

Them's Friendly Ghosts

Riding the zigzags of a downhill trail, Blumquist and his men fall into the rhythms of descent. The dust kicked up when they zag now hovers over them as they zig and they straighten up, let the horses do the scouting, and ponder the growing cloud that must appear from a distance to be rolling down upon them, inescapable, pressing them further into the gorge.

Oh, one thinks, one must think we are cornered; our opponent is forcing us out. His fingers glide along his six-shooter and he puffs one cheek — bam! bam! bam! — imaginary blasts, inaudible.

Oh, one thinks, one must enjoy this while it lasts. Such little waste when one's actions are at one with nature's law.

Oh, one thinks, one law for all things, man or dust, one must descend.

And as they descend further into the gorge and the cloud follows, there is less and less chance for sunlight to come upon them direct, less and less chance for the men to think the cloud's actions to be docile. They slow down.

"Just eatin' up my day," Blumquist mumbles over his shoulder, hand on the crown of his hat, his head craned up like a monarch's or a bird's. The men behind him are yawning, stretching, grasping at the peels of muscles stiffened by the ride. As they stop, the cloud comes upon them. Blumquist, further down the trail, sees his men become lower segments of men and he thinks then of earthworms and their ways. Soon the cloud envelopes him as well, a fine powder that sticks upon him like talcum. It passes. Above the cloud he sees now the heads of his men, their necks below, their limed shoulders, and then the cloud ceases to descend. He sees his men's eyes pucker just a tad. Now it is the cliffside which recedes above them.

As if the fog slowed not only light but other senses, at once, but late, the lumbering gait of their horses, they feel, has resumed beneath them. A pang of shame shudders among them. As if in a dream, their horses are now within the passed dust and with an instinct foreign to the men, they have decided to move and to leave the mess moved upon them. The men grow sullen. Trotting at speed with the cloud, as before, when it had been pressing from above, there is far to go to leave the darkness, for it follows — how far neither man nor horse could say. Blumquist and his men, unable to see their own waists, as if tucked in bed back home, turn to face each other, at home, or so accustomed, among this upper world, at ease with the clouds and the peaks.

"Oh," one says, "one must feel strange not knowing how the world goes on below us."

"Hell, one oughtn't speak of one." Blumquist.

"Oh," one says, "one must be curious why the world above us, disengaged from all below, is moving so. One mountain might move on its own, sure, but many mountains must be moved together, like a poker hand."

Each man looking over one another's shoulders, could, indeed, as if upon a poker hand, lay eyes upon a swath of mountains and mesas beyond, could, with the ignored ambling of the horses, see these peaks glide in and out of perspective, move behind one another, align, realign, and all that mumbo mountains might be apt for if there were indeed no worry about the world below. At times, one peak would disappear behind a mesa and out the other side would drift a different piece of stone. The men gaze longer and longer at their ranging poker hands, each furtively gaming but

failing to find the aplomb to call.

"Oh," one says, "one must be a ghost or one must not feel so affine to clouds."

Laid across the horizon, clouds pass, billowy and pleasant, reminiscent of female figures, vague barmaids, the soft curves of saloon girls, single cheeks of their faces.

Blumquist reaches one of his arms out above the cloud, touches his hand upon his forehead, easing up the hold of his hatband. "Well, them's *friendly* clouds," he grins to no one in particular, vacantly pouting, eyebrows up and at it.