

# *The Cybernetic Possum*

*A Collection of Short Stories and Poems*

*With a tribute to Greg Knutson*

*By*

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## Introduction

Over the years I've accumulated many writings and poems that were birthed into existence for one reason or another, read to a few friends then placed into the collected unconsciousness of boxes and files.

This collection contains five short stories and 24 poems from those boxes and files. Many of the poems were written during a six-month period in 1992 when I tasked myself with writing a poem a day. Of those, these are the ones I liked best. Other poems were written over the years anytime the spirit grabbed me.

I wrote the poem *Hey Baby!* as part of a project by the Wisconsin Humanities Council. Poets were asked to write about exhibits at the Elvehjem (now the Chazen) Art Museum in Madison, Wisconsin. As soon as I entered the gallery my eye was drawn to the sculpture of a realistic looking naked woman sitting on the floor. The depth of detail was amazing. I was going through a lonely period in my life and wished the statue would suddenly come to life. I scribbled down a few lines of my initial impressions at the museum then fleshed the rest out at home. Later all the poems were read in front of each work of art by a museum docent as part of a special tour in which the public was invited.

*The Cybernetic Possum* was written in 1973 while I was a newspaper reporter on a small newspaper in Northern Indiana. It has been published in *The State* newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina and also in Madison's *Isthmus*. About a year ago I found an injured baby possum on the east side bicycle path while riding to work. I put it into my backpack and took it to a wild animal hospital but unfortunately it didn't survive.

## The Cybernetic Possum

Several stories and poems (*Ralph Nader Comes to Madison*, *Bucks Tavern*, *An Inside Job*, *Wars Never End*, and *Hacking It*) are about my experiences driving for Union Cab in Madison since 1982. A number of people have made a lasting impression on me and I always enjoy sharing their stories with others.

*The Honest Thief* was written in 1975 after I returned from a hitchhiking trip to California. The prose version of that experience appears in Chapter 28 of my memoir, *Hitchhiking from Vietnam: Seeking the Ox* published in 2007 by Spinoza Publishing. The short story *Rocky Mountain High* was deleted from the same memoir which already had two LSD trips in it. Here is the third.

I entered the story *The Purple Lion* in *The Plot Quickens*, a 24-hour writing contest in 2003 that was sponsored by the *Capital Times* and the Wisconsin Book Festival. The assignment was: “Something’s happening here. What is it? What comes next? Or what came before it?” The contest used photographer William Gedney’s *Girl Lost in Thought at Fast Food Counter* for inspiration. I didn’t win the contest but was pleased with myself for completing the story in only 24-hours.

Finally, I’ve included six poems by Greg Knutson who used to drive and dispatch for Union Cab Cooperative of Madison. Greg was a gentle spirit, a kind of Renaissance man who was a guitarist, poet and National Chess Master who was working on his PhD in Mathematics at The University of Wisconsin. He died in 1996 at the age of 37 after being struck by a car on the interstate highway north of Madison.

## *Ralph Nader Visits Madison*

One of the perks of driving cab is every now and then giving a ride to someone famous. That happened on November 1, 2000 when Ralph Nader was making his last campaign swing through Wisconsin before the presidential election. I was selected to be one of two Union Cab drivers to shuttle him around Madison for a noon rally at the Capitol followed by an appearance at the Orpheum Theater. From there we would take him to Milwaukee.

I admired Nader for having the guts to challenge the two-party system and voted for him in 1996. To me, he represented the best hope of the people to rescue their government from corporate control. He was one of my heroes.

The night before he was to arrive I had trouble falling asleep anticipating what would happen. Would he even be riding with me? If he did there were any number of things we could talk about-his life, my life, the environment, corporate control of the government-the list was endless. What a great discussion we could have.

I wasn't familiar with the streets in Milwaukee but got some cursory directions from the dispatcher. When we pulled our yellow mini-vans into Madison's airport late that morning my green *Nader/La Duke* button was pinned to my yellow Union Cab T-shirt. Shortly before noon, two very large men in suits and sunglasses emerged from the terminal and walked over to my van. One opened the front passenger door then both men posted themselves near the van, in the wide stanced military "parade rest" position.

"Are you with the Nader group?" I asked.

## The Cybernetic Possum

“Stay inside,” ordered the large black man standing next to the front door. Just then several people exited the terminal and began walking toward my van. One of them was Ralph Nader dressed in a dark suit. He was talking and holding a stack of papers in one hand and a bottle of spring water in the other.

He climbed in next to me without even saying hello. He was holding a press release about the Crandon Mine which was being proposed in northern Wisconsin and began cross-examining his aids. “Is this verified?” he asked pointedly. “We’ve got to get this verified.”

