

# THE LATEST

"Visitors used to *Hangover*-style antics  
might blanch at the thought of a  
wholesome family gathering on the Strip."  
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News, essays, business and fond farewells

## What I Learned

In an age of standardized education, memories of the wild blue classroom

By **GREG BLAKE MILLER**

► **THE DREAM BEGINS** innocently enough. A book, an endless lawn, a metal globe that spins without my spinning it. In shades of yellow and pink and azure blue, it bears the shapes of nonexistent nations. The block type swings by too quickly for me to read—*Czejik-istanzhetz*—a swirl of impossible consonants painted upon impossible continents. Faster, faster. I reach out, touch the equator. The earth grabs me, spins me, hurls me at once outward and inward, and I wake up in a cathedral in the north of England at the tomb of a Saxon historian named Bede. It is very early. A lone monk rings a bell. I spin again, and I am feeding a stray kitten in a decaying Slavic city. A tiny park, white night at half past three, a statue of Gogol, the chap who wrote *Diary of a Madman*. I never felt so sane.

It's all true, is the thing. The world really did take me such places—I was in my 20s; the globe grabbed me with ease—but the journeys had begun much earlier. They began in this dry valley, with a suitcase packed in school. I went everywhere without going anywhere.

That dream, too, begins innocently enough: One day I'm a kid sitting in a sun-scorched Las Vegas backyard, a brindle boxer beside me, staring up—both of us—at cloud formations, and the very same day I am flying with Lindbergh, deplaning in Paris, bidding him adieu and continuing east, where a fellow named Stroganov will take me to Siberia. Next stop: Brooklyn, 1947, where the novelist John R. Tunis has arranged a meeting with a cocky ballplayer

named Cecil "Highpockets" McDade. It is Sunday. By Monday morning, I have to be at school. My teacher has told me, though, that I can bring Highpockets with me, intro-

duce him to the class, speak of my flight with Lindy, recount my adventures crossing the endless taiga.

Lewis E. Rowe Elementary School, Las Vegas, Nevada,

1977, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Winsett, Principal Galen G. Good, who once called me to his office just to give me a polished rock. He had somehow found out that I

was a collector. Legendary days. Reggie Jackson hitting it out three times against my beloved Bums. I read what I am assigned in a workbook called *Thundering Giants*, and I read the other things I am assigned, in books fitting under the broad category called Whatever I Want. To Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Winsett and Galen G. Good, my work with Whatever I Want was far more important than the comprehension questions in *Thundering Giants*. *Thundering Giants*—bless each little four-page text—made sure that I could comprehend paragraphs; Whatever I Want challenged me to comprehend everything else. It was an impossibly open-ended task, one I am still working on today. Lifelong learning, as they say.

When I filled in bubbles—as we had to, from time to time, even back then—my focus was on how black I could make the dot: The shading in the example was always so pure. I also enjoyed the pattern the filled dots would make as I worked my way down the page. Each letter came to mean something to me; I was partial to "D," which reminded me of a spotted goat at the Los Angeles Zoo that I had, for reasons lost to time, nicknamed Don. I rarely finished fill-in-the-bubble tests, but I found a way to make them as close to fun as one could make such things. And then I would return to my teachers, who tuned the jets, and my backyard, which was the runway, and my books, which were the wings. And I called out to Lucky Lindy. And we flew.

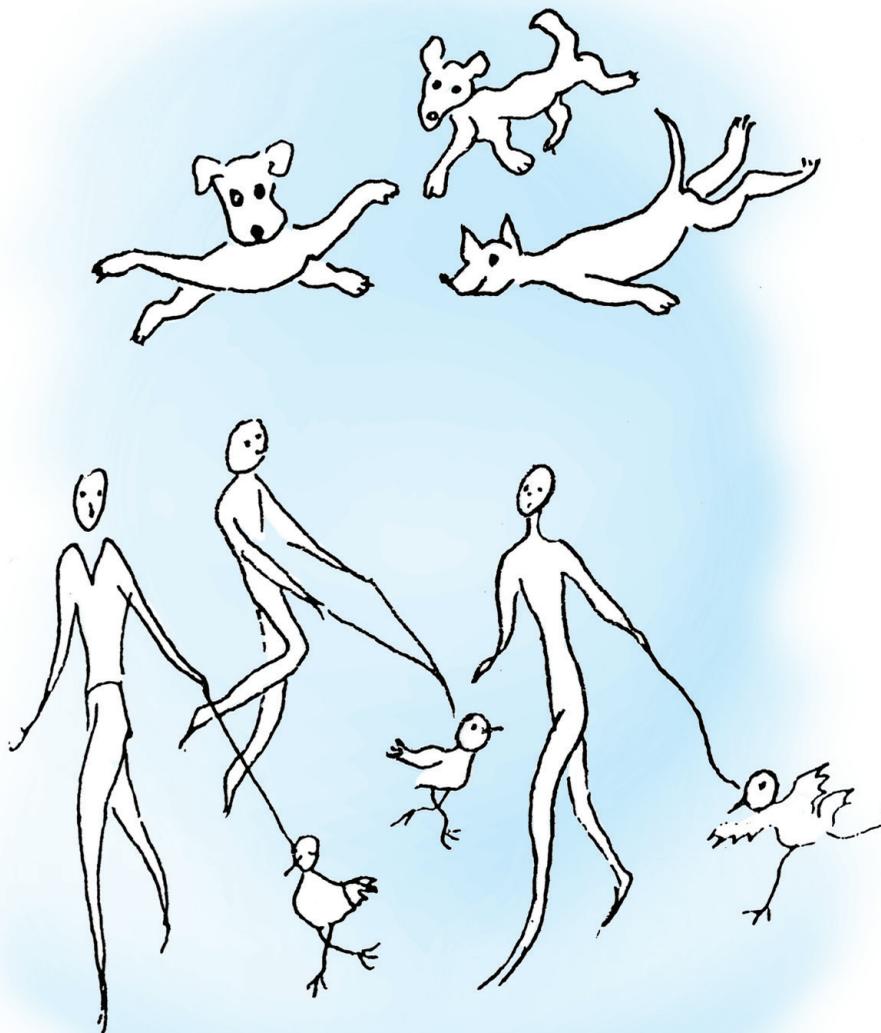


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