

High Desert Journal

SPRING 2010 ISSUE 11



T. O'Neil

By John A. Kane



Motel (Tuesday), Fordair, Washington, photographed on Tuesday, driving north on a clear winter day.

THE COVER:

By Donald Yatomi

Laundromat 015, 2009
Oil on canvas
30 × 48 inches

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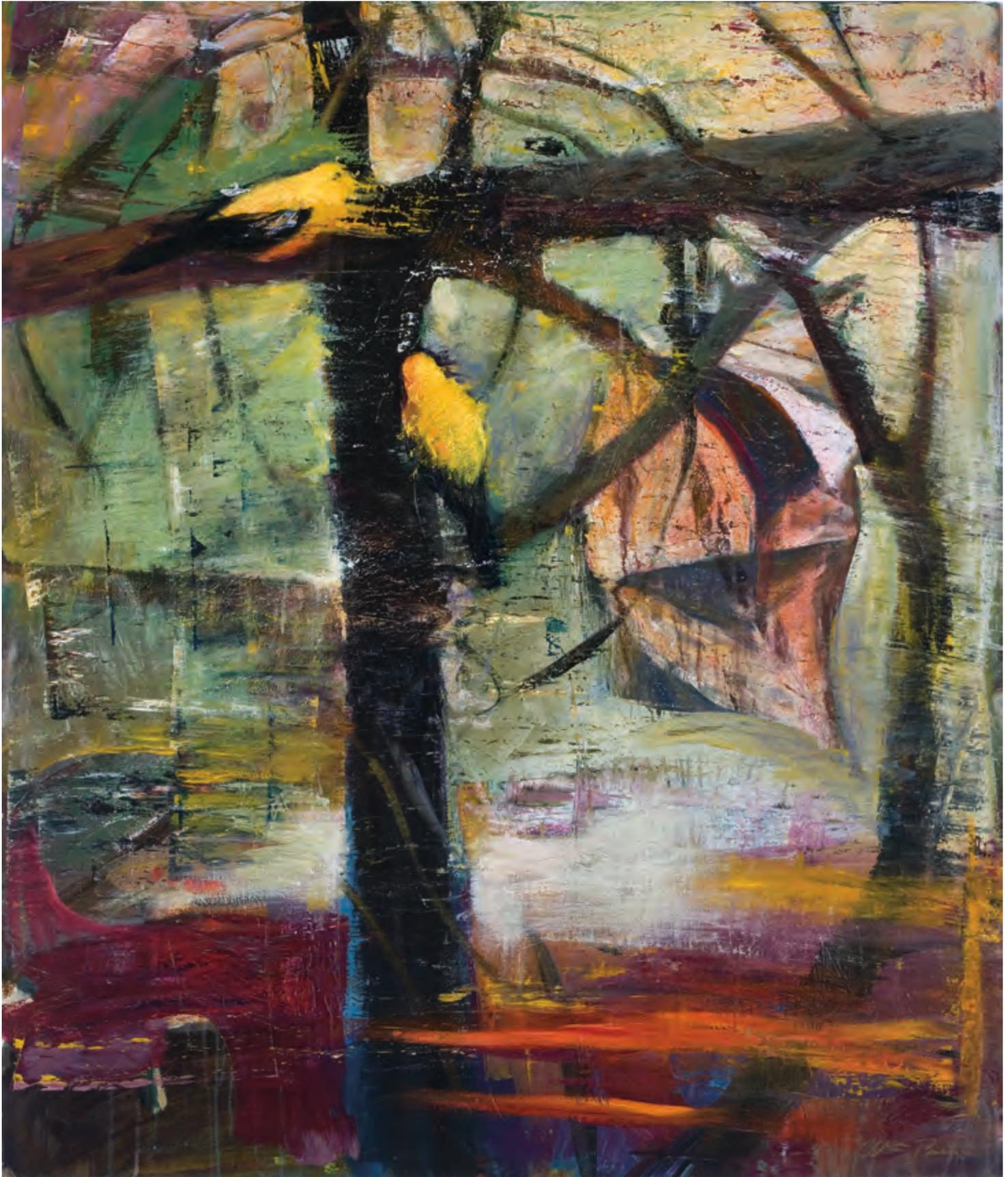
Motel (Wednesday), Fordair, Washington, photographed the next day, Wednesday, driving south in a snowstorm.

