give a weather report about the chances for a dry hike. They have opened the windows to experience that same strange sensation of approaching rain that is only feet away but which leaves you dry. In this sensation of the headwaters, I almost forget that I was the one who brought them here to touch the wind, the stones, and the water.

The bright sunshine slowly and steadily deepened the sky's pale morning blue in all directions when we started out at daybreak to follow the Provo upriver to the Uintas. Sometimes the river was to our right, sometimes to

our left, and never as straight as the roads we were traveling. Had I been told it would rain this hard, this soon, I might not have believed it anyway because I still haven't learned to expect the unpredictability of mountains. The Uintas receive sixty inches of precipitation every year. The valley where I live gets only fifteen, half of what is needed to grow grass. I am resistant, too, to what it requires to be truly prepared, which usually involves carrying clothing for all types of weather. Which isn't the worst of sins, except for the fact that I dragged my wife and kids into the elements for an innocent, short hike to Wall Lake when the deluge began. Wall Lake, I told the kids, feeds a stream that reaches lakes below and then eventually reaches the Provo River and our valley.

We had started off at the same trailhead where I had done my run previously, but we headed up an east fork. Cobalt skies hung to the south and west, but a hub of cloud-cover began to darken to the north and east where we were headed. We could hear lightning in the distance, but I figured chances were just as good the wind would take the storm out of our path. Was it one mile per second between lightning flash and thunder, or one-tenth? Or something in between? My wife and I disputed the point for several minutes as we continued to hike.

The terrain around the trail was layered with leafy bushes, watercress burst from the ground wherever there was spring water, and abundant reedy grass thrived at the edges of small ponds. The dark pines were painted with hairy moss, too, which, along with the lime-green lichen on the stones, all seemed poised in resistance to their inevitable journey to dust, creating a world of green reverberation. I tried hard to keep the children distracted from the rising wind, which whipped the tops of the pines with a low moan that mingled with the sound of distant thunder.

The elements had me feeling an ecstatic joy, making concerns for safety seem like some unwanted mosquito in my tent. We may not have gone more than a half mile before the rain began to fall in torrents, leaving us completely exposed. We hadn't even brought rain coats, and so we tried to sprint back to the car. Lightning flashed all around us, and hail began to hit us hard. We sought shelter among a grove of short trees and waited until the downpour slowed enough to run again. White balls of ice bounced across the hard stones, ricocheting in all directions. The ground was becoming white all around us, like some careless spill of Styrofoam packing pieces. Looking up to the indifferent skies, all I could see were white threads streaming down

from an invisible gray source. Small clumps of pine needles floated about our feet in brown puddles.

Paige and Camilla cried in the protective arms of their mother, their blond hair turning brown and limp in the rain. Our toddler, Sam, hugged my neck in terror, making it difficult to breathe. Our young teenager, Elizabeth, was able to keep her fears in check, but the emotions of her siblings had her on edge. Her blue eyes darted nervously between me and her mother. Amy gave me that look of maternal disapproval. "Isn't this incredible!" I offered with an exuberant smile. No one said a word, and the tears continued. "We'll be fine," I said, a little more soberly. I felt stupid for my stubborn insistence that we keep going on the trail as long as we had. My problem was adolescent: every turn in the trail, every new expanse that came into view pulled me forward and I felt like pouting now that we had to leave all of it behind.

Once back at the car, we drove farther up the mountain with the heater on, until the rain stopped and we found ourselves here, by Lily Lake, where the rain seemed blocked by an invisible wall of glass. I stood waiting for the rain to hit me, perhaps hoping that by willingly exposing myself to the elements while my family watched I would have paid penance for my hubris, or perhaps I would have shown them how thrilling nature's force can be when faced directly. But once it became clear that the rain was receding rather than advancing toward the shoreline where I stood, I climbed back into the car. Welcome back, nature boy, Amy's eyes seemed to say. We continued driving around until we found another hike.

