



*The*  
**THUNDER TREE**

*Lessons from an Urban Wildland*

ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE

*Foreword by Richard Louv*

# **The Thunder Tree**

LESSONS FROM AN URBAN WILDLAND

*Robert Michael Pyle*

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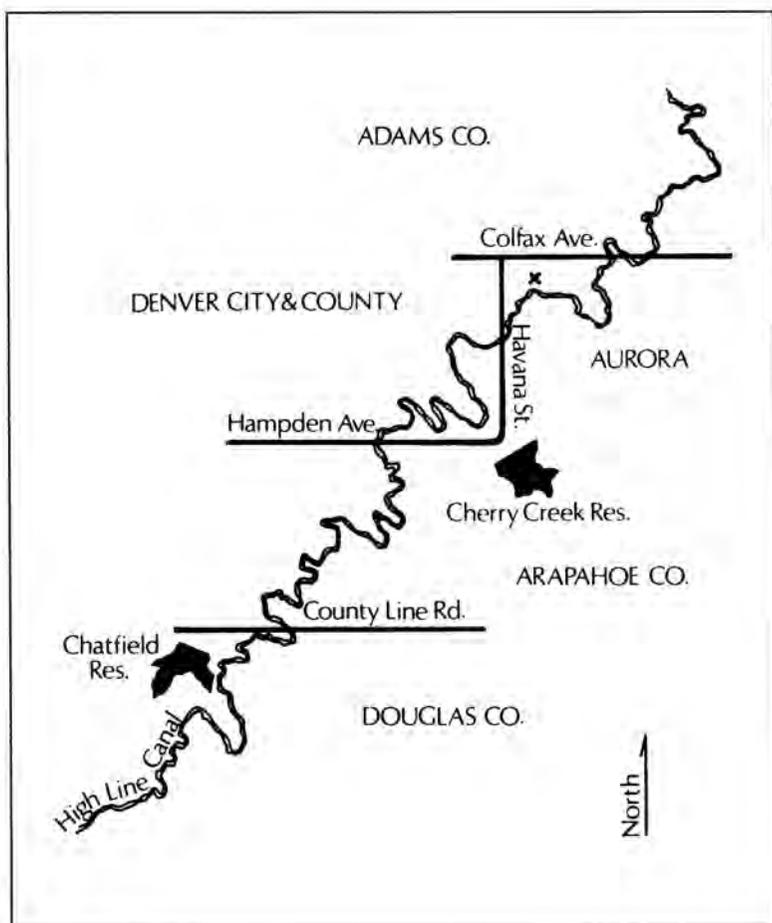
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The general situation of the High Line Canal in Colorado  
*(with kind permission of the Denver Board of Water Commissioners)*

The Front Range of the Rocky Mountains lies to the west, the western edge of the Great Plains to the east. X marks the Thunder Tree. For a more detailed representation of topography, roads, and towns, see U.S. Geological Survey map “Front Range Urban Corridor, sheet 2 of 3 (Greater Denver Area, Colorado)” :100,000 scale, 1972, also available at <http://nationalmap.gov/ustopo/index.html> (in the Fitzsimons 7.5-minute quadrangle or the Denver east 30-minute quadrangle).

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PROLOGUE

# Everybody's Ditch

*And in time there's no more telling which is which between them, no sharp distinction, no clear edge of difference where it can be said that here the land ends and here the man begins.*

— Don Berry, *Trask*

A green ravine creases northeast Seattle, draining into Lake Union near the University of Washington. My mother grew up in a white shingle house beside this ravine and it became her constant haunt. Whenever she was able to return to Seattle, Mother's first impulse was to visit "her" ravine. On one of these pilgrimages she took me along, and I saw in her face the meaning of place. At Ravenna Park she made a personal connection that transformed the way she looked at the land for the rest of her life.

When people connect with nature, it happens *somewhere*. Almost everyone who cares deeply about the outdoors can identify a particular place where contact occurred. This may have been a wilderness, a national park, or a stretch of unbounded countryside, but more often the place that makes a difference is unspectacular: a vacant lot, a scruffy patch of woods, a weedy field, a stream, a green ravine like Ravenna—or a ditch.

My own point of intimate contact with the land was a ditch. Growing up on the wrong side of Denver to reach the mountains easily or often, I resorted to the tattered edges of the Great Plains on the back side of town. There I encountered a century-old irrigation channel known as the High Line Canal. Without a doubt, most of the elements of my life flowed from that canal.