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This One Goes On and On, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
52 x 44 inches



I'll Do the Talking Here, 2009
Acrylic on paper
22 × 30 inches



I Couldn't Feel So I Tried to Touch, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
52 × 44 inches



There May Be Two Crows, 2009
Acrylic on paper with monotype collage
22 × 30 inches

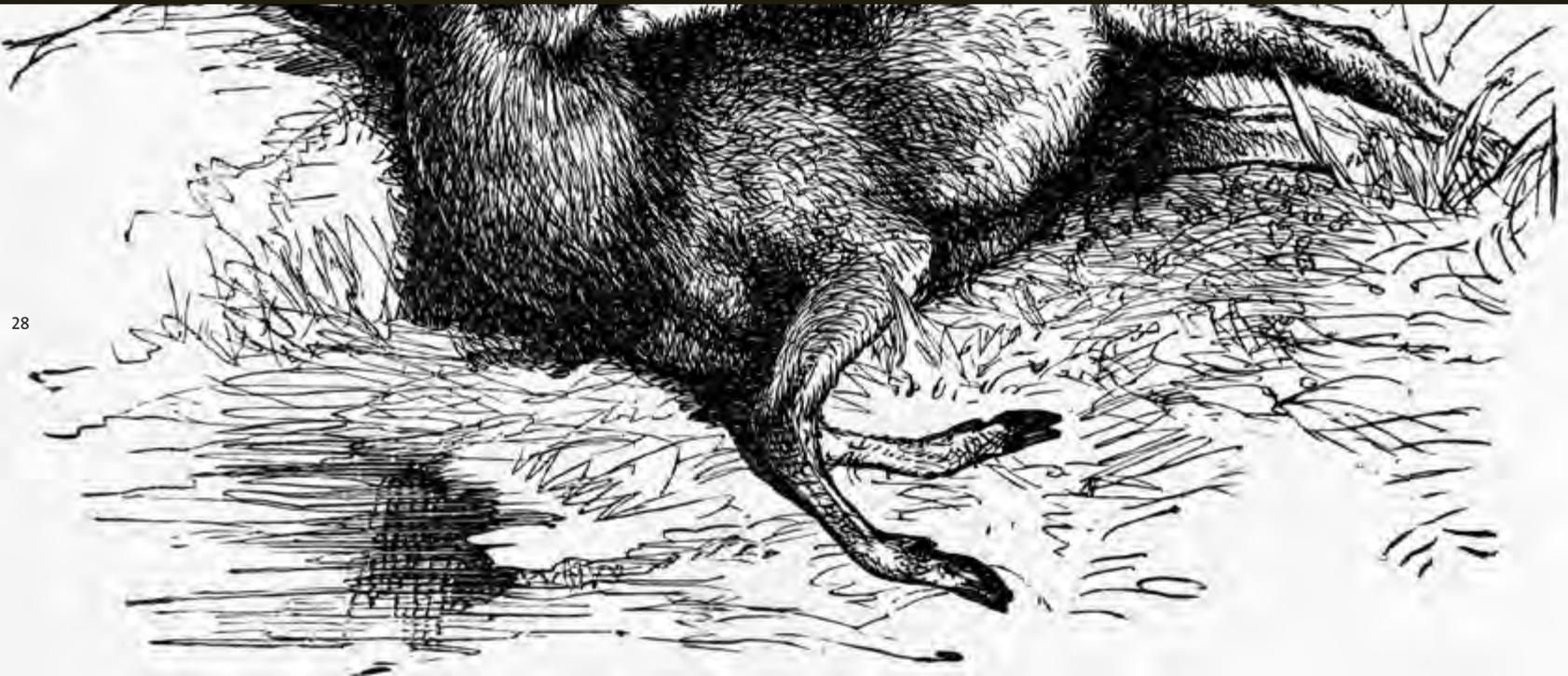
MOTHER'S MILK

You say yes to the sunlight and your pure fantasies, so you have to say yes to the filth and the nausea. Everything is within you, gold and mud, happiness and pain, the laughter of childhood and the apprehension of death. Say yes to everything, shirk nothing, don't try to lie to yourself.

– Hermann Hesse, "Wish Jar"

by Amy Irvine

All week, they were elusive. Nearly imperceptible, they slipped through the timber like phantoms. Wherever the trees opened up, telltale steam rose off large, matted ovals of meadow grass. The tangy, oily scent of animal sex hung heavy in the morning air, like ripe fruit about to fall. Still, it was hard to imagine that anything substantive had been there only moments before. Even the cries were dubious. High-pitched and mewling, their calls were otherworldly – as if the sounds nearly escaped those frequencies audible



to the human ear. Looking back, I was skeptical that I would see one. And the thought of their flesh in my mouth for nourishment was, for the first time in my life, something I could barely fathom.

