

The Last Time I Saw Cal

Time spent with a wise and talented cowboy artist who rode the range, built his own house and loved to paint leads to a revelation about life—and the heartbreaking consequences of waiting too long, waiting for “nothin’.”

By William Allen Baltz

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” asked the lady who owned the gallery as I surveyed her collection of paintings. “I’m looking to meet a Tubac artist, though no one in particular,” I replied.

I then explained that I was from Chicago staying with friends in Tucson who recommended I visit Tubac, an “artist colony” they called it. So far, I related, most of the art I had seen in Tubac seemed to be from everywhere but Tubac—sand paintings from Santa Fe, tiles from Mexico and trinkets from India. I had envisioned meeting artists working, actually making their art—painting, sculpting, fabricating.

“Well, you’re in luck,” she responded cheerfully. “My name’s Margaret, what’s yours?”

“Bill.”

“Pleased to meet you, Bill. Come on with me.”

I followed Margaret—an attractive and vivacious woman in her early fifties, by all appearances successful, who struck me as possessing both a rugged can-do spirit and a heartfelt sensibility—through a Spanish mission-style door, across a courtyard, and into another adobe building.

“Cal,” she called out just before opening the door. “Howdy-ho!” came a robust, spirited reply. We walked into a small art studio that smelled richly of paint, solvents and canvas. Cal turned from his easel and stood to greet me. He was a ramrod: Tall, lean and



“No better place on earth.” View of the Santa Rita Mountains from Cal’s spread.

muscular, with fine white hair, a thin white mustache and sky-blue eyes. He wore a gray t-shirt, blue jeans, large silver belt buckle with a longhorn steer engraved on it, and cowboy boots. Though he appeared to be in his mid-seventies, he looked strong and tough—a man who could whip someone half his age.

“This is Bill,” Margaret said.

“He’s from Chicago and would like to meet a Tubac artist at work—though no one in particular,” she added winking at me.

Cal set down his brush, wiped his huge, tanned and calloused hands with a rag, and then shook my hand. His grip was steely and firm. “Howdy, Bill, pleased to know you. This here’s my dog, Pal.” Pal, an Australian cattle dog, rose from his spot on the floor next to Cal’s easel to sniff me.

I was immediately drawn to this charismatic man with a Texas accent and similarly enthralled by the scene he was painting: A band of Indians crossing the plains on horseback through deep snow. The leader, mounted on an equally tenacious horse, presses forward against a merciless wind—his black hair and scarf flying straight back—inspiring his brethren to strive on. Behind them are bright streaks of orange and yellow-tinged clouds in a frosty blue sky. “They’re Lakota,” Cal said, using the tip of his brush as a pointer. “They’ve just broken camp. It’s near 30 below. These horses here with no rider are carrying supplies. That’s how they did it.” The frigid scene, a testament to stoic resolve, sent an icy jolt up my spine—and still does when I imagine myself along side those intrepid Lakota wondering how, or if, I could survive.

“So, what the hell do you do in Chicago?” Cal asked.
“You going to move here?”

“I’ve wanted to move out west all my life,” I said.

“Then by God do it,” Cal snapped. “Don’t squander time, for that’s the stuff life is made of.’ Ol’ Ben Franklin said that. I say it plain and simple: Don’t wait for nothin’.”

Cal, I could tell, was a decisive, no-nonsense man—old school—with a hardy appetite for life, especially Western life. Though he looked tough, and was, he also projected a warm and friendly demeanor, and his disarming grin and wink were timed perfectly.

“I’m ready for a break,” he said putting on his straw cowboy hat.
“Let’s mosey over to the cantina and grab a cold one.”

“You boys enjoy yourselves, I’ll stay and mind the shop,” Margaret said, clearly pleased with the convivial outcome of her impromptu introduction.

Cal and I walked past small shops and galleries—some with pottery, others with glass sculptures outside—while Pal trotted happily behind us.

“I like your painting,” I said.

“Then you ought to have it,” Cal remarked. “I call it ‘Snow Trail.’ I’ll finish it and send it to you or, better yet, stick around a spell and pick it up. What the hell’s in Chicago anyway other than goddamned traffic, shit weather, crooks and high taxes?”

Near death No better place on earth

So began our friendship. Cal invited me to his home tucked away in the hills west of town he called the “old hacienda,” a beautiful adobe ranch house that he designed and built with his own two hands—from excavating the foundation to fashioning the metal roof. He crafted all the doors and cabinets from oak.

Cal arrived in Tubac 40 years ago when the town was an actual artist colony without the overt commercial focus it has now with importers, trinket shops, crafters and tourists who, as Cal said, “wouldn’t know good art if it bit ‘em on the ass.”

He fenced in ten acres overlooking town and a section of the Santa Cruz River that meanders through a lush valley of cottonwoods with views of the Santa Rita, Tumacacori and San Cayetano mountains, then set to work on his house.

Though I never met Mary, Cal’s wife, I spoke with her frequently on the telephone. A former nurse turned estate-sale dealer, she was either absent on business or bed ridden with debilitating migraine headaches when I visited the hacienda. She was a chain smoker, too, and Cal’s house reeked of cigarettes. Also living with him was his 92-year-old mother-in-law who remained secluded in her bedroom, though she occasionally answered the telephone when I called Cal, speaking in a feeble voice with a mild Texas accent.

