

# FALLING TO HEAVEN

IN THIS THIRD INSTALLATION OF HIS SERIES ON WONDER VALLEY, WILLIAM HILLYARD EXPLORES TWO MEN'S LIVES AS THEY INTERSECT IN THE ARID ISOLATION OF THE MOJAVE DESERT.

BY WILLIAM HILLYARD  
PHOTOS BY PRESTON DRAKE-HILLYARD

**NIGHT IN WONDER VALLEY IS VAST AND LIMITLESS;** out there, no lights distract the stars. Looking up, you see infinity. The heavens shroud the earth with the dust of the Milky Way, the ancient pulse of countless stars in that eternity of darkness. Out there, the sky appears torn from the earth along the jagged silhouette of the mountains—those mountains, along with the dilapidated homestead shacks and the empty sand and scrub of the Wonder Valley floor, sink into a featureless black void. Late, in the calm of the deep night, you can find yourself out there in an ear-crackling silence, in a darkness without form. All you are is your breath rasping in your chest, your heart lub-dubbing in your ears. Life, the entirety of your existence, collapses to a mere spark, the briefest blush of daylight in an endless night.

Out there, with the cosmic canopy hanging heavy above, Tom Whitefeather sits in an old rocking chair staring out the open door of Raub McCartney's rock-walled cabin into the night. Raub's dusty, half-drunk jug of wine sits at his feet. The rock-walled cabin sits anchored to the flank of an island, a scab of weathered boulders, part of that inky nighttime silhouette rising from the barren basin of the valley. Whitefeather will make his bed on Raub's antique settee behind the old rocking chair, wrapped in a blanket against the cold darkness of the rock-walled room. He never goes into Raub's room; it sits just the way they left it, with the boxes overturned, the bed covered with clothes and photos. They left it with the closet door sprung open, the contents spilling out onto the floor. They left it with the box fan on the floor and the bullet hole in the wall.

**RAUB MCCARTNEY CAME FROM A FAMILY** of stonemasons; they built the rock-walled cabin by themselves from heat-varnished stones gathered from the open desert. This was throwaway land out here, worthless government property—free to any who improved it. That's what Raub's family did. His grandparents homesteaded this land in the 1950's, cut the roads along property lines, fought back nature's relentless destruction. The rock-walled cabin grew, the porch added, a guest cottage. The low stone walls keep back the invading desert sands.

The cabin faces west toward the glow of town. In the darkness, the lights of the few occupied cabins in the area float

in the inky void like ships adrift; the nearest to Raub's cabin is a mile away. Within the cabin's rock walls, Raub rocked alone in his old chair, rented movies as his company.

Raub recorded his life in a calendar he kept on the table next to his rocker. "Sad," he scrawled in his shaky hand across an entire week. "Worse than normal," was his self-diagnosis on another. Mostly, his days were blank.

In his previous life, before he came to Wonder Valley, Raub had been a sociable guy, gregarious. He had lived the San Francisco scene in the 1960's, had sold smack to Ike and Tina, had partied in L.A. only a few degrees of separation from the Hollywood hipster in-crowd. He had come to Wonder Valley, to his parents' rock-walled cabin, when his father fell sick. His father died, then his mother, but Raub was still out there, stranded alone in the desert, as on an island, separated from humanity by a sea of sand.

Raub kept a starling, Gary Bird, the reincarnation of his previous life's best friend who had died years before of AIDS. When it died, he put it in the freezer, unable to let it go. Then his dog died. He buried them both in the drifts of sand next to the rock-walled cabin.

For a while, Raub worked at the K-Mart in town, making the 30-mile drive through the tangle of dirt tracks and board-straight stretches of asphalt pavement, but he couldn't keep a car running. After K-Mart closed, he lost the will and the energy to look for more work. As his mood faltered, his health failed, medications prescribed—for diabetes, his heart problems, nerve damage, anxiety, serotonin reuptake inhibitors, anti-depressants, a daily cocktail of a dozen or more pills. He self-medicated with alcohol, as well. He sank deeper into his isolation.

At some point, Raub McCartney met Tom Whitefeather adrift in the desert. Whitefeather was a desert rat, Indian, he'd tell you, who walked miles alone every day scrounging a living. Like Raub, he was marooned out there; he had nothing, save the cats he kept as company. He lived on the little work he could find and the charity of those who had but little more than he. At night he crashed in a ramshackle shack with no electricity or water. Whitefeather frequently walked the mile from his shack to visit Raub, helping out a bit, doing odd jobs for cat food for his kitties, and cigarettes and wine and beer. Raub was glad to have someone around to talk to.



