

24SHORTGRASS.DOC

Our professor fled the floodwaters at Iowa City three days ahead of us. He left before the university announced that classes would be closed for two weeks because of overflowing rivers. He escaped before roads and Interstates leading to the airport were blocked by high water.

He e-mailed the class that in the haste and confusion, he lost our final submissions at the airport. He added, safe at a college in the high country of Tennessee, that he'd "be glad to edit five poems per student."

I think he said "glad to edit." From the way he rushed through the final class, moved downtown from the rising water, it's hard to say whether his desperate urge to leave stemmed from the flood or from the class.

Whatever the case, the idea sounded much better than the habit of passing your stuff around for the whole class to review. Workshops, poetry workshops, attract lots of retired schoolteachers. After an ol' gal calls the roll on class after class of knuckleheads, she can sigh so forcefully that air pockets develop and break in her range.

The introductory part of a new class always is a tense moment without facing schoolmarms. Years ago, I dropped the "wolf trapper from the Chihuahua Desert" line. The simple words drawled in near sotto voce: "Am a herder from the

eastern edge of the Chihuahua Desert in Texas" takes so long to say that the class forgets to link some high-notch environmental crime to my profession. Lulled by the drawl, they miss the part in my repertoire about coyotes wounding and destroying a lamb crop, or the practice of exacting an "eye for an eye" on brother black crow with a .22 long rifle ball for pecking baby goats' eyes. (Wish that sentence was clearer. I am proud of the sly proselytizing.)

I flinch when a lady announces she's a retired grade school teacher, especially the old nemesis grade that brought me down – the fifth. Strange, but they seem to sense the past. Guess I am not the only abject failure to ever go across the ol' block and sink into shame.

But those old hands, immortalized by hickory stick songs, catch on plenty fast. By the second semester in practice teaching, they'd have seen through the prof's alibi of losing the poems at the airport in much less time than he took to think up such a lame excuse while flying from Cedar Rapids to his home base at Memphis.

I like the idea of my material being lost. The disappearance offered the opportunity to mourn the loss, like I had captured a serious, precious voice. Words impossible to recreate in the way the rhythm billowed and

beat a soft melodious conclusion like a movement from Mozart.

But his excuse was too amateurish to risk back home. The cedar hills around the Mertzon schoolyard once fluttered with discarded, sun-bleached test papers and crumpled summons from teachers for private parent-teacher meetings.

You might remember that my son Johnny Noelke suffered a report card heist on the way home from the third grade — an unsolved stick-up in the annals of crime to this very day. Way after Johnny became John, he was to be a sophomore or junior in college before one of his grades ever arrived in my postal box. The report became a family keepsake in a house of dozens of old records of eight childrens' schooling.

If the teacher had kept quiet, I doubt if any of his students would have complained over losing our papers. He didn't come right out and say he lost the poems. He said, or wrote: "I am sorry, but in the confusion of checking in the airport and rushing to make the plane, I must have mixed the last assignments up with other papers."

Look closely at those words. See the hole where he says, "must have mixed," not "I was struck from behind in

the line through security. Have no recollection where the papers disappeared." Already better, isn't it?

Before working on this article, a friend – a published poet of wide boundaries into parody – advised that before objecting to the lost poems, I should recall that a husband and wife team of scientists spent two years teaching a chimpanzee three words.

The prof and I only communicate on paper – never over the wire or the Net. As soon as this article posts, I am gonna' write him the following: "Along with posing as an expert on primate behavior and herders' talents, in 25 words or less, explain why you took dough from innocent young bards to teach workshops last summer."

My pal has her work ready to mail the professor. Last night I spent an hour going through papers on this desk, hunting for my poetry to send him. Hate to face losing those poems after so much work. Floods cause man so much misery. I wish now I had made duplicate copies.