

more hidden from them, and Nick remembered that they were out there. That there was not that much of civilization beyond these planted trees and decaying homes. "I don't think he's here," Nick said.

"Nope, I guess not."

"Where else would he go?"

"He's around somewhere, maybe he's hiding, I don't know."

"I don't think he's hiding," Nick said. "I mean, it seems hard to understand, but he is leaving, he's going away. Slipping into the ether. It's not your fault."

"I don't think it's my fault."

"OK, never mind."

"Thanks though, you are sweet. At least I think you're sweet," and then, yes, maybe it was a little romantic, because she did lean forward and drape her long arms over his shoulders and kissed him strong on the lips. It wasn't the most passionate of kisses, just a fairly chapped and dry kiss on the lips, but he did feel the delicious plasticity of her skin and its own pulsing, bursting energy. He must have closed his eyes, because he felt her more than he saw her, and in the feeling she became another being again, as if a sudden downpour rainstorm had dampened the earth and released the sweet and poignant sage smell.

### ***A Brother Comes Home***

*It was out there, on the flat. There wasn't one but then Pop carved it into the sagebrush. Before that the Goyetchea's used to just land their little single-engine plane on the dirt road. But Pop said that wasn't good enough, so he took the land plane and the road grader out into the sagebrush and he carved it straight and long and flat. That he did in a day, and the next he fashioned a real windsock from canvas and placed it up on the a pole so the pilot would be able to see*

*which way the wind was coming. He wanted everything all right and ready because the telegram they got back said that the plane was due to arrive on the third day. It didn't seem like they would do it. They would fly straight through to Winnemucca and that they would never find the ranch, and that if they did they wouldn't land on some dirt strip. But the Old Man was out there early that morning, just sitting in his truck and waiting for it, scanning the sky back and forth one time after another. He sat their patiently all morning and into the afternoon.*

*There are a lot of men of energy who could not do that, what Pop did then. Sitting out there the way he had since Korea and the news that they'd found the remains of an old B-29 on the Korean Peninsula. That it was Mike's. That they were identifying the cadavers and that they would be shipping them home to their kin. Me and Joey didn't wait around for a plane, too much to do for that, but you know we had an ear to the sky all day long wondering if the Army would really deliver a son's remains, his burned ashes that just as well could have via the wind, through the air. Everything was starting to happen through the air in those days though, and the world was barging in to the ranch. We had new cooperative lights and now apparently Army air delivery. Anything was possible. Well, me and Ben just didn't want no truck with the Army anyway after the Old Man stopped us from volunteering in Korea. He wouldn't lose another one. No we had our places now. What good leaving west to the East other than dead. Dead hero is still dead. We were stuck to the ranch, we were embedded in it. Only one adventure in this family and it belonged to a short mission to bomb old Tokyo and then gone. Disappeared gone. Lost. Not the grand island adventure that had quite been imagined. There was never much Mike for me anyway. He was too much older to be remembered, to be caught talking to the little ones. There were others back then, cousins and*

*other relatives and men from the Old Country who knew the Old Man's village. We didn't have a village either. Just this place.*

*He carved it out on the flat, in the middle of the arm created on the desert by the big flow of the creek, between the spur ridge that jutted south from the east side of the creek and the foothills of the Big Waters and the southern desert mountains. In the open. Where they could see it.*

*The impermanence of landscape: this was once a lake. The ranch the inlet of what must have been a river, or at least a broad marsh. The mountains glacial. It didn't cost that much to imagine it here. It wasn't that hard to consider that in the grand scheme of things it hadn't been that long ago. Longer than us, but we aren't that long. In fact we are infinitesimally tiny. Even the lake is more or less nothing, the mountains a blink, the next ocean just a few moments away.*

*So we pretended that we were masters of our domain. We drove past him a couple of times this morning, the new air-strip also carved, practically, next to the main north south road between the headquarters and the new big well-driven alfalfa fields farther out on the flat that the cooperative electricity also brought in. He sat their unperturbed and didn't make any sign that he saw us go by or that he cared. Or that we weren't doing anything that wasn't just plain expected of us. That was the essential ingredient. You didn't do something because you wanted someone to tell you you had done a great job, you did it because it was what you did. And you didn't say thank you for something that you should have gotten anyway and you didn't say please when you took something unless it was deserved and needed. There wasn't that much to talk about anymore out there in those days. The Old Man didn't like it after Mike was gone and we just sort of got out of the habit, especially when Mom went on and it was just us. So driving by him was*

*more or less the same. Except today was different. Might be different. It could have not been believable.*

