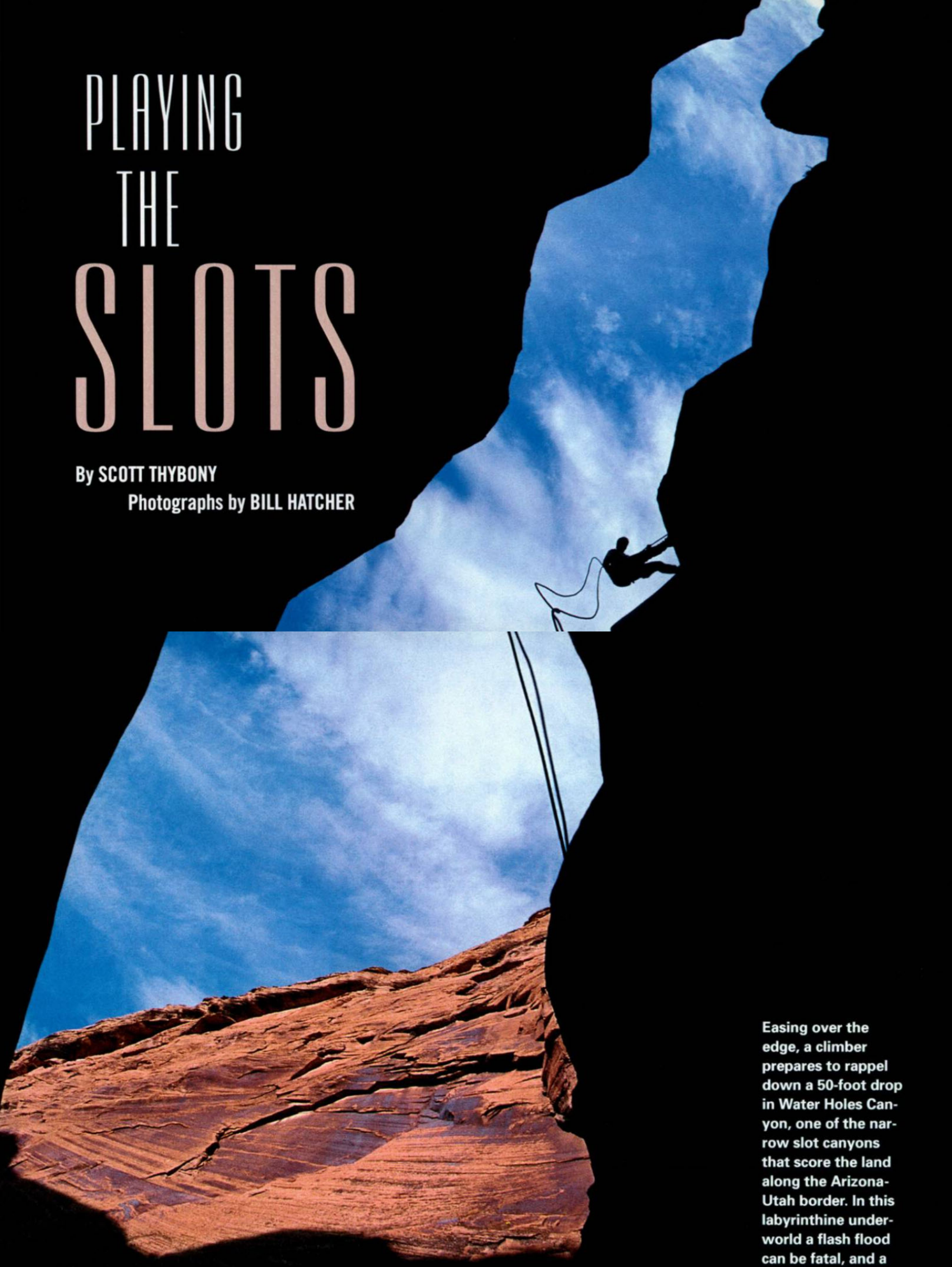
PLAYING THE SLOTS

By SCOTT THYBONY

Photographs by BILL HATCHER



Easing over the edge, a climber prepares to rappel down a 50-foot drop in Water Holes Canyon, one of the narrow slot canyons that score the land along the Arizona-Utah border. In this labyrinthine underworld a flash flood can be fatal, and a rope can be your best friend.

