The Fourth River

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Gray Gold: Striking Solace on a Slow Quest to Find Burros in the Wild

A LIFE STORY set in Wyoming stands a good chance of unfolding into largeness. Picture the Grand Tetons, the Big Horn Range, or a boundless prairie surging with the hoofbeats of wild horses. There are reasons why my home state has the smallest human population of any in the US, however. On the short list of reasons: it is windy. The Chinook winds start to howl from the West in October. Then they don't quit until the spring. Outdoors, impulses take control. We shrink our necks and chins into the collars of jackets and then squint our eyes to protect them. Nostrils tighten as a defense against the sand and dust thrown by the sky. Each year, by the middle of December, I start to yearn for the calm and warmth of our deserts.

I spent the decade of my twenties in Arizona. Our twenties are formative. Most of us become roughly who we're going to become in the decade between our teens and the long plateau of midlife. I left Arizona with a suitcase full of memories, including images of saguaro and prickly pear, ponderosa pine, and long views framed by distant mesas. The mental pictures aren't alone in the storehouse of my past, however. I've carried the smell of the desert with me across all of the months and all the miles. But the recollection of a smell is different from the images we hold inside our minds. They're more like auras, vague and shadowy, but still clear and distinct. Some years, with winter bearing down, the wind beginning to roil, I make a move that doesn't even feel like an actual decision. I just pack the car and point it south.

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I spend a good deal of time photographing and documenting the behavior of wild horses. A handful of mustangs live in Arizona, but the Grand Canyon state is the wild burro capital of the country. In our culture, we don't pay donkeys the same kind of attention that we pay to other animals. Donkeys are not sexy. In our society, we value size and speed, and burros do not possess either of those. To my knowledge, the Rolling Stones do not exalt the burro in any of their songs, at least not to the same degree that they wax romantic about wild horses.

To make another musical comparison, it might be fair to say that donkeys are the banjos of the equine world. Wild horses are more like the guitars. Horses come in different shapes and colors, like their six-stringed counterparts. The tones of guitars vary dramatically and the appeal is broad. Likewise, horses are widely beloved.

In contrast, banjos all look alike and their fanbase is small. Bluegrass is not as popular as rock or jazz, but that doesn't mean that music made with four people singing around a single microphone isn't good for the soul. The strings of a banjo somehow manage to sound both happy and forlorn at the same time. Similarly, the sight of a donkey is enough to make anybody smile, but no one can deny the melancholy that surrounds the animal—long thought of and treated as a "beast of burden."

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The ancestors of the wild donkeys in the Southwest hail from the Nubian Desert of Africa. Prospectors began to import them in the 1800's. Their strength and ability to carry a load had become legendary. Burros worked alongside the pioneers that sought to extract wealth from the landscape that the new United States had taken from indigenous people. Gold prospectors came in a rush to Arizona, lured by the thought and possibility of yellow rocks. In an economy like ours, there is only one speed—rushed. You get your share before somebody grabs it first.

When the gold ran out, the prospectors fled the landscape as quickly as they arrived. They also abandoned their burros. Fortunately, the Mojave and Sonoran deserts suit the donkey as habitats. Deserts provide everything that a hardy burro needs: a lean mix of greenery and intermittent water. Left alone, populations of wild burros began to flourish.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, American burros were persecuted by people who held the same frame of mind as those who rushed to the Southwest for gold. Wild donkeys were seen as commodities. They were rounded up along with their mustang cousins. Then they were sent to slaughterhouses where they were ground into pet food and packed in metal cans.

That business came to an end in the 1970s. After unanimous votes in both houses of Congress, Richard Nixon signed the 1971 Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. The policy protected donkeys, and the law remains in place today. The Act signified an important turn, with respect to more than just wildlife management practices. It marked a change of paradigm or a shift in our worldview. The law that safeguards wild donkeys makes it plain that free roaming burros serve as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West," but more importantly, the Act charged the Bureau of Land Management with maintaining a "thriving natural ecological balance" in the areas where burros were found in 1971. To a degree unseen in our past, for the first time as a country, we began to perceive nature as something more than a collection of "natural resources" waiting patiently for the day when we extract them and put them up for sale.

For the first time as a nation, we began to see ourselves as part of an ecological web, made up of habitats and inhabitants, each of us included. Of course, Native people had been seeing the world this way for thousands of years. Indigenous groups across the continent spent millennia forging relationships—spiritual relationships—with landscapes and the animals with whom they shared their homes. For the new American nation, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau aside, it's taken until more recently to find enchantment in our surroundings.