When I had seen him on TV he looked haggard with slumped shoulders but now he looked tanned and younger than I had expected. Since he had not even acknowledged my presence I decided to try and make contact. Something simple, I thought. I didn’t want to monopolize his time.

Everyone was calling him Ralph but it didn’t seem appropriate to get that informal, at least not until we’d had time to talk.

He pulled the door shut and turned slightly toward me. “Welcome to Madison, Mr. Nader,” I said.

He glanced over, gave me a half smile and said, “Thanks.”

We left the airport and drove toward the Capitol. I had been in Crandon, Wisconsin for the demonstration against Exxon’s proposed mine few years earlier. I had watched as Nader’s Wisconsin campaign manager, Ben Manski, got slammed to the hood of a police car, handcuffed, and hauled off to jail. I thought that maybe I could make the issue come alive for Nader by relating my personal experience.

“I was up in Crandon protesting that mine a couple years ago,” I began. “A lot of people got arrested.”

“Is the site on public land or is it private?” asked Nader.

“Exxon used to own it then they sold it to Rio Tinto Zinc, now I’m not sure who owns it...” I said trying to remember the tangled mess of

## *Ramsey's World*

Mike Ramsey was having one of those mornings again. His head was throbbing and he was going to be late for work. He had a vague memory of taking a cab home from the bar. The alarm hadn't gone off and the sun was peaking through his closed shades. He threw some water on his face and got dressed. He didn't want to be late again. This would be his third time in a month. He had been warned by his boss that he was seriously jeopardizing his job. He had a radio show to do. As he drove to the studio he decided to give *Alcoholics Anonymous* another try. OK, so maybe I have a drinking problem after all, he thought. Sure, I hate the meetings, they're attended by a bunch of losers, but I've got to try something.

When he got to the station he walked briskly down the short hall and into his studio. His engineer Alice was standing behind the glassed in control room.

Her gray hair was tied back in a bun and she was dressed in slacks and a Milwaukee Bucks tee-shirt. She had been working with Ramsey for ten years and was painfully aware of his late night binges. She looked up at him, smiled sadly then pointed to her watch.

"Nice of you to drop by," she said.

Ramsey smiled sheepishly and sat down. He put his coffee mug on the table, glanced at the morning schedule then fixed his gaze on the second hand of the clock on the wall. When the hand crossed the zenith of its arc Ramsey jabbed his finger at Alice. She flipped a switch and the studio was filled by the magnificent sound of bagpipes, the Massed Pipes and Drums of the Scottish Division playing, *Scotland the Brave*.

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Ramsey smiled and sat straighter in his chair as the music enveloped him with its heroic sound. After 15 seconds the bagpipes were replaced by the screaming electric guitar of Ted Nugent. At 30 seconds past the hour he waved to Alice and the music began to fade.

“Good morning Milwaukee, and welcome to *Ramsey’s America*, the number one rated talk show that tells it like it is. We’ve got a great show for you today. We’ve got a young man who just returned from Iraq where he was awarded the Purple Heart for taking part in the liberation of Al-Fallujah from the terrorists. I’m so proud that he could be here today to share his story with us and I hope he will inspire you to support our troops in this time of national peril. Now some people have criticized me for being one sided so today we’ll talk with the director of the Peace and Freedom Movement, Marvin Stein. Marvin thinks we’re treating Al-Qaeda prisoners in Cuba inhumanely. We’ll find out why in a minute after a word from the people who make this show possible.”

Ramsey wound up like he was throwing a ball and jabbed his finger at Alice who cut to a commercial break. He poured himself another cup of coffee, reclined in his chair and began rubbing the back of his neck. Just then an image flashed in his mind. It was the memory of a dream he had the previous night, the drowning dream. It came to him in different forms on different nights—a memory from his childhood. In the dream he was thrashing around in the swimming pool after being tossed in by his father.

“Trust me,” his father had said. “I wouldn’t let you drown.”

In the dream he was fighting for air then suddenly inhaled water and started choking.

“Daddy, help me,” he cried

“You can’t trust anyone. Save your self,” his father replied.

He was going down, he was blacking out and his father wasn’t going to rescue him.

## The Cybernetic Possum

### *The Cybernetic Possum*

While driving to the store one night  
to buy a present for my sweet  
I saw what looked to me to be  
a possum sitting in the street.

His two front legs were standing  
but his rear ones seemed to sit  
and as I drove on past him  
it appeared that he'd been hit.

I clenched my teeth in silence  
and sucked my stomach in  
because I felt that when I passed  
it was an awful sin.

For what good are we as humans  
if it's not in our moral code  
to help a half-smashed possum  
just a 'sittin' in the road.

The thought it would not leave me  
as I traveled to the store.  
I knew that poor old possum  
was feeling mighty sore.