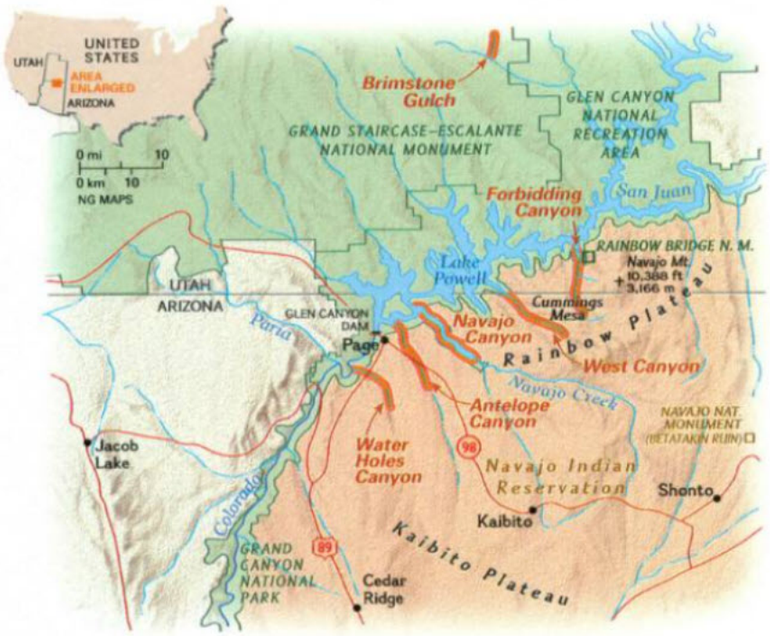
A DAWN BREEZE stirs the cottonwoods as I throw a Navajo blanket over my horse's back and heave on the saddle. Light strikes the canyon rim, igniting the treetops in a burst of spring green. With one night behind us in Forbidding Canyon we're ready to climb the mesa trail.

Our destination lies just beyond Cummings Mesa on Navajo lands along the border of Utah and Arizona. We're headed across remote and rugged Rainbow Plateau, a maze of sandstone knobs, forgotten Navajo trails, and treacherous gorges called slot canyons. The contours the slots carve in the rock are so fluid, so graceful, that it's easy to forget the violent forces that created them—raging floods that rise from nowhere with the sudden, heavy rainstorms that scour the plateau.

Few have ventured into the western canyons of the Rainbow Plateau, but for me this is not the first time. Twenty years ago I entered one of the finest of the slots—West Canyon, which slices through a remote western part of the plateau—during an overland trek from the south. On that trip I avoided the slot's tight upper narrows and ultimately was chased out of the lower canyon by a flash flood. But what I saw was enough to keep me dreaming of a return.

When Bill Hatcher, a photographer and a friend, mentioned his fascination with this country, we pulled out the maps. We would begin our exploration at the end of a sandy track below Navajo Mountain and cover the first ten miles to the top of Cummings Mesa on horseback, then continue on foot to a base camp near the east rim of West Canyon some four miles from the canyon head and about five from the southern edge of Lake Powell. From that point we would hike on high ground to the canyon head and then descend the winding narrows of the canyon's upper section, swimming through pools of early spring snowmelt and rappelling down a succession of steep drop-offs. After that we would take another day to traverse the lower narrows to the end of the canyon.

