Memories, Dust, and the Arizona Sun
Matthew L. Gougeon

The sun was setting on the horizon just across the road from the dusty shack. Ambrose Becker, the descendant of a long line of Beckers that dates back to German royalty, sat in his chair on his porch to watch the Arizona sun go down once more. The road that ran through his front yard was covered by a thin layer of fine dust. Every half a day or so when a car went by, the trail of dust took nearly an hour to settle again. Ambrose would watch it settle. He would wonder about each tiny particle, about its progression over time, thrown about by the traffic. Sometimes he would focus on one tiny particle of dust and watch it for a long time. He would give it a name, smile at it, and say good-bye. Often the name would be from someone from his past. He thought of the glory days of cattle ranching in his youth. He had many memories, many friends, all gone now. The dust would rise and create a haze in the sunshine, a haze that was much like the one that clouded his mind, thin and obscuring. Ambrose sat on his porch and watched all that happened in his small world.

His visions and dreams had not always been so limited. He used to share a great dream. A vision that was passed from generation to generation in his family. A vision of cattle ranching. In the early 1800's the Becker ranch was one of the most successful in the southwest. Flagstaff and Phoenix were fed for years on Becker beef. Ambrose followed in his family tradition well. His father died early at the hands of rustlers in the tragic stampede of 1895. Ambrose, only twenty-two years old, had to take the bull by the horns. He made a niche for himself in the ranching world. He even took a wife two years later. Mary Anne Parks was her name. She completed Ambrose's life. He had success, love, and cattle. He had it all.

In the fall of 1909, Mary Anne brought home a Victrola from the town music center. She had always had an ear for music. With it she brought a few discs with songs by various singing artists of the time. Her small collection included a recording of "Love Me Through the Chilly, Chilly Evening," by Nathaniel
Jacobs. It soon became her favorite. MaryAnne became infatuated with the song and Nathaniel himself. She purchased all of his recordings and read everything that was printed about the rising, rugged, cowboy singer. Ambrose, being considerably older than his wife, thought that she was just being silly. But, with each passing week, he noticed her growing more distant.

MaryAnne did not think she was being silly. When Nathaniel Jacobs sang it took her away from wherever it was that held her so close. Maybe it was the constant dust in the air at the ranch that choked her so. The hot wind that blew up her nostrils dried and scratched the back of her throat. She never felt clean, but always gritty, from the constant motion of the ranch, a motion that seemed ever to swirl around her and never include her. She moved separately from the ranch. She moved separately from Ambrose.

It seemed her only relief was the coolness of Nathaniel Jacobs’ voice. When he sang of a starry evening on the prairie, she could feel the light breeze kick up the hem of her skirt and breathe on the backs of her legs. It seemed to lift her, body and spirit, up to the top of the mesa and into the arms of life itself. She would imagine his face, those chiseled features that she saw in the one photograph of him she had, set against the light of the moon. He would smile at her. He had good teeth, the like she had never seen. His eyes would hold hers and she could not get away from them. She did not want to.

Her fantasies would grow and she began to discover new things about herself. She began to realize that if she could feel this heavenly in her dreams, then there was no reason she couldn’t feel this way in her reality. MaryAnne despised at the knowledge of her hidden desires and passions. She wanted to touch them, to exist in them. She needed someone to help her, to coax the treasures of her being into the open. She wanted to shout and scream to the dust and wind. But, the wind carried her pleas away and the dust stung her eyes so that she had to close them tightly.

On a Tuesday, during the summer a number of years later, while MaryAnne Becker was in town, she noticed a handbill on the board in front of the new cinema theater. Along with an announcement of a local O.K. Corral shooting and a new film on location in the county, there was a statement saying that the Monument was shooting a new film on location in the county. She swung her car up in front of the theater and read on: Residents are invited to come to the theater to see a preview of a new film, The Monuments Men. MaryAnne did not think she was being silly. Maybe it was the constant dust in the air at the ranch that choked her so. The hot wind that blew up her nostrils dried and scratched the back of her throat. She never felt clean, but always gritty, from the constant motion of the ranch, a motion that seemed ever to swirl around her and never include her. She moved separately from the ranch. She moved separately from Ambrose.

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her favorite. Mary Anne became infatuated with Nathaniel himself. She purchased and read everything that was printed about the singer. Ambrose, being conscious, thought that she was just being silly. When he noticed her growing she was being silly. When Ambrose took her away from wherever it was maybe it was the constant dust in the air that seemed ever to swirl around her. She moved separately from the ranch. He was the coolness of Nathaniel Jacobs of a starry evening on the ranch and cattle could not be left untended. She swung her car up in front of the sprawling yellow house.