After meeting Cal, I made three more trips to Tubac. On one trip, I drove across the country with Coley, my springer spaniel. We stayed in Oro Valley, at a friend’s vacation home, making daily excursions to the hacienda.

Coley and Pal became fast friends, but I worried about Coley in unfamiliar and dangerous terrain. “Don’t bother about your dog,” Cal assured me. “Pal will take care of him.” He was

right. Pal stayed near Coley at all times, ever vigilant for rattlesnakes. Being a cattle dog, he kept him close to the hacienda and from wandering off trail on hikes.

Cal had worked digging wells and some years ago as a ranch foreman. One day we all piled in his pick-up truck and splashed across the Santa Cruz River deep into the backcountry to an old cattle corral that Cal once operated for a local rancher.

As we walked around the sun-beaten posts, worn by decades of jostling rawhide, he explained how it functioned—the loading chute, separating pens and watering troughs—and recounted his days driving herds. “You know, Billy, we could build a corral on the old hacienda. Get us a couple of good horses and a few head to start. I know just where to get them,” he said as we sat on a section of fence taking in an expansive view of the Santa Rita Mountains, purple and red streaked, while voluminous clouds drifted lazily overhead. “We’d have plenty of water and the sweetest grass in the world. We’ll ride the backcountry, too,



Cal inspects his Winchester rifle of 60 years. He could track and hunt, butcher a deer and tan a rattlesnake skin.

millions of acres. I'll show you sites you'd never see on your own and teach you a thing or two about living in the west. There's no better place on earth."

Cal's idea—an invitation, really—enthralled me and I thought about it constantly. After my parents died, all that was keeping me in Chicago were my loosening business connections and engagement, both of which were uncertain and problematic.

Portrait of the artist

Cal related that he grew up on a ranch in Texas. His father was stern, hardworking, shrewd but fair, and possessed both a sense of humor and generally optimistic view of life that he imparted to Cal. Every morning before dawn, except Sunday, his mother fired up a wood stove. With his belly full of flapjacks, steak and grits he rode the range with his father and older brother, Joseph. "Best life there was," he often said.

He was 17 years old when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Largely overlooked by Americans enjoying the good life after years of economic depression and fighting World War II, it was a savage and bloody conflict defined by merciless artillery barrages, mass attacks, fighting in bitter cold and gruesome atrocities.

Cal enlisted in the Army and was soon thrust into combat. His hands were marred with small white splotches, scars from burns and mortar shrapnel that had also torn into his legs. A metal plate had been implanted in one leg and the jabbing pain from shrapnel still lodged in tissue would occasionally set him off: "That son of a bitch, MacArthur!" he would rave. "Thank God for Ridgway. He knew what the hell he was doing. Jesus God, when the Chinese came in we got our ass kicked and would have been run off that goddamned peninsula if it weren't for Ridgway."

The Korean War left its insidious mark on him. While showing me a picture he had painted in his youth of Billy the Kid, he remarked that "the Kid" was not mean or bad by nature, but had been forced to kill when he was young—as Cal had in Korea—and so he understood the dark forces that can "well up and take hold of you if you let them."

After his time in the service, Cal returned home and married a rancher's daughter in Oregon and worked the spread. Both his wife and father-in-law, it turned out, were alcoholics, so he left. "They were going to piss it all away," he recounted. After several years operating his own commercial fishing boat, he worked on oil tankers traversing the seas. On long voyages he would unwind by painting.

Cal was up at 4 a.m. everyday. A twelve-hour work-day—handy-man projects along with maintaining his spread—was standard. He knew how to hunt, butcher a deer, smoke meats, tan a rattle-snake skin, tie all sorts of knots, throw a lariat with ease, and build or fix virtually anything. With Cal, it was always a proper job and every deal was sealed by a handshake.

One morning I arrived at the hacienda while Cal was making repairs to his truck.

"Tell me, Cal, is there anything you can't do?" I asked jestingly.

"Growing up on a ranch and living in the country you've got to do most everything yourself,"

he responded, wiping his oily hands on a rag. "You get your rear end out here and I'll show you how to raise cattle, track and hunt; fix an engine and roof, and dig a well—you'll never starve or want for work. First, though, you got to get out of that shit-hole city where you're always under someone's goddamn thumb. Come on, I got something for you," he said walking to the house.

From the top drawer of a richly crafted desk, itself a handsome relic from the Old West, he took out a pocket-sized book with a soft leather cover and handed it to me. "You ever read this?" he asked. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance."

"It's been some time," I replied.

"Good books are wasted on us because we're too young to appreciate them. Once you've ripened a bit, though, they make a lot of sense and can set you straight. Read it through."

Some nights later, while reading Emerson's summons to fruitful independence, I encountered the following passage underlined in pencil:



Pal and Coley, my springer spaniel, became fast friends.

“Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only extemporaneous, half possession.”

I had a notion, presumptuous perhaps, but nevertheless real, that Cal had underlined those sentences for me. “Trust thyself,” I recalled him once saying as we discussed life on the veranda, “every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Reading “Self-Reliance” I had now discovered his source—one of many timeless mentors he consulted on his path to becoming a wise and learned man.