As much as I chafe at my wife's maternal caution and as often as I try to chastise my children for excessive and irrational fears, I am deeply ambivalent about the adventures I seek. It is a lasting legacy of my brother's death because while I want to overcome my own fears and desperately don't want my children to be crippled by their own, I cannot tolerate even the thought of causing them unnecessary pain. This is not a strength, I know. Children need to develop resolve to face the physical world, and I won't make them the last children in the woods by coddling them in their fears.<sup>14</sup> I generally achieve this kind of tough love when it seems necessary, but it always requires a herculean effort to go against the grain of my deepest, most intuitive, overprotective urges. Maybe I would have had those urges anyway without the violence of Kenny's death, but there is no doubt that I go through life permanently haunted by the prospect of those I love facing

sudden pain and intense fear. After that hike was over, the look of terror on my young son's face haunted me for weeks and overshadowed the sublime moment of thunderclaps, whipping wind, and streaming hail.

The only cars at an elevation of ten thousand feet were filled with families like my own, seeking recreational restoration, to no avail. We wanted nature, but perhaps not this much. This required more respectful distance than we had bargained for. We caught glimpses of each other's shadows through the fogged-up windows of our vehicles as we passed on the shining wet mountain pass.

Last year around this time there were cars lining the highway on both sides, as hundreds of people came to help search for a twelve-year-old boy who had disappeared near one of the many mountain lakes here. A group of Mormon families had come for a campout and some fishing in the days prior to the beginning of the school year. These were hardy people, well seasoned by Utah's high mountains, driving in their large, four-wheel-drive trucks, pulling trailers filled with Costco-sized food packages, Dutch ovens, fishing rods, and bait. And rain ponchos, no doubt. These were the kind of Mormon families I had encountered in Flagstaff, well grounded in the landscape of home, hearty outdoorspeople, spending their nights sitting around the fire, sometimes three generations at a time, filling old tin cans with embers and placing them by their feet while they shared stories of the outdoors.

This trip was extended for weeks because of a boy's inexplicable disappearance almost in plain sight of his family. It was early morning. The boy and his father were fishing on the edge of the lake when the boy fell into the water. His shoes were wet and the mountain morning temperatures left him shivering. He asked to return to the campsite some two hundred yards away to change his socks. The father offered to go with him, but he said, "I can do it." He was twelve and a boy, after all. "I'll be right behind you," the father replied, as he began to gather in his fishing line. Turning to make sure the boy knew his way, he saw his son aiming in the wrong direction. "Not that way, son." He pointed in the direction of the campsite some forty-five degrees to the right. The boy corrected his course, and the father turned back to his rod and line, which had become entangled during the exchange. I'll be right there. Right there.

And he was. Only a few minutes later.

He walked into the campsite to check on the boy. Anyone seen Garrett? An innocent question that turned to quiet panic, and then terror spread through the camp in an ever-increasing pounding of the human chest.

Scattering in all directions, the family ran frenetically, calling "Garrett! Garrett! Garrett! Garrett!" until they were hoarse. Even his bones have yet to be found.

I read the story one morning over my breakfast. Volunteers gathered to help a coordinated effort to walk as many square feet of the area as they could in concentric grids of five hundred square meters. Hundreds came at first, then dozens, and by the time I finally committed to help on a day in mid-October at the tail end of the search, five, maybe ten, came at a time. The anxiety was no longer about the boy's being alive and in pain, of course, but about gathering him before the impending snows would grind him into the very stuff of mountains. This is civilization's greatest ambition: to preserve our human difference in the face of the indifferent law of decay and regeneration.

Just when the boy's dissipation into the dust of the earth almost demanded that hope shatter, the human difference announced itself in bold and admirable outline: the father's faith seemed as beyond reproach as it was beyond my capacity to imagine. A man whose life experiences have taught him that God hears and answers prayers, he believed He would not give him a stone for his lost son. It was a simple enough request. Closure—to give the boy a proper burial, as they say—that was all the father wanted. He spoke with a broken, raspy voice. "We just want...we need...to find Garrett and bring him home." He was speaking on the news, now several weeks into the search, standing in the high mountains in the dark while a steady rain pelted his poncho and hit the microphone. "Each searcher helps. We can only do this together. Thanks to those who have come here and helped."