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The Chinook winds arrive. I fall asleep each night to the sound of the air thrashing my bedroom wall, so I pack for warm weather and head south to the Mojave. I aim for a stretch of the Colorado River that forms the border between Arizona and California. The region was formerly the site of the Gold Nugget Mine. Today, the area provides a home for bands of free roaming burros.

On arrival, signs of donkeys abound in the dirt. I find hoofprints that lead from the river's edge toward the mountains on the Arizona side of the river. Families of burros often walk in single file. That makes them easy to track along the desert floor. I fill a backpack with food and water. Then I start out on foot. The landscape fills my eyes with welcome sights—rugged peaks lined up at the base of an azure sky—but it rained the night before. It's the aroma of dampened creosote that secures the feeling that I'm home.

I track hoofprints and burro signs across the desert toward the mountains. After an hour, through binoculars, I spot a jenny and a foal atop a ridge. I set a course toward the pair. They don't see or hear me in the beginning, and at times I lose sight of them too. The angles and views change as I trek up and down the swells and troughs that separate me from the animals.

When the distance between us shrinks to a hundred yards, they notice me. They don't often meet two-legged animals in their corner of the desert. My presence startles the female. She disappears over the top of the ridge with her son in tow. I make a mental note marking the last point where I saw the two of them, and then I start to move. After a few steps toward the mark, the jenny returns to the ridgeline with four companions and two additional foals. They all came to have a look at the upright-walking creature with a stick in his hand, a blue lump of fabric on his back. The appearance of the family on the ridge freezes my feet. I reach for my camera, but before I can focus an image the burros vanish back behind the ridge. I can't see them.

And then I hear the sound. That fantastic, unmistakable, hilarious, unprecedented sound.

Hee-Haw!

Wild burros live in families comprised of bonded jennies and their young. Each matriarchal group associates with one of the wild jacks in their territory, but the males tend to lead more solitary lives. They remain in the vicinity of the others, but they wander off during the day. When a group of females senses a threat, however, they seek the security of their attendant male. In this case, after assessing me, the ladies brought their concerns to their jack, and the news prompted him to let loose with a loud, *"Hee-Haw!"* Then after he sounds off, the group returns to the top of the ridge. By this point, I am standing at the base of the rise. When they reemerge, this time with their jack, he looks at me and expresses himself again: *"Hee-Haw!"*

There's nothing like it in the animal kingdom. Pigeons coo and lions roar. Coyotes yip and packs of wolves howl back and forth to each other, but the bray of a donkey stands out as a singular kind of calling card. In a 1924 essay that appeared in *The Living Age*, an anonymous writer using the pen name "LLK" describes the donkey as the "philosopher of the desert." The author crafted the phrase in response to the things that wild burros say. LLK describes a donkey's bray as a "cry against the pain of existence," a sound that resonates from a point near the center of the cosmos. The author goes on to enlighten us with a description of what happens when a donkey makes the choice to speak: "A burro stands, he considers, attains Nirvana, meets the riddle, solves it, comes back to earth and then gives us the laugh." It's the only explanation I have heard that captures the depth and meaning of a burro's words.

After the jack's announcement, the family starts to walk the ridge and I follow, but just barely. In contrast to horses, known for their speed, burros dawdle. If you're interested in getting close to wild donkeys, the only path is unhurried. When I am trying to make images of burros, I pretend that I'm a pearl diver in a metal suit, walking the ocean's floor. I step that slowly. No sudden movements. Burros vary when it comes to how close they'll let a person approach before they begin to retreat, but if you're considerate, and you carry a zoom lens, they will let you slow-walk in until you're close enough to get a good shot.

I match the family's motion along the ridge with steps of my own, but I am also careful to hold my distance. Burros are prey animals. In the Southwest, where their territories overlap with mountain lions, burros often make up a portion of the cats' cuisine. Thus, wild donkeys maintain a healthy level of skepticism about large and unfamiliar animals. With that in mind, I pay them due respect. We settle into a routine. I'm close enough to make images, and they feel calm enough to go about their business. They browse the desert and dote on the foals.

Once I'm satisfied that I've documented the family with photographs, I take time to sit down on the ground. It's my favorite part of the enterprise. I turn the camera's power off and place the black box in my lap. Then the minutes start to unravel. I am close enough that I can see their eyes. In every case, it's a pair of dark pools set in masks of white. In their eyes, I am always struck by the feeling that I'm gaining a glimpse of something often lost in our culture. Purity, maybe? Innocence? The geographer Andy Merrifield describes the eyes of donkeys as "the gravest and most reasonable eyes the world has ever seen." In the eyes of burros, Merrifield finds "a somber patience," a unique form of animal dignity.

