

MURDALAND ISSUE #2 PREVIEW PDF VISIT WWW.MURDALANDMAGAZINE.COM TO ORDER MURDALAND ONLINE

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Zebulon (from “The Drop Edge of Yonder”, Two Dollar Radio, 2008) Rudolph Wurlitzer

The winter that Zebulon set his traps along the Gila River had been colder and longer than any he had experienced, leaving him with two frostbitten toes, an arrow wound in his shoulder from a Crow war party, and to top it all off, the unexpected arrival of two frozen figures stumbling more dead than alive into his cabin in the middle of a spring blizzard.

Rather than waking him, the cold blast of wind from the open door became part of a recurrent dream: a long endless fall through an empty sky toward a storm-tossed sea... Come closer, the towering waves howled...

He opened his eyes, not sure for a moment if the man and woman staring back at him weren't hungry ghosts. Frost clung to their eyebrows and nostrils, and their swollen faces were raw and crimson from the tree-cracking cold. The man wore a hard-brimmed top hat tied under his bearded chin with a long red scarf, along with a buffalo robe coated with slivers of ice. The woman appeared to be a Shoshoni half-breed. She was wrapped inside a huge army overcoat distinguished by sergeant stripes at the shoulders and, at the chest, two bullet holes, one over the other.

The man sank to his knees, swearing and choking from the smoke pouring out of the cabin's leaky fireplace and the overpowering stench of a nearby slop bucket. He spoke in a rasping whisper, as if his larynx had been smashed.

“I figured we be dead meat until the breed told me you was camped on the Gila. She knows things that ain't available to other mortals.”

The man was Lobo Bill, an old trapper and horse thief, known for his wide range of windy tales and maniacal rages, that Zebulon had run into and away from in various saloons and hideouts from Tularosa to Cheyenne. When he removed his top hat he exposed a face sliced on one side from cheek to jawbone, as if neatly quartered by a butcher's knife.

Lobo Bill nodded toward the breed, who was standing with her back to the wall, staring at Zebulon with huge empty eyes. “She ain't one for words but when she does open her flap, she packs a punch you don't want to know about. Even so, I owe her. She saved my bacon when a wolverine took after me. Axed it into quarters and sliced me up as well. I won her in Alamosa from a horse trader. A straight flush to his full house. A hand for the ages. She's half Shoshoni, half Irish. ‘Not Here Not There’ is what I call her and I'm favored to have her, things bein' what they is these days, or ain't, depending on which way the wind blows, and even if it don't.”

Lobo Bill and Not Here Not There took off their clothes. After their bodies thawed out they collapsed on a pile of bearskins near the fireplace.

Zebulon spent the rest of the night stoking the fire and drinking from one of his last bottles of Taos White Lightning, pondering memories of Lobo Bill and all the other mountain lunatics he had known and what he and they used to be, or not, and what he was meant to do, or be, depending on his view from the valley or mountaintop. It wasn't so much that the old mountain ways were played out, although that day was

surely coming. There was something else that Lobo Bill and his breed had brought in with them, a mysterious presence or shadow that he was unable to define. Or maybe it was just the sight of two strange and lost figures snoring on his bed.

It was dawn when the wind died, along with most of his premonitions, enough anyway to let him pass out next to his guests.

When he woke, a hard brittle light was splattering against the cabin walls. There was no sign of Lobo Bill. When he questioned Not Here Not There, she shook her head and rolled her eyes back and forth, which made him think that Lobo Bill had either gone off to find his mules and traps or he had decided to skip out altogether. Around him the cabin had been swept clean. The slop bucket had been emptied, his stock of flour, tobacco, whiskey, coffee and dried jerky were stacked neatly in one corner and split logs were piled up on either side of the fireplace.

The extreme tidiness of the cabin, together with Not Here Not There's sullen silence, made him uneasy, as if she were harboring secret thoughts or maybe, god help him, some ill-intentioned plan. Never mind, he thought. Whatever was meant to come would come, ready or not.