I knew this man, I suddenly realized. Not closely, but the demand for volunteer service in the church had brought us together briefly on Sundays for a few months. Sometimes reading the obituaries here is almost like reading the gossip column or a Christmas form letter from a distant relative. Which means that it is beyond obvious here to point out that no man is an island, especially if you and he are Mormon and in the practice of calling each other "brother." As I have so often experienced in the practice of my religion as part of a lay clergy, what initially posed itself as a theoretical question about what I would do or feel became personal and immediate.<sup>15</sup> I was ashamed to admit that my religious ties to the father, however tenuous, were needed for me to feel our common humanity more deeply, but at least I got up, searched my calendar, and set apart a day to go.

I started to think of my own children, Amy, my parents, my brother Bill, and I also remembered how in my adolescence my oldest brother, Kenny,

had disappeared from this world just as suddenly and illogically, and that it caused a similar anguish: Where did he go? How did we lose him? What do I have so that I can still hold on to him? We may never make up for personal losses, but certainly we seek recompenses in the healing bonds of community, bearing the burdens of others, and in the wordless solace of nature. And I noticed my own attitude shifting from anger to hope. So many had poured out their hearts in prayer in the first few hours and days of the boy's disappearance, and if God ever answered one prayer, I wondered, why would a God of miracles turn a deaf ear?

But as I prepared to go into the mountains, I found myself admitting that, platitudes aside, time, truly deep time, contains mysteries of forbearance and suffering. The man of God "knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."<sup>16</sup> Paul had it right, suggesting that it is more valuable to act and to feel than it is sometimes to have knowledge. Garrett's father seemed to know how to act out of an instinct that told him to reject the inevitability of things. Perhaps some Greek dramatist would connect the boy's death to an innocent mistake of the father, but there was no hubris here, no tragic flaw. His intent searching might have seemed inconsistent with religious submission, but in addition to the thousands of people from many faiths who ended up aiding in the search, the boy's family raised over sixteen thousand dollars to build a school in Ecuador in his name.

The forging of community bonds or the building of a school can't take away the pain, but I started to think that some strange chemistry was at work, like the time I sang the "Hallelujah Chorus" at my high school concert only two nights after my own brother took his life. The pain of losing him—his gentleness, his brilliant intelligence, even his dark periods of silence—was a measure of my love. I learned for the first time that I could feel pain *and* inexplicable comfort and that perhaps they were one and the same. I still don't know if I cried more of sorrow or of some as-yet-unnamed joy.

At the trailhead to Ruth Lake on the Uintas' north slope I met up with only five others, a woman from Salt Lake who was new to Utah and Mormon culture and new to the search as I was, and four men who all appeared to be retired and of unidentifiable religion. I assumed at first that they were family, but none was. "We are now," said one in his checkered, red flannel shirt and wrangler jeans who had been volunteering for weeks. He had come to love the father like a brother, "and that includes how brothers can drive you crazy sometimes," he said with a smile.

The weather that day was spectacular. The morning hours were quite cold, of course, since it was October, the coldest air I had felt since the previous spring. Patches of spring water everywhere on the trail were covered with ice sheets, creating striations that looked like basket-weave or bronze stained glass. Hiking through a meadow of thick, dead marsh grass, my feet crushed the thin, icy layer and sank into soft soil beneath. To my right wound a slow-moving body of water in deep oxbow curves. Beneath the ice I could see brook trout gliding with just a hint of panic at our movement. With the exception of such flat openings, most of the terrain was rocky with thickets of pines and bushes, reeds, moss, occasional fields of pink granite rock, and consistently uneven and unpredictable surfaces.

Searching for a human in a more-than-human world required absolute devotion to a straight line in a world in which such lines did not exist. But this, I quickly learned, was also how the contours of the land can best be experienced. I wondered how much of the variegated surface of the planet I had bypassed in my need for ease. We charged over rocks, down steep drops and up small faces of stone, and literally straight through bushes. Only a lake turned us from our chosen path temporarily. We regrouped into a straight line to move parallel at the opposite side of the lake, guided at both ends by the two men holding GPS devices. Between long silences, the man in the flannel shirt who held the GPS to my left, spoke out loud from time to time. "Come on, Garrett. Today's the day. Today you come out of hiding. Be a good boy, now." The trees and rocks grew monotonous, as if the mountain had run out of ideas.