Because they are prey in the wild, donkeys maintain alertness to their surroundings. They watch and listen. But they *are* burros, so they also radiate serenity, the kind of composure that can only accompany someone at ease in the world. I think my hope has always been, if I watch burros long enough, some of their calm lucidity, their presentness, will leak across the space between us and become my own. Isn't that the goal of most spiritual endeavors? Picture the Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Christ, Muhammad, or the Baal Shem Tov—each investing their attention in the moment—unphased by the ordinary caterwauling of our desires.

As far back as the 17th century, the mathematician and polymath Blaise Pascal pointed out that as humanity began to step away from churches and religion, we were left with a "God-shaped vacuum" in our hearts. He had no idea what the next four centuries would bring. Today, the fastest growing religious group in the US is the category identified as "spiritual, but not religious." Pascal was right about the vacuum in our hearts, but he left us wondering about the question of how we might fill the empty space. Today, Pascal's vacuum is sucking millions of us out into nature. Seeking awe-inspiring landscapes. Spending time with creatures. Gazing eye-to-eye at each other. It's as close as most of us come to tapping the source.

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I am not quite finished searching for burros. I have another stop to make before my obligations call me back to Wyoming. It's been a year since I visited the Lake Pleasant Regional Park. It's an expanse of county land surrounding the Lake Pleasant reservoir, all adjacent to an even larger swath of federal property overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, and all of that surprisingly close to the city of Phoenix. Wild donkeys are known to trek up from the federal land into the park, where they can drink from shore. I spend my first day running trails and scanning mountains with binoculars. I find plenty of signs that wild burros had been in the area, but I don't find any donkeys.

The following morning, I head west into the hills outside the park. Forests of saguaro, cholla, and palo verde make the Sonoran our most voluptuous desert. Plant life burgeons in all directions. There's almost too much to look at, but I find a row of burro hoofprints threading through the spiny labyrinth stretching over the desert floor. It doesn't take long to locate a family: four jennies and a foal.

Because these animals visit the park, they've grown accustomed to people. I don't need all of the stealth moves that I employ in remote areas, but I still use them anyhow. I slow my movements and make my way forward until the burros stand in view. Then I take a seat on an outcrop of stone. I watch as the foal weaves deftly between her elders. They all nibble on the forage at their feet. Sometimes they just look up and close their eyes, a sign that they're taking a moment to enjoy the sun. I feel the same warmth on my back as the dawn gives way to the morning. Despite the coffee in my veins, it's hard to resist the impulse to shut my eyes along with theirs.

This portion of the Sonoran always strikes me as a paradise we never lost. It wasn't mined. The area provides no saleable timber, and the vegetation is not well suited to livestock. The region survived the ravages of the 19th and 20th centuries intact. In other words, this stretch of desert made it through the periods of history where industrial nations focused solely on *extracting* wealth from nature. This part of the Sonoran lasted through to the present, where vast numbers of us now succumb to the impulse toward *appreciating* our environment. It took a while, but we are finally discovering: it is our habitat left whole that represents our wealth.

We still find ourselves in a rush, though. The economy still bustles with the same kind of lust that drove gold miners to the West. But there's a difference. In our past, the twin forces of greed and expansion cast a powerful spell. They drove us to single-minded purposes: clear cutting, strip mining, and the widespread use of monoculture. Today, there are forces—spiritual, historic, and psychological—that temper our tendency to lunge at wealth without a thought toward the consequence. We are all bearing witness, in a time when values are shifting. Today, we tend to understand that each of our lives is multifaceted, and each life story is connected to the setting where it's told.

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Winter winds aside, the state of Wyoming has broken records for visitation, year after year, unabated for a decade. For the most part, travelers visit my home state in order to test themselves on undeveloped lands, and for the chance to see a wild creature living in a wild place. Visitors travel to Wyoming in the summer for the same reasons that I leave in the winter. We're all searching for something, not a material thing, but rather, a moment in time. A moment that makes you want to shut your eyes and use your mind to try to touch something like an eternal *now*. It's a rare feeling. It's so elusive, the experience seemed to escape our ancestors for more than two whole centuries. It's the feeling that there is nothing more—nothing more and nothing better—just the simple *Hee-Haw!* of a burro in the desert after rain.