



YOU ARE
HERE

Eric Paul
Shaffer



OBSCURE
PUBLICATIONS

YOU ARE HERE

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kindling: Poems from Two Poets

(Longhand Press, 1988; co-author, James Taylor III)

RattleSnake Rider

(Longhand Press, 1990)

How I Read Gertrude Stein by Lew Welch

(Grey Fox Press, 1996)

Instant Mythology

(Backer Editions, 1999)

Portable Planet: Poems

(Leaping Dog Press, 2000)

Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen: Poems

(Leaping Dog Press, 2001)



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YOU ARE HERE

BORN WITH A TAIL

K.C. writes me occasionally when she's not working or studying or playing since she likes to get letters from me even though she only lives a few blocks away.

One day K.C. writes, "One out of every 10,000 babies is born with a tail, and I think you were one of them. They cut the tail off at birth and usually don't tell the mother. You have a scar back there as I recall."

My bathroom mirror is mounted on the wall at a height where most faces fall, so when I pull my pants down to examine what's left of my tailbone, I can't see my butt or my backbone because the angle's wrong, and my head won't turn far enough around anyway. Maybe Barbie or Regan MacNeil could, but they wouldn't need to.

Even with a hand mirror, I can't see the mark because the complexity of reflective angles defeats my desire to examine my body's geography. The mystery remains right where anybody but me can see it.

WHAT IS THE MAGIC WORD?

At the dinner table, over Cecil B. DeMille's favorite vegetable dish, on a pale purple October evening in Baron Town, one of those remarkable accidents of youth instantaneously and momentarily reveals the actual contours of the future in a grim white flash striking the top of the head, boiling blood in the veins, illuminating bones from the inside out, and scoring the image permanently on the backs of eyelids.

"Can I have some more peas and carrots?"

"Yes, you *may*. What's the magic word?"

Strangely and suddenly, I am on the spot, blinking in the brilliant glare of the rolling searchlight of disciplinary parental attention. The three heads of my sisters are weather vanes turning to me in concern as the sky blackens above my head. My brother, sensing imminent assault and battery, watches with a little grin.

What's the magic word?

Maybe I am stupid, possibly I wasn't listening, perhaps I haven't winnowed the relevant information from the constant din of adult noise falling on my young eardrums, but as I sit on a shiny square of hot orange vinyl and silver tubes turned, twisted, and bolted into the agonized shape of a chair at that round white kitchen table of my youth with my mouth open in wonder, I realize I have no idea at all what the magic word is.

What's the magic word?

All around me, the crowds of my imagination emit the white noise of conversation. I am a ubiquitous dinner topic of universal interest in an eternal room of white tablecloths appearing fantastically through the walls of a small kitchen on the left side of a little brick duplex on a cross street in Baron Town on the east coast of a big nation. Well-dressed dinner parties on all sides stare at me staring dumbly as I ransack what little knowledge of the world I have to answer my mother's sudden essential question. The diners, heads leaning together, nodding, arching necks around other heads also turned to stare, all speaking in hushed voices, endlessly exchange the pointless words buzzing eternally through the background of cinema.

"Peas and carrots. Peas and carrots. Peas and carrots. Peas and carrots. Peas and carrots." Cecil B. is in ecstasy.

My parents tire of the wordless pause that displeases and return to their food and other matters. I will get neither until I say the magic word, but I'm not hungry anymore.

As my eyes adjust to the sudden gloom of surrendering the blinding beam of correction, I whisper the question of the moment to my brother with my own particular emphasis, "What *is* the magic word?"

My brother possesses the soul of wit.

"If you don't know, I'm not telling you."

I look at my little sisters, and they look back. It is clear they sympathize, but it is also clear they cannot help. The oldest doesn't know the answer. The midmost doesn't understand the question. The youngest doesn't even understand the language of the question.

What is the magic word?

The white-clothed tables of well-dressed diners dissolve as the kitchen's yellow walls materialize once more on all four sides, with me cooling in the hot Siege Perilous at the round table of the dangerous dinners of my early years. My mother proposes a quest. It is a task beginning with insistence on courtesy and becoming the adventures of an errant knight wandering the world pursuing a Holy Grail. The quest opens the whole wide world to innocent seekers who must open their own hearts in turn and return with the simple truth living requires. All set forth alone on a single solitary quest. Mine is beginning even now.

What is the magic word?

THE FELONY STICK: VENUS

Rufus and I cross the street near the Psychology building on the nighttime U.N.U.M. campus. An anonymous young woman approaches and stands in our way. We stop obligingly.

"What's the name of your dog?" she says.

"Rufus."

"Hi, hon," she says to the dog. She bends to pet him and seeks his attention by scratching him under the chin. Thus, she passes beneath the arch of the broad Gates of Hell as Dante inscribes them. Rufus has no attention to spare when he walks at night with me. He is a dog with a mission and divides himself in 360 directions a second, watching for the campus cats with nose alert and eyes and ears turning to every sound and sight he catches. At times like these, he has no time for bipeds. Rufus is a scholar of the dark scents of the university.

She looks up at me. "Why do you carry that stick?"

"For the dog. I mean for *other* dogs. For breaking up dogfights. I got bit last year."

"Really?" she says. "Where? On the leg?"

"No. On the hand."

"Where?" she says.

"Right here." I point to a scar on my thumb.

"No, I mean *where*? Around here?"

"Oh, yeah. Over on the corner. At night. He came out of nowhere."

“Well,” she says, “you should’ve had your dog with you.”

I am struck dumb with wonder. The gates close and the gap widens.

Rufus doesn’t once look in her direction as she rubs his fur. He is as impervious to her attentions as she is to his concentration. She stands, brushing each hand off on the other hand.

“Bye, hon,” she says to the dog and crosses the street.

STAY HUNGRY: A TRIBUTARY OBITUARY FOR KING CHARLES THE RAGMAN

King Charles the RagMan, a rag of smoky rainbows whirling round his waist, babbles to the gods themselves and himself on the sidewalk, bum stumbling the gutters of Duke City toward the Frontier Restaurant and death by fire on a black night of orange flames crashing on a ratty couch behind the Harvest Moon BookStore on Central Avenue. The smoke of that great burning publishes his spirit to the clouds, the air we breathe, and when we speak now, we speak with the breath of King Charles the RagMan whose parts, parcels, and particles animate the very desert air of the Rio Grande Valley at the feet of the western face of the Sandia.

He will be missed until he comes again.

Walking now through noon sun, King Charles the RagMan comes crowned with a goldpaper adjustable fast-food coronet as colorful as the fraying ribbons of rags knotted around his trunk, waving one hand wildly in the glare and gripping the last of somebody’s half-eaten cheeseburger in the other, declaiming articulate bits of otherworldly knowledge at the top of his lungs to those who scatter along the concrete around him. Today, he is in prime form.

K.C. and I walk west on Central Avenue. K.C. has a surprise for me and teases me for my stubborn refusal to guess. The animation of K.C. attracts King Charles the RagMan sauntering east on Central Avenue, and he crosses the sidewalk to address us directly.

“Stay hungry!” he yells waving the cheeseburger in our faces. “You will if you’re smart! No telling what you’ll do if you don’t!”

K.C. and I exchange a look. We just ate two bowls of green-chili stew at the Frontier. One bowl each. We turn back to King Charles the RagMan.

"Nice hat," says K.C.

King Charles the RagMan shoves his crown back on his high and wide, queer, broad forehead, resting from the hot concrete labors of royal duty. People gather around the three of us to hear the sovereign words of the sidewalk. King Charles the RagMan squints at K.C. and then at me. He raises a painter's thumb, sights on each of us, then jabs himself smartly in the heart with his thumb.

"Who the hell do you think you are, man?" says King Charles the RagMan. "I'm talking to *you*, damn it!" Taking a generous bite of the cheeseburger and spitting bread around vaguely, His Highness reiterates, "Stay hungry, man. Get it? Stay hungry!"

Pointing at his eye with the index finger of his cheeseburger hand, King Charles the RagMan gives us a significant look and says, "I've got my eye on you." He crams the last of the cheeseburger in the back pocket of his jeans, whirls and walks away within the sublime arrogance of his illumination without another word. We, the People of the Pavement, begin our blab once more watching and wondering at the concrete pyrotechnics of King Charles the RagMan heading toward the Frontier.

K.C. grins and turns to me, "What's he so mad about?"

"He's not mad," I grin back, "he's manic."

King Charles the RagMan converses with himself and the gods again in the plate-glass window of the bookstore. His words are lost in the sound of traffic.

This is the day he dies.

"C'mon, Reckless," says K.C. "We're almost there. Right down here."

We arrive at the parking lot of The Top Hat Topless and Bottomless Bar and Grill on the corner of Central and University Avenues. A crude figure of a crude donkey with suggestive feminine curves bent over and sticking out behind is painted free-hand over the words, "K.C. Jones and Her Brass Ass." A day-glo orange banner with big bold black letters spans the stained wall beneath the art: "GRAND OPENING."

"Well, what do you think?" says K.C. breaking my concentration on the wall.

"What do you mean what do I think?"

"My new car, man. What do you think?"

He spreads his arms wide over a dark metal-flake gray generic sports car as though he's sacrificing the vehicle to obscure gods.

"I bought this car," says K.C. with his normal flourish, "with *tips*."

"What?"

"I saved tips from delivering pizzas. Took three and a half years."

He circles the car jangling his new keys, unlocks, and opens the door before anything else could possibly happen. He is serious. A twelve-pack of beer glistens behind the passenger seat.

"Huh."

"Let's go for a ride, Reckless. Get in."

K.C. revs the engine as I slide into the seat and say, "Where we going?"

Burning brand-new rubber backward into a bright black streak on Central Avenue, K.C. looks at me as he shifts and says, "Nowhere."

