

1-1-1989

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David Weaver

Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation

Weaver, David (1989) "Things on Rocks," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol5/iss1/9>

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Things on Rocks

DAVID WEAVER

The Kenyan had come to study particle physics at a large southeastern university. He had already mastered the concise, invariable dialects of math and science, but conversational English befuddled him. It darted and looped like a housefly, without pattern, and left an uncomfortable buzzing in his ears. Some rules could be broken, some could not. Some rules could be broken by certain people, not by others. He complained at length about it to the ceiling of his rented room.

His conversational English course was no help. The textbooks had chapters entitled “On a Picnic,” “In Court,” and “At the Grocery Store,” with vocabulary lists and skits appropriate to each situation. “Good morning! How do you do?” these dialogues often began. “Pleased to meet you!” The Kenyan knew no one who talked that way.

Still, these carefully scripted scenes provided comfort when he read his lines aloud in class. The language in them was rock solid, permanent, and the Kenyan found himself briefly transported to places where the language made sense, where it didn’t clatter together in unrelated figures of speech as it did outside the classroom.

“But Your Honor, I am innocent,” the Kenyan would boom, as though the script of “In Court” were imprinted on his soul. “My speedometer was broken,” he pled, his voice sharp with emotion, his pronunciation perfect. “All I had to drink was some coconut punch. It was South Pacific Day at the club.”

But then his gaze would drop to the surface of his desk, on which students in other classes had inscribed, “No Can Do,” “Blow It Out, Sumbitch,” “’Twas Ever Thus,” and a familiar, icy fear would seize him. Class dismissed, he would walk into the hallway where housefly snatches of conversation droned incomprehensibly.

As a child, the Kenyan had sat rapt in the one peeling theater in his town, where traditional storytellers and maimed, outcast tribesmen wandered in to perform. From his dark seat the Kenyan watched, invigorated by their cool patter and warehouse wit. He worked to make his own delivery as effortless and captivating as theirs.

But in English his speech was oafish and flustered. His mind often went blank in the middle of some thoughtful or humorous remark he wished to make, leaving him to feel like an invisible, stammering ghost. He studied the comedians on the David Letterman Show, viewed them nightly on the portable black and white television behind which his physics coursework piled. But the comedians talked too fast, and with constructions and references he couldn’t understand.

By the end of spring term, he had failed all his courses except conversational English. The day he got his English final back, he sat in front of his television, the exam paper rolled up in one hand, his chin in the other. On the screen, three shrill children sang, clutching clear packs of sausage.

One of the exam questions had come from the chapter, "On a Picnic." "What sort of insects might one find on a picnic?" was the question, and the Kenyan had written, "Insects who fly and suck blood." Beside his answer, the instructor had written, "You have a delightful sense of humor."

It was then that the Kenyan decided to quit school. His scholarship had been a generous cash advance, and he had enough left to sustain himself for another two months. At that moment, during the blaring TV commercial, he made up his mind to immerse himself in the day-to-day language of the native speakers, to move as fluidly through it as they did. It was raining outside, a warm summer shower. The Kenyan put his raincoat on and walked out.

He walked the streets, watching the reflections of brake lights in the glimmering asphalt, and aimlessly popped puddles with his loafers. At a tavern he stood in front of the picture window, watching water stripe the glass; then he peered in at the afternoon drinkers, seated in beery comfort. The rain clicked on his plastic coat and blurred his glasses. He walked inside. In an alcove by the front window stood two tables, and he seated himself at the empty one. Beside him sat four friends, three men and a woman, who floridly toasted each other's defects and failures. When a waitress asked if he wanted a beer, the Kenyan declined. He wanted only to watch the rain fall and eavesdrop on the playful sniping at the next table. The four had numerous inadequacies to honor; the toasting went on for almost half an hour. By the time they invited the Kenyan to join them, he had become familiar with their weaknesses, as well as their names.