Indeed, as we toiled mending fences or on some other chore, he might cite a Proverb or Psalm to temper his cussing (which was simply part of his country parlance and rarely with malice); or as we sat on the veranda watching an evanescent sky turn from one ablaze with color to an inky black expanse awash with stars, mesmerized by the unearthly transformation, he might quote a favorite poet. “I’d like to get away from earth awhile. And then come back to it and begin over,” he once mused, citing a verse from Robert Frost as we gazed at a night sky so resplendent with stars that I found myself vacillating between a feeling of a infinite insignificance to one of infinite gratitude, a sense, if you will, of the sacred. I may have even come close, in those numinous moments, to grasping what T.S. Elliot meant by “the point of intersection of the timeless with time.” Close, anyway.

Life at the hacienda

My favorite times were Cal’s painting sessions on the veranda, typically after supper or during the heat of the day. The veranda—a terra cotta patio that wrapped around the house—served as his outdoor studio replete with assorted canvases, jars of brushes, tubes of paint and various other art supplies.

Cal was the antithesis of the brooding, self-absorbed and pretentious artists I had met over the years. He painted joyfully and encouraged me to delve into his art books, which I eagerly did, while he painted, Coley snoozed by my side, Pal stood watch and a dove

named Gabby, who Cal found in the desert and saved after her wing had been shot, peeked out from her cage.

Light and color enthralled him, and he was a devoted student of those who had mastered these two qualities of verisimilitude throughout the ages. Thumbing through art books, I would call out an artist’s name and then revel in his homespun critiques:

“Caravaggio.”

“Quirky son of gun, but pulled you into the scene like no other.”



“Sweetest grass in the world.” Cal and I discuss raising cattle while walking his land with Coley.

“Rubens.”

“Methodical as all hell. Pure and powerful colors.”

“Ribera.”

“Total respect for the truth. I like that in a man.”

“Vermeer.”

“Magical brushwork. Painted the sweetest scene of a street you ever saw.”

“Here’s one for you to read up on—a fella called Aelbert Cuyp,” Cal said turning from his painting. “I’m not sure how the hell you say his name, but

he was the best goddamn painter of cattle ever.” And so I learned.

While on voyages to Europe, he made frequent excursions to the museums of Paris to marvel at the groundbreaking innovations of Manet and Degas, and to Albi to delight in the genius of Toulouse Latrec. At home, he carefully studied the works of America’s great landscape painters—Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and Frederic Edwin Church—and those who portrayed the splendors and hardships of the American frontier: Albert Bierstadt for his spectacular Rocky Mountain series; Thomas Moran for his dramatic manifestations of light; and Charles Russell and Frederick Remington for sheer adventure.

In the end, Cal did not identify himself with any one or group of artists. He did not think of himself as a cowboy artist per se; he was a cowboy and an artist who painted Western motifs but also beautiful seascapes.

Indeed, one of my favorite paintings was of a small but sturdy cabin—a symbol of independence and steadfast resolve—overlooking a vast but deceptively tranquil sea under a sky latent with peril. He painted, in his own style of realism, for the sheer pleasure of it, either to capture the poignancy of a moment, tell a story or simply experiment gleefully with the magical properties of light and color.

And he painted quickly. After making preliminary sketches of his idea, he worked fast and confidently. There was no hesitation. This was true of all things Cal did, and so painting was another manifestation of his deeply ingrained work ethic and ability to execute.

While on the veranda one afternoon, I watched him paint a picture of the San Cayetano Mountains.

The day before, we had hiked to one of his favorite places to view the mountains, and a particular ridge he wanted to paint. Cal would often stop to survey the scene, analyzing the shifts in light and color. We were both enthralled by that suspenseful moment before a violent storm when the entire atmosphere is imbued with a mysterious pulchritude.

It happens while traversing the backcountry on a blazing hot day—the colors of rocks, shrubs, sky and earth all electrified by the sun's fiery rays. Then, the wind shifts and the temperature plummets, and you hear the deep rolling sound of thunder seconds before it splits the air with an angry blast that echoes through the canyon. Glancing upward, you see the tip of a monstrous dark cloud shooting up and over the peaks about to shut out the sun and drop its payload whether you find cover or not. It is a sublime and exhilarating moment when every parched and bone-dry thing in the desert opens its pores feverishly awaiting deliverance from the merciless sun and, in the process, the entire valley throbs with color. Lightning ripping through the air, charged and lethal, draws closer. Your fears of being swept away by waters blasting through the canyon or succumbing to hypothermia in an icy deluge are well justified, though of no consequence to the black thunderheads, advancing and unstoppable—a godsend for some, the day of reckoning for others. “You damn well better have a poncho with

you,” said Cal, standing back from the canvas looking at his painting.

One morning Coley and I arrived at the hacienda while Cal was painting on a large square tile. The scene was at once riveting and alarming: Three Apaches on horseback were traveling around a bend following the trail along a canyon ridge sprouting cactus among jagged boulders with a treacherous river raging below. The leader—ammunition belt slung across his chest, knife at the ready—was mounted bareback on a ghostly gray Appaloosa, a chilling phantom with black spots, alert ears and flared nostrils. He stared directly at me with an ominous, deviously amused expression that said, “I have spotted you, amigo, and your feeble attempt to hide is in vain.”

