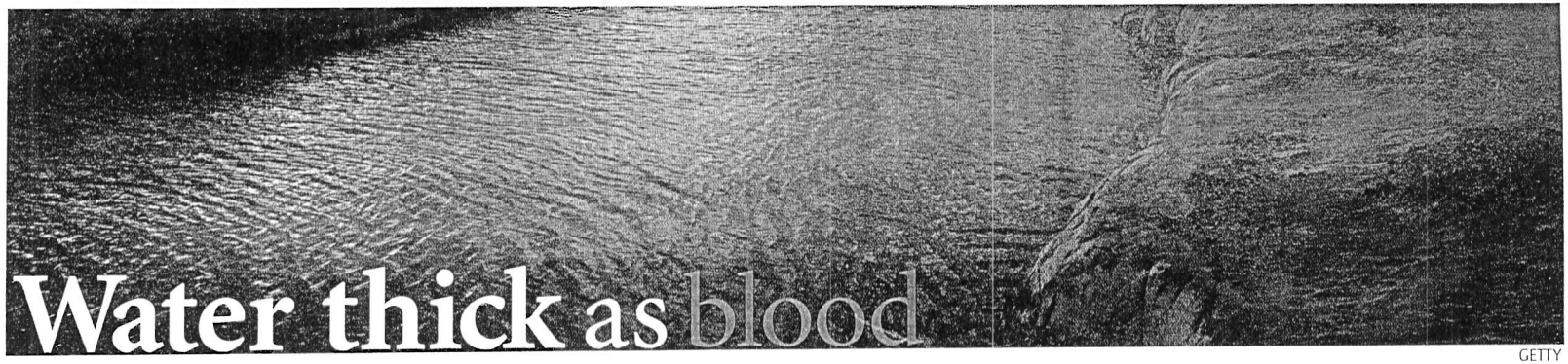

Water thick as blood

GETTY

When I was a teenager, I asked my father why we wasted our lives irrigating the desert. He wept because his only son didn't get it. My father inherited his love of the desert from his father, who homesteaded in western Utah and once dug a two-mile ditch from a spring on Indian Mountain to water an acre of alfalfa, the wonder crop. My great-grandfather believed that if the people of Benmore, Utah, were righteous, precipitation would increase to meet their needs.

God does move in mysterious ways. My great-great-grandfather was accused of poaching from the local lord's estate and ran away from Flint, Wales (rainfall 22 inches per year). He converted to Mormonism in Liverpool and eventually settled in Deseret (rainfall 11 inches per year), where he felt called by God to help the desert blossom as a rose.

For good and evil, I inherited anxiety about water.

As a teenager, I watched over the diesel engine and pump that watered our riverbed fields, 40 miles west of home. The soil was dense, white alkali where nothing but halogeton and greasewood thrived — unless it was irrigated. Where we watered, alfalfa grew three feet tall. Alone for a week at a time, I tended the faded red engine, checking the oil drip, eight drops a minute, which kept the pump shaft lubricated. I refilled the radiator and greased the engine daily, two shots into each of nine zerk fittings. At night, I spread my sleeping bag on a flat hay wagon to keep away from the snakes. I looked at the stars, listened to the coyotes wail like human babies, and waited for a change in the pitch of the diesel engine, an indication that something was wrong. And something always seemed wrong, because the pitch changed with every breath of air between me and the engine. Sometimes it sounded like a muffled drumbeat; sometimes it clattered as if shaking itself to pieces. I never slept well.

In 1980, when I was 26, I wrote a story about a boy who tended the pump. He overslept and the engine froze up. In a marginal operation, the loss was disastrous.

When I gave my father the story to read, it bewildered him. "Why did you end it *that* way?" he asked me. Clearly, I still didn't get it.

This year, Utah had record-breaking precipitation: Snowpack on many mountain ranges was twice the average, and many northern streams flooded their banks. The desert was as green as it was in the mid-1980s, when so much snow and rain fell that volunteers created banks of sandbags for the river that ran down State Street in downtown Salt Lake City. Then-Utah Gov. Scott Matheson remarked, "This is a hell of a way to run a desert." The Great Salt Lake rose 12 feet between 1982 and 1987, threatening suburbs, so the state spent $60 million to install three huge pumps to carry the water to the Newfoundland Basin farther west. Since 1989, the pumps have stood idle, but they may get their chance again.

Still, it's just a blip in the record, a mirage — the rush of a drug through desert veins.

My children are not invested in the desert, a fact that makes me feel both smug and sad. Despite my father's misgivings about my imagination, I think I grasp what God may have been thinking when he sent my ancestors to Utah. Cast out of the gardens of England and the East, my people learned about sacrifice and devotion — and also paradox and the flavor of irony. My children are part of a diaspora from the Mormon desert village. By the rivers of Chicago and Brooklyn I lay down and wept — and then smiled — because they don't remember Zion.

Seven years ago, my son met and married a woman who is half Costa Rican. She feels called to establish a school on the Pacific Coast of her mother's homeland, to teach ecology, Spanish and English, ecotourism. She wants to live near jungles, teak plantations, waterfalls, and nightly patrols to protect sea turtle eggs from poachers.

Rainfall there is 13 feet in a single year — 14 times the precipitation in Utah, seven times that of Flint, Wales. Fence posts sprout branches. Trees grow over a hundred feet high: the Tree of Ears, the Real Palm, the Naked Indian, and the Olive Tree of the Beach. On our last trip there, we couldn't walk a quarter mile along the coast without crossing a stream draining off the saturated land into the ocean. On the roof of our hotel, rain fell as if the heavens had opened.

My son, a sixth-generation Utahn, was going to follow his wife to that paradise of water, but some combination of human nature, fate and Godly intervention determined that no Bennion descendant will ever migrate to Dominical. In other words, they got divorced.

We lost our chance.

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