THE MOST SARCASTIC WOMAN IN THE WORLD

One Saturday night, there is this woman in Okie's, a bar for wild and woolly Duke City sidewalk cowboys, on the southwest corner of the busiest four corners in the Rio Grande valley, after my friends gather as we always do to make music in a small back room. Whenever I tell a story about this loose aggregate of musicians, I call them "The Eleven-Piece BackRoom Band."

The eight of us take a break that Saturday night, after playing for an hour and change, and I walk to the bar to renew my beer. A true child of television, my vision is unduly influenced by appearances, and her influence over me is immediately apparent. She wears her black hair long and straight over a sleeveless black T-shirt and almost blueless faded jeans. Some movie I saw long ago erotically charged this combination of colors and clothes she wears. A sharp cinematic impression of something sleek, slinky, and sexy beats my heart faster whenever I see a woman dressed this way. She is a vision from below for me.

I walk straight over.

"Hi, I'm Reckless. Who're you?" She has blue eyes, too.

"No kidding? I'm Emily Dickinson."

“Really?” K.C. says if anyone makes you ask that, you’re really somebody’s fool. Really. Still, after studying the Footnotes of Literature in the Century of Technological Disaster, I know someone might have named her so. Remember Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and Ralph Waldo Ellison?

“Oh, yeah.” She turns to face me. She wears peacock feather ear-rings with every color I know and many I don’t hovering near her skin. “My life has stood a loaded gun.”

“Huh? Is that Dickinson? The poet?”

“No, it’s Byron,” she says. “No, on second thought, it’s John Wayne.”

Even in a dark bar, dawn comes, and grabbing my mug’s glass handle, I rise. “I’ll leave if you want me to leave.”

“Oh, no. Stay! Stay! Are you a musician?”

“Well, I’m part of the band back there.” I point past the pool tables at the makeshift stage.

She gazes at the impromptu instrumental still life. “That’s what I thought. I’ve never met a real musician. Are you guys finished?”

“We’re just taking a break.”

“Good. What else do you do?”

“I go to school.”

“Do you know anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I mean, about what?”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Look, I’m leaving. Bye.” I stand but she sets her hand on my arm.

“Oh, c’mon. Sit down.”

“All right, I will.”

“Good for me,” she says, smiles, and sips beer.

Two guys sitting past her at the bar laugh hard with heads low over beer mugs. Funny feelings aren’t always funny.

“So,” I say, “what do you do?”

“Me? I curl and color the blue hair of ancient ladies and steal their credit cards. I’m saving plastic till I can charge a suburban cabin in the Rockies, stuff the rooms with handmade luxuries, and live my life more simple and more pure.”

“Huh. You’re a beautician?”

“Yes, but don’t come by.”

"I'll steel myself." I tilt my beer to my taste, then leaning toward her, I make my pitch, high and inside, "You have beautiful eyes."

"I knew that."

"No, really, you do."

"Oh, c'mon. Any woman you want to boss, ball, or bear your babies has beautiful eyes."

"I'm serious."

"You should be a comedian."

"Why? Is that funny?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

The two guys down the bar toast something I can't quite hear. The mugs clink, and the men drink.

"Do you know those guys?"

She turns and looks at the two. One is shaggy everywhere, his hair, his beard, his mustache, his eyebrows, and wears a small gold star in the lobe of his left ear. The other has a regulation buzz-cut, a neat mustache, and thick horn-rimmed glasses. They're both in flannel shirts and jeans. They look at her, turn to each other, laugh, and drink again.

She turns back to me and says, "I know them as well as I know you, but I like them."

"Shit," I say. "That's it."

"It sure is."

"Don't you ever stop?"

"No." She speaks to her image in the mirror behind the bar. "I don't believe I do."

"Well, I do. See you around."

I grab my glass from the bar and make my parting shot.

"You've got to be the most sarcastic woman in the world."

"Oh, sure," she says.

Nigauri

"What is this, Uncle K.C.?"

He looks up from the sizzling pan he stirs and grins. The length of his grin amazed me as a child when I first met him in Baron Town. Spanning his entire face and raising his ears as though humor was a *sound*, his grin

always spilled out laughter. Now his eyes fascinate me disappearing into crescents of amusement bowing upward to the sun. His eyes wane while his ears wax.

“Dinner,” he says.

“No, I mean what’s in it?” Trying not to laugh through the disgusting taste in my mouth, “Tastes so damn *bitter!*”

“*Nigauri.*”

“How can you eat this stuff?”

“Only bitter till you swallow, Reckless.”

COYOTE AND THE WIND INSTRUMENT

In the darkness of a New Mexico night, I sit at my desk with a big idea in the bright circle a single light creates. As I’m about to start writing, I realize he’s standing outside the last window to the west illuminated by the same light reflecting my face on the glass darkly. I turn the light to the pane and gaze through the thin dim image of my own features to recognize the strange and familiar face of one I see now and then. Two worlds meet in this dusky window.

I turn down the radio.

“Hello, Coyote.”

He holds out his paw. “Do you know what this is?”

Closely, at a glance, a thick little fleshy pink circular tube in a tight toroid coil with a few bites missing and teeth marks all around the rim.

“I think so. Vonnegut drew a picture of one once. Looks right.”

“That’s what I thought,” says Coyote. “Take it. I want you to have it. Keep it for me.”

He passes the mystery through the window and drops it in my hand. Warm and moist. Bukowski might say it resembles a doughnut. I flip the fat pink zero in the air, testing the weight.

“Do you want to tell me what it is?”

Coyote grins, “Alimentary, my dear Reckless. Consider it the house organ.”

“What do you want for it?”

“Nothing. I just don’t need it now. You can use it. Hang on to it for me.” Coyote regards me slyly. “And one more thing. Don’t leave it where Rabbit can find it. Or Fox.”

“I won’t.” I watch him, my head held at that wondering tilt.

“Yes, you won’t,” says Coyote. “Keep it close at hand.”

“I will,” I say examining the immortal coil again. From one angle, lines on the tube converge centrally, making an asterisk of themselves.

“Really, it’s a power,” says Coyote. “Trust me.”

I smile. “I won’t make a move without it.”

“Okay, I’m going. Got some business in California. I’ll be back.”

When he’s gone, I turn the sound up in the dark.

I don’t know where he went. I don’t know when he’s coming back. I still have his gift close at hand.

THE FELONY STICK: SATURN

Rufus investigates a recent pile of dogshit on the ground near the English building on the U.N.U.M. campus. I watch, sure I would not want to be that close to feces left behind, but such is the manner and matter of canine recognition. Dogs see through their noses.

A police car glides by. There are two officers inside.

Rufus runs behind the hedge seeking campus cats. He stalks them but they don’t care anymore. All he does is sniff till he’s bored. Cats live all over U.N.U.M., under buildings, in tunnels, behind the Art Annex, around the library. Some people feed them. Others chase them. The groundsguys ignore them.

Rufus is back there snuffling around.

The police car, the same one, in the other direction.

They are both looking at me.

But they go by and I call Rufus. He runs over and leaps into the air beside me so we begin to play. I crouch and run a few steps growling. He barks and wags his tail running in great circles around me.

I look up and there is the police car again backing up the street. The car stops and the driver rolls his window down. It is a cold winter day and the two officers are staying warm staying in the car.

“.....,” he says. The sound of the engine covers his voice.

“Wait a minute. I can’t hear you.”

I walk to the car in the street and bend down. Rufus follows, jumps up, and puts his paws on the side of the car to see who’s in there. He loves to look into cars. Both officers lean away from the window.

“Get down, dog.” I lift his paws and drop them to the ground. “He loves to see who’s in cars.”

“That dog should be on a leash,” says the driver policeman.

“What’s that in your hand there?” says the passenger policeman.

“A stick.”

“What’s it for?”

“For the dog. I mean other dogs. I got bit last year.”

“Well, you’ve admitted it’s a weapon.”

“It’s not a weapon. I hold it up and yell and they run off.”

“It could be used as a weapon.”

“Not by me it couldn’t.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a stick.”

“No, I mean what’s it made of?”

“Oh, it’s an old broom handle I broke off.”

“Is that tape around it?”

“Yeah, electrical tape. It splintered when I broke it off.”

“Well, you can’t carry it.”

The driver policeman feels left out. The passenger policeman converses across his face, and he resents it.

“It’s a *felony*,” he says with a force of conviction usually reserved for court.

“A felony? To carry a stick?”

“Yeah,” he says turning to glare at me directly. He does not like me getting technical with the law. Of the two officers, he likes me the least.

“Get rid of it,” says the passenger policeman.

“And what do I do the next time a stray decides to jump my dog?”

“Keep him on a leash.”

“He *was* on a leash.”

“Well, let the Animal Control People take care of it.”

“Seems to me it’s too late then.”

“Look--”

The driver policeman interrupts.

"Get rid of the stick," he says.

"Yeah," says his partner. "And put your dog on a leash."

I pull the leash* from my back pocket and hook it through the chain on the dog's neck.

"There. He's on the leash. I don't think it'll help."

"Don't let me see you with that stick again."

The driver policeman speaks once more.

"Yeah, it's an offensive weapon. Keep it at home."

He rolls up his window so fast he misses my last words.

"That makes sense."

He rolls his window down again even faster.

"What?"

"I said, 'That makes sense.'"

"Yeah, it does. Don't forget it."

He rolls the window up again. The cruiser pulls away leaving Rufus and me in the street. Through the back window of the car I see the two heads of the officers. They are looking straight ahead.

DUST

Opening the door to my house, the wind arranges and rearranges dust on the floor along the baseboards, beneath the furniture, around the bookcase, and under the table.

When I glance up from reading on the corner of the couch where I sit beneath the unlit lamp in the reading room, the only movement is the dust across the wood. The solid noon sunshine of Duke City booms through the south windows. In the sun, the temperature is high for so early in the year, but here in the shade is cool and dark enough for reading. Argent sleeps curled on my lap, the mere gray shadow of a napping cat.