Two were brothers, Caleb and Bill Canton. Caleb had recently been discharged from the marines. He still wore his hair in a crewcut and had a wide red nose and pinched eyes. Like the others, he was in his mid-twenties. He spoke slowly and deliberately so that the Kenyan understood almost everything he said. Most of the time, though, he didn't talk at all, but laughed, hard and loud. Bill was Caleb's older brother. He was smaller than Caleb, with thinning hair and a mustache. Like the Kenyan, he wore glasses.

Beside Bill sat Kate. She was tall and had eyes so wide and round that the white was visible all around the iris. Where the Kenyan had grown up, the prevailing superstition was that such women were dangerous. But he had always been attracted to

them. The fourth of their party, Archie, sat swallowed by an oversized raincoat. He was a drooping, disorderly man who kept a cigarette lit at all times. The rainy-day humidity kept his acrid smoke pressed close to him. "So what's your sad story, little buddy?" he asked the Kenyan.

The Kenyan ransacked his memory for something engaging to say, an easy, informal account of himself. "Just moving along," he said and laughed, then shrugged for emphasis, laughed again, and silently damned himself.

"From where to where?" asked Kate.

"I withdrew from the university, only today," the Kenyan said.

"Where're you from?" asked Bill Canton.

"Africa, dumbass," said Archie.

"Certainly I'm not from Scandanavia," the Kenyan said. Caleb Canton's laughter joined his own.

"Bill's the only one of us who ever graduated," said Kate. She pronounced her consonants lazily, her voice slightly nasal. Her lips were soft and pretty. "Archie and Caleb have been in school, on and off, for what, eleven years between them. Me, I couldn't hack it."

"I'm sorry," the Kenyan said, shaking his head sympathetically.

"Nothing to be sorry about," said Archie. "We make enough money to keep us in acid and beer. We're lagabouts. Do you know what lagabouts are?"

"Oh, Jesus," said Bill Canton.

"No," the Kenyan said, frowning.

"We don't give a shit about anything," said Archie. He rose from his chair and leaned over to the Kenyan, balance loosened by his beers. "We go through the week working dick jobs, and then on weekends we go out and get screaming berserk on chemicals and alcohol, and we dig up a bunch of buttons and bullets and Civil War bullshit with Bill's metal detector. Then we make a big fucking deal about selling them to collectors or giving them away to the university or the museums, and then we go home and watch the all-night Hammer shock shows on TV."

The Kenyan blinked, rapidly.

"Would someone please pull its plug?" Kate asked, pointing to Archie.

He sat down. "It's just a thing we like to do, because we're lagabouts." He sniffed smugly and brought a can of beer to his lips. The hole in the can was turned away from his mouth, and a stream of beer disappeared into the folds of his overcoat. The Kenyan laughed. They all did.

"My metal detector's on the fritz," said Bill, "so we're just going to hunt for inscriptions today."

"On the fritz," the Kenyan echoed, smiling.

The banter resumed, with its percussive laughter, and the Kenyan found that he liked his hosts. He felt a kinship with them. They seemed peculiar, atypical. With other native speakers he sensed a friendly condescension, as though they were fulfilling an intermittent requirement to strengthen international brotherhood. With these four, he felt warmth.

For a while he sat and listened, while the conversation took varying orbits around the table. Finally he was encouraged enough to point out Bill's sweatshirt, with its team insignia.

"The Charlotte Hornets," the Kenyan said.

"You like the Hornets?" asked Bill.

"When I first came here, I couldn't speak English too well," the Kenyan said, trying not to betray that he had rehearsed each word of this in his mind. "But I was a Hornets fan. And do you know why?"

"Why is that?"

"Because I was ignorant!" The Kenyan said, triumphantly. Their laughter came, first from Caleb and then from the others. For an instant the laughter of four seemed like that of a hundred.

Bill finished the rest of his beer and smacked the mug onto the table. "You know why you quit school? You know what it takes to succeed? A cavalier attitude! You have to cultivate a cavalier attitude. Stick with us. We'll teach you all about it."

