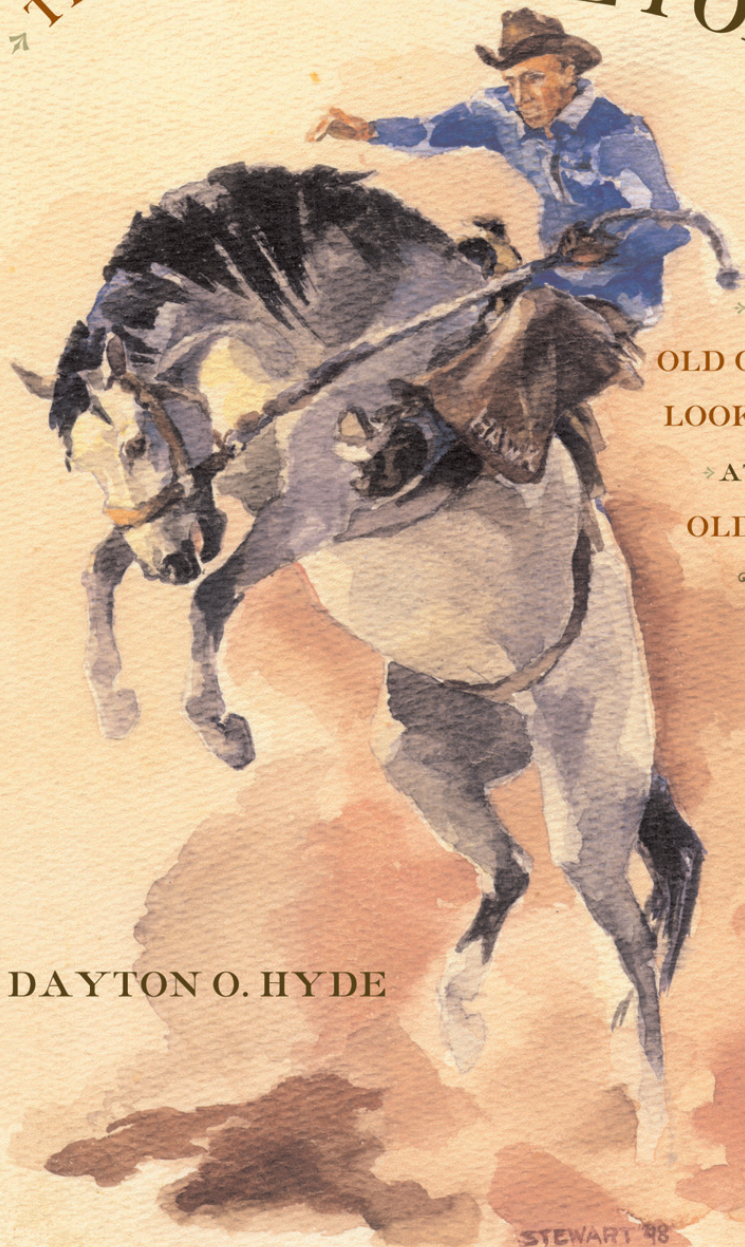


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—LARRY MCMURTRY

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND



▷AN◁
OLD COWBOY
LOOKS BACK
▷AT THE◁
OLD WEST



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OF BEYOND

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This book is dedicated to
Slim Pickens, Mel Lambert,
Montie Montana, Dick Blue,
and every other cowboy that
forked a bronc or threw a loop.

THE PASTURES
OF BEYOND

Chapter One

MY LIFE AS A COWBOY STARTED amidst the thick upper foliage of a horse chestnut tree in Marquette, Michigan. I was a thirteen-year-old beanpole of a boy given to tree sitting and watching birds. I had been up that tree for several hours, watching a robin build a nest, when my full bladder told me I had better hurry home. But not wanting to disturb the robin, who seemed to be in the process of laying her first egg, I put the privacy of my treetop bower to good use and watched as a golden stream trickled groundward from leaf to leaf. As fate would have it, at that moment my mother was walking under the tree, heading up Spruce Street with her bridge group.

What really hurt my feelings was that of all the boys in the neighborhood, my mother knew exactly who was up that tree. The chorus of screams frightened the poor robin off the nest, and as the ladies rushed up the street to tend to their bonnets, I hit the ground running. Half an hour later I was hidden in a freight car just leaving town on a westward track.