*We were down at the installation of our new cement irrigation ditch that was going to slow erosion from our first well when we did hear the drone coming up the desert of an approaching plane. We both stopped when we heard it. We paused at least. There was a beat from before we had heard arrival of the sound waves marking the unmistakable passage of a airplane. Even then we knew that sound. And it only meant one thing. It was going to happen. But we were at something, so we didn't stop right away. The sound approached got nearer and then we spotted the little plane backed up against broadly washed sky to the south. Coming from Reno and San Francisco no doubt. And we were the ones who were going to be here for the arrival. We both knew, knew once and for all and, yeah, unmistakably that it shouldn't have been Mike on that plane. That he was the wrong one to go. Any one of us. Hell, maybe even both of us were worth one Mike. We never would have said that and we didn't then, but I know that we both thought it because it was thick between us.*

*"Let's go see the going on."*

*"We should finish this first."*

*"Ah, c'mon, you're crazy. Let's go. Pop want us there."*

*Would he? Or would it just be one more whack? But we went anyway. Wasn't every day a plane landed on the ranch. As we drove north toward the ranch we saw it swing wide around along the edge of the foothills and all along the edge of the inner horizon and then, just as pulled up next to the Old Man's truck we saw it line up coming straight up from the south the way that it had come. It was a single-engine job with straight flat wings and a little backdoor. No army markings, maybe they just hired it in Reno, something we would ever know. It was something I saw once, later, going away across the ocean so far away from here that it had to*

*be another life, the big swath of the desert, the Selenites and Granites and Black Rocks, the Shakespeare's and the Big Waters lined up like dreadnoughts pointed north toward the invasion of the great North Pole. Only you never make it that far when you go north. Only a long ways. There is a rhythm to it, to the spread of mountain range upon mountain range stretching to an impossible horizon. We don't think about that. That the view each and every one of us and get for the price of a Southwest ticket is the veritable spread of Icarus's wings in the heights of ecstasy as flung himself toward the greatest light of all. Fermina was with me then, my daughter, Fermina. My mother's name. June didn't like it at all, but the little girl was always Fermina. I don't know why we were jumping off the continent, but it had to have been for something worthwhile for me to go. But then she always could get me to do anything she set her mind to. But not anymore. Now it was plane landing, my father opening the door and coming to stand in front of the hood to watch the final approach and for me and Joey to come in behind him and to stand at attention as well, the draft dodgers hiding behind their Papa's big shoulders while the rest of the county can go to hell just because his boy got it in the Big One. Our boys are dying too. Despite the dragged strip the little plane didn't set down easy, it bounced here and back its mated edges threatening to shatter against the decaying lakebed, but held firm to Mother Earth and indeed did come to stand before us in the middle of a forsaken plain in goddamned Nevada.*

*The propellers still beat an awesome wind and slapped at the new dust and the plane bounced a little on its engine held in governor, and then it throttled down and settled like a calmed colt. And the little door opened in the fuselage, a half door really, and a man dressed in Army green did hop down somewhat gracefully and somewhat painfully in shiny shoes and a drab greens. He retrieved a cardboard*

*box and a knapsack from behind him, in the fuselage, while the plane did hold ready. As if this, in true military style, this could be an ambush and they might flee. No color guard, just a man in full dress walking through across the newly scraped away sagebrush toward our nearby parking. "Mr. Louis Yrutia?" He stood at half attention as if the plane ride had shaken out a little of the ramrod or like he really need to take a shit in the sagebrush behind us.*

*"Yeah, I'm Louie." We never heard the Old Man say that. "Did you find it all right?"*

*"Sir, yes, yeah we did. Sir. I am here to present you with the remains of your honorably deceased kin Michael Louis Yrutia. Please sir, these are for you." He stepped forward and pressed the cardboard box into the Old Man's arms, and then dropped the knapsack onto the ground, opened it, and pulled out a tri-corner folded American flag. He dragged himself partly to attention and tried to hand the flag to Pop, but Pop was occupied by the cardboard box that he held and the soldier fumbled and nearly dropped it, but it caught it and then looked us. "He was you brother?" he asked. Joey nodded and stepped forward and took the flag from the solder. "Thank you for your loss, country, your Country thanks you for your loss," he got through the rehearsed line. Who would want this job anyway, even for a chance at a half-day off for a plane ride on a lark. And then he retreated to the plane, hopped aboard and immediately it spun and turned south, accelerating as it powered up the big engines driving it into the air and rode them away forever.*

### **The Foreman Gets Off the Mountain**

More thunder. They jumped the sky was growing ever darker. "I hope it rains. Could mean fire," Mina said automatically, something she hadn't thought in years. Then, it was true, Pop riding up and down the