But on the third day of the hunt, Herb, my husband, proved their presence by dropping a five-by-six bull – a single shot at 400 yards to the base of the animal’s throat. Before the harem had time to mourn the loss of their lead male, a younger bull moved up from the rear to assume the lead. As far as hunts go, it was ideal – quick and clean – the kind every first-time hunter dreams of. And it all went down well after daybreak as my husband cruised casually along a mild ridgeline – just far enough from the road to be legal. Even the aftermath was easy: Herb and his partner, Chris, gutted the animal, and then had no trouble catching a ride back to camp. Two guys from Michigan pulled up with our men sitting on the tailgate; Herb’s grin was wide enough to span galaxies. Into four of our camp mugs he poured shots of good whiskey. The men raised them in celebratory toast while Mandy flipped pancakes for the kids and I stoked the wood stove that burned continuously inside the wall tent.

It was meant to happen. I could tell he really believed those words as if there had been an explicit contract of understanding between the animal and him. The other men nodded in total comprehension. Even after the visitors left, Herb and Chris continued to replay every detail of the morning. They spiced up their tale with graphic, grisly adjectives as they gathered the gear they would need to quarter, skin and carry out their quarry. I moved away, beckoning our five-year-old daughter to follow with the mundane ploy of brushing her teeth. But Herb noticed the way we hung back even as Chris’ wife and children encircled him. Finally, he called me over. With blood-stained fingers, he scrolled through the photos on the screen of the digital camera. They were the kind where the hunter stands proudly over his kill, the antlers hoisted up for a better visual.

He kept looking down at my face, growing more confused by the minute at the distance I had put between myself and his success. After all, he knew that I’d grown up in a family of hunters. That the procurement of meat for the dinner table was in no way an abstraction. And while he never actually took me hunting, I had always helped my father – and with eagerness: Plucking pheasants. Gutting rabbits. Catching back straps as they were sliced away from a hung carcass and then wrapping them in freezer paper. In short, my husband would have thought that, of all the women he knew, I’d be the most excited about this new family experience. He would even admit that I was the one who had taken us along this trajectory; that but for my rants about factory-farmed animals and my concerted efforts to pass a hunters’ safety course and to get our names in the draw for game tags, he’d still be eating shrink-wrapped feedlot hamburger. He’d even go as far as to say that I have the better shot. The better eye at spotting game. And the more ravenous appetite for wild meat. But suddenly, for both of us, these facts were totally irrelevant.

Herb took one last, long look at my face before heading back out, and still I could not muster an expression to put him at ease – for I failed to understand my reaction as much he did. Conversely, I could see in the man I knew like the back of my own hands precisely what he had concluded: that I lacked the R-complex, that most elementary part of the brain which higher mammals share with reptiles. The part that manages the most basic, most primal acts. The part that can, even in the most mild of men, override reason and restraint with aggression, lust and brutality. In his mind, I was the chalice: the one

suited to receive the gifts of the hunt, *to render* them into a meal and *to offer* them up as sustenance. But I was not the blade. I was not cut out *to kill*. And since I had nothing with which to refute this, no better explanation, I quickly conceded with a shrug that he was probably right.

THE NEXT MORNING, the men offered to remain in camp with the kids so Mandy and I could stay out in the field until we were successful. We saw plenty of sign again – but in the San Juans, Colorado’s highest and southwestern most portion of the Rocky Mountains, that’s not unusual, given the region’s plentiful herds. The challenge lies in tracking across the rugged and varied terrain – a manic topography that plunges into the scarlet desert canyonlands of the Colorado Plateau before spiking the sky abruptly with snow-kissed, 14,000-foot peaks. But Mandy and I loved the walking, and the looking. Each previous day, we covered at least ten difficult miles – pushing into remote ravines and thickets that no ATV or horse could enter, where few humans had ever passed on foot. And in each place we found that the animals had departed just ahead of us. Once, we even felt the forest floor shudder with the pummel of hooves as they pushed into deeper, darker timber.

