Moebius

Volume 6
Issue 1 *The Dumbing Down of America*

Article 16

6-1-2008

Blood in the Desert

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Recommended Citation
Emilio, Greg (2008) "Blood in the Desert," *Moebius*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 16.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol6/iss1/16

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Blood in the Desert

Greg Emilio

O. W. Red Austin
1907-2007

Normally, I would never travel
to the sun-blasted landscape of Beaumont,
let alone go there in August.
    But we dusted East across
the 10 freeway that day to celebrate
the 100 years my great-grandfather had been alive.

Despite all the Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners,
I only really knew him through the tales
of my father and uncles:

a dust-bowl Depression survivor who hunted daily to feed his family.
a gaunt quarterback when a thin piece of brown leather was a helmet.
a pool hall hustler earning college tuition.
a 75-year-old dirtbike rider.
a tobacco smoker 'till 85.
a man who carved custom canes with weary fingers, then sold them online.
a man who lived before there was TV, space travel, or cell phones.
a man who came from a time when you could be named
    Ora Wycliffe Austin, and go simply by "Red."
a man who, even in the early stages of Alzheimer's,
had always been able to remember my name.

As he sat in his red leather recliner that day,
sipping softly at a warm Coors Light,
dressed in shorts and a cotton T-shirt,

exposing centennial skin; ivory-white and exhausted,
he told us about the time he fell and broke his hip while he was alone,
managing to drag himself to the closet where he kept his revolver in a shoe box,
and how he was glad he had decided not to pull the trigger.

His sandpaper voice rasped against the stifled heat
of the un air-conditioned living room.
He didn't cry, and though difficult,
neither did we.

When he finished speaking,
a tight-lipped smile stretched under his hard blue eyes,
and he lifted his silvery can;
toasting to our lives.

Then, calling me by my brother's name,
he asked me to fetch him another beer.

I went and got it without correcting him.