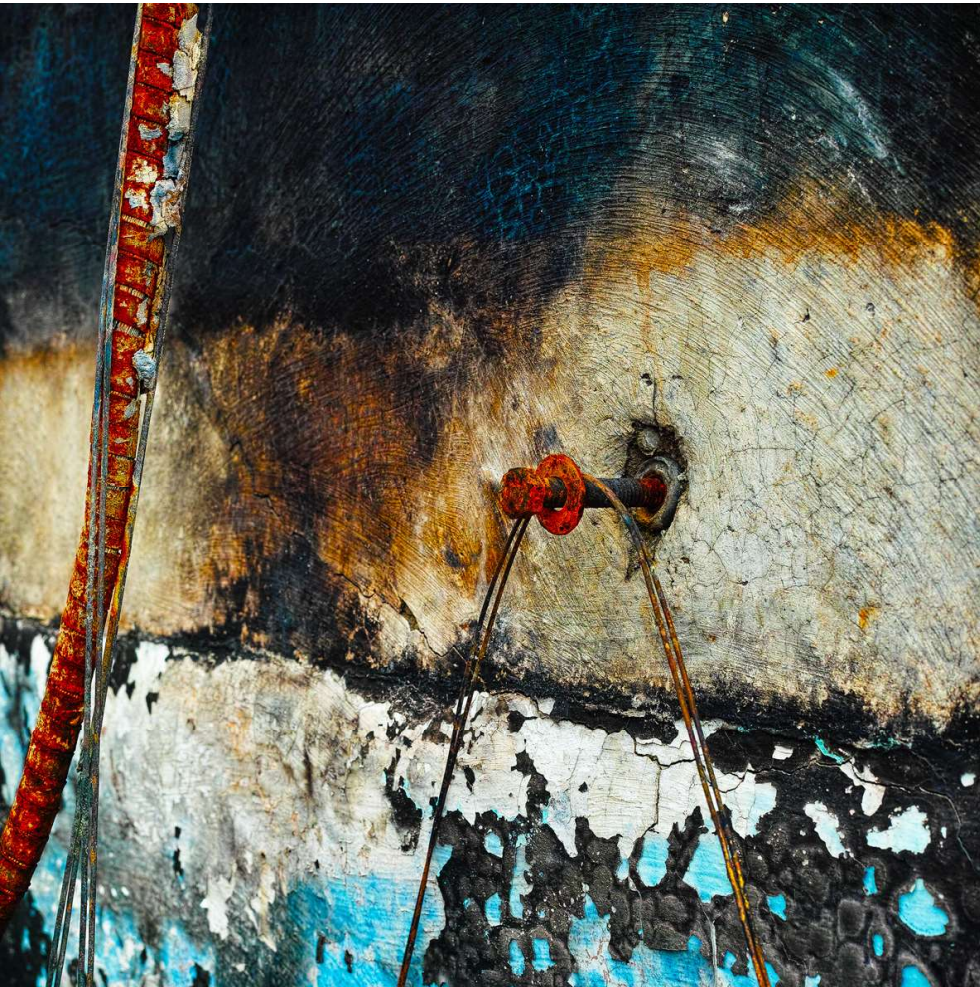


NEAL SNIDOW

Burn Zone 4, 2019
Archival photographic print, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ROBERT KERWIN

Wayne

A journalist's adventures on the set with John Wayne

Weaving the same old cowboy suit, John Wayne lumbered my way, looking larger in person than he ever had on screen. As we shook hands hello, his enormous paw swallowed mine altogether.

"Cold up here in the mountains," he said. "You shoulda wore heavier clothes." Wrapping his huge sheepskin-lined jacket around me, he said, "Here, take this. My son gave it to me for Christmas."

Well, there I was, up close and personal with John Wayne. Who would have thought, back when growing up, that any of us would ever get to meet the legendary Wayne, let alone have him wrap you in his sheepskin jacket?

As he stalked around the location, Wayne's presence dominated. At one point, he stopped to talk with a still photographer. At first they were having a laugh, the photog downwind of Wayne, looking up at him, things going fine; then Wayne flew into a purple-faced fury, yelling, "God damn you! Get the fuck out of here!" while poke-punching the photog's breastbone, knuckling him backward down the slope.

What would I have done if John Wayne came climbing over me? Shove him away, probably. Maybe even take a swing at him. But the photog only covered: "Sorry, Duke, didn't mean no harm."

Wayne dropped his hands. "Okay," he said, "just so's it don't happen again."

At rehearsal, whenever the director called "Action!" Wayne said "I ain't ready yet." Whenever the director called "Cut!" Wayne waved off the camera operator: "No, don't cut. Let's keep going 'til I reach the woods. I want to give 'em a little more of the old wiggle."

In the day's main scene, Wayne's cantankerous old character—with eye patch and ruddy drinker's face—is about to make a half-assed apology to a spinster schoolmarm for leading a dissolute life.

The director calls "Action!"

Wayne gazes around, holds up a stop-sign hand—keeping everybody right where they are—big, hairy cough coming on. He signals with a forefinger that the cough is imminent, then, after a few anticipatory rattles, he rasps noisily, and with arms akimbo, his head bowed in concentration, he waits for the precise moment, then hacks all over the set.

The gossip going around here is that Wayne has Big C, and Big C is moving in for the kill.

"You got to hand it to him," says a crew member. "This here is a brave man, a genuine hero. This might be the end of the trail, this here scene might possibly be the last that Duke will ever walk through."

