

ONE NIGHT IN DENVER

A man is indeed a city, and for the poet there are no ideas but in things.

—William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

Tonight, even so far from home,
I want to leave, excavate for golden verse, find
the city. Let it pour from my hands and mouth.

The city behind the mountain's eyelids,
unreal to me until my twenties when
I began to live in it. Denver, the city in my mouth,
built up between my teeth and slick on my tongue;
open and the sun flows as a river down the mountain slopes and
into me.

Denver was made from dust and wilderness,
a dirty man's endeavor to sculpt freedom into a home.
He dug fervently on his wagon trails,
hoping for flecks of gold, but he only found this city.

He couldn't possibly want it, couldn't fathom what it could become.

Denver, the city I've swallowed, or perhaps the one
who has gulped me down like alkaline water,
the city I've dissolved within myself like a pill,

the one that has always been west and tall,

I see you more now. I live more now.

*Down in Denver, all I did was die*¹ and I don't doubt that,

but I have lived and died and breathed in all its noise
until I become rigid and full as a mountain peak.

¹ Jack Kerouac wrote this in *On the Road*. Denver, the city after the mountains, was certainly on the road.

Denver, the city I ate because I had to,
the one I kissed and made love to like a writer does.

And where did I learn to write this city? In this city? As this city?

At 18, just on the cusp of 19, I unfurled my life
into a college dormitory. My window faced east, over
green lacrosse fields,
but downtown and the mountains just laid
west of me. It was here at this university, nestled in
between the cracks of High Street and Evans Avenue,
that I learned to write.

It was here in a bubble of manicured lawns, brick buildings,
maroon lamp posts, that I liberated the language
in my mouth. It was here that I learned about tumultuous ignored histories,
bewilderment and blood droplets staining the soil. The wounds of
massacre. John Evans, founder of the very university I learned
to write poetry at, was culpable in the infamous
Sand Creek Massacre. The past remains with us, is never erased.

Fort Lyon, C.T.
Dec. 18, 1864

Dear Mother:

We have had considerable trouble with Indians this fall. The day you wrote, I
was present at a Massacre of three hundred Indians mostly women and children.
It was a horrible scene and I would not let my Company fire. They were friendly
and some of our soldiers were in their Camp at the time trading. It looked too

hard for me to see little Children on their knees begging for their lives, have
their brains beat out like dogs.²

I step through campus grounds,

sink into screams of those who

became open wounds.

Terms like blight and revitalization
are freighted with moral judgment, exposing power...

White skin and gilded eyes have it.

It was a Regiment of 100 days men who accomplished the noble deed. Some of the
Indians fought when they saw no chance of escape and killed twelve and wounded
forty of our men. I had one Horse shot. I have been an Indian scout for at
least three weeks, but don't think I will have much more at present.

I do not write near as often as I used to for I have so much to do to keep my
Co. papers correct. I am responsible for fifty thousand dollars worth of
government property which must be attended to. I will write occasionally.
Don't get worried for there is not the least danger in the world of my getting
killed, and as I am the most interested party, you shouldn't fret. I believe I
will write a letter to Uncle Ben.

Good night.

And how many good nights has this city seen?
Sink, sinking, sunk into a built-over past, I wonder what letters I would
write to my own mother,

² Letters from Captain Silas Soule, a Union captain, abolitionist, and friend of the Native Americans. Also an
apparent friend of Walt Whitman, whose verse inevitably echoes in these poems.

the same one who rarely ventured this far into the city,
a voyeur to my Denver life: and I, a voyeur
into a history made wordless by glossy, glimmering buildings.

Jan. 8, 1865
Fort Lyon, C.T.

Dear Mother:

I suppose you are anxious to hear from me. I should have written oftener if I had not been so busy fixing up my papers. Our Reg. has been mustered out, their 3 years having expired, and all the officers are relieved from duty at this Post, and I amongst the rest want to get my papers all square so if I go out I can start for the States right off. The only chance would be to marry a rich widow. Do you think there is a good chance in Maine or will I find richer ones out west?

Just feet from golden spires and floor-to-ceiling windows,
I run into the green grass, frolic just a bit, spin around to
see the sky. The sun is setting, no one is on campus. Are we the richer ones
here in the West?

I had applied for a leave of absence to go to Maine and just received answer from it saying that our Regt. was to be immediately reorganized, so I will have to wait and may not see you before March. I suppose you have seen Mr. Gould. I sent a letter by him. He will tell you all about killing Indians.