TOM WHITEFEATHER STANDS OUTSIDE RAUB MCCARTNEY'S ROCK WALLED CABIN IN THE MOJAVE DESERT

The two formed an unlikely pair, a tumultuous relationship. After 10 years alone in the desert, Raub was set in his ways. And his depression and his drinking made him volatile at times. Whitefeather, too, was strong-headed and opinionated. He ate Raub's food, drank his booze; he constantly needed money to feed his kitties. They argued and fought. But Raub craved company, human contact. Someone was better than no one, and out there, there was no one else.

**BY THE END OF MAY**, any chill is gone from Wonder Valley nights. On the 19th, the moon would only rise near dawn; Raub and Whitefeather were drinking. They had picked up a gallon of wine in town, rented some movies. As he drank, Raub grew morose and moody.

As typical, they began to bicker and fight. "You promised you'd only have two glasses," Whitefeather complained to Raub, taking away the wine jug and hiding it outside. Raub became depressed when he drank and Whitefeather tried to control him, to control his drinking and stabilize his moods.

That night, Raub became furious. "I'll go get a jug of my own!" he screamed, climbing into his van and rattling down the washboard roads to town. From the rock-walled cabin, Whitefeather watched the van's headlights float off into the desert's black void. Whitefeather ran back into the house and called the police to report him as a drunk driver.

Isolated on their desert island, their blow-ups were frequent. A few months before, on a hot, autumn night, Raub, in a drunken rage, pulled a gun on Whitefeather, a .22 caliber revolver, pointing it at his chest.

Whitefeather backed against the wall. "Shoot me," he murmured. "Put me out of my misery." The two men stared at each other.

Raub fired the gun three times, out the open door and into the desert night, then sunk into a kitchen chair and turned the weapon to his own temple. Whitefeather lunged and grabbed the revolver, turning the cylinder before Raub could wrench it away and press the barrel to his temple again. Click. The hammer hit an empty chamber. Whitefeather dove again for the gun, snatching it away and firing it into the kitchen floor, emptying it of bullets which ricocheted into the stove and walls.

Raub stumbled out of the kitchen to his rocking chair. Whitefeather, agitated, continued to berate him, scolding him, chiding him. They were both drunk. As Raub rose to confront Whitefeather, Whitefeather hit him with two jabs, blackening both his eyes and crumpling him back down in the chair in a daze.

Months later, on that moonless night in May, Raub returned with his second jug of wine, and evicting Whitefeather from his home, sat down in his rocking chair to drink. Whitefeather sat outside with his own jug, fuming and drinking. The police never came; they responded with sirens to Whitefeather's drunk driver report, rolling up to the wrong house—one in Barstow, 80 miles away.

On those moonless nights, under that immense Wonder Valley sky, the world becomes detached from the lights in the heavens above. Out there, your hold on the world seems tenuous. You feel upside down, hanging off the planet,

hanging above an abyss—the stars pulling you to them. Gravity, the law of gravity is just another law in this lawless place, and on those nights in the desert you might just lose your footing and fall from the planet, fall into the void of space.

Whitefeather heard a bang from within the house. It was a .22 caliber pistol. Raub was left handed, but that hand was weak; he held the gun in his right hand and steadied it with the other. Bang. Raub shot the box fan on the floor of his bedroom, the bullet lodged in the wall. He put the gun to his temple. Bang. That bullet lodged in his brain. Instantly, Raub McCartney was dead.

**THESE DAYS, TOM WHITEFEATHER** sits in Raub's old rocking chair staring out into the blackness of night. Disembodied voices enter the cabin through his radio, news that the world still spins, that there are others beyond the ocean of night. He rocks in Raub's chair in front of Raub's new television. The television sits largely abandoned, only occasionally visited by the characters from the stacks of videos on the floor.

This is still Raub's house, and it will be until the state takes it, until they auction it off to recoup the medical money they paid to maintain the cabin as Raub slipped into ill health and deep depression. In the meantime, Whitefeather sits rocking in the cabin, the concrete floor and heavy rock walls anchored to the bedrock of the valley, terra firma. Outside, the moaning wind claws at the cabin, which holds its ground against the pull of the heavens and the black void of the Wonder Valley night. •