“Those hombres are up to no good,” Cal said, as he continued creating brush in the foreground where I saw myself hiding, hoping the Apaches and their fearsome horses would pass by. “Yes, sir, you’d better hope to God they don’t get a hold of you.”

He set down his brush and pulled something out of his shirt pocket and tossed it to me. “Take a good look at that,” he said. It was a small, clear vial. “Gold?” I asked, examining the contents. “You’re damn right it’s gold—an ounce. Come on, let’s take a ride.”

We loaded shovels, buckets, pans and other gear into the truck. The two dogs and I hopped in the truck with Cal at the helm. “Los amigos,” we called ourselves. Cal crossed the Santa Cruz River and blazed to a remote location in the backcountry.

“My brother Joseph taught me all there is to know about finding gold,” he said as we jounced over rough terrain. “He found enough to buy himself the truck and equipment he needed to start his excavating business in California. Hell, he was worth damn near four million when he died.”

We arrived at a place near two large drainage pipes and proceeded to fill our buckets with sand that had washed out from the pipes. “You come out here and we’ll find gold—enough to keep us fed and happy. I know every square inch of this land and I know where there’s gold,” Cal said as we shoveled.



Cal takes a break from painting at the hacienda to say hello to Gabby, the injured dove he rescued.

After completing our task, we again piled in the truck and made our way back to the hacienda. Cal took a detour down another dirt road and stopped near a series of rock formations. We got out of the truck and surveyed the rugged countryside. “Aren’t those outcroppings something,” he said gazing at the oddly shaped boulders. “Look closely and you’ll see creatures with faces and bodily forms.” Cal was hypersensitive to his environment, picking up on the slightest changes in terrain and weather and observant of everything and everyone around him. He thought deeply about where and how something fit into the whole. “You can’t paint a picture of a fence post, leastwise not accurately, until you’ve put a thousand of them in the ground,” he once said to me. It was the nuances, the depiction of a thing’s essence—it’s spirit—that drew me to his paintings.

“You waited too long.”

One afternoon, during a particularly harsh and seemingly endless Chicago winter in which the sun simply vanished behind a lugubrious gray cloud cover for weeks, a large package arrived at my home. It was from Cal. I tore off the brown wrapping paper and removed the contents—a painting of the old corral. I was overcome with emotion. That magical moment in time—sitting with Cal on the corral’s weathered fences gazing at the Santa Ritas while discussing his vision for a new life—came flooding back.

Also in the package was a note from Cal: “Bring your dog and get out here.” He signed it with his trademark, which appeared in the corner of all his paintings: A sun-bleached steer skull.

Several years went by. That’s all; they went by—a long stream of days, one dissolving into the next that simply vanished, sadly, without a trace.

I did, however, telephone Cal with regularity. Every few weeks, on a Saturday evening at my cabin in Michigan, I would make a dry Manhattan, take a sip, and dial his number while looking at the “Old Corral” above my fireplace.

“Amigo!” I called out when he answered. Cal, recognizing my voice, would instantly shoot back, “Where the

hell are you? I thought you were in jail!”

One time, he sadly told me that Mary had died unexpectedly and that his mother-in-law had moved back to Texas. Cal was now alone with Pal and two of Mary’s cats. When I spoke with him again, and several times thereafter, he told me about life at the hacienda but also began relating strange stories about past times working under cover for the government—some sort of special military operation that took him to China. He rambled and repeated. Something was not right.



Cal built the “old hacienda” with his own two hands--from foundation to roof.

Events in my life took a turn for the worse as well. Coley developed diabetes, which caused cataracts in both eyes. I had the cataracts surgically removed, but problems in his left eye required its removal all together and the eye sewn shut. I nursed him day and night. For a short time afterwards, we once again roamed the woods and fields of Michigan. One day, however, he simply collapsed and was gone.

In addition, my engagement ended and I spent more time alone at my cabin. Typically, I slept well there. But I experienced a stretch of fitful, anxiety-ridden tossing and turning—disturbing dreams or insomnia,

my mind racing like a fly wheel, one disjointed thought after another, skipping pell-mell through the years, recalling a host of unpleasant events, lost opportunities and departed love ones.

One February morning before dawn the howling of coyotes startled me awake. Their cries had mixed in with an unsettling dream and sounded as though they were, frightfully, immediately outside my bedroom preparing to charge through the ground-floor window. I sprang out of bed, disoriented, and fumbled for the light switch. The coyote howls came again but from where they always did—across the lake. I fell back into bed, my heart pounding, and stared at the ceiling. I thought of Cal and the image in his painting of the “Old Corral” of a cow and her calf grazing peacefully just outside its fences, a sublime touch that infused added poignancy to the scene. I felt a compelling urge to speak with him right away. “I’m going to tell him I’m coming out. We’re going to build that corral,” I said out loud to myself.