From the time I was six, this weedy watercourse had been my sanctuary, playground, and sulking walk. It was also my imaginary wilderness, escape hatch, and birthplace as a naturalist. Later the canal served as lovers' lane, research site, and holy ground of solace. Over the years I studied its natural history, explored much of its length, watched its habitats shrink as the

suburbs grew up around it, and tried to help save some of its best bits. Despite the losses, the High Line remained a place to which I would often return. Even when living in national parks, in exotic lands, in truly rural countryside, and in Seattle near Mother's ravine, I've hankered to get back to the old ditch whenever I could.

Around dry Denver, the canal has many adherents. Since the public trail along the canal service road was opened in the seventies, tens of thousands have taken their pleasure there. But even before that, in the days of its unofficial access, I was not alone in finding it. A young woman named Laura Corliss wrote her "Study of the High Line Canal" for school in 1975, telling of her family's longtime dependence on the ditch for recreation. The Corlisses lived along the canal in Denver, between Eisenhower and Bible parks. Laura's dad, Charles, rafted significant portions of the canal, and his children tubed, biked, chased frogs and crawdads, swung, dived, and swam all summer long. It was all against water department rules, but "without the canal I don't know what I would have done," Laura told me, "or what growing up would have been like." She spoke for many kids and many ditches when she wrote, "During those hot and long summer days, I would have been bored stiff if it weren't for that High Line Canal."

It isn't difficult to find lovers of the High Line around Denver, but I've been surprised by the number of people from elsewhere who care for this particular ditch. Three women I've met in the Pacific Northwest exemplify this phenomenon. Evelyn Iritani, a Seattle journalist whose father spent a lot of his time on the ditch when he lived near it in the forties, knows it through his tales. Ellen Lanier-Phelps, a land planner in Portland, gained her appreciation for urban greenspaces from growing up beside the canal in a Denver suburb. Norma Walker now lives in Ocean Park, Washington, near my home, but the High Line was her sons' "safety net" when her family lived in Colorado and she was mayor of Aurora. I am no longer surprised, no matter where I am, when conversation comes around to a common affection for the High Line Canal.

Even if they don't know "my" ditch, most people I speak with seem to have a ditch somewhere—or a creek, meadow, wood-lot, or marsh—that they hold in similar regard. These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets

under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin. They are the secondhand lands, the hand-me-down habitats where you have to look hard to find something to love.

This book is my love song to damaged lands, a serenade for all such places. I want to ask: What do shreds and scraps of the natural scene mean, after all, in the shadow of the citified whole? What can one patch of leftover land mean to one person's life, or to the lives of all who dwell in the postindustrial wasteland? In the end, this is not a book about *a* ditch. It is a book about everybody's ditch, and what Kim Stafford, with perfect pitch of place, calls "weaving a rooted companionship with home ground."

*The Thunder Tree* is neither a guidebook to the High Line Canal nor a complete historical chronicle of this venerable watercourse. There is a need for both types of books, which I hope will someday be satisfied. In the meantime, I trust that this very different book will awaken interest in places like the High Line in every community.

Nor is this a personal history. The ditch made the man, yet this is a memoir of a place, not a person. My life stories are meant to illuminate the land, not the other way around. As for sequence, I agree with Vladimir Nabokov, writing in *Speak, Memory*: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip." Just as recollection and current events mingle in the stew of our awareness, history and happenstance trade places frequently in this narrative. Readers looking for a linear chronology will surely trip.

Instead, I have sought to draw a dense but light-permeable portrait of a changing countryside and the people who depend on it in different ways. The first part, "Lifeline," introduces the ditch through intense personal experience, follows it from top to bottom, and tells of the illimitable importance of water in the West. "Landmarks," the second part, examines the face of the near-urban countryside as a habitat for hope, change, and continuity. Part III, "City Limits," considers the consequences of growth when natural limitations are ignored. The last section, "Still Life," speaks of loss and what's left when trees, people, and landscapes pass from the scene. Leaflike, the book hopes to honor and emulate the woven canopy of the namesake tree.

Nearly forty years have elapsed since I first saw the High Line Canal. The landscape that so touched me has changed almost beyond recognition in those years—until I get down inside the ditch. Except for the proliferation of plastic among the flotsam in the bottom, the scene between the bank grass and the cottonwoods remains much the same as that which first enchanted me so long ago. As a ditchwalker in that silty bed, I have had none of the rights the farmers enjoy, no responsibilities such as the ditchriders bear—just the exercise of my free senses in company with the wind, the rain, and the place. What follows is my experience of that place.