In late afternoon, when light began to fade, the director called it a wrap. Wayne sat heavily onto a camp table, with his stuntman cronies crowded around him.

As I approached, Wayne turned on a smile, while shooting an inside look to his boys: careful what you say—press. With a magnanimous sweep of his hat, he beckoned me aboard: "Sit down, guy, how you doin'?" He lowered his heavy mitt, like a weight, onto my shoulder, and drew me in beside him.

Men among men, trading stories: stunt stories, drink stories, saloon-brawl stories, and women stories. All stories connected to previous Wayne pictures; no stories about pictures that he hadn't starred in.

"I'm nothin' special," Wayne said. "Never been. Ask any of these men. They'll tell you what I think about this celebrity business. Hell, all I ever was, all I ever wanted to be, is a two-bit cowboy."

True, true, the boys nodded.

"Some people got a negative image of me—like I'm nasty, some kind of right-winger." Snarling, Wayne moved into my face. "The press especially. Got their story written before they even meet me. I never did them any harm. I was never a *prima donna* like some of these young actors nowadays who get a couple of good reviews they think they're somebody. Shit. They sit there picking their nose. They think they're somebody. But they ain't."

He is poking my breastbone.

"People wonder how I am to get along with. Well," (poke) "ask anybody who knows me. I'll drink with people, I'll help people any way I can—especially when they're in trouble. And I'm not talking about big people who can possibly do me good," (poke) "I'm talking about the little guy," (poke) "the ordinary fella in the street. . . ."

"When you're a legend long enough, it's hard for people to separate the legend from the real person. I'm big. I get my own way. The image is strong, and they keep casting me in it: tough, brawling, drinking, swearing, gun-toting. But through it all I tend to remain just myself.

"Hell, nowadays I don't drink anything like I used to. All my life I was doing the kind of drinking where you'd go around clearing out bars and things, fighting your way across town. But what I'm telling you now is I'm ashamed of myself for all the trouble I got into.

"Look: I couldn't play an effeminate character in a film, could I?" (poke) "How would that look?" (poke) "Duke Wayne, playing some kind of sissy? No. And I couldn't play an English gentleman going around sucking on a meerschau pipe, could I? So I'm kinda stuck with the image I have. And I play the image. So what? If you play only yourself on the screen you're a dull son of a bitch."

Wayne climbed off the table and moseyed up toward the limos. The stuntboys and I tagged along behind.

Half-way up, one of the boys broke silence and said to me, "Sure beautiful up here in the mountains, isn't it?"

A nod would have sufficed, but I said, "It sure is." Then, without thinking, I added, "It's nice for you to be able to knock off early and enjoy it."

Wayne came at me in a rage and with the heel of his hand forced me backward downhill. "God damn it! These men work fucking hard for a living and been at it a long time! They been up before dawn this mornin' just like every other mornin', so don't ever say something like that again!"

He was all over me. The sunlight, the forest, the entire wilderness—were gone; there was only Wayne.

All at once he dropped his hands and backed off, while giving me a queer, mixed-message look that said, I'm glad I said what I did, but I'm sorry for having said it.

Stars always know when you see through them and aren't in awe of them, or afraid. Most of all, they know when you're not overly impressed by their reputation.

After allowing the silence to sink in, Wayne wrapped his arm around my head. This might have looked like a playful hug of endearment, but to me it felt a lot like a schoolyard bully's mean headlock, with all the adolescent meanness built in.

My first impulse was to shove him away: "Get your hands off me, asshole." That's what I wanted to do, and probably what I should have done, but I backed off before even getting started. I rationalized: Hell, Wayne isn't being overly out of line, he's just having a good time, showing off for his boys.

I did nothing, said nothing.

"Aw hell, come on," Wayne said, giving my head another squeeze. "We all like you, fella, you know that. Really we do. No shit."

With my head locked in the crook of his arm, I couldn't see Wayne's face as he spoke, but I sensed that he was probably playacting (with appropriate grins) to the boys.

"You're a good guy." (squeeze) "And we think the" (squeeze) "world of you. And we're all mighty glad" (squeeze) "you're up here in the" (squeeze) "mountains with us."

After a time, he let go of my head, and, affectionately, with an elbow, pushed me aside.

I saw Wayne again, at Burbank, where he was starring in his last picture, *The Shootist*, which is about an old-time gunslinger who is dying of cancer.

The set was like a wake. Not only was Wayne's *Shootist* character dying, but so was Wayne.

But Big C or no Big C, the show goes on, and he was up to his old tricks: working the wiggle, saying "Not yet, God damn it!" when the director said "Action!" and "Keep 'em rollin'" when the director said "Cut!" Also leveling threatening stares at everybody who got in his line of sight, followed by, "Want to make something of it?"

The last I saw of Wayne was when he appeared on TV at the Academy Awards. He sauntered onto the stage looking gaunt, wearing a dress suit that didn't fit him anymore. His yellowed skin had been touched up with dabs of orange. "Hang in there," he told the audience. "You ain't seen the last of ol' Duke yet."

Robert Kerwin's celebrity profiles, essays, short stories, and travel and op-ed pieces have appeared in *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Ellipsis*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Trib Magazine*, and *Los Angeles Times Calendar*. Born in Chicago, Illinois, he now lives in Northern California and most recently has been working on a memoir, *The House That Saved My Life*.