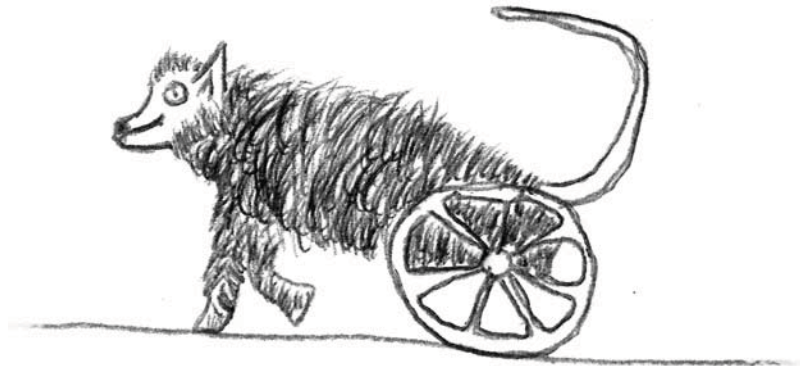
## *Poems*

I vowed before I drove on back  
that I would spend some bread  
to buy a possum basket  
and hope he wasn't dead.

I bought a yellow basket  
and hoped it wasn't too late  
to save my friend the possum  
from some destructive fate.

With two strong legs I'd raise him  
and feed him possum meals  
and if his back legs would not walk  
I'd build him possum wheels.

What a strange sight to behold.  
What a friendship that would blossom.  
When I took him on a walk they'd say,  
"Here comes the cybernetic possum."



*A Post Vietnam Memorial Day*

The guns were fired.  
A wreath was laid.  
A widow cried.  
A speech was made.

Some poor bastard  
laid out in a tomb.  
They said he died for his country,  
but he died too soon.

If they'd have told him what  
he was really fighting for  
he'd have stayed at home,  
he'd have locked his door.

He'd have raised his kids  
and made love to his wife.  
He'd have helped his neighbors.  
He'd have had a good life.

Instead he died for lies  
too long on the shelf.  
He died fightin' communism  
which died by itself.

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### *Farewell to Hardies*

I looked in the mirror the other day,  
blinked my eyes then turned away  
because as the winter winds were blowing  
the fat around my waist kept growing.

A pizza here, a cookie there  
to keep me warm, it sounded fair.  
Some M&M's while on the go  
to help me concentrate you know.

A pound of two of weight each month  
didn't seem like such a bunch  
until the time of spring arrived  
with a glutinous mass of fat archived.

So now it's time to say good-bye  
to Hardies clubs and curly French fries  
and day-old doughnuts grabbed on the run.  
With this heavy load of guilt they are no fun.

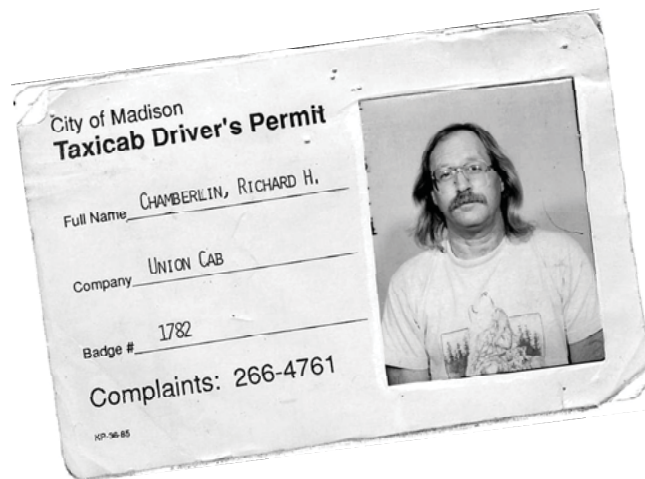
Those days of gastronomic delight are past  
in hopes the latest regimen will last  
and soon self-discipline will be the winner  
so that by July I'll be ten pounds thinner.

## *Hacking It*

You asked me how I did today  
so sit back down and let me say;  
two no-loads and twenty-five trips,  
booked 112 dollars and 30 in tips.

A full shift worked in a long snow shower,  
that comes down to ten dollars per hour.  
Before I checked in I saw a two-car wreck,  
got a kink in my back and a sore neck.

Picked up a masseuse at *This is Heaven*,  
the fare was \$6.90 and she gave me seven.  
While doing a delivery picked up a flag,  
got six bucks out of him but I won't brag  
because there will be another day  
when I know that things won't go my way.



*Tribute to Greg Knutson*

***Dear Mr. Science***

*By Greg Knutson*

Despite recent advances in optics  
there is no device which allows you  
to see through the eyes of a child.  
It's been 47 years, still no one's  
repaired the sound barrier.  
Furthermore  
no matter how well you  
master the language of dolphins  
they will not invite you to  
the secret ritual at  
their underwater circle  
of stones.