I could have toughed it out, of course, and bared my behind to my father's leather slipper, but in my pocket was a crumpled letter. It was from my rancher uncle in far-off Oregon, who had written that he could step off the front

porch of his ranch house and scoop up enough trout in a dishpan from the stream to feed his crew. If that were not enticement enough, his cowboys had just captured thirty wild horses and were breaking them to ride.

I felt no guilt at leaving home. For seventeen years my father had been bedridden with multiple sclerosis, and I had long been dreaming about relieving my parents' burdens by fending for myself. No matter now that I had neither spare clothes nor money, nor had I ever been more than sixty miles from home. I had yet to ride a horse, but at that moment I was already a cowboy.

By the time the steam locomotive had sounded its lonesome whistle at several crossings, however, I was so homesick and hungry that I was ready to jump off the first time the train slowed. My fate was decided by an old hobo named Gus, who, smelling of rancid sweat and cheap wine, threw his bedroll into my car at the next town, followed by a gunnysack that proved to be full of blackened pots, coffee, and dried beans. Nursing a hangover, he didn't talk much. For much of the trip I huddled near the open door, hypnotized by the rise and fall of telephone cables between the poles. Gus left me at a hobo camp under a trestle near Spokane, but not before he had lectured me on the dangers of rattlesnakes, booze, and young girls, and seen me safe from yard dicks on a Southern Pacific freight train headed south for Oregon.

When I jumped off the train a day later in the southern Oregon town of Chiloquin, I was tired, dirty, and as hungry as a teenager can be. Gus had given me fifty cents as a parting gift, and with this I purchased a chocolate cake from some

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND

ladies at a church sale, and sat down on the curbing to devour every crumb.

My uncle's ranch lay thirty miles to the east, one of the church ladies told me, but there was a stage that delivered groceries to the ranch and the logging camps beyond. I'd best find the driver, an Indian named Hi Robbins, and arrange to get a ride.

I found Hi Robbins at the back of the general store, loading groceries into the back of his Chevy panel wagon. The groceries were in different piles, one marked Pelican Bay Camp, and one marked Lamm's Camp. I took them both to be logging camps. The other pile, no less large, was marked for my uncle's ranch, Yamsi.

The vehicle was old and needed paint, but it was clean. I had never seen an Indian up close. I was astonished to note that Hi was as handsome and well-groomed as any western movie star.

At that moment, a slender Indian girl trotted up on a spirited black-and-white horse. She looked at me and giggled. I realized how dirty I must have looked to them both. I rubbed my face on the back of my torn sleeve, no doubt making matters worse, and tried to smooth down my cowlicks with my hand.

"Mr. Robbins," I said, "my uncle owns a ranch named Yamsi at the head of the Williamson River. Can I catch a ride out there in your truck?"

The man's bronzed face showed no emotion. "Inside," he said. "Inside the store there's a sink with soap and water. You better scrub the dirt and stink off yourself if you're goin' to ride with me!"

The girl must have thought better of me when I cleaned up. She slid from her horse and offered me the reins. "Go ahead," she said. "Ride him if you want."

"I got a sore leg," I said, not wanting her to know I was afraid. "Some other time."

"My name is Rose," she said shyly, as though a last name were superfluous. She seemed to sense that I was looking down her shirt front, and her face flushed darkly. Grabbing her reins and a mane-hold, she vaulted swiftly onto her horse and galloped off. I was ashamed at my own crudity and turned away, embarrassed.

Hi Robbins covered the groceries carefully with canvas and nodded to me to get into the truck. The roar of the engine filled the cab, making conversation impossible without shouting. We headed out of town on dusty roads that wound through great forests of ponderosa pines. Here and there were windfalls, so thick in the trunk a grown man could not have seen over them. Now and then we would pass small Indian ranches, where little brown children lined the fences to wave at Hi. Now and then older women in long skirts looked up from their chores, their round faces splitting in grins.

Once, we stopped at a roadside spring, where Hi sieved out pollywogs from a rusty coffee can with his fingers and filled the steaming radiator with water. "Your uncle know you're coming?" Hi asked. His voice was as refined and beautiful as his face.

I shrugged. "I guess not," I admitted.

"I figured as much," Hi said. "He's quite a character, that uncle of yours. Never did get married. They say he hates kids."

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND

Doubts swept over me. My uncle had never really invited me west. Just told me about the trout in his stream and the wild horses. What if he got angry when he saw me and sent me packing back to Michigan?

