

The Concrete Curtain

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I have not spoken for two days, my hair is tousled, and a stubbled beard speckles my face. Having driven a remote backroad that cut one hundred miles off my route, I find myself a day ahead of my schedule, and but a dozen miles from the most popular tourist attraction in the state of Utah. On a lark, I drive past marinas and desert dry docks, and turn in at the government visitor center, to stare point blank at the giant dam that enthralles engineers, enrages environmentalists, and hides what some say was the heart of this canyon country under five hundred feet of water. I walk into the air-conditioned room that pays tribute to the impounding of the once-wild river. In this room, admiration outsells outrage. Shutters are snapping, like bubbles popping, as sightseers stare through the enormous plate glass window that is oriented to highlight the gray dam rather than the red rocks. Tourists speak several languages, pilgrims come to see bigness and human ingenuity.

A disembodied voice comes through the ceiling: "a free tour of the dam will be leaving in five minutes." I line up, keeping my thoughts and emotions to myself. Our tour guide at this government site is ten years my senior, a clean-shaven man with glasses and neatly combed hair. He wears a turquoise polo shirt and an enormous silver belt buckle engraved with his name and "Glen Canyon"—the name of both the canyon that was and the dam that is. He makes a point to ask each child where they are from; some retreat in shyness behind a parent's leg, others delight in the spotlight. When discussing the work of the dam and its power plant, he uses the words "we" and "our." Statistics pass fluidly from his lips. He recites the corollary benefits of this construction project: roads, bridges, a new town, citizens' clubs. All this, of course, merely complements the sorely needed electricity, and the renowned boating and fishing opportunities, so rare in this desert country. We are gathered around an impressive scale model of the region. He points to the Kaiparowits Plateau, and with a proprietary sense says. "Folks, this is the largest untapped coal reserve in the country—good anthracite." I think of the sheer gray cliffs that just an hour ago I painstakingly descended, then look at their miniature representatives—small, plastic, unthreatening.

Part of a long line, I am frisked by the security guard, enter the elevator, and

descend into the humming world of the Colorado River Storage Project. We walk along echoey chambers of yellow tile and fluorescent light, then reemerge into daylight atop the dam. The steep and graceful curve of the dam falls away from our feet to the technicians' world below. After a couple minutes outside, we enter another building and travel down the nation's tallest elevator to the belly of that world. The entire seven hundred foot height of the dam now looms directly above us. It is an odd sort of knowledge, that one of the great rivers of the world stands behind this concrete curtain, just a few dozen feet away. The image of a curtain plagues me: it is as though the curtain should open, the play begin. But here the curtain is the drama. Characters and plot all fade behind the aura of the immense concrete curtain. Five million cubic yards of concrete, according to the pamphlet in my hands.

Between the dam and the powerhouse lies a verdant, two-acre lawn of Kentucky bluegrass. Upstream, cottonwood groves that once caught sunlight and spun it into green leaves and cool shade lie below water. And here, in the middle of the river's old course, a green lawn now grows. Perhaps it's all just about exchange: cottonwoods for bluegrass, wild river for electricity, Glen Canyon for Lake Powell. There is a strange symmetry in this line of thinking.

Here and there, water drips from cement or sandstone, but we are advised that this is no cause for alarm. We move along corridors, gaze in awe at giant turbines, shiny chrome, and a plethora of gauges. A video screen explains how the movement of water, properly channeled, can create electricity, and how that power is shuttled throughout several states, for the good of all. Portraits of employees stare from the wall, all seemingly pleased to contribute to such a monumental task. The cluster of forty tourists of which I am a part is well-behaved, asking a few technical questions, and obviously admiring the cleverness that made an employee of a huge river.

My body aches from the strain of remaining polite. I categorically reject every assumption spewed forth from this propaganda machine. One of my most profound sadnesses is that I never experienced the real Glen Canyon, and that nothing can recreate that opportunity. My life is about nothing, if not the effort to impede similar wreckage. What has been stolen from me must not herald even greater thefts from my son and daughter.

I feel no malice toward the people I rub shoulders with here—the obvious enthusiasts for that which I detest, nor even for our guide, whose remarkable wrongheadedness (to my way of thinking) is matched by a genuinely pleasant demeanor. And so my mouth is clenched tight, matching the tautness in my belly. At the earliest opportunity I slip away from the group, and walk back along corridors now empty, following the EXIT arrows through the labyrinth.

Behind the dam, the waters wait. The great river, interrupted in the task assigned it by the Creation, grows edgy. The tension of the stifled water is palpable. Ghosts of the real Glen Canyon twirl into the air: green cottonwood groves, with soft undulating rustle; homeland trails pecked into rock walls centuries before Columbus; flocks of sandpipers who once called to each other while probing long-gone sandbars.

How many years, I wonder, until this cork is shoved out of the way, and the old grade of the stream restored? I suspect I will not see these changes, but the absolute certainty that they *will* occur provides me some bittersweet reassurance.

I ascend through the network of hallways, elevators, and windowless rooms as quickly as technology allows me, and exit in haste into the crowded parking lot. Above the powerhouse, swallows turn and dive, swooping for insects near the throbbing towers. I hop back in my truck, and drive over the bridge, trying to shake the great weight that envelops me.