As we headed out that last morning, Mandy mused that perhaps it wasn’t her year – not like the year before, when she had dreamed of her elk the night before a magnificent bull had walked right into her sites. *He had turned just so*, she said, gesturing with her hands. It was as if he had given her a perfect bead on his vitals. *Now that felt right.* I tried on her words for size and found there was nothing with which I could compare. I knew animals well – both tame and wild. I had even experienced what were, from my end anyway, profound encounters with them. But in regards to hunting, there had been no harbinger, no talisman.

Mid-afternoon, Mandy and I decided to hike out to the hillside where Herb had gotten his animal. We settled ourselves in between the latticework of downed trees at the edge of a steep grassy knoll. Mandy was above me, her sites covering the upper slope and an adjoining clearing that came in from the northeast. I was positioned to cover the lower half of the slope and the aspen stand just west of it – along with the fur-lined creek at the bottom of the hill. Weather was moving in; yesterday’s long, glossy lenticulars – burnished by the dust from development, orvs and cattle that blows across the West these days – had turned dark and matte. Sunlight angled toward the western skyline. The temperature had risen and it was almost cloyingly warm. My butt quickly grew damp with the last castaway leaves of autumn that decayed beneath it. And somehow the setting gave me the first sliver of optimism I’d had all week.

When the call came from across the slope, Mandy gave me a bright, hopeful look and two thumbs up. I took off my gloves, checked the rounds in my rifle, then seated it against the strata of wool, fleece and down that padded my right shoulder. The whines came closer, and branches snapped as one animal, maybe two, moved diagonally downhill toward us. Cramped, I held my position. The sounds continued in our direction at steady intervals. But then suddenly the calls changed in quality – they were fainter, maybe distressed. And then silence. Mandy and I waited for another 30 minutes before getting up and walking in the direction we had watched so intensely for the

YIELD

At the grain elevator
we broke for lunch
and told the story
of harvest last
when the auger snagged
the boy's pant cuff,
and snapped his shin bone
like a stick match,
then his thigh,
and all the way up,
twisting him straight through,
and how he soaked
the folds
of sour yield
red under the ashen flutter
of silo pigeons
and we said
goddamn,
and spat on the warped
pavement all shot
with seed, and shook
our heads
while rotten grain
swelled in rain puddles
slicked and ancient with oil.

By Brandon R. Schrand

THE PASSAGE OF WILD HORSES

by John Haggerty

He found the horse about three-quarters up one of those canyons that cut the desert mountain ranges like ragged wounds. It was a brown and white mare from one of the wild herds that roam around like moving fossils, artifacts of the mean, drunken miners, the benighted settlers, the outright lunatics that brought their animals to this angry land.

The men and women were mostly gone. They left behind not just the old, abandoned and rotting shacks, dead and wind-scoured orchards, collapsing tunnels and other mummified human dreams but their animals as well. And it seemed they had formed their horses and donkeys in their own image because they possessed the same ironheaded obstinacy that made them all, humans and animals, unsuitable for life back East, for the softness that comes in places where regular rain gives life an illusion of predictability. Their animals were somehow more



than them because they stayed in the desert long after the last of the hard-rock derelicts shuffled off to slow drunken deaths in the cities on the coasts.

He hadn't seen the animals much, just traces: hoofprints, dried dung. But every once in a while he would get a glimpse of the real thing, a herd of wild horses, a dozen at the most, kicking up dust, a cyclone of vitality in the bare brown land. He would always stop, sit in his battered old Jeep to watch them move across the hot empty land, and it felt like looking into a mirror. The last of the wild horses and the last of the prospectors, both of them looking for things increasingly rare – a long, silent day; an unfettered breath; the mirage of an easy life.

Something in that side canyon had caught his eye, drawn him up there for the first time ever. The sedimentation suggested a vague hint of mineral wealth. It wasn't much, probably another false lead like most things in his life but worth a try anyway. As he walked he found his mind moving repeatedly to the letter in his shirt pocket. His sister in Oregon, her children moved out. She asked him to come live with her, to give up his baking trailer, the dying Jeep, the pointless deprivation and empty isolation of desert life.

Preoccupied as he was, he had missed the signs of animal activity: the disturbed brush, the piles of manure that announced that a herd was nearby. But then a mile up inside those gritty limestone and mud walls, there the horse was.

