

Adobe Flats

Ken Wilkerson

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The stories in this collection revere the land surrounding the drama, a mysticism that seems to guide characters in and out of trouble.

"At an empty table I sat and listened to the tired voices of forsaken souls seemingly trapped in a kind of post-apocalyptic American dead-end," writes Ken Wilkerson in his fantastically vivid short-story collection *Adobe Flats*. It's as if Wilkerson has struck his tuning fork against boulders, capturing the subtle vibrations of life in the Badlands of the California desert. In these stories, he recreates the hums resonating off canyons, pacing coyotes, and the "men of desperation [who] wander from rescue mission to bar to jail to boxcar and back again."

Wilkerson artfully treats setting like a beloved, developed character. Often, his barmaids, loners, and drifters further decay and experience alienation in the man-made environments of motels, biker bars, and bus depots. In contrast, his motley crew teeters on the edge of salvation back in the Badlands, in the natural world.

"With nature I often prefer romance over science," he writes in "Cloud Walker," a calming story in which he outlines the bond with his "coyote blood brother." Meanwhile, "Tumble" features a Hunter S. Thompson-style romp through Yuma with an eccentric artist. And in "Eclipse," the protagonist drinks with ghosts in an abandoned hotel before going to sleep on the "cold slab" grave of a woman who apparently went mad and died in the desert.

Wilkerson's ability to paint a scene is astounding. He satisfies every sense of being in a place: the sight of sun-bleached animal skulls, straggling cacti, and yellow-orange skies; the sound of desert silence punctuated by coyote howls and heavy metal; the feel of suffocating 110-degree heat only moderately tempered by the tang of tequila and the burn of mescaline.

Closing the collection are Southwestern-flavored noir stories featuring private investigator Jack Chase, which also reveal reverence for the land. As he so eloquently writes in "Eclipse," "But now I savored the sublime beauty of the desert, the tender blue sky, the graces of dawn. Kindled by the essence of the moment, I reached down and touched the earth."

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