K.C. blows in with the next good gust and sees the wind in the dust.

"Dust bunnies," she says.

"Is that what you call them?"

"Yeah, but I've heard others. Hair mice. Snipe nests. Ghost balls. Dust puppies. Witch wigs. I've even heard names I don't remember now."

K.C. and I watch these named yet nameless things begin again as all things begin. Imperceptible bits gather themselves from airy nothings into

shapeless clumps and become vigorous balls of cloudy stuff whirling in open circles with the breath of the wind.

“Ghost balls?”

“My grandma called them that in Glen Ferris, West Virginia.”

“Glen Ferris?”

“Yeah, there aren’t really any real names for them, so I try to remember new ones I hear. I collect them.”

“A language collector.”

“Yeah.”

The breeze winds through the dust across the floor again.

“Don’t you have a broom?” says K.C.

THE FIFTH AMERICAN KOAN: THE RIDDLE OF DEFINITION

Asked by William F. Buckley, Jr., in his fifth decade of living on the nationally-syndicated television show *Firing Line* to define the word *beat*, Jack Kerouac says one word, “Sympathize.”

Get it?

Pointless Commentary from Ten Pines Hermitage

Kerouac was dying by fifths distilled in the days of that decade, and this is one of those rare moments he clearly burned bright right through the flames.

The part of speech here is verb.

The voice is active.

The mood is imperative.

MISSING THE POINT OF MISSING MISSING THE MISSING MUG

K.C. greets me with a smile, sits immediately at my table at Morning Glory Doughnuts, and says, "I'm delighted."

I remove my thumb from the central crease of my book, and the covers slowly close on the table before me. "Why are you delighted?"

"I lost my favorite coffee mug. You know, the indigo one with the chartreuse stripe around the lip? Gone."

The sun glints from the rear window of a car parked across the street and shines through the "O" in the last word of Morning Glory Doughnuts painted in backward capitals on the inside of the front window.

I squint into the glare of the grin of K.C. He looks happy even through the arch of my eyelids.

An old man with white hair and no hat glides by the booth staring into the darkness of his coffee. The cup is full and age slows him enough to prevent spills.

"Why are you delighted you lost your favorite coffee mug?"

"Took me six months to miss it, that coffee mug," says K.C. giggling.

The old man now seated at his booth stirs his coffee. Sugar only. No cream. He stares through the glare through the window.

This morning I miss the point of K.C. missing missing the missing mug.

THE FELONY STICK: SOL

I'm watching Rufus piss on a brown bush too brittle and brown even for winter time and so must be a dead bush after all when the campus police car glides up on silent speed and stops behind me with a tiny yipe from the tires. Most days in the Rio Grande Valley winter are clear and cold days and I take the stick every time anyway, but today is a rare New Mexico foggy winter day and it is still clear even in the fog that I have the stick in my criminal hand.

Other cars brake quickly forming a silent line in the fog behind the cruiser blocking the single traffic lane.

This time the passenger policeman speaks first.

"Man, you're still carrying the *stick*."

"I know, but what do you want me to do?"

"Leave the stick at home. You can't carry it."

"And what do I do if I have to scare off a stray or break up a dogfight?"

"Let the Animal Control People do their job?"

"If they were doing their job, I wouldn't've got bit last year."

"Man, you can't carry it."

"The shots cost three hundred dollars, man. Should I bill you next time?"

"Look, I'm giving you a *break*."

"Yeah. I'm sure you see it that way."

"Get rid of the *damn* stick."

"You want it?"

"Yeah, give it here."

I hand him the stick. Slowly. Because I'm mad and he knows I'm mad. Very slowly.

He puts the stick on the floor of the car and looks up at me. One side of his mouth crooks up. "Merry Christmas," he says. He dares me to contradict Christmas.

Only seven more shopping days.

I smile because I usually mean what I say.

"Merry Christmas."

The silent driver policeman pulls away so fast the line of cars left looks strange idling in the fog. It's a long line by now.

As cars start creeping slowly by, each driver glares or stares at me standing on the curb with my dog. They know I'm a criminal and soon I'll be behind bars where I belong.

K.C. STUDIES UNDER JOHN WAYNE

K.C. is not an actor, she just does things. She studies under John Wayne because he's hung over the end booth in the first room of the Frontier Restaurant where she sits with books of calculus, chemistry, geology, physics, and a dog-eared novel. John Wayne* is framed large on the wall with lots of white space, looking as unfinished as Gilbert Stuart's "Founding Father"

White House portrait of George Washington hung in Washington, D.C. The Duke's portrait is wired for crime since somebody stole five paintings from the walls of the Frontier last year, and the last thing the proprietor wants to lose is John Wayne over the booth where K.C. completes her nightly tasks of education.

All of this is actual truth.

Proof is in the picture on page one of section B of the Thursday, April 11, 1985, edition of the Duke City *Tribune*. Burn and learn.

Synchronicitistically, three days after and seventy-three years before this photograph developed, the *Titanic* carrying John Jacob Astor and 1,479 other passengers and 860 crew members struck an iceberg a few points to starboard and sank in the cold and starry North Atlantic night on its maiden voyage bound for New York. Captain E.J. Smith wisely accompanied his luckless luxury liner into the dark recesses of natural self-storage space known as Davy Jones' Locker.

John Wayne was five years old that year. His name was Marion Morrison at the time.

John Wayne lived another sixty-seven years, but that wasn't long enough for the *Titanic* to be discovered under God's extra pairs of shoes on the bottom of the Atlantic, wine bottles and crystal strewn still intact over the bulkheads, even though all that was left of the grand piano was the harp not even decked with undersea vegetation or brushed by the poetic fins of passing fish but lying silently in the ocean's dusty attic under countless fathoms of dark water on the shards of a chandelier.

LAUGHTER, WHAT I REALLY WANT TO BE WHEN I GROW UP ON THE DAY THE MUSIC FLIES

"Reckless, I'm going to tell you a joke," says K.C. from the monkey bars on the playground one day in the fall of the third grade hanging upside-down over the white imported sand spread below the equipment where sometimes K.C. and I sift that same sand through our fingers to find shark's teeth, once causing a great craze of discovery by finding a dark gray and

black tooth the size of a new 1963 quarter the teacher took with us to the Museum of Natural History where the man announced the tooth was from an extinct Mako shark between 15 and 25 million years old.

"The big kids next door told me," says K.C. "It's pretty funny."

"Okay." I grab the bars with my hands and let go with my legs looping over my head and twisting around to drop to my feet.

"Okay. There's this teacher, and she has all the kids doing the alphabet, and she says, 'Susie, tell us the alphabet.' And Susie does, but this kid named Reckless puts his hand up and starts waving--"

"Wait a minute. Is he really named Reckless?"

"Yeah, and the teacher says, 'Just a minute, Reckless. You'll get your turn.' And then she has this kid named James do it and he does it and Reckless starts waving his hand around again and the teacher says, 'You have to wait your turn, Reckless,' and she has a kid named Tom, no, Chuck, do it. He does it and the teacher has Molly and John and David and Ed do it until everybody in the whole room does it and every time somebody gets done Reckless raises his hand but she lets all the other kids go first. Finally, she lets Reckless and he says, 'A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z.' And the teacher says, 'Where's the P, Reckless?' and Reckless says, 'Running down my leg, ma'am.'"

We laugh since I realize and K.C. reveals the teacher is truly my third-grade teacher, the meanest teacher in the history of Elementary School in the Western Hemisphere of the Cenozoic Era, Mrs. K.C. I discover the reputation of Mrs. K.C. is well-earned one day when she catches me talking to the girl sitting next to me and the door. On that day, my eyes roll and my teeth rattle and my heels click in the air as Mrs. K.C. picks me up by the hair on my head and shakes me in the quick jerks usually reserved for shaking dust out of rugs over my little yellow wooden chair and ever since I have equated education with hair loss.

We're laughing now when the bell rings and recess is over and we run to line up on the sidewalk to march through narrow elementary school corridors to classrooms for the afternoon. K.C. and I attended the same class in the first two grades but this year we run to different lines on the sidewalk at the end of recess and don't see each other again till the end of school and we walk home together and this is why I find myself a stranger in a strange room of kids I don't know who all know each other from two grades ago when we arrive in the yellow cinderblock classroom in the back of

the school and start working while Mrs. K.C. cracks an evil whip of words over our down-turned heads as we scratch large lead letters on blue lines, spelling words as the spelling book does and shaping our characters with thick pencils and tongues sticking from the sides of our mouths.

Mrs. K.C. never likes me much and likes me less than the rest of the class since I'm new and I always hear her call my name during roll while she tries to catch me not paying attention.

"President," I always answer with my straight little face.

"Pardon me?" she always says.

"Here," I always return.

There is always a lesson to be learned in this class, and today Mrs. K.C. teaches me what all schools teach accidentally.

"No cheating," says Mrs. K.C. "Keep your eyes on your own paper."

Looking anywhere else but myself for answers never occurred to me before. The vast vistas of the infinite possibilities the Valley of Cheating reveals appear as a sudden panorama viewed in a precipitous rush to the edge of the void my twinkling toes dangle over. This is Inspiration Point. I look up in wonder and Mrs. K.C. frowns at me, lowering my head with a single glance heavy as a hand but not fast enough.

"Are you cheating, Reckless?" says Mrs. K.C. "I know I've said this time and time again to this class, and I'm going to say it once more. If you cheat, how will you ever know how good you really are?"

"No, ma'am."

"No, ma'am, what?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not cheating."

"What's so funny then, young man?" Mrs. K.C. strides through lanes of little desks toward me.

This is one of those moments I know I'm from another planet. I wasn't laughing. Nothing is funny. I want nothing more than to do exactly what she tells me to do right now. Yet my hair is in immediate danger of bearing the weight of my whole body by the roots.

"Nothing, ma'am."