With an announcement of a local Charleston contest was a statement saying that the Monumental Movie Company was shooting a new film on location in the area. She caught her breath and her heart pounded in her chest. Her eyes focused on each letter in turn. Starring Nathaniel Jacobs. She swallowed hard and felt the dry scratch in the back of her throat. She read on: Residents are invited to try out for these roles as extras. We need Indians. Mary Anne felt weak. All the old feelings of pressing want returned. She had thought that the wind had taken them away years ago, but now they were back. They seemed to come from all around, swirling in a small tornado that settled right on top of her. She felt sick at the thought of returning to the ranch. There was a tightening in her chest when she thought of Ambrose. He was not a bad man. He treated her well. Most folks thought she was lucky to have such a dedicated husband. His only true dedication, was to cattle. The last few years she had accepted this and taken refuge in all the things that Ambrose had given her. But, he had never really given her what she wanted most. He had never really paid attention to her. He had never really known her. She felt as though she were his prize cow, something kept in a nice barn something to look at, an achievement. She hated cows.

Mary Anne now moved as though she had no power over her actions. She climbed into her brand new Ford and raced down the red dirt road that led out of town. The car was the talk of the county. Ambrose had given it to her in an attempt to regain her attention. It seemed to him that his wife had no interest in anything at all. Sure, a few years ago she'd had that infatuation with the Victrola and that cowboy singer, but she never played those songs anymore and the Victrola sat gathering dust. He felt that she should have taken more of an interest in the ranch. After all, the ranch was their very lifeblood. In fact, the Becker ranch was an important part of the entire community. Many people depended on him and his cattle. But, for reasons he couldn't understand, his wife moved around their life together as though the ranch weren't there at all. He never had time to understand the reasons, the ranch and cattle could not be left untended.

She swung her car up in front of the sprawling yellow house.
that Ambrose had built for her. She got out of the car and ran through the trail of dust that had been lifted behind it. She thought of how it didn't seem so much that her car had raised the dust, but that it had followed her in urgent turbulent pursuit. She ran quickly upstairs and without a word to anyone, began to pack a few things in an old trunk. She took only what she thought she might need. She called out the window to Samuel to come help her. She had the hired hand load the trunk into the car. Confused, Samuel ran to tell Mr. Ambrose of his wife's actions.

Mary Anne had gathered a few last minute articles into her bag when she noticed her rosary lying on the top of the dresser. Ambrose had given her the rosary on their first Christmas together. It had been imported all the way from Italy and she cherished it. She picked it up and put it in the bag and only then did she stop and think about what she was doing. It wasn't that she had never loved Ambrose, it was just that she needed something to stoke the fire in her wanting soul. That was something more than Ambrose and the immutable motion of the ranch could give her. Besides, she would return to him someday. But now, she had to realize her dreams, dreams that now kept coming to her in fleeting images, swooping up in front of her face like swallows to an opening in a barn.

Ambrose was standing by her car when she came out of the house. He was wearing the dust of the ranch on his clothes and face. She looked at him and a pain arose in her chest. It was sharp and biting. She felt embarrassed. She noticed, for the first time maybe, that he looked somehow necessary. Covered in the dust as he was, he looked very much a part of the world and he moved within it. She walked past him and got in the car. Ambrose didn't try to stop her. In fact, he never said a word. He felt that if it was in her to leave him, then there wasn't much he could say. Besides, there would be plenty of time to talk when she returned.

But, Ambrose never saw Mary Anne again. Except, of course, in the movies. He would go to the theater on nights when not many people would attend and sit in the back row. He would watch his wife make love with the actors. He would imagine that it was him making love on the screen transfixed his mind. The credits billed Ambrose would stay in his seat until the last row and like the dawn of a new day. Suddenly Mary Anne to memory he would make out into the night.

Ambrose began to lose sight of Mary Anne. Eventually his cousin, Hiram Bee, came to the house on the back of the ranch. His needs were taken care of. Ambrose lived in the small, dusty house and watched the years away. Bits and pieces would fly off as the years went by. Soon his own small gathering of dust, memories would gather into little piles and scatter them, catching them into clouds in his mind.

He lived a long time on the property, outlived Mary Anne and her career and the Becker ranch. He seemed to wind. He made a niche for himself and had memories. He had dust, and all.
She got out of the car and ran as though the dust of the ranch on his face stuck to his face and moved within it. She felt embarrassed. She had never loved Ambrose, it was a few last minute articles into her trunk. She picked it up and put it in the car. She had the hired hand load the trunk. Samuel ran to tell Mr. Ambrose that if it was in her to talk when she returned.

Ambrose began to lose sight of his ranch and himself. Eventually his cousin, Hiram Becker, set him up in a small house on the back of the ranch property and saw that his needs were taken care of. Ambrose would sit on the porch of that small, dusty house and watch as the hot, dry wind blew the years away. Bits and pieces of the Becker land were sold off as the years went by. Soon all of it was gone except for his own small gathering of dust. Like the dust, Ambrose's memories would gather into little piles. The wind would come and scatter them, catching them up in whirlwinds and mixing them into clouds in his mind.

He lived a long time on the porch of that shack. He outlived MaryAnne and her career. He lived longer than Hiram and the Becker ranch. He seemed as constant as the dry wind. He made a niche for himself in his own small world. He had memories. He had dust, and the Arizona sun. He had it all.