By full morning light the animals are saddled and packed, and we are ready to start up the trail to the top of the mesa. With us are two Navajo guides, Jim Begishe and Leo Manheimer; a naturalist named John Manygoats; Tony Williams, a former park ranger and river guide; and Tyler Williams, a river guide with a passion for canyons. The pace quickens as horses and pack animals swing into line, threading their way between sand and layered sandstone. The air is hazy with dust kicked up by the wind. A line of tabular cliffs stretches along the western horizon; to the northeast stands Navajo Mountain, bulging dark as a



Carved by water, honed by wind, Rainbow Bridge—the world's longest natural bridge—spans 275 feet. To local Navajo the arch is sacred—a central feature in an area they regard as the place where all moisture is born.

"These canyons kept me from being shipped off to Anglo boarding school," says Buck Navajo, a shepherd who lives in a traditional hogan. As a boy he hid out near Navajo Mountain to dodge Bureau of Indian Affairs truant round-ups. An old sheep trail leads hikers out of West Canyon (facing page), where prehistoric Anasazi images now serve as an exit sign.

rain cloud. Our trail meanders from mountain to mesa, where bare sandstone tosses in waves and sunken troughs, a sea of ancient dunes turned to rock. At the foot of Cummings Mesa we halt to tighten cinches and retie loads for the ascent.

The mesa trail angles back and forth, growing steeper; the horses pick their way up the talus and into the cliffs. We dismount and walk as the animals lunge up to precarious rock shelves. Hot breath from my horse's muzzle brushes my neck as I maneuver to keep in front.

At a steep switchback where the trail squeezes between a boulder and the cliff face, the lead mule balks, bringing everything to a standstill. The loss of momentum sends a ripple of confusion through the string, and the horses stir uneasily, sidestepping, some trying to turn back while others crowd forward and bunch up at the turn. The Navajo guides begin to shout to each other.

A horse rears, backing toward the edge of a sheer drop. Its back legs slip over the edge. Tyler and Jim hang onto the reins with all their strength, leaning into the ground as the horse struggles to find a purchase. And then the horse is gone.

Tyler and John backtrack down the trail to retrieve the saddle from the horse, dead on the rocks below. With the loss hanging heavily over us, we spread out and continue to the mesa top. "What a day," sighs John. "What a day."

By noon we reach Jim Begishe's hogan, at one of the most isolated camps on the Navajo Reservation. This is where the trail ends and where we leave the horses and the two guides. We walk to the far edge of the mesa to look for the route—the vestige of a trail washed out years ago—that we'll use to shuttle loads of equipment and supplies to the base camp we will set up at West Canyon, 1,400 feet below.

SCOTT THYBONY's work has appeared in National Geographic books and in *National Geographic Traveler*. BILL HATCHER photographed "Biking Across the Alaska Range" for the May 1997 issue of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

Before us stretches a rockscape flooded with light. Everything lies open, pared down to sky and stone. I try to trace the narrow canyon passage, but the rolling slickrock hides much of its course as it twists and falls and twists again for more than ten miles to Lake Powell.

During the 1920s Charles Bernheimer, a wealthy New Yorker, made half a dozen expeditions to this area. On his 1921 expedition he hoped to pioneer a western approach from Forbidding Canyon to Rainbow Bridge. In an account he wrote for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC in March 1923, he blamed his failure on "lack of food and feed, horseshoes, tools, and explosives."

He returned in 1922 with a string of 28 animals, seven men, and a load of dynamite, TNT, and black powder. Rounding Navajo Mountain, Bernheimer reached Rainbow Bridge from the south—after six days of earthmoving.

Since dynamite exploration is no longer considered good form, we will make our way as modern canyoneers, traversing the canyon by climbing, rappelling, and swimming. Our gear, adapted from equipment used by rock climbers and cave explorers, includes dry suits, ropes, headlamps, and two-way radios.

UNDER A STRAIGHT-UP SUN that bleaches the sandstone to hues of pale ocher and ash gray, we shoulder our backpacks with the first load of supplies and equipment and descend to our base camp. By dusk, when we reach the camp with our last load of the day, the yellows and reds around us are so deep they seem to seep from the heart of the rock. Surrounded by a vast expanse of slickrock domes above a dark cleft leading into the main canyon, we shake out our sleeping bags and sleep.

