

Now it is springtime of 2002. I sit in my college dorm room, looking out my dorm-room window at the Boston College landscape, knowing that I will be in Bethesda in one week. I know that I will miss the late-night eating sessions and long talks about anything and everything with my college friends, and that returning to my old home may bring surprises, just as it did after my time in Venezuela. The challenge of readapting and perhaps rebuilding parts of my life that have fallen out of place over this school year will be one that I have faced before, but with the knowledge I have accumulated over the past few years I trust that I will have the capacity to successfully deal with these changes and move on.

Guiding Questions

1. Di Tata describes feeling "lost" upon her arrival in Venezuela. What are some of the major cultural differences she notes between Bethesda and Caracas?
2. Di Tata notes that much of what she learned from her experience living abroad occurred when she returned to what had become her "other" home. What did she learn upon her return to Bethesda?

Paths for Further Exploration

1. Have you ever traveled to another country? Describe the cultural differences you observed.
2. Di Tata describes the realization she came to: "I had no choice: either I adjusted to the new social and academic conditions which I faced, or I risked failure in both areas." Have you ever been faced with a similar challenge? What were some of the difficulties about transitioning from one place to the next, from one culture to another?

A History in Concrete

BLAINE HARDEN

Blaine Harden is currently a reporter for the Washington Post and is the author of Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent and A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia. In "A History in Concrete," Harden recalls his—and his father's—relationship to Washington's Grand Coulee Dam, a place that sustained both father and son in different ways. The essay was first published in

Preservation magazine. It also appears in the collection A Certain Somewhere: Writers on the Places They Remember, edited by Robert Wilson.

Down in the bowels of Grand Coulee Dam, you can feel the industrial-strength menace of the Columbia. The river, as it pounds through turbines, causes an unnerving trembling at the core of the largest chunk of concrete on the continent. Vibration jolts up from the steel flooring, through shoes and up legs, and lodges at the base of the spine, igniting a hot little flame of panic. The gurgle of water creeping through seams in the dam doesn't help.

Grand Coulee Dam won't hold still. And it does leak. Water sluices noisily through drainage galleries that line the fourteen miles of tunnels and walkways inside the dam. Engineers say all dams leak, they all tremble. It is absolutely harmless, completely normal, nothing to worry about. I don't trust engineers.

This gray monstrosity gives me the creeps. It has ever since I was ten, when my uncle Chester took me on a dam tour, fed me extra-hot horseradish at a scenic restaurant, and laughed until he cried when I spat out my burger. Ever since I learned from my father at the dinner table that this mile-wide monolith was the rock upon which our middle-class prosperity was built. Ever since I worked here in college and got myself fired.

The dam sits out in the middle of nowhere—the tumble-weed coulee country of north-central Washington, a wind-swept landscape of basalt cliffs and grayish soil. Seattle is a 240-mile drive west across the Cascade Mountains, which scrape moisture from the sky and leave the country around the dam in a rain-shadow desert. When construction began, *Collier's* magazine described the dam site as so hell-like that "even snakes and lizards shun it." For as long as I can remember, I have kept coming back to this unhandsome land to feel the addictive tingle of being near an object that is intimidating and essential and big beyond imagining.

And it is big. The Bureau of Reclamation, which built Grand Coulee in the 1930s in its crusade to turn every major Western river into a chain of puddles between concrete plugs, loves to talk bigness. The dam is so big, the bureau said, that its concrete could pour a sixteen-foot-wide highway from New York City to Seattle to Los Angeles and back to New York. So big that if it were a cube of concrete standing on a street in Manhattan, it would be

two and a half times taller than the Empire State Building. As Franklin D. Roosevelt, who ordered the dam built, boasted, "Superlatives do not count for anything because it is so much bigger than anything ever tried before."

It was a tonic for the Great Depression and a club to whip Hitler, a first to smash the private utilities monopolies and a fountainhead for irrigated agriculture. The dam was a gloriously mixed metaphor validating the notion that God made the West so Americans could conquer it. Grand Coulee's turbines came on-line just as the United States entered World War II. It sated an unprecedented national appetite for electricity—to make, for example, aluminum for B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft at Boeing's Seattle plant and plutonium at the top-secret Hanford Atomic Works downriver. Without the dam, said Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, "it would have been almost impossible to win this war."