She leans over my desk and examines my paper, then looks at the little girl beside me as she squirms in her seat by the door and the kid with the hearing aid on my other side plays with a wire stretching from the flesh-colored plug in his ear to the box in his shirt pocket wearing the fabric into the shape of sound. We sit stiff as she towers over our spelling.

Mrs. K.C. sniffs and returns to her desk at the head of the classroom. She gives us three more words to spell, and we pass the papers up and across. Then, she says, "Get out your *Weekly Readers*, class."

We do and she points at pictures on the cover.

"This man is a fireman, this man is a policeman, this man is a doctor," recites Mrs. K.C. "Chuck, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Chuck jumps and stutters, "I want to be a pilot."

"Does anyone else know what they want to be when they grow up?"

All hands in the class rise, straight up stiff or waving through the air to entice Mrs. K.C. to call on that hand next, but for once Mrs. K.C. looks at me, holding my breath, leaning forward with my stiff arm tilting toward her at the flag-pole angle of that stagey scene in *Sands of Iwo Jima* where a motion picture mocks a photograph, hoping to hear my name next since I have considered my future occupation long and hard, and I'm eager to reveal to the class what I anticipate will be my rather surprising choice.

Mrs. K.C. then does the single most terrible thing she will ever do in the Dark Ages of Elementary School, coinciding coincidentally exactly with her years of classroom reign. She calls on me.

"Reckless," she says, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I am proud to be chosen and in my enthusiasm I even push my chair back and stand before the whole class so there will be no mistake about my unique choice as I announce, "Santa Claus. When I grow up, I want to be Santa Claus."

There is a moment of silence I mistake as reverential as my smile of pride widens and I survey the room beaming with triumph and then an explosion of laughter so loud cinderblocks split and doors fly from hinges and a roar of merriment rings through the narrow halls of Pleasant Plains Elementary School and throughout the whole broad and vast time and space of the Cenozoic Era.

This is the single most devastating moment I ever know.

The laughter quiets quickly as a sudden crackle and sputter sounds directly over my head. The P.A. speaker is high on the wall and the volume is high but I don't listen as I stand alone on a barren plain in an antique land, a vast and forgotten figure grown stone of blood and bone in the hot shock of the sands of humiliation with the tooth of an extinct Mako shark turning gray and black at my feet in the sun of twenty million summers fossilizing

for discovery in the palm of the hand of a child in an elementary school playground.

As I slump into my little yellow wooden chair, sounds of sniffing and sobbing come to my ears. I look around and the girl on one side and the half-deaf boy on the other are crying and I look toward the windows and the class is crying and I look ahead and even Mrs. K.C. stares straight through us as two channels of tears flow along the sides of her nose and around her mouth in a shiny mustache of grief before dripping, dropping directly on a spelling test that might have been mine.

My immediate delusion is that everyone sympathizes with me, but the clamor is too great to be tears for my shattered future career. I glance around the sorrowing classroom once more and force myself to speak a single incisive word of wonder.

“What?”

No one answers, but the oracular voice of the Principal Of The School choking with emotion rings from the speaker high on the wall, speaking two simple words with a world of meaning, “Classes dismissed.”

These are the days of sugar-cube vaccination and helium-balloon races with a little tag inscribed with your name and address stamped and tied to a string and rising into the open infinite promise of blue sky to sail the currents of the clouds through the slipstream of imagination to a kindly red-faced Nebraska farmer finding your wrinkled red balloon in a newly-turned furrow of his wheat field and mailing back your card to win the long-distance race by two-hundred and fifty miles and walking home with your friends to actually drink glasses of chocolate milk before playing outside until the lightning-bugs spark the yard with dull green flashes moving faster than stars and slower than hands and especially these are the days of the Civil Defense childhood.

So everyone is crying and all around are losing their heads and the whole world is in sudden and complete chaos and only one question comes to mind and mouth at this moment so I say to nobody in particular and everyone in general as loudly as I can muster the fearful words of doom, “Shouldn’t we all get under the desks?”

Nobody hears a word I say. The class simply stands and walks through the door leaving the work on the desks, without putting books away and without lining up. I trail the ragged sounds of general mourning through the dark corridor and flow outside with the crowd. There is no sign of K.C.

and I walk home alone. Once away from the school, the streets are deserted. The sidewalks are empty. The blue of the sky is a dark uniform gray. There is not even the usual growl of distant engines in the air to shade the sounds of birds.

The trees are loud with birds on the way home. I am young and birds confuse me. What They say about birds confuses me. They say birds sing. The sounds birds make sound good but not like song. Blue jays bicker. Catbirds borrow. Mockingbirds steal. Crows scorn. Robins make compleynt. Cardinals disdain talk. None of this sounds like song to me but today the sounds the birds make is long and loud and big and bright. Today, I understand what They mean when They say birds sing.

The rain starts as I reach the top of the hill on my street in boyhood BaronTown and even running all the way down to my front door my clothes are dripping and the gutters running with rain before I reach the front porch. The door is open, but there is nobody home.

The house I live in in BaronTown is never empty before today but now I find even a small house echoes with a small voice calling for people who are missing or doing something else somewhere else. This house usually contains my father, my mother, me, my brother, my younger sisters, and my grandmother, but now all the rooms hold only me escaping gray rain in a house made dark during a sudden afternoon storm.

There is a voice I don't recognize coming down the stairs and the sound scares me but I climb the stairs to the source. The radio in the room of my grandmother and sisters is on and the announcer says the same thing over and over so I will hear.

"The President has been shot. I repeat, the President has been shot."

This will always be the same. People will always repeat bad news. Burn and learn.

The news the world is changing in a significant way forever and ever doesn't affect me at all right now. What is significant now is when the rain starts the birds stop. I listen for a moment on the porch for the sounds we call song but hear only silence and rain.

My mother always let us play in the BaronTown rain since the water falling from the sky was warm and there were no neighborhood pools and there was a magnificent racket with all the kids inside the house so I take my shirt and pants off and go outside in my underwear to play even on this chilly day. The rain is light but the gutters are full. Sitting on the curb, I dam

the water with my legs to feel the force of the flow against my thigh and over my knees as I play alone in front of an empty house under a dark sky in the sudden rush of a cold rain gathering in the gutters of Baron Town with the urge of the downhill current against me and that day the world was new again.

THE BIG IDEA: A MAP OF *Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era*

The Ideal Edition features an eight-fold map of the United States of *Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era* dotted, lined, circled, and flagged with real imaginary places of interest, starting with the seven elemental Western streets of Duke City. Drawn with a free hand, the map marks the spots of any and all big ideas, compass points, and wild open spaces back East, down South, up North, and out West.

You are here.

THE FELONY STICK: LUNA

The phone rings in a dark castle in Berzerkeley where K.C. and I are staying with Aunt K.C. for a week to celebrate Christmas. K.C. is named after her famous aunt. Aunt K.C. is an anthropologist studying Native American tribes of California and gone south with tape recorder and equipment to catch another tale of Coyote. Coyote is the main subject of her research and her primary source of wonder. Aunt K.C. can discuss, discourse, and dissertate on Coyote at great length, breadth, and depth, and she does. Now, the house is quiet but for the ringing of the phone.

We are here in this vacant home with tables, shelves, and walls filled with anthropological curiosities and even a portrait of Coyote hung over the fireplace on K.C.'s annual visit to distant friends and relatives and yearly pilgrimage to the Pacific. There is nobody else here in this huge empty house but us, and the phone is ringing. The call may be for one of us, but I don't want to talk right now.

"Let it ring."

K.C. sets the wooden spoon on the stove and answers the phone. The house is under her dominion.

"Hello," she says. Pause. Sound of bubbles in a pot of spaghetti sauce boiling on the stove. Smell of garlic everywhere in the kitchen. Near the hot stove, K.C. and I are safe from the cold of fog flowing outside, from the darkness of night in the lighted kitchen, from hunger with spaghetti white and sauce red on our plates, and even from Christmas vampires with their least favorite seasoning in the air and on our breaths.

"Yeah, he's here. Reckless, it's for you. It's K.C."

I take the phone. The sound of the ocean long distance in my ear from a black sea shell on a winter beach.

"Hello?"

"There was a fight."

"How is he?"

"He's all right."

On the wall is a frame displaying arrowheads of all shapes and sizes. Each is mounted with a bit of shaft to reveal how the stone point attaches to the wood. I turn one to view the shape horizontally. My thumb rasps along the ridged edge of the material.

"How are you?"

"Not so good. I got bit on the hand trying to break it up."

"Damn! What about the other dog?"

"He just ran off."

"When was it?"

"Christmas Eve. I was the only person in the Emergency Room. I guess there aren't usually emergencies on Christmas Eve. I asked the nurse about that. She told me no accidents, only suicides."

"What'd they do?"

"She says a lot of people hang themselves for Christmas."

"No, to you."

"Oh, they sewed up my finger and bandaged my hand. Now I have webbed fingers like a duck."

"I'm sorry." Visions of the confiscated stick dance in my head. "I forgot to tell you to watch yourself."

"It's all right. I yelled and kicked. It just didn't help much."

"Damn."

I lean forward to examine another arrowhead closely. The surface of the point is the same color and texture on both sides. Tiny concave indentations mark how the stone chips flew. I move my thumb back and forth across the tip. Even the gentlest pressure catches the point in the ridges of the whorls on my thumb.

"Well, it's okay now. I just get a little nervous about walking Rufus at night. When you coming back?"

"Next year."

"I'll figure something out," laughs K.C. "Have a good time out there. I'll see you when you get back. Bring me a piece of California."

"I will. Kiss Rufus and Argent for me. Thanks for taking care of my animals while I'm gone. See ya."

"Yeah. See ya."

I replace the phone between the four posts forming the little black cradle in imaginary sand where the receiver hums sleepily to the ocean, curled among hermit crabs and empty shells when no one calls or speaks.