I spent New Year's day on the battle ground counting dead Indians. There were not as many killed as was reported. There was not more than one hundred and thirty killed, but most of them were women and children and all of them

scalped. I hope the authorities at Washington will investigate the killing of those Indians. I think they will be apt to hoist some of our high officials. I would not fire on the Indians with my Co. and the Col. said he would have me cashiered, but he is out of the service before me and I think I stand better than he does in regard to his great Indian fight.

The sky is scalped here. I want to leave,
find good people elsewhere.

I am reforming in regard to my bad habits, Mother, for I have left off chewing tobacco and smoking a pipe, but I will smoke cigars when I can get them. I don't drink, so you see I am getting quite responsible and will stand a chance of getting a wife when I go down east.

Your affectionate Son,

Sile

Where does one who is disenchanted go? To the brighter lights.

I walk,
enter the jaws of the RTD train,
move as light towards the light.

Get off at Union Station:

Zephyr-tunnel of Denver, unreal landing-strip for weary travelers,

neon-orange letters, a title, a stamp of time. In the lobby,

huge chandeliers fit for giant's hands, a little book store, an eloquent bar in the corner.

The sharp pull of suitcase wheels on the shining floor jolts awake
those in awe. Perhaps only me; some things don't get old.

Just outside the station, far past dusk, dark now,
a cylindrical sculpture of light and words. I bask in it.
Words and quotes, acknowledgements of history: ARAPAHOE AND CHEYENNE,

A CHERRY CREEK PROSPECTOR, THE DENVER ART ASSOCIATION,
HIGH ALTITUDE, PIKES PEAK, FOSSIL EVIDENCE

But best of all: MOUNTAINS WHERE THE YELLOW DUST IS FOUND.

They wrap around me this cold night.

The Denver Union Station Master Plan presents a vision for the next stage of Colorado's transportation future. A revitalized Denver Union Station will blend many transportation modes and transportation networks in one place for the benefit of the entire state. This future may look like this:³

The scene is Denver Union Station, somewhat later in this century. During evening rush hour, a Rocky Mountain sunset illuminates the huge arched windows above the 17th Street Promenade. The air is scented with flowers and roasting coffee beans. Inside, hundreds of commuters move smoothly and efficiently through the station toward gates for light-rail and bus connections. Many carry home fresh produce, cheese, or bread from specialty markets in Denver Union Station.

I commute through this place tonight
like the wind. I don't smell flowers or coffee,

just hear the sprawling footsteps of tipsy people and homeless
pleading for something, anything.
Culture is more and more the business

³ The following is from the Denver Union Station Master Plan in 2004, written to extol and glamour the city and paint the Denverite as worldly, busy, enamoured with the cityscape's offerings. And who wouldn't want to travel with Union Station when the city is so inviting?

of cities, so the words tell us.

Still, the glow of orange is

warm.

Arrivals and departures are announced over the public address system: "Transit to Silverthorne and Breckenridge, Platform 3, 6:37pm Train to DIA, Platform 2, 7:14 p.m. Greyhound bus to Grand Junction, Gate 4, 7:15 p.m. Express to Fort Collins, Track 6, 7:16 p.m., stopping in Loveland only." Attractive signs and arrival-departure boards direct patrons to their connections with ease. A young couple pushes a child in a stroller. They just stepped off the 16th Street Mall Shuttle after visiting the Denver Art Museum, and are about to board a light-rail train to their home in the suburbs. Another young couple is planning their wedding. They arrived via RTD bus from Northglenn and will take light rail to Park Meadows Mall to register at a department store. A few commuters tuck bike helmets under their arms. They rode light rail from work elsewhere in the metro area, and are off to claim their bikes from the on-site Bike Station outside the historic station building. Neighborhood residents drop by the Train Room to meet friends for a bite at a bistro. They may hang around a few hours to hear some jazz at a new club next to the station. Afterwards, their friends will grab a taxi home to Washington Park.

Unreal city. I bask in sculpture-words, pull my jacket

close to my chin to lock in warmth. Real for some, not for others.

Long-distance travelers pull wheeled luggage through the Train Room. They may be catching Amtrak to California, or boarding the Air Train to DIA for a flight to London. Some passengers just arriving in Denver follow signs to local buses, taxis, and car-rental counters. Travelers carrying ski bags head for private van services that will shuttle them to mountain resorts. Several retirees

visiting from San Francisco wander around the historic Train Room snapping pictures. After reading about the revitalized Denver Union Station in national magazines, they traveled by train (stopping in Glenwood Springs for a few days) to see for themselves. After a day in Denver, they plan to take a light rail to Englewood to visit relatives. The historic building itself—one of Colorado's great examples of Beaux-Arts architecture—has been meticulously restored. New shops and services introduced within and near the building complement the station's style, scale, and materials. The former parking lot in front of the station on Wynkoop Street has been transformed into a handsome public plaza.