Cal typically answered his phone in two or three rings. He did not have an answering machine—in fact he had few modern appliances, and certainly no electronic gadgets—so I could not leave a message. I telephoned him at his regular supertime, throughout the evening and into the night, and repeatedly the next morning. Concerned, I telephoned my friend Dyna, an artist in Tubac, who knew Cal.

“It’s all boarded up,” Dyna stated matter-of-factly later that afternoon. She was standing on Cal’s property calling from her cell phone. “You waited too long,” she added curtly. I knew she was displeased with me, and had been for some time. A beautiful and talented leatherworker, my initial flirtations in her shop gradually evolved into a genuine friendship. Whenever I spoke with her, though, I would offer up some excuse why I could not visit Cal—and her.

Dyna proceeded to investigate and called me the next day. “I spoke with a neighbor,” she reported. “She said that Cal had some trouble and was taken to a facility in Tucson. You’d better get your ass out here.”

The neighbor also gave Dyna the name of Cal’s friend, a retired Army officer. When I spoke with him, he told me that Cal “got ornery” when the authorities—sent by whom or for what reason he did not know—went to his house asking questions. He also said that Cal had been “acting funny” for some time and gave me the name of the facility he was in, a place, he said, for people with mental disorders.

On the road

“Amigo!” I called out to Cal when I heard his voice on the phone. “Who the hell is this?” he demanded. “It’s your amigo, Billy,” I replied. “Where the hell are you? They came and stuck me in this god-damned place.”

Cal, I found out, had been diagnosed with early stages of dementia and his only child, a daughter living in Texas, had placed him in a small mental health care facility in a residential neighborhood of Tucson.

He did not know what was happening to the hacienda or precisely Pal’s fate. He also complained that he had none of his painting supplies. I prepared to leave for Tucson.

Desiring complete flexibility and freedom, I drove from Chicago to Tucson. I left the city at 5 a.m. in a harrowing blizzard. By noon, I was rolling through Missouri, mild temperatures and sun, on my way to Oklahoma City.

The morning after I arrived in Tucson, I telephoned the facility caring for Cal to announce my visit. Located in a working-class neighborhood, the facility—consisting of three residential houses similar to those in the immediate area and enclosed by a beige rod-iron fence—fit innocuously into its surroundings.

A petite woman wearing white pants and a blue shirt named Marcie, who often answered the phone when I called to speak with Cal, greeted me at the facility gate. Her dark-brown hair was pulled straight back. She wore no make up or jewelry, just black-rimmed glasses, and looked pale and ghostly—an anomaly in the sun-baked land.

Marcie greeted me with minimal cordiality and said nothing as I followed her across the enclosed courtyard, shaded in part by several

grapefruit trees, to the house entrance. I felt like an intruder, a nuisance, until a distinguished looking man in his mid-60s wearing a navy blue polo shirt and neatly pressed khakis walked by as I turned to enter the house. He nodded and smiled as he strolled past and, though he did not speak, he looked directly into my eyes. He appeared to be thinking about something intently, yet his friendly eyes and smile set me at ease.

Stepping inside the house I saw a mixture of middle-aged and elderly men sitting on reclining chairs and sofas watching television—a game show. “Wait here,” Marcie said. “I’ll get Cal.”

The men briefly stared at me then resumed watching television. On the wall next to television were numerous framed photographs—mainly family and individual portraits, some men in uniform. Above the pictures, along the top of the wall, were gold letters: “Wall of Fame.”



Cal shows me how to pan for gold while Pal looks on.

One photograph immediately caught my eye. I stepped over to examine it more closely. It was a professional portrait of the man who had walked past me in the courtyard moments ago. In the photograph, he is dressed in a dark suit and crisp white shirt with a conservative but stylish tie. His salt and pepper hair is thick and neatly trimmed, parted perfectly by a thin white line of scalp and his smile is warm and affectionate, just as it was in the courtyard.

“That’s Dr. Bob,” said a man watching television. I turned and nodded in appreciation and noticed that I had seen his face among the pictures on the Wall of Fame as well. In that photograph—taken many years ago—he is sitting proudly in a richly tanned saddle atop a magnificent black horse whose shiny coat ripples with muscles.

“Well I’ll be damned!” I turned around to see Cal. “Amigo!” I exclaimed. “God almighty, you’re sure as hell a sight for sore eyes,” he remarked, his face aglow. “How the hell are you?”

Cal’s handshake was strong as ever. He was dressed in a red plaid Western shirt with pearl snap buttons, blue jeans and cowboy boots, and his white wavy hair was neatly combed, one of the few times I saw him without his cowboy hat.

“Come on back here,” he said. We walked past a small dining area to Cal’s room consisting of a twin bed, dresser, chair, window and closet. His sparse room was void of photographs, books or artwork. “Make yourself at home,” he said sliding over the only chair. He sat on the bed.

After our initial greeting, I got down to business, asking him about the hacienda, how he wound up in this care facility and if he knew why he were here. Some answers he gave seemed plausible and his delivery clear; others were not.

“Where are your art supplies?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied angrily. “Those sons of bitches busted up the hacienda. But don’t you worry. We’re going back and we’re going to fix up the place—I built that place with my own two hands—and by God I’m going to paint again.”