He stopped still when he saw it, not wanting to spook it, surprised and enchanted at such an unusual sight. But soon he realized there was something wrong. For one thing it appeared to be alone. The wild horses were herd animals, always traveling in groups. And the horse barely moved at the sound of his footsteps. It leaned up against the rough canyon wall, head hung low. He saw that it was not weighting its left foreleg. It was hard to tell from where he was, but he guessed that it had broken a bone. A veterinarian had once told him that horses were perfect animals except for their legs and digestive systems, the joke being that there wasn't much to a horse besides that. He figured that this must be the way many of them die – a misstep in a rocky canyon and then abandonment by the herd to a painful and lonely end.

It wasn't the first time he had seen imminent death. Death, he figured, was what the world was about, and the desert had no problem rubbing your face in it. The desert is a kind of museum of death, preserving its traces in the sand as in glass cases. But something in him rebelled against this one. Maybe it was the rarity of the wild horse or its beauty or its ties to the past. Or just the deep sadness of death coming to it in this way, left alone for perhaps the first time in its life.

He could see now that the horse was a female, probably not too old, maybe a couple of years. He quietly sat down in the wash about 30 feet away. It nervously twitched its head and moved restively on its three good legs, tentatively setting down the injured leg as if to run but immediately taking the weight back off.

He unscrewed the lid of his canteen to take a drink, pondering what to do. Smelling the water, the horse's head came up, its nostrils expanding to take more air in. He watched the animal, thinking, and then moved toward it slowly, his canteen held before him. The horse snorted and tossed its head but remained staring at the canteen, even as he got close enough to pour the contents onto a dished rock beneath the horse's nose. He backed away and the horse buried its nose in the water, snuffing it greedily.

He ran back down the canyon. It was a couple of miles to his Jeep, and the day was hot. He was sweating and tired when he got back to the horse, carrying a gallon can of water and a plastic garbage bag. Once again, he opened the water container so the horse could smell it, keeping its attention while he arranged the garbage bag over some rocks, making a crude tub. Moving carefully, he poured the water out for the horse. It almost pushed him aside with its head as it reached for the water. He backed away and watched it drink desperately from the makeshift trough.

The next day he came back with more water and a bale of hay. It was a little hotter that day even in the relative cool of the canyon, and the horse again drank greedily. He spread the hay out next to it and it ate quickly. He sat down a ways off and watched it with a mixture of pleasure and concern. There was really no way for him to help this animal, he knew. He wasn't a vet but he was pretty sure that it had broken a fetlock, a death sentence for any horse, domestic or wild. He couldn't get it down the canyon, and even if he could, there would be no way to repair the damage. But he loved its still-smooth coat, its deep brown eyes, its untameability.

After the horse ate it hobbled around a bit eying him warily. He sat still, trying to silently communicate his good intentions to an animal that had never felt such things as human generosity or openness in a harsh life full of fear and want.

He never tried to touch it in the days that followed. That felt too presumptuous or unclean – that he would exact such a price for water and food, things that were easy for him. He would just look at it, letting its wildness soak into him, take him away from the dreary lives of men.

After a week it stopped eating hay, so he brought oats. It only ate the oats for a day before it stopped eating completely. Two days later it stopped drinking water. He sat as before, silently watching and saw for the first time its dull coat, the growing lifelessness in its eyes, the resigned sag in its neck. The next day he returned with a .45.

The horse didn't even move now as he walked toward it. It leaned against the canyon wall, its head drooping. He moved as close to it as he ever had, close enough for a single, sure shot. He raised the revolver, almost touching its barrel to the horse's forehead. The animal stirred, lifting its head as if to look at him one last time. Later he would tell himself it was just foolish sentimentality but he thought in that instant that he saw a sadness and an acceptance in its eyes, a weariness of suffering, a profound exhaustion. He stood there holding the gun for a long time until the weight caused his shoulder to burn and his hand to shake. The horse stayed unmoving and impassive, even as he lowered the gun and turned away. He saw his mistake then, interfering as men always do, with the best intentions, claiming ownership where there was none, applying rules to lawlessness, trying to make everything up in his own image, making rights and wrongs out of events far beyond such feeble measures.

He never went back up the ravine but a year later he found a jumbled pile on the floor of the main canyon. Washed down in a flash flood like so many of the other works of man and God, a clutter of bones and a few patches of leathery white hide. He closed his eyes and imagined what the years ahead would hold: the slow, steady erosion; the sudden pulses of water; the long, baking heat. There was creation and destruction and the inevitable dissolution of all bonds. And he saw how, in the end, everything would travel, as it all must, down to the soft empty forgetfulness of the sea. <HDI>