Denver, the city behind a cloak of newness,

silky chainmail, shiny verbiage, narratives of movement and adventure. I cross the street,
then I stand still facing the thing,

look up at the dome of this building. Denver, the city

of spur and visitation and destination. I stand still, breath in

the coolness of a zephyr, turn on my heels and walk on Wynkoop Street
further west...

Right on the corner of 16th — famous, popular, walked-on street—
a bookstore: Tattered Cover. The banner with its name flows

in the cool wind in between two silver poles
sticking out from weathered bricks like horizontal needles.

Denver, the city with pockets of books,
sections of poems and novels, floors of stories,

I wish I could lock myself inside of your corners all night,
blanket myself with book jackets and used espresso grounds,

sleep in the dark, un-lonely pages of the city-night.

Those who create images stamp a collective identity.

Poets stamp a collective identity,

don't they?

Denver, July 12: This city by the Rocky Mountains is better known for skiing than scholarship. It has far fewer people than New York or Los Angeles; lacks the vibrant academic community of the San Francisco Bay area or Boston, and ranked 17th in per-capita bookstore sales.⁴

Denver, city of comparison—

What is this city without the towering presence of

other cities?

But Denver has one thing no other city has--the Tattered Cover Book Store, which many people in the book business consider the best general bookstore in the United States.

`It is simply one of the great bookstores of the Western world,' said Jason Epstein, the editorial director of Random House.

David R. Godine, the Boston publisher, agreed. `It is a magnificent bookstore that both satisfies and helps create a hunger for good books in this country.'

Some gems aren't hidden. Dirty man-hands rejoice at the wellspring

that is creaky floorboards, far-flung codexes, worn book spines.

The once-explosive growth of the chain stores, like B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, has slowed, publishers say. And since many of their outlets are in shopping

⁴ From Edwin McDowell's New York Times Article, "Bookstore Thrives on Independence", July 1989. A paper from the city of all cities writing on a small books ore, The Tattered Cover, container of the obscure.

malls, they have been forced to emphasize highly marketable books in order to pay the costly rents.

So readers who crave an obscure book of poetry or 18th-century Dutch history are increasingly turning to a growing number of well-stocked, well-run independent bookstores like the Tattered Cover, as well as Borders in Ann Arbor, Mich., Oxford Books in Atlanta and the Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center, VT.

The doors are a deep shade of purple-red. Who lives above these books,
these words?
Perhaps a writer is desolate without places like these.

The Tattered Cover is almost always bustling with customers and activity. While Ms. Meskis declined to give sales figures, industry officials estimated them at \$6 million to \$8 million a year.

The store has achieved remarkable results by maintaining a huge stock of books published months and even years ago and a large staff, averaging 170 full-time employees, that is attentive to detail.

The Tattered Cover is housed in a three-story renovated department store in a shopping complex four miles from downtown Denver and three miles from the nearest chain bookstore. Unlike the typical chain bookstore, which occupies 2,500 to 3,000 square feet and carries 20,000 titles, the Tattered Cover is a 41,700-square-foot cornucopia of more than 400,000 books ranging from the Loeb Classical Library of Latin and Greek to books on channeling and spiritual healing.

Denver, city as a Russian doll—

Large shell: skyscrapers and tourists,

smaller shell: bookstore on the corne

smaller shell still: the writer enveloped

smallest shell: this poem, and all others.

'We want to provide a living-room atmosphere, so that people will feel at home,' said Ms. Meskis, a Chicagoan who moved to Denver in 1962 and bought the Tattered Cover 12 years later. The store is a far cry from the first Tattered Cover, which had only 950 square feet, two employees and sometimes endured long periods without making a sale.

The Tattered Cover, which is open every day except for six holidays a year, now handles as many as 2,500 transactions on an average day and needs three switchboards to deal with the 24 telephone lines. It has 15 buyers for its backlist, which provides the vast majority of its sales, and four people who buy current titles.

The display of art,
for public improvement or private gain,

represents an abstraction of economic and social power, even in books.

I recall grazing fingers along fiction spines, thinking
that words are made corporeal at the cost of something else.

At the cost of what?

The store averages about 300 special orders a day, many on its toll-free telephone number. Requests include everything from a little-known collection of

writings by and about Kate Chopin to a history of the Ukraine published in Canada. (It was able on a recent day to fill both those requests.)