The pot bubbles the aroma of the sauce through the dim rooms of the house, settling over the baskets and blankets of a century of collection. K.C. picks up the wooden spoon and spins the wood through the boiling.

"What's the problem?" says K.C.

"Rufus got in a fight and K.C. got bit."

"Is he okay?"

"He says he is."

I lean against the wall to view an arrowhead head on. I wag my head over and again back and forth to get the right angle for a vision of how an approaching arrow might appear in the short glimpse I would get.

"I thought you had a stick," says K.C.

ARITHMETIC

Convinced I'd discovered the mystery behind numbers I ran to my mother making a meat loaf in the kitchen.

"Mommy! Listen about numbers, Mommy."

"I'm busy, Reckless."

"No, Mommy, listen. I *know* it. One plus one is two. Two plus two is three. Three plus three is four . . . but, Mommy, how does it go after that?"

“Reckless, I’m *busy*. Go outside and play.”

I’m too excited about my new discovery to leave so I stand there on my toes and count them off again.

Holding the index finger and taking the middle finger, “one plus one is two.” Including the ring finger, “two plus two is three.” Grasping the little finger too, “three plus three is four.”

I raise my hands above my head and regard her from beneath, wiggling the last loose end my thumb makes.

“But, Mommy, how do I get the thumb in?”

My mother turns, grabs my hands, bends down, and slaps my behind.

I’m too surprised to speak and start to cry instead.

“Go outside and play, or I’ll really give you something to cry about.”
Makes you think.

I run outside letting the screen door bang crying all the way to the back of the backyard where the fence is overgrown with weeds and crouch low, making out I’m invisible.

“I’ll teach her. I’m never going home again! Never! Not even for a million dollars!”

But soon I was thinking about how to get the thumb in again and I forgot not to go when my mother called me in for supper. I walked through the dusk and the screen door slammed again when I went in.

I never did figure out how to get the thumb in and I hadn’t even thought about it until I remembered this story today and now I can’t even remember what my theory of numbers really was or why the way to get the thumb in was so important although now I remember at the time it was a mystery demanding my whole attention and I’ve never encountered another one like it since.

YORICK’S VANILLA GRIN

K.C. and I are reading different books together in the reading room of my house and drinking beer on a lazy Duke City afternoon. As always at this time of day, the room rings with light. K.C. looks up suddenly.

“What’s a *memento mori*?” says K.C. sipping beer.

“A reminder of death.”

“Why would anybody need a reminder of death? Even when I’m not looking I know it’s there.” Her eyes focus on something beyond this room beyond this day. “But that does remind me of something.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Every year my mother asked me what kind of birthday cake I wanted. What flavor cake and what frosting. I always said vanilla cake and vanilla frosting.”

“So?”

“One year, I don’t remember how old I was, I was about to blow out the candles and I saw something terrible in the cake.”

“What are you talking about?” I close my thumb in the book and watch K.C.’s legs dangle from the end of the couch.

“I saw a skull* in all that sucrose,” striking an oratorical pose on her back, “big white jaws agape to swallow summer.”

She shakes her head. “And I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t blow out those candles even when my mother slapped me. *She* did it.”

“Alas, poor Yorick’ and his vanilla grin . . .”

“It wasn’t funny. It scared me.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I’ll never eat that birthday cake again,” says K.C.

MY UNCLE KILLED JOHN WAYNE FIRST

“Go For Broke!”

— 442nd Regimental Combat Team Motto

Legend says John Wayne is killed in only three of his movies. As far as I can tell, this is true. The Duke kills thousands of bad guys from a good number of centuries, but John Wayne rides or strides into the sunset of nearly every movie he ever made. Although there’s confusion on several occasions concerning his mortal status in various scenes of some movies, John Wayne shuffles off the celluloid coil on only three reels.

In *The Shootist*, shortly before the enemy within conquered Marion Morrison, John Wayne is killed on his birthday, the twenty-ninth day of Twentieth Century, in the Metropole of Carson City, Nevada, by an evil

trinity of bad guys into each of whom John Wayne fires back his lead retort. William McKinney. Richard Boone. Hugh O'Brian. And a bartender named Murray who, I believe, after I sat through the credits twice, didn't even get one. Maybe because the bartender is not answered by fire from the gun of John Wayne. Ron Howard avenges John Wayne's death in the last picture show Marion Morrison ever made by shooting the bartender after John Wayne disappears beneath the bar for good and forever. Guaranteeing nobody who kills John Wayne lives to see the credits. Ever.

Bruce Dern dies shortly after blasting the Duke in the belly in *The Cowboys*. Dern said once on a late-night talk show before *The Shootist* was made that he was the only one to ever kill John Wayne in the movies but long before those little cowboys water the Duke's marble monument with the unhappy trails of their tears and make their manly vows in the dust, my uncle sends John Wayne to an early unmarked soldier's grave in the anonymous movie sands of time on the beach of a tiny island in the Pacific previously famous only for a patriotic photograph.

I watch this movie often, and the truth is, I never actually see my uncle fire the shot heard round the reel, nor is his name recorded in the credits, but my father swears my uncle kills John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and not only does he kill John Wayne, my uncle kills John Wayne first. In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, my uncle plays one of the "little lemon-colored characters," who shoots Sergeant Stryker in the back and immediately finds himself trapped in a foxhole in an angry storm of lead rain, his unseen body riddled with the celluloid bullets of the script by one of Stryker's enraged squad before the guilty shell hits the sand. When these soldiers confirm my uncle and Sergeant Stryker are dead, one of the grunts rifles Stryker's pockets for the rest of the script, the end unfolding as a patriotic letter to the son of Stryker addressed to a captive audience.

Who sit tearfully through the entire letter as anyone else would.

During the filming of *Sands of Iwo Jima*, John Wayne joked regularly with my uncle, who portrayed every other close-up Japanese soldier in the entire film and acted the dying fall from every angle over and over and over. John Wayne once asked my uncle in jest, "Any new ways to die today?" The Duke was confused since my uncle used the same name in World War II and in movies about World War II. Marion Morrison did not serve in World War II, and John Wayne only acts in the war.

My uncle smiled a smile John Wayne saw as inscrutable as the hot imported sand under the bright lights and artificial palms of a Hollywood set. My uncle was one of 120,000 Americans confined to concentration camps in the hasty execution of Executive Order 9066 made law on February 19, 1942 after approval expressed by the signature of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. My uncle was a Nisei who served in World War II, leaving wife and child behind barbed wire in the Manzanar War Relocation Center in Owens Valley, California, to fight for his country in the European Theater of real bullets, bombs, battles, and bayonets, with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, known as "The Christmas Tree Regiment" since the soldiers of that regiment were an American holiday of decoration.

In Europe, my uncle once found himself lying very still playing dead in a field of dead men as the Nazis checked every body confirming each was as dead as said body appeared by bayoneting the chest three times for good measure before leaving him for dead for good in the mud of the battlefield. My uncle was a good actor and never made a sound when the three points were made with him. He once showed me the scars of silence.

And so it goes in *The Century of Technological Disaster*, where even *The War To End All Wars* has a sequel, *The Great War, Part II*. My uncle demonstrated his acting ability daily on the set in the white glare on the Pacific sands of the lights, camera, action of Hollywood projection, smiling politely at the quotidian quip of the Duke because my uncle knew a lot of good ways to die.

THE FELONY STICK: MARS

In the New Mexico midnight university streets there is no one to talk to so I talk to the dog.

Rufus noses through the dark bushes circling the gray walls of the physical plant of U.N.U.M. The physical plant generates all the heat for the mental plant the university is. The university imports light. Campus cats live under and around the foundations for heat. Rufus rides their scents through the hedges along the interchanges of the interstate of instinct.

"Look how close Mars is to the moon, Rufus."

There is a brilliant flash of white light washing Mars and the moon away and I stand glowing in the glare of a spotlight directed from the police car in the street.

"Hey,," says the black outline of the cruiser around the corona of blindness.

"Wait a minute. I can't hear you."

I walk over to the car idling by the curb. The car is on the wrong side of the street. There are no other cars on the street and this car is a police car after all. Burn and learn.

Before I reach the car, the darkness inside says, "What are you doing over there?"

"Over there?" I say pointing at the spot I started from, "Walking."

"Walking."

"The dog."

"The dog."

Rufus walks over to a dark bush and leaks on the leaves. The voice and I watch Rufus spray the night.

"I told you before about the leash," says the voice. A face follows the voice leaning from the inner darkness into the backwash glare of the spotlight. The passenger policeman. We recognize each other. My face is familiar to the law.

"Huh." This is the American Acknowledgment Noise but the passenger policeman hears the sound as a question.

"I said I told you before about a leash for that dog. Something wrong with your ears?"

"No, my hearing is fine. 'As good as a dog's,'" I say quoting one more thing from the past I'll always remember now.

The passenger policeman is not interested in the past right now. I usually admire this in people since they usually get right to the point. The passenger policeman is no exception.

"So why isn't the dog on a leash?"

"He is on a leash."

"What do you mean he's on a leash?"

"I mean he's on a leash."

"Where?"

"Come here, Rufus."

Rufus comes here. As he gets closer the leash appears snaking along glossy in the damp black grass between his feet.

“There you go,” comes audibly to my tongue.

“What?”

“There it is,” I point to the leash hanging from the silver chain. Rufus watches me, ears erect and tongue out panting. He thinks we’re playing.

“There it is.”

“I see it.” The passenger policeman stares at the leash in the grass.

We gaze together at the leather leash on the lawn between the dog’s paws. The radio snaps, crackles, and pops with nonsense and static inside the car. Next to the radio, a rifle is mounted upright on the dashboard. Makes you think. The passenger policeman does not reply to the static or me.

Rufus sits down in the grass. A barn owl skreeks overhead. We all look up but all I see is Mars and the moon again. When I look back, the passenger policeman and Rufus are both looking at me. I think they both want me to say something.