We left the main road at a twenty-six-mile marker to drive across a cattle guard made of railroad iron and through a grove of virgin pines. There were no stumps anywhere, indicating the timber had never been thinned. The ranch house showed up suddenly while I was still ogling the immense trees. The building was huge and ominous, with sharply sloping roofs to accommodate heavy mountain snows. The substantial walls were made of local lava rock with windows framed by huge pine logs, showing rough scars where they had been peeled with a broad axe.

The windows caught the afternoon sun and stared back at us, each pane a tiny eye. I thought I saw a curtain move, but no dog barked and no one came out to greet us. Even the birds were silent, as though busy watching.

I helped Hi Robbins unload groceries onto the back stoop. "Good luck, kid," he said. The engine roared, leaving a pall of stinking blue oil smoke, and swiftly the old Chevy was gone up the dusty road. For a few minutes I could still hear the growl of his truck engine as he shifted gears, and see a cloud of volcanic pumice dust as he progressed up the ridge toward the logging camps to the east. Then all was silent, and I was alone.

There was water running everywhere amongst the willows of the house lot. It bubbled in clear springs from the ground and merged into a larger channel spanned by a crude

log bridge. The holes in my worn sneakers squirted water as I crossed the bridge and moved across the wet meadow toward an A-frame barn and log corrals. There was a freshly skinned cowhide draped across a top log on the corral, raw side up, and a dozen black-and-white birds with long tails were picking it clean. I'd seen their pictures in my bird books. They were magpies and rattled off at my approach, cursing me angrily. From the rafters of the barn hung a fresh beef carcass, shrouded with cloth against the flies. The white cotton had soaked up blood, giving it the coloration of a strawberry roan horse.

Far off I heard a horse nicker and a cow bawl, but the sounds ceased before I could judge the direction. To my right was a small unpainted cottage I took to be a bunkhouse. The door of the adjoining outhouse swung open and shut with the wind; I peeked in, half hoping that there would be someone sitting there I could talk to, but the three seats were empty. On the floor of the privy was a pile of chewed pinecones where a squirrel had recently made a meal.

I was about to investigate the bunkhouse when suddenly I became aware that I was being followed. I turned and saw a tall gray man standing there, watching. "Who the hell are you," he growled, "and what are you doing nosing around?"

I felt a flash of resentment at the greeting. I sensed that this was my uncle, but I had expected him to be wearing cowboy boots, Levi's, and a big Stetson. Instead, wearing a wool cardigan sweater and a slouch hat, this man could be some old banker from Marquette.

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND

“I was looking for my uncle,” I smarted off. “He owns this place. You must be his hired man.”

He watched me, unruffled, as though he hadn’t heard.

“Deaf as a post,” Hi Robbins had said. “He’s got a hearing aid, but damned if he ever turns it on.”

“Your ma was the pretty one in my family,” my uncle said, as though he had read my lips and needed to put me in my place. “It would appear that none of her good looks rubbed off on you.”

With that he turned back toward the house, hooking his head to indicate that I should follow.

The house had a musty smell of mildewed books and was dark and chilly. I had been around enough antiques in the big old houses in northern Michigan to know quality when I saw it, but there was a dark, somber cast of ancient walnut to the carved chests and highboys that depressed me.

He led me upstairs and down a long, gloomy hall to a north bedroom, where there was only a bureau, a small desk and chair, and a narrow cot. “You can sleep here,” he said. “I’ve got business in town for a couple of days. There’s food downstairs in the cool room.”

I was looking at the cot, wondering how I’d fit, and when I turned he was gone and the hall was empty. I sat in my room, fighting homesickness, until I heard his car start and its sounds fade in the distance. Then I got out of that cold house to sit on the massive, sun-warmed lava rocks that formed a garden in front of the ranch house. Yellow-striped garter snakes slithered off to cracks in the rock as though they were not used to human

intrusion. The shallow soil bore a profusion of wild roses, all bursting in pink as though to cheer me up. I sat until the sun had warmed me, and then began to explore.

The house was wired for electricity, but there were no power lines stretching from town. Instead, one of the out-buildings possessed a diesel generator that, I learned later, was only used during evening hours. Hanging on the kitchen wall was a crank telephone which rang every few minutes, jolting the silence with a variety of rings.