Our pace was very deliberate and slow, so that we had time to look into tightly formed groves of trees or bushes where a cold and frightened boy might have hidden. As the morning sun rose and shone more directly down upon us, I could feel my body beginning to sweat. I paused to shed some clothes and brush the salty sweat from my brow. I felt guilty stealing glimpses of the castellated peaks of rock, the broad meadows and high grasses, the variegated limbs and trunks of trees, living and dying... or dead, the strange, wild world that had stolen this boy.

Looking at the incipient soil of a dead tree, tragedy seemed a feeble human concept in such a world. But I looked around at these men and this woman who had no connection at all to the family or their faith, acting on their commitments, and I knew that my heart had to refuse this peace. I would have to think of beauty as a distraction because the smallness of

human love and loss can't win against the expanse of the physical world's incomprehensible reach. Maybe this is what Pablo Neruda meant when, despite his lifelong fascination with the sea, he insisted that man is wider than the sea. Maybe he never convinced himself. But at least he learned impatience with nature's mute indifference. The dark passage of faith that took Abraham and his son to the altar does not seem so anomalous in light of the acquiescence to the law of death that nature seems to demand of us all.

The sky above us was unrelenting in its openness. Small bursts of white, streaking clouds interrupted the drumming blue, and as the day wore on and the feet grew sore, the relentless variations on the ground seemed downright monotonous. No boy, only stones, trees, sky, and water. We found balloons, an abandoned shoe that didn't match the boy's, a bag of dead fish, a bottle of nasal spray, and the occasional beer can. This was only one day in an effort that lasted for two months with thousands of man-hours, but I now had a better sense of the weight of all that effort.

It seemed the boy literally walked off, or into, the face of the earth. Even the next spring, when the snows receded and the family organized one last push to find his remains, they only found animal bones, other shoes, other socks. Hunters, campers, hikers, wandering the oblongs of the earth, all believing themselves alone and beyond the reach of human society. Something about the endless shifts of forest trees, mountain slopes, streambeds, and spring creeks appeals to wanderlust, a need so unsatisfied by the conveniences of modern living that men, women, and children clamor for the chance to risk disappearance.

It was what drew a young teenager in the 1930s, Everett Ruess, away from his California life into the wilderness of southern Utah, year after year, until he too disappeared. Recently discovered bones were thought to be his, after decades of mystery, but they were not. Instead, they remain at large in the vast universe of dispersed matter. "He who has looked long on naked beauty," he wrote in his heartbreaking journal, "may never return to the world, and though he should try, he will find its occupation empty and vain and human intercourse purposeless and futile. Alone and lost, he must die on the altar of beauty." I myself couldn't escape the temptation to come back with my fly rod and wander off trails seeking unnamed lakes to catch wild trout.

As indifferent as it is, the mountain wilderness holds no guarantee of escape from humanity, however. The idea of a humanless world is the intoxication of American rugged individualism, whitewashing the West of its native populations just for the chance to play Indian to civilization's cowboy.

It was astonishing to consider just how human the place felt despite, or maybe because of, the boy's invisibility. So I wondered if it was because of our humanity that we come seeking nature, and even in losing ourselves, if we need wilderness to finally confirm our suspicion that we are unique. Was it our humanity that persisted in desiring to escape from our condition? We seem born to die in such confusion.

A proper burial. I like the idea of my body joining the drainage, the idea of dissipating into water and soil, becoming fish and plants or quaking aspen green. That would be a homecoming, but I don't say this to sentimentalize the boy's disappearance. Accepting death may always be a matter of finally admitting our biology, but it isn't religious energy that is misspent in denial of the bloody facts but rather the energy of our hurried, automated lives.