I look at the leash shining in the grass.

“Nobody said I have to hold the other end.”

“Right,” says the passenger policeman. He nods once with grim certitude to the driver policeman who puts the cruiser in gear. The car rolls away without another word. The driver policeman aims for the middle of the empty street making the center line a double-yellow hood ornament.

Rufus returns to his research in the bushes again seeking the solution that makes his nose glow black and wet in the dark, but I stand looking at the moon one day away from full so bright all the stars disappear in the luminous New Mexico night haze the light makes. All but Mars, the red eye satellite of the moon tonight.

A TERMINAL CASE OF CURIOSITY

Walking by the cork message board at the local supermarket, I glance over a flash and see the words “John Lennon” in black script on a tacked and folded note. I stroll through the door and then veer around, come back, and stand before the piece of paper.

The paper is blue, the pushpin is black, and I am not John Lennon.

Today, John Lennon was assassinated many years ago and someone has left him a note fluttering in the breeze through the door into the blazing New Mexico afternoon. I think this is no coincidence. Somebody put this note here today.

The crease is clean. One fold. One hand. There are no other notes near. A single blue note tacked to a bulletin board nobody notices. Imagine.

Customers breeze by me and that note into the sunshine or into the aisles of the brightly-lit Products of America but I stand transfixed by curiosity as surely as if that black pushpin held my sole to the floor.

I reach up and take the note down. I unfold the piece of paper slowly. Inside there is a single question.

“Are you really John Lennon?”

THE PARADIGMATIC PARASOL PARADOX

“I’m not sure what chartreuse is.”

— Ray Charles

On rainy days nobody usually looks out the eighth-floor office windows since there’s nothing to see but clouds but today K.C. follows me in and makes a discovery. I walk in, drop my pack on the desk of Dr. K.C., and start to sit, but K.C. speaks from where he stands staring down through the window, “C’mere, look at this.”

Down on the glossy concrete, people pass back and forth to classes or offices or homes, gliding around under the rain under our eyes.

“Makes you think.”

“The umbrellas,” he says.

The umbrellas below are complex geometric compositions dripping in cloudy light. Boots flash from beneath the rain shadows drifting over wet sidewalks. There’s no telling where these umbrellas are going on the glassy concrete but they are really getting somewhere. Some spin, some tilt back and forth against the quixotic wind. Some wobble side to side over two people huddled beneath a rain shade too small for two dry bodies.

Most of these umbrellas are divided into eight equal sections.

Some alternate two colors. Gray and blue. Black and yellow. Blue and red busy with each other. Black and blue.

A tiny turquoise umbrella barely big enough to cover one head.

A huge umbrella divided exactly in halves of red and black covering three people.

"An umbrella of chance and fortune," says K.C.

Some alternate four colors twice. Red, yellow, green, blue. Brown, maroon, blue, gray. Each color points to itself over the spire in the center.

A large umbrella with ten sections repeating each color once. White, blue, green, yellow, red.

"Not parasols."

"Not today," he says glancing at the clouds for a second look.

Solid color umbrellas. Red. Purple. Black. Yellow. Black. Blue. Red. Black. Black.

"Black is a serious color for an umbrella," says K.C.

A clear umbrella bubble around a dark head.

An umbrella with the colors of the spectrum. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, navy blue, and purple.

"Just a minute," says K.C. "There's only seven colors in the spectrum. I learned that in high school science class. There's a name for it. Roy G. Biv. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet."

We examine the erroneous umbrella closely from our great height.

"At least they're in the right order."

"Navy blue's not even in it," says K.C.

"An umbrella has eight sections. They needed another color."

"Navy blue?"

"They probably had some extra lying around. They could've used black. What about black?"

"Hell, no. Black's not even in the spectrum. Black's the absence of color."

"How can They tell?"

K.C. glares through gray light at this rainy day fault.

"Well, what about indigo?" says K.C.

"What about it?"

"I never heard of indigo till high school. My science teacher said Sir Isaac Newton added indigo to the spectrum, but nobody knows why."

"What a maniac," I grin.

K.C. is serious and says, "I'm not even sure I've ever seen indigo. Is that *really* indigo?"

"It must be or that umbrella is really wrong."

A delicate blue and white floral print umbrella with parabolas of fringe drifts along with a no-nonsense black umbrella.

"Beauty and the Beast."

"Abbott and Costello."

"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"Fred and Ginger."

Umbrellas with concentric bands ringing the spindle in the middle. Red, yellow, blue. Blue and red. Green and red. Red and pink. Let it ring. White, black, blue, red, yellow.

"Hey, isn't that archery target colors?"

"Hey, yeah. In the right order, too. A hobby umbrella."

"Or a strange sense of humor."

"A target for the gods."

A black umbrella with red dots. A blue umbrella with white dots. A white umbrella with pink and blue bubbles.

"Even a plain umbrella ain't a plain umbrella, is it?"

"Look, a paisley umbrella." Maroon and gold.

A purple umbrella with a red border. A red umbrella with a border of pink roses. A gold umbrella with a green border.

"The California Umbrella. Winter green, summer gold."

K.C. suddenly gazes through vinyl umbrellas and concrete sidewalks. His thoughts aren't on what his eyes are on anymore and I wait for the news.

He laughs.

"Do you think Hemingway had an umbrella?"

THE NINTH AMERICAN KOAN: THE RIDDLE OF INTELLECT *a Coyote chapter*

Coyote always tells this story at the same time on International Time Travel Day, "I remember Plato standing in the sea off the coast of Zanzibar up to his neck with ocean to the horizon in every direction as far as he can see surrounded by other bald scholars and people in a similar situation all looking around at each other with waves breaking under all their chins. Then, Plato announces in a loud voice so that all can hear, 'I am not in the water.'"

Get it?

Pointless Commentary from Ten Pines Hermitage

Brother Serendipity heard Coyote say something about something else to the point once, "It's impossible to get out of your mind, it's imperative to get out of your head."

THE FELONY STICK: MERCURY

I look up from reading my book in the Morning Glory Doughnuts and there is one of the cops who took the felony stick away from me. He is the cop who liked me the most which is not to say a lot which is to say very little. He wished me a merry Christmas and I did have a good one. Except for bad news just before Christmas dinner. I can see his nameplate and I try to read it but his name is too small and the metal is too shiny and the light is too bright.

He raises his coffee cup and looks in my direction but he is not looking at me. He's looking at the newspaper on my table. The newspaper is not mine but he doesn't know that. He doesn't know I wouldn't own a newspaper unless I was training a puppy or lining the bottom of a birdcage or sleeping on a bench in Yale Park. In neat sections, the newspaper lies under his eyes.

"Are you reading that?" he says.

I raise my book for him to see. *Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era*.

He nods at the newspaper. "Can I see it?"

"Sure."

I lift the stack and hand the pages over the side of the booth.

He takes the newspaper and sets it in front of him. He looks at me again. He sees me this time.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he says.

"Yes."

He drinks his coffee black and looks down at the paper. He looks up again.

"Do you want it back?" he says.

"What?"

"The newspaper."

"You can have it."

"Thanks."

I nod and open my book. I find my place with my thumb between the pages and start reading from the last page I was on. While I read, the newspaper rattles and cracks as he folds and unfolds and refolds the sections. Time passes at the speed of reading on a Sunday morning.

When he stands up to go, I look up.

The newspaper under his arm, he shifts his equipment belt on his hips. His hand grips the handle of his nightstick and he looks at me again. He looks down at the nightstick.

He looks at me once more as he walks to the door.

"Yeah," he says.

THE GREAT KING KONG AIRPLANE ANNIHILATION INCIDENT

For a long time, my father used to go to bed early. He was early to bed and early to rise for most of the childhood I remember. Benjamin Franklin had nothing to do with his fealty to the light of the sun. He was a route salesman for an east-coast snack-cake conglomerate and rose before either of his own two sons to get to work before the cakes and pies arrived from Philadelphia where the sons of Benjamin Franklin worked awake all through

the dark so my father could deliver sweetness to grocery store shelves where people who knew no better found cakes and pies still warm in packages bought and brought home in the twilight of dawn.

He also returned home early from work in the afternoon before we even got home from school but often he fell asleep during dinner as he did one day sleeping with a fork full of spaghetti two inches from his slackly-hanging open mouth for a full five minutes before our giggling or his snoring woke him ending the delay once and for all with a decisive clomp of his teeth on my mother's wedding flatware.

My sister called him "Our Father Who Art Asleep."

My father goes to bed before me and my brother every night and tonight we're playing in our bunk beds laughing and giggling and fooling around not paying attention to the noise we're making as I bounce my brother's body on the balls of my feet through the mattress from below even after the second warning. The hall light flashes on. This is the third time. My father's booming footsteps on the wood of the hallway floor say, "This time there is going to be trouble."

Backlit by the hall light, my father is a huge rushing figure of rage crashing into the room, announcing his arrival with a smack of thunder I know landed across my brother's butt since he emits the high-pitched piercing shriek of pain now and always much louder and greater than the sound should be but often saving my brother from further buffeting from my father. My father stoops to peer at me scooted over between the mattress and the wall in an effort to save myself. His eyes are sparks of red and he graces me with an actual snarl. I've never seen my father this angry before and I quickly learn the meaning of pushing someone too far. Burn and learn. Somehow in the pitch of his anger my father slaps at my brother with both hands and kicks at me with both feet but misses both of us completely as he accomplishes what I know must be impossible even as I see him held aloft gripped in the great hairy fist of his own rage and using all of his limbs to make the whole thing clear to my brother and me.

He is speaking and spitting, "Damn you, boys. I told you to go the hell to sleep two times already tonight, and I MEAN IT!!" He glares around the room waving his arms around in dark anger in the dark. "You boys don't appreciate a single thing I do for you, do you? I get up IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT to make money to feed you, and this is the thanks I get?"