It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth, to see that it really matters. We need to recognize the humble places where this alchemy occurs, and treat them as well as we treat our parks and preserves—or better, with less interference.

Everybody has a ditch, or ought to. For only the ditches—and the fields, the woods, the ravines—can teach us to care enough for all the land.

PART I

# Lifeline

# The Hailstorm

*These are the ice nuclei, which come to lie like secret seeds at the heart of every pearl of hail.*

— Lyall Watson, *Heaven's Breath*

“Wake up, Bobby.”

My brother nudged my shoulder until I opened my eyes. His flannel pajamas and messed-up brown hair told me he'd just gotten up. Cool, fresh air drifted in through the window I'd cranked open beside my pillow. Blue sky filled in the mesh of the screen. That and the gentle air promised a fine day, but I wanted to sleep. I closed my eyes again.

“Come on,” Tom insisted, poking me. “Let's head over to the canal before it gets too hot.”

The breeze smelled faintly of window screen and irises. Then it shifted and the sweet stink of fertilizer took over, until that was smothered by the acrid odor of roofer's tar. These smells would be with us all summer, field marks of a new suburb still under construction.

I rolled out from under my brown Space Cadets bedspread and into my slippers, keeping the cold asphalt tiles from my feet. To get me moving, Tom chased me down the hall to the kitchen. Mother was already outside in the yard, having laid breakfast things out on the table for us. We toasted white bread and slathered it with butter and grape jelly to have with our Cheerios. When the oat circles were gone, we dredged the yellow bowls loudly with our spoons for the thick sediment of sugar and milk in the bottom.

Our spoons and bowls chinked on the blue Formica tabletop. Finished, we scooted back the chrome chairs of our dinette set, rinsed our dishes, and left them to dry. If we were lucky, we should be able to make a clean getaway—our room was relatively tidy, the lawn had recently been mowed, and the dandelions were in hand.

We dressed quickly in the light cotton print shirts, jeans, and black engineer boots that we wore all that summer of 1954. It being a weekday, Dad was at his office in downtown Denver, or making sales calls for the Mutual Office Supply Company. Mom was working in her embryonic garden, her tan deepening as our bare new yard began to fill with plants. Before she could think of something for us to do, we asked if we could go to the canal. “Okay,” she called through the back door, “but stay out of the water and come home for dinner. Have fun!”

Free to wander, we strode the concrete sidewalk to its slanted curb and entered the odor of new asphalt heating up with the day, then crossed Revere Street into the Jefferses’ yard. Beside the little tower of their standard backyard incinerator, a chain link fence opened onto Hoffman Heights Park. The gate clanked shut, and we left the built world behind.

We had lived in Hoffman Heights for a little over a year. The rows of brick homes like ours were beginning to acquire the softening influence of grass, gardens, and small trees. Our house was built of rose-yellow bricks, topped with a red roof of bright asphalt shingles speckled with white. The Jeffers house was almost identical to ours except for its brown roof, its garage, and the fact that it backed onto the park.

The park was donated by Sam Hoffman, a developer who used assembly-line methods to build solid but low-priced housing tracts across the country. Hoffman Estates, Illinois, destined to become the home of Sears, Roebuck in later years, and Hoffman Heights, Colorado, were two of his largest and best-known projects. On the square mile of old Cottonwood Farm, between Peoria and Potomac streets, Sixth and Thirteenth avenues, Hoffman built 1,705 new homes. Brick or shingled frame, set on concrete pads, they had one story and no basement. Variations in brick color (blond or red), style, number of bedrooms, and garaging (one car or no garage) made the subdivision seem less like a tract than most. The streets curved gently. Here and there a court or circle sliced across the pattern to break it up and confound kids on their way to piano lessons. Concrete sidewalks with sloped curbs and gutters ran beside the broad oiled-and-graveled streets that smacked in summer with the sound of swelling tar bubbles.

Hoffman's plan to build "way out beyond Aurora," as doubters put it, made sense to couples who wanted to raise their families outside the aging city, yet within commuting range of Denver. When Dad went off to World War II in the merchant marine, his family numbered only three. After Susan came Tom, then me. We grew to six when Bud was born in 1952. Our North Denver bungalow wasn't a shoe, but it was bulging. Like many another veteran coming home to cramped quarters that quickly grew more so, Dad found the new suburban alternative appealing. Mother, anticipating more bedrooms and a larger garden, agreed. They decided to buy a Hoffman Deluxe Brick for \$11,450, plus \$250 extra for the fourth bedroom. We moved "way out beyond Aurora" in June 1953.

