

Prologue

Like an amoeba; just like a goddamn running, yelling, but worst of all, touching, amoeba, she thinks, as she watches children flow out of the long yellow bus. The amoeba moved up the marble steps toward her, a multi-colored mass of stinking little bodies herded by a heavy-set teacher in run-down shoes. The sweaty brats still breathe odors; the teacher will be exhausted from a long climb in the unseasonably hot last week of school. Why did I volunteer to work at the museum, she wondered; why did I ever agree to give tours? Because that's what women in my situation do, she answers herself. They don't work as clerks in dry good stores; instead, they serve as docents in local museums. They give of themselves because their husbands can buy anything they want.

Out in the parking lot her new white Mercedes gleamed in the hot sun. Her high-heeled lizard shoes matched perfectly a stylish belt and complementary earrings. She has her script memorized. Thank God there are no American Indians or blacks in this group. She never felt she was able to say anything meaningful to black kids, and the Indians embarrassed her. She felt most comfortable playing like an expert on arrowheads and flint scrapers when the group was all white, and especially if the girls were nicely dressed. Nor did she mind the Hispanics; they were mostly Catholic, and consequently quiet and well-behaved, although still not very receptive to her spiel.

Inside the building, the teacher smiles, wipes her forehead, and pushes the children into a group, speaking harshly to a few, and finally gets them all facing the docent. Around each neck is a yarn loop holding a name card. Good; she could ask questions by name: Michelle, now why do you suppose these people painted their stories instead of writing them? A dozen hands go up. They didn't care what Michelle supposes; they just want to tell their version of some experience

that popped into, or out of, their minds. I painted a story once! My brother painted a story once! Hey, lady, one time we were out at my grandpa's farm and we found a arrowhead ("err'haid")!

Michelle? Michelle is shy, sucks on her finger. I know, 'cause they didn't know how to write! A freckly-faced redhead blurts out Michelle's answer. His friends laugh. You cain't write neither! Douglas, be quiet! says the teacher. Michelle, can you answer the lady? I don't think the Indians knew how to write back then, says Michelle softly. That's right, Michelle; written language had not been invented, so they kept records with pictures and stories. Good! What else hadn't been invented, Michelle?

Atomic bombs, answers Michelle, and television sets, and cars, and assault rifles, and telescopes, and computers, and electricity, and . . . and . . . and.

That's enough, Michelle, says the teacher; that's enough.

But I think they made pretty pictures on their teepees anyway, continues Michelle, and they probably had good ideas.

And they probably used them hatchets to bash in each other's skulls! says Douglas. His friends laugh. Yeah, Douglas! And they'd shoot you in the ass with one o' them arrows ("errs")!

The docent is ready to shoot Douglas in the ass with an arrow herself. If she'd been able to get into the glass cases she'd probably have done it. She looks at her watch. Need to hustle these kids on. Supposed to meet a friend for lunch before her tennis lesson. The group moves on, but Michelle stays behind, staring into the case.

Why did one of them paint a picture of a raccoon? she asks. Nobody is around to answer. Her teacher calls; come, Michelle, we need to move on. But Michelle does not move on. Something about that raccoon behind the glass keeps her attention fixed. I wonder, thinks Michelle to herself, why a raccoon was important enough to paint its picture. The question sticks in her mind.

When she gets home that night, she gets on the Internet to learn as much as she can about raccoons.