They invited the Kenyan to join them in their search for inscriptions that had been carved into stone by Union soldiers. Bill Canton had found a letter in the manuscripts collection at the library, indicating the approximate site of an encampment of troops bound for Atlanta. "Soldiers get bored, and they carve their names on rocks and trees," Bill said.

"And we get bored and look for them," said Archie.

"Bill is the only one who knows anything about this stuff," Kate said as the five of them left the tavern. "It gives the rest of us an excuse to hike around in the fields and get some exercise."

"I'll exercise my new cavalier attitude," the Kenyan said to Caleb, whose response, again, was laughter, full and pure.

The rain had begun to thin. They stopped at a liquor store and bought a fifth and

a pint of bourbon. At a convenience store they bought a case of beer, put it in two coolers, and packed the coolers with ice. A little girl waved at the Kenyan from a parked car. Delighted, the Kenyan waved back.

They jammed into the cab of Bill's pickup, with Kate seated in the Kenyan's lap. He was thrilled at having no place to put his hands, at having to let them fall shyly on Kate's thighs, his forearms wedged by the others against her midriff. Beside him, nipping surreptitiously from the pint, Archie asked, "Do you eat pussy, Kenyan?"

The Kenyan was at a loss. "I eat hamburgers, hot dogs..."

"I'm talking about furburger," said Archie.

"Oh, you're pathetic, Archie," said Kate. She swatted at him, her weight shifting in the Kenyan's lap.

The soldiers had camped near a creek that ribboned along the bottom of a hill, at the top of which sat a brick church. Bill parked the truck behind the church, where its gravel driveway ended. The rain was gone. The sun shone white and clean. The grass on the church lawn was verdant.

The Kenyan watched as Bill and Caleb wrestled in mock dispute over the disembodied head of a toy rabbit, which Caleb had found on the ground by the truck. "I kick you ass, mofo," said Bill, pinned beneath his laughing brother's knees.

The Kenyan did not need to know the precise meaning of their words. He understood the meaning of their tones, their instinctive playfulness. He felt suddenly in place among them. As they packed Archie's trenchcoat with cans of beer, he felt the alcohol intensify the sunshine and the color of the church lawn, that of bright limes. He opened another beer. On impulse, he frisked the top of Caleb's bristly haircut and said, "Punk rock!" They all laughed.

A track of large stones and outcroppings enabled them to walk through the creekbed without getting wet. Wisteria and honeysuckle sweetened the air. Enmeshed with the underbrush, the fragrant vines walled the creekbanks, reaching the canopy of overhanging trees and forming a corridor through which they walked. Spots of sunlight speckled the water and dazzled them.

"Something should be along in here," Bill said as they neared a series of white stone ledges. The group casually inspected them. Caleb slapped at his neck and murmured, "Mosquitoes."

"Beware," the Kenyan said, "of insects who fly and suck blood." A tap in his head was coming unblocked. Ideas splashed and foamed in him like the beer he drank.

"There's no space between ourselves and those soldiers," he was saying as they moved

up the creek. "Only time. And time seems so...insignificant. It's as if we're the soldiers, now."

"Give the drunken African another beer," said Archie. He handed a dewy can to Caleb. Caleb handed it to the Kenyan, who consumed it eagerly.

They progressed upstream, across the fine, weblike shadows of the pine and water oak that lined the banks. "I found one," Kate shouted.

They hurried to where she stood on a large rock protruding from the bank. Inscribed in its surface were the words,

Pvt McNamara whipped Pvt Thompson at aces on this rock
— Apr 9, 1863

They studied the inscription in silence. The characters were shaded with a thin tint of algae and moss, and so smoothly sewn into the rock that they might well have been weathered into it by the sun and the stream.

"Aces was a card game some of them played," said Bill. "Kind of like Acey-Deucey."

"Must have been a big deal to beat Thompson," said Archie, "cause McNamara went to a lot of trouble to carve this."