While they both waited for Lobo Bill to appear, Zebulon hunted for small game and prepared for the annual spring rendezvous by taking down and sorting the hundreds of muskrat and beaver pelts he had stashed in the crooks of several trees.

After three days Lobo Bill still hadn't returned. Most of the time, Not Here Not There sat on the bench outside the cabin, staring at the river and the dark blue ice that had begun to splinter into large moving cracks. In the evening she avoided looking at him as she cooked one of the rabbits he had shot. After they ate dinner, instead of retreating to the corner she had chosen to sleep in, she joined him near the fire. Looking at him with a sly grin, she took his bottle of Taos White Lightning from him and drained the rest of it, then swayed back to her place across the room.

That night he was woken by her long nails scratching lines of blood down his stomach and across his groin, a violent gesture which she repeated even as she pulled him inside her, locking her legs around his waist as if she wanted to break him in two.

For the rest of the night she dictated their furious passion on her own insatiable terms. In the morning she left the cabin without looking at him or saying a word.

Two days later she returned in the middle of a thunderstorm. Standing before him, she looked into his eyes as he removed her clothes and positioned her over the table, pinning her arms above her head.

When the door opened he was plunging on inside her as if they had never been apart. When he became aware that Lobo Bill was standing above them with a raised hatchet, he decided that he might as well go out in the same way that he had been conceived. Part of him enjoyed the prospect and he was damned if he was going to give Lobo Bill the satisfaction of an apology. He continued to thrust himself inside her with even more abandon, letting out a long mountain yell: "Waaaaaaaagh!"

His fury broke the table, sending them both to the floor. Lobo Bill's hatchet missed Zebulon's skull by an inch and sliced a large hole in the middle of Not Here Not There's stomach.

Before Lobo Bill could react, Zebulon reached for a pistol inside Lobo Bill's belt and shot him between the eyes.

Unable to move or speak, he sat on the floor, watching Not Here Not There stagger through the door.

When he finally went after her, she was standing naked on a slab of ice halfway into the river, her hands trying to hold back the blood oozing from her stomach.

"You killed the only man that ever cared for me," she said. "And now you've killed me." They were

the first words that he had heard her speak. As the ice sank lower, carrying her downstream, and the black freezing water rose over her legs and hips, she called out to him again: “From now on, you will drift like a blind man between the worlds, not knowing if you’re dead or alive, or if the unseen world exists, or if you’re dreaming. Three times you will disappear to yourself and all that you know, and three times you will –”

She said something more but he was unable to hear the words as she slowly sank beneath the ice. When the days became longer and formations of geese and ducks flew overhead, Zebulon cinched his pelts on the backs of his two mules and rode off on his horse. He was a tall raw-boned man drifting through the mountains in greasy buckskins, with matted yellow hair falling over his shoulders, his gnarled trunk scarred top to bottom from knife and arrowhead wounds, as well as wounds secret and unimaginable.

That year the rendezvous was held along the Purgatory River, at the end of a narrow valley dotted with clumps of cottonwood and stunted alder. As Zebulon walked his horse toward the sprawling camp of half-starved Indians and drunken mountain men, he was confronted by an ancient Arapahoe squaw wearing a top hat and a dirty brown blanket thrown over a long red skirt. In one hand she held a large war club made of an elk’s horn, in the other, a rattle. As he guided his horse around her, a luminous veil of smoky light shimmered down her body. He thought of Not Here Not There, staring at him with angry, accusing eyes. As he looked closer, her shape dissolved into a mulatto woman with high cheek bones and finally, into the frozen death mask of a white-haired Mexican crone.

The Arapahoe laughed at his fear. Shaking her rattle, she circled him three times until he finally lost consciousness and fell headfirst off his horse. When he struggled to his feet, his body covered with mud, the Arapahoe was gone as if she had never been there in the first place.

