

21:

“Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities.” One-eyed Tom, the proprietor of the Coney Island Saloon in El Paso and the old man’s long time friend and gambling associate, read from the page Apollinara had prepared from a text by the agnostic, Ingersoll.

The day had begun with a gullywasher and had made a pond of the rectangular hole carved in the red dirt in a neglected corner of the Las Cruces Odd Fellows Cemetery. As the funeral procession had wound its way to the burying ground later that day, large threatening dark clouds raced across the severe blue like itinerant mourners threatening to drop more misery on the assembling dignitaries, friends and family.

“We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. We cry aloud and the only answer is the echo of our wailing cry.”

The old man’s children, four boys and three girls, stood at graveside, their heads bowed. Paulita, the youngest of the girls, held the three-year old boy on one hip. Apollinara stared solemnly, stoically at the long plain coffin holding her husband’s body. In her black-gloved hand, she clutched the telegram of condolence from President Theodore Roosevelt. At her side, a grim Governor Kerry stared intently at the red muck that encased his new boots. The old man’s brothers, long estranged, had made the trip from Louisiana, tall and gangly like their departed sibling. A young reporter from the El Paso Herald stood off to one side, unobtrusively, jotting in a narrow notebook.

“From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead,”
One-eyed Tom quavered, “there comes no word; but in the
night of death hope sees a star and listening love can hear
the rustling of a wing.”

A cloudburst greeted his words. With the sound of
spreading wings, almost in unison, and as if in salute, the
black umbrellas of the prepared rose over the heads of the
dark clad mourners. Rivulets appeared in the rutted red
earth, wending their way between mud spattered shoes,
over the piles of crimson dirt at grave’s edge, and around
the large gray mass of granite headstone upon which was
carved the name, *Garrett*. The accumulating wet gathered
in depressions made by the carriage wheels and boot heels
like murky pools of blood before dribbling down the
desolate hill.