Bill Canton took out a pocket camera and snapped two pictures of the rock, then climbed to the top of the bank to get his bearings and to locate the site in relation to the church.

"How long would it have taken to carve that?" asked Kate. "I mean, it wouldn't be that big a deal if it wasn't too much trouble to carve it out."

"Depends on what he used," Caleb said.

"Perhaps he was preoccupied," the Kenyan said. "Perhaps he was a big, blithering moron."

He laughed alone. The others had not heard. Their eyes remained fixed on the rock. At the top of the bank, Bill's camera clicked tersely.

"Probably frustrated," Archie said. "Lost too many games to Thompson."

"Maybe Thompson irritated him. Gloated," said Caleb.

"Or it was just that he was fed up from being in the army," said Kate.

"This division hadn't seen action up to this point," said Bill, descending the bank. "The area had been pretty much cleared by the time they got here. I bet McNamara was bored to death."

The tone of the four had completely changed. They were almost grim now, arguing

over details that the Kenyan was unable to understand. He knew nothing about what a Union soldier would or would not do. He had only the vaguest idea of what a Union soldier was.

“Could I have another beer?” he asked.

The group moved on. The conversation was sporadic, limited to the hunt. The Kenyan’s lighthearted patter was ignored; each of the group became absorbed in his own search.

The Kenyan had lost touch with the group. He urged himself to find an inscription, to belong again with them. He pressed ahead of the others. Archie had absently given him another beer. He felt fuzzy, and twice almost fell into the water. He found himself with the fifth of bourbon, bubbling it down. Foliage blurred.

He came to a large peninsula of rock that blocked almost half the waterway. He stared emptily at its surface for what seemed a long time. A single voice, then a chorus, sang loudly in his head. He couldn’t recognize the language. Before him, the rock seemed impossibly bright.

He sensed peripheries, the creek underneath the thick ceiling of branches, the gradual wriggling of the honeysuckle vines between water oaks. He was in a cavernous green chamber, through which shafts of brilliant sunlight shot. His companions had vanished.

He next became aware of a scattering of lines across the rock. As the singing in his head grew intolerably loud, he realized the lines had formation, and he jumped over to the rock and sprawled on it. He rolled over on his back and looked at the treetops and the cool glint of sky between them.

“Hey hey, it’s here!” he called.

Phantoms played in his eyes. As he continued to stare upward, the patches of sky seemed to pulse, and bright green lines spread across them, forming unknown alphabets. A swarm of white dots perforated everything in sight. They activated the daylight with a profound, molecular excitation. Heat crawled along the Kenyan’s back.

The others were splashing over toward him. “Well?” said Bill, his gaze sweeping the rock.

The Kenyan felt obligated to introduce his find, to unveil it with ceremony. He wanted to tell them that something fantastic had happened, incomprehensible but real. He remained supine over the notation, coyly obscuring it from the rest of them. The singing, the swarm of specks, the heat, all ebbed away.

“Come on, get off the rock,” Archie said.

The Kenyan began his preface, but the only words that came to him were in his native language. A breeze stirred the leaves overhead, and with them he heard his own words colliding, brittle and meaningless. He stammered, eyes tightly shut. He groped for the words that would get him off the rock.

“Is he all right?” asked Kate.

“Get off that fuckin’ rock, Kenyan,” growled Caleb Canton.

He stepped across the water to grab the Kenyan. Held by Caleb’s massive hands and jerked aside, the Kenyan felt something unlock. He yelled and rolled over into the water. Trembling, he got to his feet and turned to the rock. He and the others read the inscription there.

Kick he!

— Ethan Bell

“Kick he?” asked Bill Canton after a moment.

“That’s what it says,” said Archie.

“Kick he!” repeated Kate.

Again they were quiet. They stared at the rock with expressions approaching horror.

“What kind of moron would write something like that?” said Archie.