Our antecedents had come from small farming and ranching towns with names like Fancy Farm and Steamboat Springs and from big cities like Detroit, Denver, and Seattle. Sam Hoffman promised that his suburb would combine the best of the country and the city in a pleasant setting more livable than either. But town and country never married easily in my family, any more than they did in Hoffman Heights. Aurora would eventually become larger than Denver itself, a vast clutter of subdivisions full of motorists bound daily for real city or real countryside.

The living was not, in fact, unpleasant, but the suburb, neither urban nor rural, left many of its residents hungry for one or the other rather than satisfying their need for both. In those early days, however, genuine rural countryside still survived within walking distance of the vanguard tracts. Now Tom and I set out to reach just such a leftover landscape.

We crossed the open park, still just an old weedy field. Backyards bordered it along Revere Street, Del Mar Circle, and Seventh Avenue; the volunteer fire station and Hoffman Boulevard lined the north side. Ball fields had been plunked down in the dirt and tumbleweeds, and a county crew mowed the stiff farm grasses into a semblance of lawn. The only big trees around, a few plains cottonwoods along filled-in ditches, gave away the sites of old farmsteads. One of the biggest stood in the middle of the presumptive park. All the local kids made forts in the dirt and brush around the base of that old cottonwood and in the small grove of Chinese elms surrounding it.

Years later there would be tennis courts, playgrounds, and a mothballed trainer jet in Hoffman Park, but we made do with the ghost farm's shady grove. Our games and bivouacs beat the place barren, leaving it muddy in winter and dusty in summer. Then, like nomads abandoning a used-up oasis, we left the tatty grove behind and took to rambling the fields and ditches beyond the last platted streets.

We passed our favorite part of the nascent park, the so-called sanitary landfill, which was anything but. A long slot in the raw ground, it was where the developer disposed of the generous effluvium from the building of hundreds of houses. It was good for salvage. With Dad, we would carry a load of garbage to the fill and return with a box of nails or a few bricks for the patio barbecue pit. He finished our bathrooms with ceramic tiles from the sanitary landfill.

We were forbidden to visit the fill by ourselves because of its real or imagined dangers. The deep canyon of the landfill oozed a sour nosegay of thrilling stinks and smokes. Methane vapors swirled in the shadows. Since the slit cut into lakefill beneath the water table, dark pools of polluted water collected in the bottom. Outcrops of trash, old clothing, splintered wood, and half-rotted garbage made lurid strata in the crumbly walls. Of course, it was irresistible. There were trophies to be found, adventures to be enacted. But the attraction had paled the day we buried our deceased hamsters in holy ground on the bank of the fill. The older, tougher Yourtz boys, Gary and Ian, violated their grave, gaily hurling their furry corpses into the smoking pit. When we objected, they beat us up.

This bright morning we hurried past. The pit, nearly full, was soon to be covered over and a playground installed on top, but we had somewhere better to go. One day the previous fall, Tom had come home on his bike and breathlessly announced, "There's an old canal. It's neat. Come on!"

Only seven years old, I hadn't yet shed my training wheels, so I followed as best as I could on foot. Tom had led me across the park, past the fire station and the bulldozed and graded site of the future shopping center, over a railroad track, then across Sixth Avenue, through a cornfield to a ditch, and along it to a bigger one. It was nearly a mile, and I panted to keep up. How far was Tom taking me? When we arrived at the High Line Canal,

I took a long look up and down the winding watercourse and agreed: “It is neat.”

Brimful with muddy water in midsummer, the High Line Canal spanned some twenty feet from bank to bank. Ranks of tall cottonwoods, like the one marooned in the park but less lonesome, lined the ditch as far as we could see in either direction. The canal, the dirt road beside it, and the vegetation twined into a sublime tangle. Peachleaf willows nudged old homestead locusts at the headgates of feeder canals. Fields of unruly weeds ran up to banks of yellow-flowered rabbitbrush. Long grass overhung the canal, swaying with the current in a summer-long hula. Screaming black and white birds fanned overhead, their colors echoed by big butterflies darting out from the willows, gliding back to the same perches again and again. After the barrenness of our ordered young tract, this wild green clutter promised rich pickings.

