

SID GUSTAFSON

Plume

Hear the man climb. Hear the occasional rock clatter downhill and know he climbs. He climbs in darkness. Through the silence of the first frost he climbs. A cortege of silence rises from the earth escorting him upward.

He climbed until, from the east, light. In this first light he sat, his perch a hill atop the silhouette of his world, his world of the last decade, his world a ranch inherited from his grandfather, he the sole heir of the line, the last heir. He waited besieged by a cold silence, a silence reddened by a flood of morning light. Into the day he waited, the hill besieged by light, besieged by the secret desert that was the hill, is this hill. Mountains behind, a bliss of mountains, a green hold against the drying autumn, a brilliant hold against the distant dryland farming visible on the plains beyond, strip farming, altered wheat dissecting the land below his native spread. And further east, irrigated farming. Orchestrated water turning giant pivots, circular fields, balloons of green beyond the rectangles of red. The geometric farming stirred a fury in him as he sat watching, an abstract fury, a fury regarding the doomed human race that the tampered wheat intended to feed, a fury of how it all edged toward him, far removed, yet edging into him.

A broad view from his sandy rest, a barren spot, an Indian grave. The imagined view it once beheld would offer a permanent resting place, above the falling away of plains, plains falling away. A grave. He sat in bonedust, forgotten bonedust, long forgotten but by him and the silence of the world. From here he wished his ashes spread, having spread his grandfather's from here, his father's from here, and after him no ashes to spread. He picked up a handful of earth and filtered it through his fingers, dust rising, sand falling to earth, dust floating on dry air. Top of his ranch, top of his world, crumbling.

He dozed and woke to weather medium blue and fine. He relished the remnants of his range, native range unfarmed save the meadow hay. Alone he waited, waited for the plume to rise above the horizon, the dust plume her car would make as she raced toward him from the east.

She had written him telling of her coming, words telling him the day when she would arrive, nothing else, not why, or from where, only when. Two weeks ago she wrote and told him the day. Today.

On top of the day he waited, his liver loose inside him, his face seamed with the fatigue of time. Mountains waiting behind him, looking with him, over him, they too seamed with time. The air waited, air empty for the plume. Horses grazed distant. Cattle distanter. Hay bales waited in the bottom, an army to defend against winter.

White sky. White sun.

Burning trees fell out of the Rocky Mountain front on either side of him. Red trees, yellow trees, leaves buzzing with eternity. Trees skirted by grass, grass holding onto green.

He ate the lunch he'd packed, red roast beef bled into white bread. Saltine crackers. Half-rancid butter, butter rancid from the warming sun. Tea. Limpid green tea, limpid and Thermos cold. Good tea.

Weltering sun. Westering sun.

The day bluer, colder.

Quieter but for an occasional exploding grasshopper.

Three quarter moon rising. A moon he once unhooked for her.
If only she would plume.
Only plume.
Ten years later plume.
Her visit, a chance to square off his life. To get reborn.

She drove. Drove through red wheat, strips of red wheat, red wheat ripened, evening wheat.
She plumed.

He stood to watch, watch it rising, chasing to him, rising high. Chasing and rising. Distant plume.
Nearing plume. Dust pluming.

A most beautiful plume of dust, sun behind, low and behind, sun lighting the plume afire, red fire, red chaff, sublimated red wheat.

His memory came to her, through the plume it came, hers to him. Memory veiled in tears. Old belief. Belief that if they did the right things, the right things would happen, and things would work out. Things didn't work out. No they did not. Not between them. Not *of* them. Not at all.

Stillborn twins. Dead twins stillborn. A boy. A girl. Mummified. Gray. For some reason then embalmed, their black blood traded for embalming fluid.

Buried now. Buried beside his mother in another part of the world, an urban part of the world not this world. What sun and wind and silence that morning.

He'd hoped ranching would transform his canticle of illusions terrible and real and dead to a cradlesong relinquished and forgotten. No.

He rubs his hands, his vesseled hands, hands knotted with desolation, hands wetting with sweat, nervous sweat. Hands gritting with sand, gritted by indurated sand. He wrings his hands, hands rough from labor, labor fencing the land, putting up hay, hay to feed cows, cows to pay banker, never enough, never enough flesh. Never enough. All the remnants of his dreams packed into this land, land threatened to be foreclosed upon, his life foreclosed upon, hers foreclosed when the twins stillborn. Ten years ago. Stillborn.

The swirl, merge, and clatter of dreams dissipate in friable clouds gathered above. He walks down, down though the foothills, down through slow thick curves of land. Evening birds dive crazily, a gray cold descending about them. He thinks of her erratic attitude toward men, toward him, her troubled past before him, dignity dissolved, then a troubled past with him, then stillbirth. Through his land he walks, then runs, land waiting to be nourished by snow. The mountains mirage, mirage into the plume, magnified, rarefied. Yawning mountains, tired mountains, their canyons plunging in darkness. His last good kiss with her ten years ago. A kiss followed by rage. An ancient rage burning about his eyes.

In twilight he reaches the yard. Her car waits, and in it, her. His note flags in a warm breeze that has set the peepers peeping, a world suddenly bereft of silence, his note waving from the hitching post where she would for sure see it, see it, read it, know his hand and wait. Her car parked before it, car parked, car full of belongings, a chair and desk strapped atop her car, a car low in the springs. She steps out, steps out smiling to meet him. He approaches her quickly. Quickly. Ten years later quickly, the last kiss over their children's grave, a last unchilded kiss.

A short-legged dog scuttles out of the car and runs about chasing dogwise chickens.

She steps through stirs of dust, she steps to him, folds into him, folds into him and lifts her head smiling, pulls his head down to her lips, his lips to her lips, knowing love is the best place to feel safe. And from the car, from the car a cry, a baby's cry, a baby's cry engulfing the world.