From the ranch, a single wire stretched from tree to tree through little white insulators. Listening in to conversations, I soon determined that the line ran to several ranches and various fire lookouts, with a central office at the Klamath Indian Agency, which handled emergency calls about forest fires. Penciled instructions on the kitchen wall informed me that in order to make a call one had to crank out two longs and a short to reach the agency operator, who would then complete your call. I had eavesdropped on some pretty interesting flirty conversations when someone heard my breathing and screamed at me to get the hell off the line.

That night, I lit a kerosene lantern with a big wooden kitchen match, cut two giant beefsteaks from a hindquarter hanging in the pantry or cooler, lit a fire in the big wood-burning cookstove, peeled some potatoes that Hi had brought from town, and cooked myself a meal fit for a thirteen-year-old. Then, having eaten to the point of discomfort and erased all evidence of my meal from the kitchen, I took the lantern and went upstairs to bed.

The next morning, I awoke shivering in the chill of the

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND

fresh mountain air. A front had moved down off the Cascade Mountains to the west. Outside my window, pine boughs clashed like swords, parrying thrust with thrust. A flock of Canada geese, feathers ruffled, sailed past and sought shelter on the pond beside the house. A tree crashed nearby, and I could hear the scream of busting barbed wire and the snapping of wooden posts under the falling tonnage. Yet above the din, from the shelter of the gables, I could hear the persistent cooing of a mourning dove pleading for peace in the forest.

I was still apparently alone at the ranch, and my uncle would not be back until the morrow. I had ventured out into the dying storm to survey the damage when I saw a great cloud of pumice dust rising up like smoke through the pine trees south of the ranch and all but obscuring the sun. My immediate fear was of a forest fire, but soon I heard in the distance the bawling of cattle and the wild yells and curses of cowboys. First a trickle and then a deluge of thirsty cows rushed through the trees, found an open gate, and flowed toward the house springs to drink. Soon there were cowboys, faces caked white with dust, who eased through the milling cattle, dismounted, took the bridles off their horses so they could drink, then bellied down beside their mounts to thrust their own faces into the cold, crystal springwater.

The din hurt my ears. There were cows bawling for their calves and calves bawling for their mothers. A pair of white-faced Hereford bulls fought up a dust storm, battling at the edge of the willows, bellowing curses at each other, rattling horn on horn. Then the riders mounted again. "Move

'em out, boys!" someone shouted, and the yelling began once more. Reluctantly the herd left the water and knee-deep grass to move across the house lot into the corrals.

I stood on the bridge over the stream, watching from a distance as the cowboys rode through the corrals, mothering up calves with their cows. Soon the bawling stopped, and the cows, having nursed their calves, lay down to rest. In time, calves at their sides, the animals began to move out through the open gates and drift northward down a lane toward the home meadows along the Williamson River.

The cowboys unsaddled their mounts and turned them out to roll in the dust. The tired horses lay with their hooves kicking the air, then lurched to their feet and ambled out to pasture. Dark sweat marks showed on their backs and flanks. There was no running, kicking, or biting. It was the end of a long cattle drive, and their heads hung low with fatigue. From a hundred feet away, I could smell the sharp odor of wet horse hair and sweaty saddle blankets.

One by one and in pairs, the cowboys headed for the bunkhouse. A boy, not much older than I, nodded to me shyly. For a moment I thought he was going to come over and talk to me, but he changed his course swiftly and ran for the outhouse.

Black smoke poured from the bunkhouse chimney, then turned white as a fire took shape in the kitchen stove. Two men came out with buckets and scooped up water from the spring. I sat on the bridge and watched, too shy to go over and talk.

THE PASTURES OF BEYOND

One at a time, men came out on the front stoop and emptied washbasins of pale gray water on the grass.

As I sat on the heavy planks, dangling my feet above the water, a big, white-headed horsefly bit me on the knee. I smacked it hard and sent the body floating down the stream, where a hungry trout made short work of it. My knee still hurt from the bite when I got up and headed for the ranch house to cook myself another pile of steak.

When he arrived from town the next day, my uncle seemed surprised to see the kitchen clean. He glanced into the cool room at the big chunk I had carved from the beef but made no comment. He seemed shy and unable to carry on a conversation with someone my age and was no friendlier than he had been when I arrived, but I gathered courage to ask him what had been uppermost on my mind since I arrived. I figured that he couldn't get more grouchy than he already was. "I was wondering," I asked, in a voice loud enough for even a dead man to hear. "I was wonderin', Uncle, when do I get to ride a horse?"

