

Last Lament of Johnny Lang

"Gone out for grub," read the sign on my door
Havin' no burro, long trek to the store.
Out of the canyon, sharp cold winter breeze
By foot I'd travel 'neath the Joshua trees.

Mojave desert, arid rugged land
Mysterious mountains, coarse gravel sand
Towerin' yucca, pinyon pine 'n' sage
Creosote 'n' cholla assuage this stage.

Gettin' dark 'n' weary, the goin' be slow.
Thin, old 'n' worn I can no longer go.
Found a spot to camp 'n' unrolled my bed
Filled with hard pain, I'd be better off dead.

With dried grass 'n' shrub built a fire so crude
Fried strips o' bacon, the last of my food.
Saved one for mornin' wrapped in wax paper
In the event I finish this caper.

Clean starry night sky, no need for a tent
Body grows numb, mind begins to lament.
Curled under my tarp, head driftin' to dream
Ponderin' the past, thoughts flow like a stream.

I herded cattle, a cowboy by trade
From Texas through Mexico, Southwest strayed.
Dusty desert trails, herd would graze 'n' roam
Stopped in California, my final home.

Our steers were content north of Salton Sea
When my horse chose to move on without me.
Tracked him up the mountain, forward sally
Trail led me to this high desert valley.

Behind a cabin the horse I had sought
Claimed by McHaney 'n' his wicked lot.
Known to be outlaws, gang of ill repute
I said 'twas my horse, they'd quickly refute.

McHaney stood firm, spit chaw to the ground
Starin' back at me like some bloodthirsty hound.
I argued a bit, enough to cause strife
Didn't press my luck fearin' I'd lose my life.

Though stealin' my horse, McHaney I thank
Mentioned a miner, a local, "Dutch" Frank.
Curious 'bout the hermit they'd bullied
Walked the valley, found him spent 'n' sullied.

Frank said he'd found gold but wanted no fame
McHaney'd steal from a defenseless claim.
His life was worth more than gold 'n' rich grief
How could this be? Deny wealth? Disbelief.

I left 'n' returned with cash, arms, 'n' men
Bought Frank's claim, a thousand dollar bargain.
Lost Horse Mine I proudly said it be called
So much gold found, we were justly enthralled.

Minin's hard work, my partners had their fill
Sold their shares to Ryan against my will.
That Montana rancher thought to build big
Diggers, mills, trucks, a legitimate gig.

Day 'n' night the labor would deliver
Amalgams of pure gold 'n' quicksilver.
But this was my mine 'n' much to my dismay
Not enough yellow was comin' my way.

Rather than sulk, I stole an extra share
Whether it was legal, I did not care.
Ryan claimed I's stealin', charges he'd file
Unless I sold out 'n' left in exile.

He owned it all. My return he forbid.
I stayed nearby, to what I stole 'n' hid.
I could've left, spent my gold while hidin' my face
But I found myself compelled to stay in this place.

Soon after, Lost Horse would run out of ore
I'd move back 'n' reclaim my hills once more.
Solitude. Wide open space. Grand landscape
Sparse terrain to discover 'n' escape.

I wonder, will someone find my last stash?
I grin, chuckle a bit. My fire is ash.
Shiverin' cold with a clear starry roof
Irony, leavin' as I came, no hoof.

Decades ago gold 'n' wealth I admired
Only to learn 'twas this land I desired.
Last thing I hear with my soul now at ease
The whooshin' of wind through the Joshua trees.

~ Rusty Alois

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