At this point in my childhood there is a change in the world every day and my father soon makes another one. As he waves his hands around his head in frustration, his thumb tangles in the string of one of the many plastic airplane models we built and hung around the room as proof to visitors our room was a boys' room. The plane suspended from the ceiling on the string around my father's thumb raps suddenly and sharply on my father's left temple. He turns slowly to face the offending facsimile, then closing a thick fist of hairy knuckles around the fuselage, rips the model from the air, raises the wreckage over his head, and hurls a flat line of force toward the opposite wall, the plastic exploding and scattering little bits of destruction and previous plane parts all over the room.

In his madness, the words are incoherent but the actions speak loudly enough for my brother and me watching this dimly-lit dance of destruction as our father methodically reduces our model air force to shattered bits off the old wall.

My father seizes *The Spirit of St. Louis*, crushes the silver wings in a hairy fist, and the propeller bounces off my history book. Unlucky Lindy. My father breaks a B-17 across his knee and the ball turret gunner on the belly of the bomber is the first to go. My father snaps and shatters our Hindenburg as quickly and surprisingly as a stray static electrical charge ignited the hydrogen in New Jersey in 1937. My father causes the mid-air collision of a Sopwith Camel and an F-104 jet fighter, pitching history against anachronism, letting the pieces fall as they might make right some other mystery some other time. My father makes Amelia Earhart disappear that awful night.

Last, my father sees the model of the kamikaze I finished that night in the light from the hallway falling across the desk where I left it to admire the sight as I fell asleep. He snatches up the new green plastic kamikaze with twin clear orange plastic rear-rocket flames glinting in the light and throws the plane with all his might across the room against a poster of the *U.S.S. Constitution* mounted on the wall. The green shell of the flying bomb, removable nose-cone included, slams and shatters into a bursting circle of shards, the little green molded plastic image of a Japanese pilot blown from the tiny aircraft in a successful suicide mission skittering across the wooden floor through the light in a crash, bounce, and tumble into the heating duct near the window by my bed where I find his lone figure in later days.

Even the “Giant Spider sequence” cut from the original *King Kong* could not have been this scary.

The end of the kamikaze is the end of my father’s rage.

He shambles out the door exhausted but not defeated and nowhere near beaten, leaving me with an eternal and unbreakable link between my father and old science-fiction movies and the urge to never right the wrong by force since the breakage long litters dusty floors, plastic snapping under careless feet, and the noise echoes through the twisted corridors of childhood until the building collapses or the passage is walled up or the keys are lost or left forever under the fraying brown straw door-mat before the blind and broad black door to eternity.

THE MAN WHO COULD DO NO WRONG MEETS THE MAN WHO COULD DO NOTHING RIGHT *a fable of the future*

The accident of their meeting was monumental.

The Man Who Could Do No Wrong was just married to the Most Beautiful Person To Ever Be Born on that gorgeous late June day at the newly-built and wondrous gold, glass, mahogany, and marble of The Greatest Cathedral Ever Constructed in the Finest Capitol City Ever Designed and Built in the Most Powerful and Best Loved Nation On The Most Prominent Planet In The Whole Universe. The wedding was the first ever performed at the spectacular altar of sunlight and silver gleaming at the center of the aerial magnificence and lofty grandeur of the brilliant interior of this truly eminent structure. The ceremony was composed and choreographed by The Man Who Could Do No Wrong himself and even reporters and photographers wept at such beauty.

There was joy in every heart but one as the Most Wonderful Couple In The Universe descended shining steps to a sparkling carriage to transport the two to Spaceport Central where a gleaming ship chartered only for them waited to whisk them into the sky and stars for a month of honeymoon

on the planet Amour. As they reached the carriage, the lovers turned and smiled and waved to cheering crowds of admirers.

The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right stepped forward. The crowd froze. Smiles fled. There was a single scream, and silence reigned. The brilliant day darkened. The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right held a pistol to the temple of The Man Who Could Do No Wrong.

“Too long have I lived in the shadow of your luck,” said The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right in a loud obnoxious voice, “My life, always the evil mirror of your good fortune. It’s just not wrong--.” The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right hesitated biting his lip and began again. “It’s just not *right* that I suffer a dismal fate of ill luck and evil odds in darkness so that you may stand forth in the sun shining with the untarnished grace of good fortune and a perfect destiny. I will have it--I mean, I will *not* have it any longer while I live.” The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right stopped briefly for an annoying dramatic pause and cocked the gun.

“*Sic semper tyrannis*,” said The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right and pulled the trigger.

There was one frozen instant of suspense throughout the entire universe.

The gun misfired, and the trigger flew off and put out the left eye of The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right. He screamed and fell to his knees on the steps. The Man Who Could Do No Wrong called for an ambulance and ran to The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right, stanching the bleeding with a priceless Venusian silk handkerchief, a gift for the occasion from the Second of the Seven Planetary Presidents. The Glorious Two then accompanied The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right to the hospital postponing their honeymoon an entire day while ensuring The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right received the best medical care and arranging to pay all the costs of his treatment and recovery.

Many say that the incredible generosity of The Man Who Could Do No Wrong was the finest event of the day, and the wedding is commemorated by all the people of the world every year on the day of longest light, known simply as The Anniversary. A direct descendant of William Shakespeare was commissioned to pen a spectacle inspired by the day’s events, known now as The Greatest Drama Ever Written, and the work is performed annually on The Anniversary all over the planet and there is never a single dry eye in the house.

After the almost complete recovery of The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right, who did, after all, lose the eye, The Man Who Could Do No Wrong bought a wonderful house and secured rewarding employment for The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right, and The Man Who Could Do No Wrong was always there for The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right when things went the way that things often went for him.

The Man Who Could Do No Wrong lived a wonderful life, long and productive and filled with great events, and even death loved him and came to him peacefully in his sleep. The people of the planet built the largest monument ever constructed to commemorate him, inscribed with the legend, "In Grand and Loving Memory and Eternal Tribute To The Greatest Person Who Ever Lived On This Planet and In The Universe."

Late in his life, The Man Who Could Do Nothing Right was known to stop and gaze long at this magnificent memorial on his way to work at the fortune cookie factory where he wrote the inevitable sentences of fate for a living.

VAGARY, VAGRANCY, VACANCY

The moment the sun sinks in winter tonight I sense the approach of a strange thought. Central Avenue is jammed with cars, buses, trucks, and the rest of the rush hour darkening as the light of the day fades from nowhere in particular as the sun sets behind four gray walls of high hard clouds in all directions.

The notion nears as the light hovers for a moment before slipping away at last to make time for darkness and the bright wonders of the night. This notion is a wandering in mind and in motion making what was empty full, a jarring notion bumping through the gap in attention between what you are doing and what you are going to do, dazin' again. In fact, the notion concerns what makes empty and what makes full, whether what is empty is full of emptiness or only empty of fullness. It is one of those strange thoughts I get, a thought as strange as a single bus tire dropping through dark water sliding by a barracuda to bounce in a pothole on the bottom of the sea.

I get this notion riding a bus away from a bookstore in a vast fantastic indoor mall glittering with Christmas. I went there to buy something important and return with something novel. For hours I watched people

carry packages back and forth from stores to cars and come back for more. Every color I ever saw was wrapped around packages of all sizes holding secrets from everybody but the giver all to be revealed on the same great morning. The mall was a vast aquarium of wealth, a tropical ocean of shopping.

I wandered through the bookstore as the tides changed and when I went to make my purchase I had a tough time getting back into the world from the bookstore. I fought the undertow of cash and charge sucking sand from between my toes and working to drag me under even as I boarded the “Number 3: Louisiana-Central” bus for the Frontier.

As I read, light drains over the horizon and the gentle nudge of a traffic light halting the bus raises my eyes from the bottom of the page where words crawl across the sand of the imagination in borrowed shells.

The black depths of the sea of night press on the glass, and I raise my hands to cover my reflection so I can see to see what there is to see from my fat submarine box of warmth and light rolling over concrete through the cold Duke City winter.

On the other side of the glass are the gritty green neon Western letters of the Ranch Motor Hotel sign. The sign features a rash red, obscure orange, dubious blue, and rude brown representation of a Conestoga wagon with a drowsing cowboy slumped over the reins of a weary horse. The night makes this sign magic. In the dark, the cycling of electricity through a radial set of stationary glass tubes visible only in daylight sets the spokes whirling within the invisibly turning felloes of the wagon wheels rocking through the night. Below, there is a violent yellow word shrieking for attention: VACANCY. The transparent glass word* preceding the glow of these garish letters is unlit, a dark secret only to those who know only the ways of the visible world. This word waits for power. The illumination of this word is the end of something vital and significant in the hours of just passing through. This word is charged with denial, with turning away, with immediate dismissal. With this word, all doors are locked at the Ranch Motor Hotel.

Beneath the sign, seated on a low rock dragged in from the desert for the strange garden surrounding the sign of accommodations in the new night of this cold day, is King Charles the RagMan. The arms of King Charles the RagMan rest on his knees and each of his empty hands holds the other empty hand. I watch him wait for nothing I can see in the ghastly shadows of neon while the bus driver waits for a change in a light only she can see from

where I sit. The present wait is a short one. When the bus driver bumps the bus back into gear, King Charles the RagMan lifts his left hand in the classic kid-gun position. The thumb of King Charles the RagMan twitches as he squeezes off a round of emptiness at the bus. King Charles the RagMan fires again as the bus accelerates and fires again as my seat glides by and the shot flashes through the glass and hits me right between the eyes.

The impact is imperceptible, but now I have this notion.

SECOND-HAND NEWS OF THE MINUTE PARTICULARS

On a bright summer Sunday morning in San Harmonica, I find Uncle K.C. early in the garage behind his house already surrounded by the scattered gears, coils, faces, hands, springs, and other odd pieces and parts of broken clocks and busted watches, numberless bits of junk from timepieces of all shapes, sizes, designs, demeanors, and details.