At our old house in North Denver, the city limits lay just a block away. There, Tejon Street shed its macadam hide and became “the Dusty Road.” In the first years of the fifties, Susan and Tom and I had taken to the Dusty Road daily, a borrowed cocker in tow, to explore its fields, its brook, its raccoon-and-crawd-dad-filled marsh. Along the road was a dairy farm. Between its great barn and the roadside ditch grew gleaming mountains of discarded milk bottle caps. Their bright foil, printed with the dairy’s red and blue badge, seemed like some magical ore deposit. Tom and I flung the crinkled disks at each other until the road sparkled with silver circles. Queenie the cocker followed us as far as we walked, bouncing back and forth and off to the side like a paddleball. In the evening we would urge the spaniel, by then a bedraggled and filthy marsh beast, back into her own yard. We fancied that her owners never knew how she got so muddy.

Moving to Hoffman Heights, we missed the Dusty Road. The weedy park, with its boundaries, scarcely made up for a country lane that could take you forever. Not that our new streets were all paved at first. Mounds of gravel lay in rows down the middle of each block, like camels resting in some suburban caravan. On their humps sat lanterns—round black kerosene pots with wicks—to show motorists the obstacles after dark fell. As rainy

afternoons faded into dusk, the ozone aroma of damp gravel blended with the oily smell of the smudge pots. These roads were dusty, too—they just didn't go anywhere. So when we discovered the High Line Canal, with its dirt service road stretching away for miles and miles in either direction, the borders of possibility fell away.

On this sunny Tuesday in July, almost a year later, we trekked to the canal for perhaps the fiftieth time. We had followed our usual route along the Sand Creek Lateral, the broad side ditch that ran off to the north. Its headgates were closed, so the lateral was dry, but it was lush with growth from the slosh of its full flow against the banks. The morning that had begun so cool and moist was already growing torrid. When we felt the shady breath of the ditch we sucked it up like the air in the chocolate aisle of Hested's dime store. Turning into it, we walked west along the canal service road, past old farmhouses with rickety barns and bridges and rusting farm implements. No Trespassing signs, posted by landowners and the Water Department, drew us on.

The heat of the day began to build in earnest. Ragweed flagged in the wilting rays, and magpies took to the thickets. We shuffled more slowly, plucking succulent shoots of pigweed and rubbing them until our fingers were green. Our engineer boots were hot and covered with dust. Cumulonimbus climbed the eastern sky. "Think this is far enough?" I asked after a long, treeless stretch.

"I haven't seen the ditchrider," Tom said. "He'd kick us out if he came along, but if we're lucky, he won't." We couldn't see any houses from here, either.

We longed to get off the griddle of the road. Dropping into the shade of a spreading willow, we stripped down to the swimsuits we wore underneath our jeans and slithered into the current. Some fifty miles from its mountain source in the Platte River Canyon, the water was still cool, almost cold.

Denizens of the Great American Desert, we were drawn to water wherever it was to be found. We gravitated to plastic wading pools. We sought out lawn sprinklers, broken hydrants, and warm rainwater running ankle-deep in the concrete gutters of the streets. But the slippery brown flow of the canal was best.

Parents worried about drownings, and rightly so—from time to time some kid would indeed drown somewhere along the canal. They worried about broken glass, and now and then we did bring home a bloody toe. And they warned us of the dangers of polio, supposedly transmitted in dirty water. But that seemed like double jeopardy to us: if we had to have those unpleasant polio shots at school, why should we have to skip the ditch as well? Generations of farm kids had used the High Line as their swimming hole, and we did the same.

We hadn't been in the water long before the cottonwood tops began to rustle, announcing the arrival of a summer squall. The morning's easy breeze came up in a wind that sucked the heat out of the day as clouds crowded the blue. Soon raindrops speckled the surface of the ditchwater. Tom and I half hoped for a cool afternoon thunderstorm, but this one was coming a little early. Usually we made it home first, or met the rain on the way.

Lightning scratched the western sky. We were leery of lightning, both in the open and beneath the cottonwoods. A kid we knew claimed he knew someone whose cousin's friend had been struck while caddying. Everyone knew you weren't supposed to get under a tree, which could act as a lightning rod. And Dad had told us that rainwater could carry the jolt along the earth or into a stream, through what he called ground flash. It seemed nowhere was safe.

Willow leaves blew off the tree as we scrambled wet into our boots and jeans. No longer hot, we were getting damn cold as the ditchwater evaporated off our skin in the wind. By the time we reached the Sand Creek Lateral, cottonwood leaves clattered like rattlesnakes and their boughs creaked close to breaking in the rising gale. This was no ordinary afternoon shower. Then the first hail came.