My hometown, Moses Lake, about an hour's drive south of the dam, owed its existence to Grand Coulee. Before the dam, the town was notable for its large jackrabbits and frequent sandstorms. It was a hard-luck town, where farmers worked until they wore themselves out, went broke, and moved away without regrets. Even the town fathers had admitted, before the dam, that Moses Lake had a certain pointlessness about it. As one chamber of commerce brochure put it, "Out of the desert a city was built. Some of the earliest homesteaders and settlers would ask, 'Why?'" When I grew up, the answer to that question was obvious. Everyone knew that life itself—at least life as lived in our prosperous farm community, with subsidized irrigation and the nation's cheapest electricity—would be impossible without the dam.

My father, the out-of-work eldest son of a failed Montana dirt farmer, joined four thousand men who were building the dam in early 1936. Arno Harden was a broom-and-bucket man, working in the gut of the construction site. Dams rise from the bedrock of a river in a series of rectangular pours stacked like dominoes, and before each pour, laborers must tidy up, hose down, and sand-blast every surface. Otherwise new concrete will not adhere, and cracks and structural weaknesses could cause the dam to fail. For fifty cents an hour, eight hours a day, six days a week, my father scooped up loose rocks and bits of wire and ensured that Grand Coulee would stand for generations.

He hated it, of course, but he did it until he had saved enough money to go to trade school and learn to be a first-class union welder. He then spent most of his working life building dams and welding at other federal projects along the Columbia. Because of

the dams, my family was something other than poor, and I grew up in a handsome lakefront house with a bedroom for me and one for each of my three siblings, a new car in the driveway, and money in the bank for a private college.

The dam, though, meant far more than money to my father. It had been the great adventure of his life. He lived at the construction site during six wild years when it was gluey mud in the winter, choking dust in the summer, and live music all night long. He and his brother frequented an unpainted, false-fronted saloon on B Street—a dirt road thick with cardsharps, moonshiners, pool hustlers, pickpockets, piano players, and a few women who, like everybody else, had come to town for money. An ex-con named Whitey Shannon employed fifteen dime-a-dance girls at the Silver Dollar, where the bartender, Big Jack, tossed out men who got too friendly with the ladies. A sweet-voiced crooner named Curly sang like Gene Autry, and between numbers a skinny kid shoveled dirt from the muddy boots off the dance floor. Mary Oaks, the dam's telephone operator, took calls from B Street nearly every night: "The owners would say, 'We got a dead man over here and would you call the police.' If they weren't dead, of course, they would want a doctor."

As my father explained it at the kitchen table, Grand Coulee was an undiluted good. It may have killed more salmon than any dam in history and destroyed the lives of the Colville Indians, who centered their existence around the fish. It may have launched a dam-building craze that turned America's most powerful rivers into adjustable electricity machines. But that was not what I learned at home. I once asked my father if he thought it might have been a mistake to kill all those fish, dispossess all those Indians, and throttle the river. He did not understand the question.

My first real job was at the dam. Grand Coulee was expanding in the early 1970s, and my father used his connections to get me a summer job as a union laborer. It paid the then princely sum of five dollars an hour. My labor crew cleaned up bits of wire, half-eaten pickles, wads of spat-out chewing tobacco, and whatever else might be left behind by craftsmen higher up on the wage scale. This was the same job that my father had hated in the thirties.

I was nineteen, a rising sophomore at Gonzaga University in nearby Spokane, and very impressed with myself. I told my crew how boring our jobs were and how I could not wait to get back to school. Many of the laborers were middle-aged Indians with families. They kept their mouths shut and their eyes averted from me.

Federal inspectors nosed around after our work, spotting un-picked-up wire and other crimes. They complained to a

superintendent, who complained to some other boss, who complained to an unhappy man named Tex, our foreman, who then yelled at me, the loudmouthed college boy. Tex wasn't much of a talker. When he did speak, he had an almost incomprehensible west Texas twang. *Wire* came out as *war*.