Sarah, a peppy and affable caregiver, poked her head in Cal’s room. “Excuse me, gentlemen, it’s lunch time. Will you join us?” she asked me.

Cal and I sat at one of two tables in the dining area. I sat next to Dr. Bob, who I learned, had been a family doctor until diagnosed two years ago with dementia. Cal sat across from me. Marcie, moving quickly from the adjacent kitchen to the tables, served lunch—grilled cheese sandwiches, tomato soup and salad.

I introduced myself to my lunch companions, Dr. Bob, Phillip and James—the man on the horse in the photograph on the Wall of Fame—and related how I met Cal.



At the old corral with Cal where he once worked as a ranch foreman.

Cal said nothing during lunch, happily eating his sandwich, dipping it in the soup, and eventually devouring one more. “Cal eats like a horse,” said Sarah cheerfully, refilling our water glasses. “But stays fit as a fiddle. It’s all that hard work. He’s up early raking and cleaning the courtyard before breakfast.”

“So, you are an artist,” Dr. Bob remarked politely to Cal. Cal looked at me: “I don’t talk to these people. They’re nuts.”

I felt pity for Dr. Bob, but he seemed unfazed by Cal’s barb. I got the impression that no one

at the facility, including the caregivers, knew much about Cal. “If I have offended you, I apologize,” Dr. Bob said to Cal. “But I enjoy art, especially paintings, and would very much like to see your work.”

Cal kept eating his lunch without looking up. “I don’t have any of my paintings here,” he said. “I don’t know where they are. I’m going to find the son of bitch who has them.”

“I’ll bring you paints tomorrow,” I said. “You’re going to paint again.”

“By God I do love to paint,” Cal remarked grinning. Phillip and James, quiet during lunch, appeared excited at the prospect of a new activity.

At that moment Marcie, looking peevish, arrived at our table. “It’s time for your medication, Cal,” she said, placing a tablet in front of him. She had overheard my

plan to bring Cal paints and seemed to be calculating what additional labors and disruption that might entail.

After lunch, Cal and I returned to his room. He went in his closet and pulled out his straw Stetson cowboy hat. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s sit outside.”

About ten male patients stay in each house staffed by full and part-time caregivers who also cook and clean. Many of the patients, or guests as the staff calls them, had been successful professionals as the Wall of Fame attested.

Cal and I sat in a gazebo in the courtyard. The sky was clear and the sun’s radiant heat felt good in the chilly air. From our conversation, I gathered that he was undergoing various medical and psychological tests. His story about whom and why people came to take him from the hacienda was disjointed and conflicted, but the episode—whatever happened—clearly riled him.

“What kind of paints do you want,” I asked. Cal ticked off a few basic supplies. “I’ve been thinking, Billy, once I’m done with all these goddamned tests I’m going back to my house. The banditos knocked the hell out of it, but we can fix it up. You and your missy could live there, take care of things.”

I later learned from the facility manger that Cal’s daughter had power of attorney and now controlled the hacienda.

Dr. Bob and another man ambled separately along the perimeter of the courtyard passing our gazebo. The doctor mumbled to himself as though attempting to solve a complex problem. Somehow I think he knew what he was dealing with. There still existed a portion of a lucid and intelligent mind, though it was encircled and dwindling, and he was mustering all he could to counter, out maneuver and stave off this encroaching enemy.

The other man sauntered Zombie-like around the courtyard. Occasionally he stopped at the gazebo to stare at Cal and me; he simply stood in front of us, mouth agape, until Cal order him away. “Goddamn nuts,” he muttered. Dr. Bob nodded and smiled at me as he passed by.

Recalled to life

Before leaving, I spoke with the facility manager, asking him if I could take Cal out for a steak dinner sometime during my stay. “The food here is for kids,” Cal had complained to me. “I want a T-bone, charbroiled like it should be, with potatoes and apple pie.” The manager told me that he would call Cal’s daughter for approval, but apparently she never returned his calls and so Cal was not permitted to leave the facility with me.

Vexed by issues and questions, I did not sleep well that night. I recounted the day’s events—my conversations with Cal, Dr. Bob, Marcie, photographs on the Wall of Fame—and how rapidly a person’s mind could dissolve. Not long ago, after all, Cal had been sharp as a tack. Why did he not have his art supplies? What was happening to the hacienda? What, I imagined, would it be like to be at the mercy of strangers with no escape and no control over my own affairs?

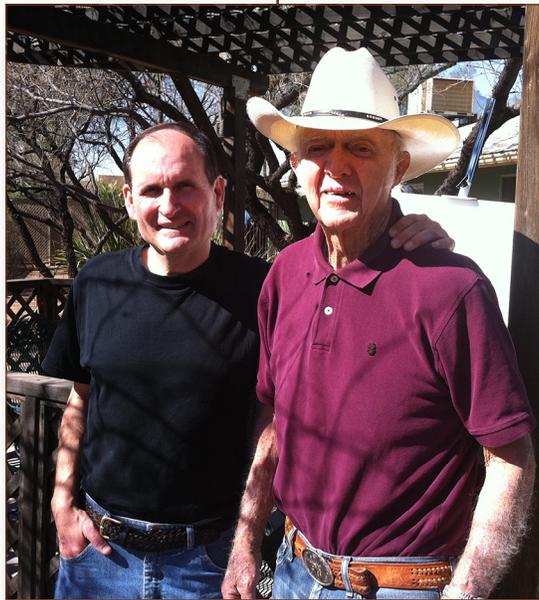
The next day I went to a small but well-stocked independent art supply store. The owner seemed to know what Cal wanted and needed to get started. In addition to paint and brushes, I purchased several canvas panels and an easel.