At first it just stung. Hail wasn't uncommon with our summer thunderstorms. Normally pea-size, it could smart, but it wasn't a big deal. We knew from school that hail occurred when hot air near the ground rose rapidly in powerful updrafts, carrying ice crystals into supercooled vapor in the heights of the towering clouds. Layers of ice formed around the nucleus, making a hailstone that eventually fell to earth. GrandPop had told us of hailstorms that ruined crops on family places farther east, but the

most we'd ever seen hail do was break off a few flowers. We were still more worried about the lightning. Thunder growled and lightning rent the dark fabric of the cloud bank.

But the thunderclaps and lightning strikes were far apart—we counted “One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three”—while the hail was here and now. The stones had grown to the size of marbles and were pounding down like a giant bag of aggies emptied overhead. The hail didn't pass quickly by as it usually did, and it was beginning to hurt. Confused by the rough touch of weather I'd never known before, I fell behind.

“Come on, Bobby! We're almost there.”

I could barely hear Tom over the thunder, the wind's wail, and the hail thudding all around us. Hailstones bouncing up met those coming down, creating a percussive curtain that kept us from seeing our feet. But I could see Tom's face, which had gone terribly pale. The wind whipped his cotton shirt, exposing his tanned back already red with welts. Tumbling on the slippery sediment of hailstones, I tried to catch up.

Iceballs pounded down, bruising our elbows, knuckles, knees, and heads. They were bigger than any hail we'd ever seen, bigger than our marbles, and getting bigger. “Tommeee,” I wailed as a stone the size of a shooter struck me on the collarbone. I squatted beside a locust tree, uselessly: a shattered magpie nest fell from its branches and disintegrated around me, its sticks mixing with the white rubble. Mesmerized by white and out of breath from crying, I felt the blows on my back and watched pellucid eggs of ice roll down toward the ditch.

Tom came back and hauled me to my feet. He said nothing, just clamped his mouth shut with his lips sucked in. I knew that look from Grammy's face when she battled weeds, a turkey on a platter, or shiftless grandsons, and I knew it meant business. I stopped crying and let myself be pulled. Dragging me behind him, Tom dove into the ditchbed of the Sand Creek Lateral. Had the headgate been open to the lateral we would have been stuck in the open field. We sought shelter behind a concrete check dam, but it gave no lee. The smells of chopped weeds and rotting leaves filled my nostrils, the pungency of pulverized earth mixed with the wild ozone.

Walnut-size hailstones smashed against the dam and ricocheted into our faces. Between sobs I saw that Tom was red all over. His brown hair was plastered over his eyes; he still had his glasses, but he was crying, too.

We tried to run again. Dad sometimes brought ball bearings home for us to play with and now it felt as if we were running on them. I slipped over and over and fell into the mud. Struggling up, I huddled against Tom, hanging on his arm. A great hailstone struck his forehead. He staggered and fell.

When he looked up again, without his glasses, Tom squinted toward a gray-green shape looming in the dull light. "There it is," he cried, but I could barely hear him over the din of the storm. Tom scrambled up the ditchbank and called for me to follow. But the bare slope had turned to mud, and I kept sliding down. The ice bullets drilled the air and drove me back. My boots slipped, my stinging fingers found nothing to grip. I landed in a bed of hail and mud and whimpered, "I can't do it. We're gonna die."

Tom's hand, wet and cold, grabbed mine and yanked me up the bank. "No, we're not," he hollered. "Come on, the hollow tree is right up here. See?"

I did see it. I stumbled to the old hollow cottonwood and clutched at its furrowed brown bark, the smooth white edge of its heartwood cleft, glassy wet. Its tattered leaves slapped our faces. We crawled inside the punky charred hollow, and I dropped to my knees, whining and gasping. Tom coughed, choking on ice and dust. He pulled me up, packed me deep into the blackened hold, and fell across me, covering me as best he could. He tried to block the gape with his body, using his battered back like the operculum of a snail. But he was too skinny, and the wind got past him. The storm shifted to the north, blew directly at the hollow, and pummeled us afresh.

Then Tom went heavy and loose against me, and I saw that his forehead was bright blue. I thought he might be dead, after all. A friend of mine, Patrick Ramsey, had died of bone cancer, and in his coffin he had looked this pale and still. That was the first death I'd ever known, and it left me feeling hollow, scared, and guilty: he was my friend, and I was supposed to deliver his *Weekly Reader*. But near the end, I'd stayed away.