In the meantime between time before the camera, Uncle K.C. repairs the means and mechanisms for measuring the minute while he develops a philosophy of time. Actually, he thinks about time more than he talks about time, but I can tell time is on his mind because he tells tales all the time he anatomizes and assembles clocks. While he works and I watch, Uncle K.C. reveals Orient stories of monks and talking monkeys, emperors and enchanted fish, alchemists and their dogs, an odd company of bald scholars, hermits, travelers, peddlers of magic and mystery, and four brothers of ancient fame. Time is of the essence in these tales.

I casually examine the boxes, the shelves, the tools, and the miscellaneous and mysterious hardware of the home crammed in the cluttered garage. Uncle K.C. sits atop a stool amid the dimness peering into a clock. A single bulb hangs over his head in the cartoon image of an idea.

“Does anything work in here?” I say waving my hand around the three walls filled with the still hands and frozen faces of stopped clocks.

Uncle K.C. concentrates on the clock of the moment and says, “Only me.”

“Why do you work on this stuff?”

“To make money, and it’s funny,” says Uncle K.C. “*Shikata ga nai.*”

“What does that mean?”

“Shit happens,” says Uncle K.C. “My grandmother used to say it all the time.”

“Wait a minute. What’s funny about clocks and watches?”

“It’s funny because I can make them work. I don’t know what they do, but I make them work. If the hands move, they’re fixed. And people pay me to do it.” Uncle K.C. laughs, “They say time is money, but timepieces are where the money is.”

I find a balance wheel with an axle through the center and spin it on the table.

“I thought clocks measured the moment.”

“A minute is not a moment.”

The gear tips over and skids to a stop. I spin the shaft again and watch it whirl over and disappear among the pieces of the clock Uncle K.C. is working on.

“Why not?”

“A minute is an inch of time, and a clock measures out the minutes. A moment is something else.”

I gaze into the face and hands of a wooden mantle clock and idly spin through the hours. Every time I change my grip, the clock stops at some equally random and inaccurate time. 11:11. 1:23. 4:15. 7:56. 3:14. I look at my uncle.

“What?”

“A moment is a place you stand and look around while it lasts. It’s a real measure of time. If you’re lucky, the moment comes in and out like breathing at the same rate you live your life.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” says Uncle K.C. and grins.

I stick my hand into a stained and oily cardboard carton of brass shafts, silver springs, and golden gears and assemble the bits into the strange and accidental elaborations of random chance. From the contents of the box, my creation takes a form of its own creation in my hands as I link springs and coils and pawls and styles into a working mechanism of wonder measuring time and space in the singular and particular way the design defines the shape the pieces take on the crowded workbench.

“How do you know what goes where?”

“Whatever fits, works.”

“What about what’s left over?”

“Nothing is left over when it works.”

“Do you ever lose any parts?”

“That’s another thing,” says Uncle K.C. “You have to live with what you lose.”

THE FELONY STICK: JUPITER

K.C. looks up as we leave my house with Rufus for the nightly walk along the dark streets of U.N.U.M. Argent, the Shadow Cat, disappears from the shadows of the night and into the shadows of the house before I can close the door.

“The Return Of The Ghost Of The Silver Shadow,” smiles K.C.

“I don’t think I saw that one.”

“Yes, you did.”

Thick clouds crowd the sky and the moon is full and beaming a silver edge around the dull lead-colored centers of the altocumulus billows high in the indigo pierced only where the steady stars throw down their spears sharp in the narrow places between masses of drifting mistiness.

“A Dulac sky,” says K.C.

I grab the umbrella hanging on the inside doorknob of the front door. The umbrella is decorated in bright yellows, oranges, pinks, and streaks of green and white in a design familiar only to people awakening inside a rosebush with the sun directly overhead. The umbrella was forgotten at Morning Glory Doughnuts one drizzling day and after three sunshiny days of watching the colors blur with newsprint from the papers tossed on top of the fabric I finally snatched the handle and shoved the garish sleeping bat of a rainshade into my black pack to save for a rainy day of my own.

“You won’t need that,” says K.C. pointing to the umbrella.

I hang the handle through my belt loop as I do every night lately on the walk with Rufus alone or with others.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not going to rain,” says K.C. “You won’t need the umbrella.”

“No. What’s a Dulac sky?”

“Oh,” says K.C. resigning herself to me carrying a pointless umbrella, “I mean the sky looks just like a sky painted by Edmund Dulac, brilliant

midnight blue, glaring white stars, and huge, white, puffy clouds with silver centers and edges made luminous by the moon.”

“Are you quoting somebody?”

“No. I’m telling you what a Dulac sky is.”

“Okay,” raising my voice for the dog running ahead, “Rufus, wait up.”

We cross the street in silence and walk by the long dark grass by the gymnasium. Rufus disappears into the bushes. I hear campus cats scattering through leaves and underbrush and startled snorts from the dog as his nose finds warm spitting or hissing fur among the dark branches beside the Biology building.

This part of the nightly quest of Rufus always makes me laugh. When I do I look up and see the darkened police car waiting on the wrong side of the street, and that is the same side of the street I am on, and since I am on familiar and speaking terms, though not on a first, last, or middle name basis with two particular officers, I know the cruiser waits for me.

K.C. and I walk up the street and start to walk right by right next to the two officers in the car looking straight through their windshield in the direction K.C. and I are not going and not looking at us.

As we pass the window, the driver policeman says without turning his head, “Is the dog on a leash?”

K.C. and I stop on the sidewalk. K.C. looks at me. I look into the dimness of the car and the double dark figures of the uniformed officers.

“Uh-huh.”

The driver policeman turns and says, “That’s not right, you know.”

“No.”

He looks at me and does not ask how my response is appropriate to his statement. He seems to consider this particular exchange of unpleasantries carefully as he watches Rufus lift his leg on the shrubline around the walls of biological knowledge. He does not speak.

The passenger policeman does not move. He is an exact representation of himself in official uniform sitting silently facing forward in the front seat of the cruiser not moving.

The driver policeman looks up from the dog to me. He looks up to me only because he is sitting and I am standing close to the door of his car. He looks down at the umbrella of many colors and little shapes hooked on my belt loop. He looks up to me again. He looks up even further than I am at the sky with large white shapes with hearts of silver and the narrow lanes of

stars and startling clarity with an occasional irregular glimpse of brilliance and the full moon. He looks back down to me again, puts his elbow out the window, and asks his final question.

“What’s the umbrella for?” says the driver policeman.

I look at the driver policeman. He is serious about the question. I ask him an equally serious question.

“You don’t know what an umbrella is for?”

The passenger policeman does not react. The passenger policeman is motionless and speechless tonight. He is truly the unspitting still life image of himself unmoved and unmoving at the center of nowhere in particular but here.

The driver policeman looks at me standing on the sidewalk of night without the light of the moon to brighten my face and changes his mind. He turns and faces forward through the glass in the backward direction for K.C. and me and starts the car, engages the engine, and pulls away from the curb fast. He is going somewhere. Else.

K.C. turns and watches the cruiser drive away down the dark street.

“What was that all about?” says K.C.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Rufus runs to the next corner and sits on the curb looking back waiting for us to arrive so we can cross the street together.

“C’mon, what’s going on?” says K.C.

“It’s a long story.”

K.C. laughs and says, “Well, make it short.”

READING THE LAST PAGE FIRST

Those of us who do this find it amusing enough. We hurt no one but ourselves, learn absolutely nothing about characters yet to be introduced, discover nothing but the end of a book we have yet to begin, and by the time we’ve read through from the other direction we’ve forgotten what we read in the first place and the end is a surprise to us again.

K.C. deplores this practice.

In the bookstore, I open a book to the last page and scan the text. From behind me, she runs up and knocks the unbought book from my hands to

the floor leaving my reading finger pointing to nothing in the air over my other empty hand.

“Why did you do that?”

“I can’t stand it when you do that. It ruins the whole damn book.”

“Not for me.”

I bend down and lift the book from the linoleum. The cover creases diagonally across one corner now.

“Not for me,” I say again.

People watch us from other parts of the bookstore. Two stare from “PSYCHOLOGY,” whispering and pointedly not pointing. A woman turns away from one quick glance from “ROMANCE.” The guy in coveralls crouching in “AUTOMOTIVE” doesn’t even turn around.

“Not for me,” I say one last time.

“Huh,” says K.C. She whips around arcing her hair behind her as she strides to a cash register where nobody stands.

K.C. calls over her shoulder as she walks, “Will somebody come and ring this up for me, please?” She holds up the book she’s chosen for everyone to see. This book. *Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era*.

I turn back to the last page learning something I will forget and surprise myself to discover again later. When I read, not only do my lips move but my tongue moves too, wagging doggily, happily over the words, rattling between my teeth.

Proof is this last page.

What do you know about this bookmovie now that you’ve read the last page first?

YOU ARE HERE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Paul Shaffer is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Portable Planet* (2000) and *Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen* (2001) from Leaping Dog Press, and editor of Lew Welch's *How I Read Gertrude Stein* from Grey Fox Press. Shaffer received the 2002 Elliot Cades Award for Literature, a literary prize to an established writer in Hawai'i. His work has appeared in *ACM*, *American Scholar*, *Asylum*, *Bakunin*, *Chaminade Literary Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Grain*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Malahat Review*, *North American Review*, *Rattle*, *Threepenny Review*, and in the Todd Swift anthology *100 Poets Against the War*. His next book of poetry, tentatively entitled *Lahaina Noon: Nā Mele o Maui*, is forthcoming from Leaping Dog Press in April, 2005. He lives with Veronica and Harlequin on the sunset slope of Haleakalā, among mockingbirds, cardinals, *kiawe*, and cactus.

*This edition is limited
to 60 copies.*

This is number 6.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. P. Taylor". The signature is highly stylized and cursive, with large loops and flourishes. It is positioned below the text "This is number 6".

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