The real question is why, once one death has been absorbed, we can't accept the fact that no death should rise above any other in significance. I remember being in the hospital in Connecticut where my brother had died and staring out the window onto the highway, astonished at the moving traffic. Who hasn't lost a mother, a sister, a brother, or a child and not felt betrayed by the continual march of humankind and the spinning of the earth along its indifferent course? If biology were a sufficient explanation of myself, I would not continue to keep at bay the pain of a lost brother with so many frenetic and pitiful stopgaps.

Nature's peace? Perhaps. If the beauty of the world offers such peace, it is only acceptable when it comes to the afflicted as revelation, and that is not mine to receive, which is why I won't insist on knowing why God would not grant that family the chance to find the boy's body. I don't like to think about nature's end any more than the end of man, but as I walked in straight lines I thought that maybe trust is possible, trust in some promise that will catch and connect us all after all this waiting, changing, losing, and searching. The sorrows of the body are what remind us that we are individual and idiosyncratic. But I think it is when we are surfeited by the body's ecstatic joys in the vast physical universe, our capacity for sorrow signifies something much more, that we are human and alive, with no end of companions. We are impatient with history, it is true. But it isn't the history we have lived in the land that should define us, anyway. The past that should define us is the history that the land hides, that we keep searching for with desperate and abiding human love. These are nature's recompenses.

Our search party reached a small ridge, below which we heard the calm lapping of mountain water before we could see it. I wondered who

these sounds were for. I listened to the hollow wind as it blew through the branches of desperately rooted trees which leaned into the mountainside in their pretense that they would always be able to resist the heavy pull downward. From such heights it seems impossible that anything ever remains standing. Seeing slant and drop in every direction feels as if the world is a protruding island, a thrust of denial in the face of the inevitable death of all things piercing the clouds and the blue sky in one last hurrah of stony resistance to the law of gravity. Which only seems to suggest that death is the lie, even if it is the rule. If it weren't for such protrusions, there would be no concentration of precipitation, no purification of water, no riparian worlds of vegetable, mineral, and animal, no human community. But if there were no protrusions and all the earth were a sea of glass, we would know exactly where little Garrett lay hiding, along with every other lost son or daughter of the human race.<sup>17</sup> So the fact of the earth's uneven surface, its infinite variety, is the ultimate tomb of all human dust even as it is the womb of all human possibility.

## Five



I HAVE COME TO THE CABIN TO DO SOME READING AND WRITING BEFORE we close it for the winter. It has been a mild fall, so there is time still for a day at the cabin. I have made a conscious decision that this place will be my home base, my place of recollection, and a site for gathering new family memories for my own children. I know this is a romance, really, not to mention a stroke of good fortune, since my father purchased it from his siblings after my grandfather passed away. I think he likes the idea, as I do, of making new family memories for me and for my brother Bill. Coming here in the late summer is one way to prolong the pleasure of fall by catching it early, before it has arrived on the valley floor, following it down with each passing week, until finally you are still enjoying the brilliant colors, the smell of decaying leaves, and the first slant light of winter, well into the first week of November.

Now that I am here, I can't help feeling I am blind. Shrouded at best, hoping at least for some small new strangeness to be revealed. Today the water runs like silk past the cabin, the aspens display their changes unevenly, some more like lime green, some prematurely brown, but plenty in full naked yellow, sending reflections in all directions and making even the ground glow. I am not one to believe in the radical need for disavowing all modern life, but here at least it seems that the veil of the world is thinner, and I am always yearning to push through the surface of what I see, to feel a hand on the other side.

Might not the angels also wish for the same, to reach back into us, to feel the pulse of our blood and to feel the swirling of the earth's breath around them, to veil their minds again with the blue sky and green canopies of trees that are our home? Yes, I think they envy us. I am with Robert Frost: "Earth's the right place for love." Or with Rilke: "Hiersein ist herrlich" (to be here is glorious).<sup>18</sup> It is an old and tired argument that religion is for those who can't face the reality of death. Ever since my brother died, the most paradoxical gift my belief in life after death seems to have afforded me is a penchant for weeping at the transience of beauty. Whoever thought that the