

#26 “Flickers”

Painting: Last One Up Artist: Lyn Boyer

Nancie McCormish

They'd always been close, natural enough, sharing this place since its luminous light first entered their eyes. His: ember copper, hers an airy aquagreen, two translucent gemstones born by these rusty canyons. Copper and Turquoise. Land of AZ, she'd called it, ages ago, on that summer dig that stretched like hot taffy from out of sight to out of mind. They'd taken her best mules—two saddle and four pack— heading deeper down than any but the ancients had ventured, to turn stone over stone as long as the supplies held out.

She gave him Dino, his first ride on a “mountain of mule.” Bright blood bay with high stockings, bottomless azure eyes, lightning blaze zigzagging down aquiline profile, punctuated by a wry Eastwood smile and tall apostrophic ears. His left hip bore a white Theropod track, her personal brand. He liked Dino instantly.

She sang for hours leading downhill, borne by Lulu, the Spotted Wonder, whose salt and pepper rump spots swayed hypnotically as they followed, pack mules loose behind. He didn't recall any tunes, just hoofbeat rhythms, sounds sucked away by gusty canyon currents. Dizzy from the infernal unbalancing heat, Dino's ears kept him oriented as surreal stone horizons disappeared into tortured bands of red, yellow, brown and black, accented by vertical streaks. She'd said they were Earth's tears, black mascara laden, that carved these canyons, before human time.

Geology jokes were something else they shared. The hot baked yellow sandstones had got her laughing, thinking of Oz and the fabled brick road. One time, flipping her sandy braid over a shoulder as she turned, he heard her laughing about some sudden insight between Oz, AZ, and Adze. He could just make out mouthed words shaded under her (oddly reptilian) blotched and scaly high-miles straw hat, mottled and multicolored with dust, like Lulu. Like them all. Its band held a yellow Flicker feather at attention just over her right ear, pointing towards her mesmeric smile.

After a week camping the canyons, finding nothing but endless time staring them—daring them really—evening campfire conversations wandered. Neither could name what they were tracking anymore. Once, in a dense dark lit only by a small fire and a single cold star, she jumped up, exploding with insight. “First one down, last one up! Poison food, pollen, pictographs, windfall timber, Buffalo Jumps, sediments, fossils... all obey the orders of gravity and time” she’d explained. “You have to keep going deeper to get to the proper order of things, including yourself. They were here and gone, we are here and gone, too. The wind takes us all in time. Dust to dust, see?”

Afternoons a hellish wind spat sandy shards of ancient animals at them. She’d hollered back all the wind in AZ couldn’t push those old dinosaur teeth hard enough to draw even *one drop* of her blood. It taunted them though, showing them past was always present, yet impossibly long gone. It coated them and eternally escaped at once, left them hunting for tracks only Precambrian waters could quietly capture.

Footprints. Temporal pilgrimage, she said. Fundamental flickers of past life. The only track he'd found was on Dino's hip when he saddled up.

The wind was angry again, sandpapering his skin. Dogged Dino was slower but steady, third trip in as many days. Still following her mules up but she and Lulu had vanished. One morning he found the canyon and the mules silent, Dino stoic, facing west. No wind, no tracks. Evaporated.

He and Dino lead search and rescue further down canyon. They branched out but found no trace. He almost hadn't, either, but the big mule abruptly turned into a narrow slot canyon masked by shadows, pulled the reins hard and dropped his head like a bloodhound, searching. Higher up the slot held some wet sand, Lulu's tracks, then Lulu's bare body. Peaceful as California beach bather. Nothing more, at first. No sound, no life. Just the stony weight of ancient air. Over fluttering black ears—Dino chuffing a sad hello and goodbye to Lulu—he caught fresh patterns on the stained stone wall. A few yellowish clay painted words slowly emerged from the coppery stone. "*The wind got into me.*"

Dino's penitent steps clinked a dirge, steel shod hooves sparking stone into flickering candelaria as they climbed from past to present, tense. He had no words, told no one. Inside his breast pocket rested a yellow Flicker feather.

He was the last one up.