

DIE BETTER

I wonder what they thought,
the East Coasters with that desperate
human desire to survive and a one-way ticket
to a place that was half-myth,
when they got to Colorado
and saw the mountains rising snowcapped and purple,
when with their ruined lungs
they drew in the fresh dry air
that they were told wouldn't save them,
but would at the very least
help them die better.

I wonder if the elevation
made them dizzy.

It seems like something that happened a long time ago,
Tuberculosis--
you know, one of those epidemics that kind of
slipped out of the public consciousness,
became a disease that they have in Russia,
not here.

But don't forget the truth of the nineteenth century,
the twentieth:
it was sickness that built this state.

So:
take a moment to consider the ghosts.

The west is full of ghosts, see,
cowboys and Indians and consumptives,
the people who wouldn't have lasted another year
in the claustrophobia of the big city.
The people who had to leave their homes
like explorers who reached a place
some decades too late
to find anything
new.

They stick together, the ghosts of the ill,
or maybe they're stuck together.
No matter--
they still are the ones who

marvel at the million and one ways
the world has changed since their deaths,
and wonder if the reason they haven't gone to Heaven
is because it's nicer here in the mountains.

Besides,
everyone has an attachment to the place they die.
It's one of those funny little dead person quirks
that the living just can't understand
through no fault of their own.

The ghosts play in the buildings
that used to be schools
for the children with tuberculosis.
They walk hand-in-hand along Chautauqua trails
and make up this game where they
step in the footprints of the living
and pretend they are the ones that left them.
They coo at the newborns in the Denver hospitals
that were once sanatoriums.
They stroll along Pearl Street
dodging pedestrians
because phasing through people
is uncomfortable for everyone.
They watch the calves wobble around
in the springtime
when things are new,
And roll their eyes
at the constant undercurrent of spite
that separates bicyclists and motorists here.
They look at the stars and wonder
if the sky is still so hard to see
in the big cities from whence they came.

They watch the hundred year flood
from hospital windows
and drenched playground structures,
and agree with each other that it's terribly eerie
to not feel the rain,
and to see something new
when they have been here so long.
Some of them weep to see their adopted land
drowning.

But the westerners always pick themselves up,

they remind themselves,
just as they have through the mountain fires
and the eaten-up pine trees
and the drought.
Westerners survive.

They should know,
they survived as long as they could.
Held on.
They're still holding on,
comfortable here.

They've got no blood anymore:

Now, they say water from the Springs
runs through their veins.

Go to Colorado, they were told.

Go to Colorado, and die better.

It's not often that doctors are right.

Colorado's ghosts smile and grimace
from black and white photographs
in old newspaper articles,
and don't mind the one-way ticket anymore.

They were told:
go west,
die better.
So they did.