After retrieving the last of our supplies the next morning, we scout the branches of West Canyon until we find the best entry into the upper section. It's so narrow the cleft disappears in swells of bare sandstone.

Bernheimer does not mention this canyon in his diary, but he skirted it on "the most dreadful trail I have ever crossed."

We fall asleep under a clear sky, but by dawn the weather has shifted. At breaking light, rain clouds are gathering to the south over country that drains toward the canyon. Sipping coffee, we weigh the risk of descending through the upper slot, about two hours from camp. We know the canyon contains abrupt drop-offs, but we don't know how many or what other obstacles we might encounter: chockstones, as boulders wedged between the walls are called, tangles of driftwood, or plunge pools—deep basins carved by waterfalls.

The biggest mistake a canyoneer can make is to descend without the option of backtracking. In the fall of 1996 John Ey, a photographer from Tucson, entered a slot canyon north of here known as Brimstone Gulch. Certain he could find a way through, Ey lowered himself over an eight-foot cliff and let go. Hours later and totally exhausted, he found himself trapped in a rock chamber five feet long, three feet wide—and 60 feet tall. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, he had only five ounces of water and a few bites of a sandwich left. It was Tuesday, and no one expected him home until midnight Sunday.

"The nights were absolute terror," Ey recounted. "The time went so slowly there's almost no way to describe it." He shivered so violently he could not fall asleep. Dozing off at last, he would wake with a start, praying it was morning. "Then I'd look at my watch, and only 10 or 15 minutes had passed." He was so thirsty he forced himself to cry so he could lick the tears from his fingers.

Eight days after Ey entered the canyon, a search team using dogs reached the rim above him. They hauled him out with ropes—just in the nick of time. "That night," Ey said, "it dropped into the 20s, and the next day it snowed."

Ey was lucky. A group of hikers in Antelope Canyon, on the outskirts of Page, Arizona, on August 12, 1997, was not. A flash flood born of a

Ancient sand dunes turned to stone surround Navajo Mountain (above). Some five million years of rainwater and snowmelt cut canyons through the porous red rock. Viewed from above (facing page), a half-mile-long stretch of slot canyon—plunging 50 feet or more in some places—is intersected by a shorter slot.

cloudburst over Kaibito Plateau, 15 miles away, sent so much water pounding through the tight gorge that it swirled 80 feet up the rock walls. The hikers, mostly young European tourists, had paused inside the canyon to pose for photographs. Francisco Quintana, their guide, heard the roar of the oncoming flood and wedged himself and two others into a cliff face. Moments later, the muddy torrent arrived and shot Quintana a quarter mile through the canyon in just seconds. When it was all over, he was the only survivor.

WATCHING THE STORM BREWING over Rainbow Plateau, we decide we have enough time to push ahead into the upper narrows if we split up for a quicker descent. Bill and Tyler will attempt to traverse the entire length of the upper canyon. Tony and I will accompany them part of the way, carrying ropes to support their effort, then climb out. John will remain on the rim with a radio, watching the weather.

On the canyon floor the four of us pull on our dry suits and climb down into the first pothole, a basin scoured into the bedrock by water-swirled sand and rock. Here at the bottom of the slot thick twilight lasts all day, and meltwater fills much of the sunken corridor. As we wade belly deep, the passage narrows and our view of the sky constricts to a vein of blue. Water deepens below the pour-offs. To swim the pools, we push waterproof packs in front of us for flotation. John's voice crackles over the radio. "Still the same," he says. "Clouds still forming."

Reaching a break in the east wall, where the canyon begins to close in even tighter, Tony and I hand off the ropes and climb out. Tyler and Bill are on their own now, passing into the deepest section, where radio contact is broken.