Children's books are big sellers for the store, which features weekly story hours, a summer reading club, poetry contests for children and prose contests for young adults.

Psychology books are also popular, as are books about recovery from addictions.

I continue to walk west, try to catch a glimpse of an open book on display;

I don't, rather can't, and the wind stings my face.

Margaret Maupin, a buyer who also coordinates the autographing sessions, displayed a calendar filled with events, ranging from autograph sessions and readings to seminars on the future of space.

`About the only time we won't book an author,' she said, `is on the day of a Broncos football game.'

In her modest one-room office in the basement, Ms. Meskis said she had turned down requests to franchise the Tattered Cover, which she said was `still getting its sea legs.' But she sounded more receptive to the notion of opening additional stores of her own.

`I think a lot about it,' she said. `But right now, we're not through here yet, so we're not quite ready to expand.'

Denver, city of wholesome words.

My leather boots dig into the top of my feet, painfully.

Despite it, I enter the jaws of Lower Downtown.

Brick angles, oblong winding roads, low lighting. It's quieter

here. Not serene, but each step drowns the buzz out just a bit.

I slink behind a row of apartments, notice the rushing waters of the Cherry Creek
tributary of the South Platte River.

It's a beautiful noise. There are rusty metal
bridges to get to the other side,

but I only look across.

Lower Downtown, affectionately called "LoDo," is a neighborhood rich in history, controversy, and wonderfully eccentric characters. As the birthplace of our city, and a recent revitalization success story, the area provides an important link between past and present. Today LoDo contains one of the finest remaining collections of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial buildings in the American West. The city of Denver was founded at the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek in November 1858 after a small amount of gold was discovered there. Prior to that time, the area had been inhabited by Native Americans, mostly Cheyenne and Arapaho, who had legal title to the land through the signing of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851. Legal possession of the region, including the area that would become Denver, passed to the United States in 1861 with the Treaty of Fort Wise, which to this day is contested. The first towns founded here were Auraria and St. Charles. St. Charles began and ended as a single log cabin located on the 1400 block between Blake and Wazee Streets after William Larimer, a town founder,

jumped the St. Charles claim to build Denver City. Auraria, across the creek, disappeared after merging with Denver City on April 6, 1860.⁵

I continue past an old cable car suspended in the air on train tracks. A sign
informs me that it is the location of a youth summer camp.
I imagine

sitting in there floating over rushing, violent waters, writing.

What poems might be written? The city unheard here, just a poet
inside of metal and history. Only poems. City gone. Respite.

Only poems.

Denver's early appearance typified western frontier towns. The buildings were long wooden sheds with false fronts and raised porches that doubled as sidewalks. When the cottonwood trees along Cherry Creek were exhausted, settlers turned to making bricks from the rich clay deposits found in abundance around Denver. The low cost of bricks, coupled with a devastating fire in 1863 and the passing of a city ordinance, resulted in Denver's commercial district evolving into brick and stone construction. The buildings were of warm orange-red brick, characterized by repetitive round, arched windows and bays, with simple brick cornices and arched brick arcades.

Something bobs its head up and down with the water:

A rat swimming, somehow, down Cherry Creek.

The arrival of the railroad in 1870 brought new businesses, an improved economy, and a fast link to the East. In addition, the railroad brought new building materials such as pressed and cast metal, which was used for cornices,

⁵ From the Denver Libraries article "LoDo ~ Denver's Lower Downtown Success Story", a rumination about the old, historical pocket of bricks and businesses in Downtown Denver.

storefront columns, and window hoods, adding decoration to the plain facades of Denver's commercial buildings. A number of excellent examples of these early structures remain in LoDo, including 1515-1533 Market and 1515-1540 Wazee Streets.

By the mid-1870s, Denver's retail trade had shifted uptown as the growing streetcar system encouraged development. Despite this exodus of businesses, LoDo continued to boom as wholesale businesses established themselves around the railroad yards. Although the buildings constructed prior to 1870 were usually simple two-story structures, these warehouses were more massive, utilitarian buildings that were often adorned with interesting brickwork and window details. The Denver City Railway Building at 1635 17th Street and the Struby-Estabrook Building at 1660 17th Street remain as examples of warehouses appointed with fine architectural detail.

I arrive at a small beach. The wet sand crunches beneath my soles.

I take a deep breath. Cold. Unsatisfactory. Perfunctory.

The roaring waters intimidate me. I can almost touch
the skin of it.

I think about those *who journeyed to Denver,*
who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain,
*who watched over Denver & brooded and loned in Denver*⁶ and I
wonder if I am who he refers to, at least partially.