Unable to move under Tom's limp body, I hoped he was only knocked out. We'd often played at knocking each other out with the butts of our cap guns, as our cowboy heroes did in the comics and movies. But here he was out for real and not coming to right away, as the cowboys did. The ice continued to pound the tree and shatter like shrapnel. Broken stones collected at our feet in a cold white crust, like strange snow in midsummer. I felt alone and very cold. Tom moved, then moaned.

Gray rainwater ran down the ditch in a torrent studded by floating hailstones like so many clouded fisheyes. The cornstalks we'd often squatted among, gnawing on stolen ears, lay threshed by the hail. Tom could see little of this without his glasses. Then lightning struck close by, and I was blinded, too. Through the flash behind my eyes I could hear the thunder banging nearer. I no longer worried about lightning. Though I knew this hollow tree had been struck in the past, nothing could get me out of there. My sight returned, but there was only gray. Over the thunder I heard the hail's tattoo on the cottonwood drum, and beneath that my own small voice, pleading for it to end.

Then, after a last punishing volley slipped past Tom's shield to strike me over the kidneys, where a slap hurts most, it did end. The hail faded into the summer storm that spawned it. Wind dropped; the nimbus died. Soft rain began to fall, the kind we'd expected when the clouds sneaked up on that sultry afternoon. Final thunder thrummed across the eastern plain. The storm passed.

We clung to each other, reluctant to leave the hollow tree in case the hail came back. Slowly, along with the air outside, we were becalmed. Realizing where I was, I felt my old dread of spiders almost as relief. Normally they scared me half to death in such places. Here, scared much closer to death, I'd forgotten the spiders as I embraced the walls of our blessed den. The damp, off-sweet smell of the burned and rotting wood filled my nostrils and left a permanent brand of scent.

After a few more minutes it seemed safe to go. We uncoiled our stiff limbs and scrambled out of the hollow tree, through the skerried waves of toe-chilling nuggets, over to Sixth Avenue. There were no cars in sight. Hail covered the fields, the road, everything, in drifts and sheets, like a

winterscape. For a moment it was easy to believe that everyone else was dead and we were the only survivors.

A farmer, out surveying his devastated fields, found us and took us to his home. We recognized the place as the last farm in the neighborhood, kitty-corner from the bulldozed mire of the future shopping center. Tom and I had often slipped across Sixth Avenue to play in DeLaney's barn, keeping an eye out for the farmer, who was sure to chase us off. But today Farmer DeLaney led us into his house, where his wife gave us cocoa and blankets, looked to our knots and welts, and called our mother. I heard her voice, delirious with relief.

Mother came for us right away in our old Packard. When she arrived, her fine black hair was disheveled, her gray eyes red with crying, but she looked steady and amazed. She thanked the farm couple as she knelt to hold her sons. When she stood again, Mother looked from Tom to me and back again as she stroked our bruised foreheads lightly and made soft sounds. Her full lips maintained their will as she said, "There's been so much damage . . ." Her already high cheeks rose in a smile that became a muffled sob. She cried and embraced us both for a long time. When she opened her purse to find her hanky, the familiar smell of leather, lipstick, and Pall Malls erased the fierce freshness of the hailstorm's breath.

Mother and the farmer talked about the storm as we finished our cocoa and she dried her eyes. Then we were home, beneath our ruined red roof. I found myself still dazed, safe in a warm bath to ward off bruises and chilblains. Tom went to Dr. Rowan's office, concussed. There, and ever after, Tom described the experience with pithy concision: "It started hailing," he said. "Then, *bam bam bam* on the ol' head."

When I climbed out of my bath and into my bed, I asked for Blackie, our kitten. "He doesn't seem to be around," Mother said. I suspected, but it was long before I learned for sure, that he'd been battered to death by the hail. Searching frantically, Susan had found him lying in a puddle behind the ash-pit.

Blackie wasn't the only casualty of the great Hoffman Heights hailstorm. Cows had their backs broken by hailstones the size of grapefruits. Damage to homes and businesses ran to several hundred thousand dollars. At the

peak of the maelstrom, the driving rain and hail had short-circuited the fire department's siren. According to the *Denver Post*, "The siren wailed for five minutes while housewives covered behind furniture to escape flying glass from broken windows." Grammy and I looked up "hail" in her *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and learned that we lived in "Hail Alley," where "on the New York-Denver airway one thunderstorm in 800 produces hail as large as walnuts and one in 5,000 as large as baseballs." It didn't mention softballs. A friend later sent a clipping that did, from up the alley in Woonsocket, South Dakota, where hail "like baseballs and softballs" shredded all the roofs. So we were not the sole victims of such a freak. But to us, ours seemed the only storm in the world.