Softly splashing water, the Kenyan stepped from where he stood in the creek to the surface of the rock. He stood beside the others at the edge of the writing, observing it. After a moment, he said, “Maybe he had become provoked at someone, or was frustrated.” His head was clearing enough for him to know how very drunk he was.

“But why he?” said Caleb, staring down at the rock. “Not him? Why not, kick him?”

“Perhaps he spoke English informally,” said the Kenyan.

“Number one, the man who carved this was Ethan Bell,” said Bill, disbelieving eyes fixed on the inscription. “He was a full colonel. He was the one who wrote the letters I read in the library. The ones that got us here. I read six of those letters, and they’re all written in perfect English.”

“And number two,” Kate said, “nobody, I mean nobody would ever in a million years say something like kick he. It’s not informal English — It’s impossible English.”

Archie turned to the Kenyan. His eyes were humorless and squinted. “Did you write this?” he asked softly.

“Oh, come on,” said Bill.

“He got here maybe a minute before we did,” said Caleb.

"We'd have seen him," said Kate.

"Look at those letters, said Archie. "Look at the edges. Clean. And there's no moss anywhere on this rock. This rock's white as bleach. This is a new rock."

"Bull," said Bill. "There's no such thing as a new rock. Besides, he didn't know who Ethan Bell was."

"He sure laid on the rock a long time..." Archie trailed off.

The Kenyan, in a brief minute, was an outsider again, the nameless ghost discussed in the third person, a non-entity who had become noticed only in the arousing of suspicion. He stepped from the rock onto the bank and sat down near a tangle of briars into which he stared, chin in hand. The alcohol roiled in his stomach. The briars were needle-sharp. He listened to the others, down in the creek. Their speculations were growing more sour.

"Maybe he stopped short," Kate was saying. "It was going to be someone's name, like Herbert, or —"

"But that's an exclamation point," said Bill. "If he took the trouble to carve that, he'd carve the whole name."

"Initials?" said Caleb.

"He capitalized Kick, why not H. E.?" said Archie. "Where are the periods?"

"Maybe he got depressed," said Bill. "Bored. Forgot what he was carving."

"You don't spend fifteen minutes chiselling out a typo," said Kate.

"Well what the fuck does it mean?" Archie said, as an empty liquor bottle fell from the lip of his trenchcoat pocket onto the rock and shattered. "Damn!" he hissed.

Unnoticed, the Kenyan had crawled up the embankment and was making his way back to the truck. Day lillies bloomed at the back of the church, their open, orange throats reminding the Kenyan of the choir he had heard when he found the rock. As though it might shut them up, he flung gravel. It fanned across the back wall and popped against the bricks. A man appeared at the corner of the building and yelled something. The Kenyan ran. He veered down toward the creek again, hurdling drainage feeds and underbrush.

Bill's keys still hung in the ignition of the pick-up. The Kenyan opened the door on the driver's side and got in. He sat for a minute or two, thinking of nothing at all. He gently tapped the keys. They swung, slightly, from the key-ring.

He opened the glove compartment and took out the pint of bourbon. He took a long pull. The alcohol felt good. It took him back to the old theater in his town, where he once saw a preening Masai, an ancient drunk exiled from his tribe, telling anec-

dotes about his youth to an indifferent audience. The old man wore the full attire of a warrior and had a catheter bag full of urine strapped to his leg. Periodically, he detached the bag and waved it, menacingly, at some of the noisier patrons. Each time he brandished the bag, the catheter hung from beneath his robe, swaying slightly — like the keys the Kenyan now tapped — and dripping down to a patch of gloss on the stage floor.

The Kenyan took another drink, then fought for a moment to focus his eyes. He started his pick-up and drove it out onto the highway. The road ahead was split and skewed. The stickshift grew stubborn. To each pedestrian he saw, he honked the horn, and, leaning out the window, yelled, “Kick he!” then gunned the truck ahead. He hoped to get to his room, get packed, and be on his way to the airport before the others found the truck was missing. He hoped to make it home alive. Cars screamed past him.