I have watched over this city, brooded and been alone.
This poem is proof. I think the water hears my grief.

Denver, the city of loneliness amidst liveliness.

Someone save us.

⁶ Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* presents a speaker all at once enveloped and disenchanted with the city.

In 1973 the 1400 block of Larimer Street was designated Denver's first Historic District, sparking a movement to save the ancient heart of town from the wrecking ball of urban renewal. Following this trend, a small but growing number of urban pioneers saw the potential value of the area and began to invest in and renovate its many interesting buildings. In March 1988 the unique historical and architectural value of the area was officially recognized by the City and County of Denver when it declared Lower Downtown a Historic District.

I've left the red brick and low yellow lights, turned
towards the heart of it, the bustle of it. Swivel right onto 14th—
Bulb lights adorn buildings like stars.

Look up at the sky—
Stars are hidden under smog and clouds.
Denver, the bright city— why can't I see what matters?

The city in its complete sense: a geographic plexus,
an economic organization,
an institutional process,
a theater of social action.
Most of all: an aesthetic symbol of collective unity.

So much more than one poet can bargain for
or ever hope to write.
I walk for what seems like an hour,
past a winding Colfax and snaking Broadway. Vagabonds crawl
through the night, yearning for some shred of warmth.

I end up at the Capitol, green body and dappled
tip towering in the ephemeral shadows.

The Colorado State Capitol was constructed in the 1890s and opened in November 1894. It is located at 200 E. Colfax Ave. and is home of the Colorado General

Assembly, and the offices of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Treasurer. Designed by architect Elijah E. Myers, the building is intentionally reminiscent of the United States Capitol, constructed of Colorado white granite and topped with its distinctive gold dome. The dome itself is covered in copper panels that are gilded with gold leaf from a Colorado mine. The gold was first added in 1908 to commemorate the Colorado Gold Rush.⁷

An emblem. At sunset, it looks ablaze.

Tonight, it is still— unmovable.

The inside of the building is adorned with what is believed to be the entire known supply of Colorado Rose Onyx, a rare rose marble from a quarry near Beulah, Colorado. White Yule Marble from the quarries near Marble, Colorado, was also used throughout the building for the floors.

Civic Center Park behind me, vast and oblong, packed with bystanders of history.

How dirty can one building appear?

Chin lifted, I am my own marble

sculpture,

slender, taut, transparent. Those who are blasting music
behind me in the park glance over,

see through me like an old page held up to the sun.

Many of the Colorado State Capitol's windows are stained glass, depicting people and events related to the history of Colorado. The third floor rotunda is decorated with portraits of the presidents of the United States and other artwork.

⁷ An article called "History of the Capitol" gives detailed information about this towering, gilded building.

The Capitol is the eastern edge of Denver's Civic Center, and is part of the national historic landmark. It serves as the beginning of the Capitol Hill District, sitting slightly higher than the rest of downtown Denver. The main entrance hall is open 180 feet (55 m) to the top of the dome, about the height of an 18-story building.

I walk past it, see a bookstore on the corner of Grant and Colfax.

Words stuck in a building. An eclectic sort of decoration. Capitol Hill Books
is local and worthy.

The wind is cold, frigid. Denver, city of ice wind,
where is your heat if not in these pockets of words?

The city of helplessness, of dichotomized presentations. A quaint bookstore
versus a towering capitol building; historic neighborhoods versus
high expenses; a poet versus the will of the city.

Denver, city of mine, will I ever win?

The official elevation of Denver is measured on the West steps outside the building, where the fifteenth step is engraved with the words "One Mile Above Sea Level." From this step, at 5,280 feet (1,609m), the sun can be seen setting behind the Rocky Mountains.

I can't really make out the mountains now. Face numb, I look down at my hands.
Grime, scum, and flecks of gold. I've been digging tonight.

A man walks past, muttering something to himself, gray sleeping bag
draped over his shoulders. A poem.

Denver, city of skyscrapers. A poem.

Denver, city of sunsets. A poem.

Denver, city of bricks and rivers. A poem.

Denver, city of good people. A poem.

Denver, city of wounds. A poem.

Denver, city of the West. A poem.

I feel the immense force of it all. A writer has no trouble excavating
love and loneliness. Yet, a city is an amalgamation.

*All the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.*⁸
A poem.

Too far from home to walk,
I call an Uber. I wait in the cold.
Some warm zephyr dances through my hair.

It smells of mountains and even, perhaps, gold.

⁸ *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, perhaps the best embodiment and commentary on the city a poet can look to.