- 15 "Git off yer ass, pick up that war," he would instruct me after complaints about our cleanup job had trickled down the chain of command. We worked swing shift, four to midnight, near the spillway. The river, swollen in the summer of 1971 with heavy snowmelt from the Canadian Rockies, rioted over the dam twenty-four hours a day in a cascade eight times the volume of Niagara Falls and twice as high. The dam's base was a bedlam of whitewater and deep-throated noise, and when Tex shouted "*war*" in my face, I could never hear him. Along with the racket, cold spray geysered up, slathering the construction site in a slippery haze slashed at night by hundreds of spotlights. The entire dam site—wrapped in the spray and yowl of the river—struck me as a death trap. At weekly safety meetings, I filled out lengthy reports on what I considered to be hazardous work practices.

By my fourth week at the dam, Tex had had enough. He told me at the end of the shift not to come back. He mumbled something about *war* and how I spent too much time on my butt when bosses were around. I slunk away from the river, driving home to Moses Lake after midnight. I barely managed not to cry. My father had paid for the Volvo I was driving, paid the eight-hundred-dollar initiation fee that got me into the Laborers' Union, and paid for a big slice of my college education. He had been shrewd enough to work much of his life for men like Tex without getting canned.

When I got home at 2 A.M., I left a note on the kitchen table. My father would be getting up in three hours to drive back up to Grand Coulee, where he was still a welder. The note said I was sorry for letting him down, which was true. What I did not say was that I was relieved to be away from that dam.

Twenty-three years later, I invited my eighty-two-year-old father to ride with me up to Grand Coulee. I would buy him lunch, and he would tell me everything he could remember about the dam. Like most father-son transactions, the deal favored me. But my father welcomed any excuse to look at the dam.

It was an abnormally hot Saturday in May. Snow in the mountains was melting, and water in the reservoir behind the dam was rising faster than the turbines could swallow. The river had to be spilled, a spectacle that only occurs once every few years. We had no idea this was happening until we drove down into the canyon that cradles the dam. Before we could see

anything, we heard the dull thunder of falling water and rushed to the railed sidewalk overlooking the dam's spillway.

The river exploded as it fell, and the dam trembled beneath our feet. We had to shout to talk. At the base of the spillway, three hundred feet below us, the Columbia seethed, boiling up a milky spray in the warm wind and turning a marbled green as it scuffled downstream. The din from the falling river and the vibration from the dam made my father smile. For him, it was a song from the thirties, a snatch of dance-hall music from B Street.

Neither of us had ever said a word over the years about that morning when I left him the note on the kitchen table, and it didn't come up that day, either. He had come into my bedroom before leaving for work and woken me up. He had told me it wasn't my fault that I got fired, although he must have known it was. He had said I was a good son.

Instead, as we stood together on that trembling dam, I told my father that the noise, the vibration, and the height scared me. He said it did not scare him, that it had never scared him.

Guiding Questions

1. What techniques does Harden use to create a character out of Grand Coulee Dam?
2. How would you describe the narrator's relationship to the dam?
3. Through Harden's descriptions of the dam, what do we learn about Moses Lake? About his connections to the town?
4. Harden ends his essay by noting the difference in his and his father's attitudes toward the dam. What does the last sentence in the essay reflect about Harden's relationship with his father?
5. Kimberly Wheaton, in her essay "Mom and the Kitchen," also connects a certain place with a parent. How do Harden and Wheaton use place to connect the generations, or do they? How do these two writers compare in terms of their treatment of parents and places?

Paths for Further Exploration

1. Write a researched narrative about your hometown. Is there a specific place (building, park, monument) around which you might focus? What is the significance of that place?
2. In paragraph 4 Harden claims, "For as long as I can remember, I have kept coming back to this unhandsome land to feel the addictive tingle of being near an object that is intimidating and essential and big beyond imagining." Is there a place that inspires a similarly complicated response from you?