As we work our way along the rim above, Tyler and Bill enter a dark passageway. High walls press so close together at one point they have to take their packs off and twist sideways to fit through. They reach a log-jam that plugs the narrows and toss their packs over the tangle of debris, then tunnel underneath. For several hours the two carry on, rigging ropes at six separate drops. The last rappel lands them in a deep pool.

There are no escape routes in this section of the canyon, but farther down in the lower narrows a few Navajo sheep trails reach the canyon floor. Once Bill and Tyler complete the upper narrows, they find a sheep trail to the rim, where they join us as evening approaches. If the weather holds, we'll move camp into the canyon tomorrow and complete the descent through the lower narrows in one long day.

Rain falls in the evening, and clouds mass on the horizon the next morning, the beginning of the fifth day. We postpone our descent and head off to explore some of the surrounding country. By nightfall, as the storm arrives, we are camped at the rim of a distant slot canyon. Thunder rumbles, and a soft rain turns into a cold downpour.

In the dark before dawn I hear a sustained, high-pitched roar coming from the gorge, like a wind blowing steadily but never coming close. The canyon below us is flashing. The air hangs heavy with moisture, sharpening the scent of wet sand and juniper. A few hours later, at daybreak, I angle down the wet slickrock to watch the floodwaters pour over a cliff and cascade into a chain of bedrock basins. In a few hours only damp sand will remain.

Three days later we return to West Canyon to complete our descent. At our old camp our tracks have disappeared from the sand—a flood

With a spider's agility, canyoneers Eve Tallman, at top, and Glenn Rink inch their way down a 20-foot-high chute in a side slot of West Canyon. Such climbing is not for novices. Says Tallman: "Going up is only half the story."

"I wanted to know how people in trouble feel," says park manager Effie Yazzie, who volunteered to be lifted from a hundred-foot-deep chasm in lower Antelope Canyon. Most actual rescues are of people lost or injured in falls. True disaster struck here in 1997, when 11 tourists drowned in a flash flood.

has swept through. We move camp down to a wide pocket in the main canyon for an early start in the morning.

At dawn, clouds are rolling above the rim again. Bill and I decide to set out without the others. If all goes well, we will reach Lake Powell and return by dark. We're racing the weather, glancing back at the sky as we push ahead. The stream channels through a narrowing passage, and the cliffs vault 400 feet overhead in endlessly curving faces. A recent flood churned through this gorge, leaving uprooted trees wedged across the narrows and driftwood jammed high above where we are now.

Bill, in the lead, steps into a deep patch of quicksand and sinks almost to his waist. Instinctively, he hands me his camera for a shot and then tries to extricate himself. He pulls out his right leg but can't budge the left. I begin digging, but under a foot of flowing water the hole quickly fills back up. I scoop sand with both hands as Bill leans forward. Finally the suction breaks, and he's free. "Maybe," he says, "I should take up wedding photography."

Five hours after leaving camp we exit the last narrows, a fluted channel augered through red bedrock. Pressed into the damp sand in front of us are fresh footprints and the tracks of a dog, most likely a boating party up from Lake Powell—the flooded core of Glen Canyon. We round several more bends and reach the lake's high-water mark.

The threat of flooding makes it too dangerous to return the way we came. Bill spots a vertical crack leading to a break in the cliff above. Wedging into the crack, I press my back against one wall and my feet against the other and inch my way up. Bill leads the next climb up a set of ancient Indian hand- and footholds. We soon top the cliff and pause before starting back to join the others.

A slickrock expanse opens around us. Shadows from passing clouds race across the surface as the wind picks up and raindrops slap the ground. We begin our long journey across the Rainbow Plateau, keeping to a high route. In the canyon below, the water rises. □

"Sometimes you have to swim right into it," says Eve Tallman, crossing a debris-choked pothole in Navajo Canyon. Rain leaves a shine on the cliffs (above) and washes leaves, branches, dirt, and even dead animals into canyon recesses. The muck stagnates until the next downpour flushes it out, and a new cycle begins in these back alleyways of canyon country.