Back at the facility, Marcie came to the gate to let me in. She had styled her hair and wore lipstick. I complimented her on her appearance, not merely to win favor, but because her transformation was indeed becoming. She betrayed a slight smile, but nevertheless viewed my cargo with suspicion as I passed through the gate.

“Take those things to the gazebo,” she ordered. “Please do not make a mess.”

Marcie could be—and usually was—icy and strict, but she was also a devoted caregiver albeit methodical and dispassionate. She was good at dealing with the stark and disturbing realities of men and families coping with dementia and the terrifying possibility of Alzheimer’s disease.

She knew that the facility had to be managed with orderliness, punctuality and discipline notwithstand-



*Cal and I meet at the facility caring for him.
“Your’e going to paint again.”*

ing its casual and homey feel. The part-time caregivers cheerily moved about the facility, chit chatting with one another and with the men. They, however, had support systems—a spouse, children, siblings, parents and a host of family activities—to occupy them outside work and bring about a healthy balance. This was a job to them, not a career, and certainly not an overly challenging one. If any serious problems arose, someone like Marcie was immediately on the scene.

Marcie lived alone and reminded me of a hospice nurse I knew in Chicago. The similarities between the two women, both in appearance and disposition, were striking. In her early 40s, my friend had never married. For two decades, she returned home from work emotionally, mentally and physically exhausted. She slept a great deal on her days off and what little free time she had was consumed by mundane errands and occasional visits to her alcoholic parents. She devoted herself to work, not for money, career advancement or recognition of any kind, but because she was needed—and in a strange way that need fostered a deep-seeded resentment not to any one or thing, but to the human condition in general.

Like Marcie, she did not exhibit compassion per se, but did exude a claming influence, a sense of normalcy and thereby hope, in the disciplined execution of her duties. Whereas some are driven to find companionship and intimacy as a vital counterweight to, and refuge from, professional responsibilities that entail a constant interaction with life's more trying and morbid conditions, over time, brick by brick, my friend erected a barrier. Inside, however, under layers of lonely anguish was a heart of gold. Nevertheless, her once sanguine vision of a whole life—with its passions, adventures, promise of eternal union and offspring—gradually dissolved leaving a human being who had willfully replaced being with doing.

I once saw Marcie sit with the men watching television. Her eyes, however, were not fixed on the screen but on the Wall of Fame. With a pensive expression, she surveyed the portraits of once happy and prosperous men with their radiant wives and children gathered round. What longings, I wondered, did these photographs evoke? Perhaps, I mused, they were similar to my own.

Cal strolled out to the gazebo wearing his cowboy hat and work shirt. “Jesus God almighty, what the hell do we have here?” he asked, gleefully looking over looking the assorted supplies I had procured.

“You want to paint, amigo?” I asked him. “You bet your ass I do,” he said inspecting a brush.

Cal set to work immediately. The early morning chill gave way to a warm day as the sun climbed higher. The weather was perfect and Cal was painting.

“I didn’t know you were an artist, Cal, until Bill told us about your paintings,” said Sarah placing a pitcher of lemonade and plastic cups on the table. “This is a first, at least as long as I’ve been here.”

Curious caregivers, housekeepers and maintenance workers stopped to see Cal at work.

The man whose name I did not know stood for several minutes silently gaping at Cal’s painting, then continued his trance-like shuffle around the compound.



Cal eagerly looks over his new paints and brushes with a visiting artist friend.

Two men riding horses

Dr. Bob, stimulated and engaged, carefully studied Cal’s work in progress. “Renoir painted well into old age despite hands crippled by arthritis and Mary Cassat kept painting while slowly going blind,” he remarked.

“You seem to know quite a bit about art,” I said to Dr. Bob, impressed by his comments, and also sensing that he was rallying around his friend.

He looked at me and said nothing, then began mumbling to himself—once again attempting to unravel the insidious mystery bedeviling him.

“Go on, git,” Cal barked. “You’re bothering us.” Dr. Bob—as he always did when Cal snapped at him—smiled, nodded courteously and strolled away.

The Cal I knew, though, would never have chased off someone enjoying his art. He relished people watching him paint as he brought forth his vision, typically telling a tale or recounting an experience as he did. Besides, I had seen him laugh with Dr. Bob and treat

him affectionately. Suddenly, a wave of apprehension came over me.

I watched as the outlines of a mesa took shape on the canvas. Cal painted intently with confident brush strokes as though there had been a composition in his mind for some time and now was his opportunity to express it. He squeezed liberal amounts of red, yellow, black and white paint on his palette and soon had paint on his hands, shirt and jeans. This added to my sense of foreboding, as Cal was always a meticulous painter, careful not to waste a drop of anything.