He continued toward the camp, his spirits revived by long whoops and gun shots from the assembled as they traded pelts for supplies, swapped horses, gambled and brawled. He had earned the right to let it all bust out, he promised himself, no matter that tight-assed company agents were offering only two months credit for supplies – including whiskey, coffee and gunpowder – that no mountain man, particularly this one, could live without. Or that he knew the talk around the campfires no longer would be about who had been scalped or gone under or who had done what to whom and for what. Nossir. On this particular night he was in no mood to hear about the collapse of the fur trade, or the booming California gold rush, or the wave of ignorant flatlanders that were spreading across the mountains like a plague of locusts, or the last days of the free-trapper, when a mountain man could ride wherever he wanted and perform any sort of mischief that suited him. A way of life that was being replaced by sinkhole towns and know-nothing Eastern greenhorns honking the arrival of civilization and the dictates of the Sabbath – none of which, at least for him and his kind, were even remotely possible. Nossir, he announced again. This mountain lunatic was going to sink his teeth into what was directly in front of him and chew the pleasures of this particular rendezvous to the bone. Ready or not.

After he accepted a low cash offer for his pelts, he drank himself toward oblivion. His spirits raised to the frothy brim, he engaged in a tomahawk throwing contest followed by several rounds of three-card monte, then a hurried poke with a Pawnee squaw and, with a dozen other mountain desperadoes, a wild free-for-all in the greasy mud that came to a sudden end when a crazed Polack tried to bite off his lower lip.

“Hoorah fer mountain doin’s!” Zebulon shouted, smashing the Polack’s nose halfway into his skull and kicking out what was left of his teeth. The two men then staggered arm in arm to join other lunatics sitting around a fire, smoking and drinking fire-water by the bank of the swollen Purgatory. They drank straight through the night, the river roaring past them high on the spring flood as they stuffed sloppy buffalo gizzards down their wet throats, singing and swapping a winter’s worth of windy lies and tall tales.

The next morning he hoofed his way through a drum-thumping, fiddle-scratching fandango, then

played poker around a torn blanket spread over the frozen ground. He won more than he had any right to, considering that he was unable to make out the numbers on the cards.

“Bad is best,” he yelled, slamming down one winning card after another. In previous years, he wouldn’t have stopped until he had lost his entire winter haul and found himself buried under in debt to the Fur Company. That was the all-or-nothing code that he had always lived up to. Another year always came around and when his pouch was finally empty and his body bruised and broken, he would head back to the mountains to hunt and heal himself and move on, to drift wherever the wind and his raw instincts took him. It was a grand free-for-all life that he took for granted, one that he never thought would end. But this year was different and he had just enough presence of mind to sell one of his mules and ride out before he lost it all. Things end, he told himself as he pondered his options. Stealing and raising horses – he was skilled and experienced for that, enough to secure a cattle ranch on the headwaters of the Green. Or maybe he could make a stab at the California gold rush, even though that greedy stampede was at the bottom of his possibles list. In any case, he wasn’t getting younger; hell, he was near thirty-five, or was it forty? He had never counted the years and his folks had never bothered to tell him. But one way or the other, he was riding down a river of no return on a leaky raft, a sloping drift headed for the rapids unless he figured out how to change. His mind was wandering, his body wasn’t what it used to be and more and more he felt the ominous presence of a dark shadow looming up behind him.

On his way back to the mountains he planned to give himself the luxury of a pause in Panchito, a squalid high-desert settlement that he had hid out in more than once – gut shot or on the run from a war party or a round of horse thieving from one of the sprawling Spanish ranches south of Santa Fe. It was a place where he could wet his beak and lay out with a seasoned whore without worrying about being drilled in the back or skinned in a crooked poker game.

Two days outside of Panchito, a storm slammed down from the north and twice he was blown off his saddle by gusts of ice-blue wind and sleet that...

That’s all of the story we can give you online.

To read Rudolph Wurlitzer’s ‘Zebulon’ in full alongside an additional 176 pages of dark original fiction order the second issue of ‘Murdaland’ online at www.murdalandmagazine.com.