The young gardens of the new town, so recently carved from the bare prairie, were largely destroyed. My mother agonized over hers, which she had lovingly coaxed from farmed-out soil—her slaughtered chard, her maimed zinnias. The *Denver Post* asked her what it was like: "It was like a swarm of grasshoppers passing through," said Mrs. Pyle, surveying her battered yard. "But there won't be any more getting up at five A.M. to water."

If Mother was able to laugh about her garden, she never could about us. During the height of the storm, her heart was in her throat and her mind ran to the High Line Canal. There, she knew, her sons were playing when the squall arose. Afterward, when we went back to look for Tom's glasses, the most we could find was a small fragment of hammered gray plastic. When she saw that, she choked an "Oh!" and praised the hollow tree instead of yelling at us for being out there. A spanking, in any case, would have been redundant.

All the ruined roofs were eventually repaired, the gardens replanted. Order restored itself to the fresh settlement on the edge of the High Plains, its neat rows broken only by occasional great relics of cottonwoods left behind from Cottonwood Farm in the backyards of a few lucky families. We had no big trees in our yard, just the stripling Chinese elms my mother had stuck in the ground. But Tom and I shared in the luck of the cottonwoods just the same, for that old hollow poplar, which we came to call the Thunder Tree, surely saved our lives.

The Thunder Tree itself was the survivor of countless prairie tempests. Had it not been there, had Tom not known about it and found it for us through the screen of hail, the papers might have recorded two boys lost to the big hailstorm of July 27, 1954—just a week after the younger lad’s seventh birthday.

For a long time I believed that a farm boy had been killed in the field next to us, battered to death by the hail as he tried to take shelter beneath his tractor. But studying the newspapers years later, I can find no mention of any fatality. They rightly report our adventure and that of my schoolmates Dennis Christie and Rich Bolenbaker getting caught in the hail close to home. They ended up with scars on their shoulders, but definitely alive.

Did someone make up the story of the dead farm kid to scare or impress us? Or was there such a boy—perhaps the son or nephew of our rescuer—who, like us, was caught out and hurt, but survived, and we, to make a better story, later killed him off in the telling? Who knows. Sometimes I wonder whether Tom and I between us didn’t spawn the whole story of the boy and canonize it as part of our large body of canal apocrypha, just to remind ourselves how close we’d come.

I remember the small clipping taped to our kitchen cupboard for years, and what it actually did say. It’s long gone, but I found the article in the library’s microfilms of the *Denver Post*:

“Tommy Pyle, 11, and his brother, Bobby, 7 . . . suffered dollar-sized bruises on their backs, heads, and shoulders before finding refuge in a hollow tree.”

The story goes on to tell of Blackie the kitten’s fate, but that part had been censored from the cupboard-door version so we wouldn’t be reminded of our pet’s ordeal every time we reached for the Cheerios.

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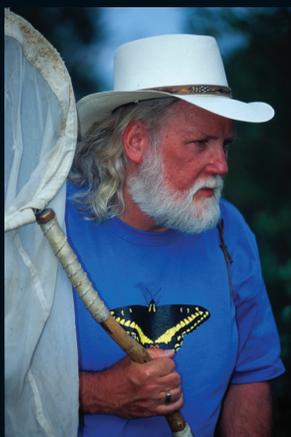
“*The Thunder Tree* is good for the head and the heart, full of wisdom and joy, one man’s sense of place that speaks to the necessity of knowing the world about us.”

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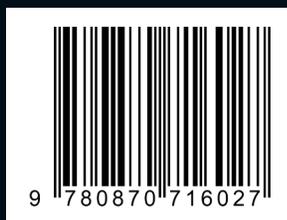
“When people connect with nature, it happens *somewhere*,” writes Bob Pyle. “My own point of intimate contact with the land was a ditch.” The High Line Canal, originally built outside of Denver as part of an ambitious plan to bring water to eastern Colorado for irrigation, became the young Pyle’s place of sanctuary and play, his birthplace as a naturalist, and the inspiration for his widely quoted concept of “the extinction of experience.”

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ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE, called “one of America’s finest natural history writers” by Sue Hubbell, is the author of fifteen books, including *Mariposa Road*, *Chasing Monarchs*, *Where Bigfoot Walks*, and *Wintergreen*, which won the John Burroughs Medal. A Yale-trained ecologist and a Guggenheim Fellow, he lives in southwestern Washington.

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