“Ah, hell. I need some damn mineral spirits,” Cal said wiping his paint-stained hands on a rag. I had forgot to purchase thinners and solvents and left immediately to fetch some at the art supply store which, given distance and traffic, would not be a quick trip. Before getting into my car, however, I paused briefly to peer through the facility gate and marvel at the scene: Cal in his cowboy hat and boots happily painting away.

I did not want to be absent long. Yes, a blizzard raged in Chicago while in Tucson it was warm and sunny, and Cal was painting again. But nothing at this facility was quite as it seemed—human minds, for mysterious reasons, were gradually erasing themselves while those caring for them strove to maintain a façade of normalcy. Things could go wrong quickly.

When I finally returned it was afternoon. Marcie greeted me at the gate.

“Cal has made a terrible mess,” she said in a reprimanding tone. “He is covered in paint and getting it everywhere.” I quickly made my way to the gazebo where Cal was glad to see me and brimming with excitement. “Take a look here,” he said holding a brush in his dark green hand. There were smudges of paint on his cheeks and shirt and red paint was smeared across the patio, which meant it was on his shoes and could be tracked into the house.

I stood and gazed at his painting, unable to speak. The mesa and blue sky—the scene that had been emerging from Cal’s brush when I left—was gone.

Instead, there was a vague outline of a mountain. The formless image on canvas was mostly varying shades of green.

Feeling a presence, I turned to see Dr. Bob who had quietly appeared behind me. He studied Cal’s painting. “So quick bright things come to confusion,” he said softly, revealing another facet of his cultured and still perceptive mind. Then he turned and looked at me: “It was two men on horses.”

“What was?” I asked.

“The scene he was painting while you were gone,” he replied. “It was the mesa in the background and two men riding horses in the foreground. Quite a lovely composition.”

I stood transfixed by Cal and his painting, watching as he haphazardly slathered on more paint feeling just like the grotesque image he was creating. The repulsive painting before me was, in reality, an apt depiction of my own fear, vacillation and self-doubt. Dyna was right. I had waited too long.

Onward home

Several days later, Marcie met me at the facility gate and took me to see the manager. He said that it was against regulations to store hazardous materials, such as paint solvents, anywhere on the premises and that because Cal’s painting, which I had moved on the easel to his room, consisted of wet, messy oil it would have to go.

“I could get him acrylic paints,” I said. “Much easier to clean up—just soap and water.”

“Cal’s not going to be staying here much longer,” he replied. “He’s going to live with his daughter in Texas.” Cal would never paint again I immediately thought to myself.

Cal was standing in front of his painting when I walked into his room.

“By damn it’s good to see you,” Cal said beaming with delight. He went on, exuberantly, pointing to various



*Cal immediately sets to work.
“By God, I do love to paint.”*

spots on his painting. "I'm going to bring in a stream here and some cattle in over here."

I told Cal that I liked the painting just the way it was and that I wanted to take it back to Chicago with me. Cal insisted on adding cattle first, but relented when I assured him it was perfect and he need not add a thing. During lunch, I excused myself, went into Cal's room, put the painting in a plastic bag, and then walked to the gate to discreetly place it in the trunk of my car. Marcie accompanied me.

I did everything possibly to maintain my composure, but felt several tears spill over my eyelids and run down my cheeks as I shut the trunk. Marcie walked over to me and gently took my hand. "You made Cal so happy," she said. I wanted to embrace her, but that moment, too, slipped away.

"There the hell you are!" said Cal arriving at the gate. A strong breeze suddenly went rushing through the grapefruit trees and the temperature plunged dramatically. Large raindrops mixed with hail began to fall.

"Good-bye," Marcie said, forcing a smile. The rain and

wind intensified. She closed the gate and ran to the house. "Come on, Cal, you'll get soaked."

With trepidation, I went to the gate. Cal stood on the other side, rain pouring off his hat. His blue eyes—now drained of their sparkling ebullience—locked on to mine, penetrating deep into the very meat of my being. He put his arm through the bars and shook my hand, gripping it so tightly that I clenched my teeth. "Don't wait for nothin'," he said forcefully with a piercing, dreadful glare. "Not nothin'." I saw, at that startling and furious moment, with terrifying clarity, all the tragic blunders of my life—the waste, loss and squandered opportunities, all for lack of courage. He then released his grip, retracted his hand, turned around and walked back to the house through an icy deluge—and was gone.

I got into my car, drenched and shivering, and began my long journey back to Chicago. Seventeen hundred miles: Through an unholy dust storm

in Texas where I disposed of Cal's painting and with it, I prayed, my own crippling fears. Onward, I went, through endless tears of remorse—haunted by the image of two men riding horses.



A wise and learned man.

William Allen Baltz is an independent writer who resides in Three Rivers, MI. Recent essays of his include "A Little Brother Remembers," published by the New York Times on the 50th anniversary of a mid-air plane collision over New York City in 1960 that killed his older brother Stephen; and "The Last Hunt," outwardly an account of teaching a shelter-rescued springer spaniel how to hunt, but on a deeper level a meditation on the cultivation of human potential. He has also written about the experiences of combat veterans, including those coping with post-traumatic stress disorder through art, music and poetry. His stories can be read at www.williambaltz.com

