Hell Or High Water
Adams, Eilean

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The old buzzard drifts high over the river, riding the thermals of a sun-drenched autumn afternoon. As he makes a shallow banking turn, his eye is drawn to the glittering ribbon of the river.

Something is down there, floating on the current. Curious, he moves into a lazy downward spiral. The shape is beyond his experience: long, sturdy, tree branches bunched together, supporting a lumpy, roundish creature with odd-looking limbs. One half of the creature is pale and smooth; the other half is very dark and rough and ends in a mass of long, matted, yellow-white fur. It lies as still as death.

Suddenly, the creature lifts itself from the branches, the fur moves from side to side, the pale limbs twitch. The movement startles the old buzzard. With powerful strokes of his huge wings, he rises and flies off to the west. As he beats his way skyward, he turns his head for a last, brief look at the strange, dwindling figure.

Below, the river current flows strongly, but without turbulence, carrying the flimsy burden of bunched tree branches with its alien passenger. Up close, the branches become cottonwood logs lashed together with ropes to form a crude raft. Here and there, strips of white cloth bind two of the logs in the manner of a repair where the rope has frayed dangerously thin. Up close, the creature becomes a partly naked
man, lying prone, arms outstretched to embrace his raft, hands clutching the edges convulsively. The hands are broad, burned very dark, the skin of the blunt fingers shriveled from near constant immersion.

Tied around his waist is a rope, its other end secured to the raft; the intervening length is twenty, maybe thirty, feet; the loop trails in the water—now to one side, now to the other, now directly behind—weaving sinuously as though with a life of its own. It separates the man’s naked lower body from his partly clothed upper body and has torn a raw and jagged red line across his waist. There are a thousand tiny scratches from the rough logs on his legs and buttocks and abdomen. There are still-oozing sores with clean white edges, ugly scabbed sores with soft brown edges, and puckered white scars, newly healed but fragile. There are bruises, some small and shallow, some deep and large; some are dark with new blood, some yellow and green and mottled—many days old. The feet are shriveled too, for they hang over the uneven end of the crude raft and drag, unresisting, in the water. There is terrible evidence of the sun’s unrelenting work: an angry redness and blisters, some fat with water, some burst and wrinkled and burnt again.

The coat of coarse homespun is shrunken and ripped in many places; the sleeves have been torn away up to the elbows. He wears the tattered remnants of a shirt, most of it long gone to repair the shabby raft. His hair is long and matted and looks like bleached hemp; a tangled beard and mustache eclipse his mouth and chin. What can be seen of his face is burned to the color of old mahogany.

His eyes, pale blue and expressionless, see nothing—not the water or the raft beneath him, not the riverbank with its mesquite and greasewood and scrub, not the dun-colored hills or turquoise blue sky. His focus is on bruised flesh; tortured muscles; burning, blistered skin; suppurating sores and cuts and scratches; empty and spasming stomach; cramped hands. When he lifts his head, it is merely to turn away from the sun, a futile gesture. When he opens his eyes, it is merely an unthinking response to a wave breaking over his head.

All around him the river is a shimmering brown strand, undulating relentlessly. Up ahead is a bend. On a narrow stretch of bottomland on the far side is a low stone structure. Clustered nearby are a few adobe and jacal houses. Nosed against two big logs on the riverbank is
a vessel with a crude little cabin; it is long and lies low in the water, and onto it a score of men are loading big burlap bags. Here then is a lifeline for the man on the raft if only he will raise his head—open his eyes—summon the effort to call out. But the eyes stay closed, seeing nothing but their own dark, inward vision.

This shimmering brown strand is the Colorado River. This lonely sliver of civilization clinging to this riverbank in this godforsaken desert is the Mormon settlement of Callville in the newly admitted state of Nevada. The vessel is the barge *Colorado*, recently arrived from downriver. It is Saturday afternoon, September 7, in the year 1867.