

SHADOWSHINE
AN ANIMAL ADVENTURE

Johnny Armstrong



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To my wife, Karen, who always believed in this story.

*To my children, Cody and Abby,
of whom I could not be more proud.*

To my grandchildren, Eva, Tullie, and Bain.

*To the memory of my beloved Doberman,
Stella Louise, "the Pup."*

*And finally, to the forest-folk,
in whose midst and boundless inspiration I dwell.*

What we are familiar with we cease to see.

—Anaïs Nin

Introduction

WHAT IS SHADOWSHINE?

The expression cannot be found in any standard dictionary in English. Even so, it remains plausible to me that the little word could have been around for a long while. But, of course, nobody knows exactly how long, and nobody can say exactly who it was that first coined the term. Yet, to this explorer of deep-woods supposition, it seems reasonable that the inventor might have been some attentive character among a diverse clan known as the forest-folk, those many and varied individuals who thrived in a great living cathedral—a forest whose canopy was so tall that in some places it allowed only occasional sunbeams to reach the ground and the rolling waters of its winding, clear streams.

Those scaly and feathered and furry citizens, I believe, watched that shadowshine as it skipped across the smooth, gray skin of the butt of an ancient beech tree, and they watched it as it set off the emerald sparkle of the wet sphagnum growing on the rocky wall of a creek bank. Wherever shadowshine happened to make its appearance, the ever-vigilant forest-folk would not likely have missed the show. Who else but the forest-folk could have invented the term?

shad • ow • shine \shad' ō shīn\ *n.* [For. Folk] (Pleistocene-Holocene epoch transition) illumination, usu. in the form of moving spots in a shaded background, created by the reflection of light from ripples on the surface of water

So. Almost all of us have seen shadowshine—those ripples of light on a shady creek bank. All it takes is a walk along a stream in a forest on a sunny day. It's a commonplace phenomenon of nature.

Just as the forest-folk have, we humans have been observing shadowshine throughout the millions of years of our evolution. But why didn't we humans give it a name, like the forest-folk did? Why doesn't it rank as a noun in that massive taxonomy of the English language? If not *shadowshine*, then why not some other collection of letters of the alphabet? Something short and clever. Being that we are all so familiar with it.



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UP IN THE still, dark chill of the leafless canopy were voices of comrades in quiet chatter. Close comrades. So close, in fact, they were touching each other. Sena, a handsome, well-groomed, and rather stately bobcat, was sitting on Zak's tail. Zak was a forty-eight-year-old, twenty-nine-pound possum, considered middle-aged and slightly above the mean in weight for the species, a fairly typical specimen by most accounts. But it was a time long, long ago—a time when possums were larger, lived longer (*much* longer), had fewer teeth and more brains, liked to climb high to the top of a tall tree, could hang by their tails for extended periods, and could think and travel with greater swiftness than the possums of today.

Zak's long tail was coiled around a limb of a venerable old oak, permitting the rest of his plump fusiform being to hang in midair with a little pink piggish nose pointing straight at the ground seventy feet below. Sena was sitting erect on the limb, with his large furry feet astride the reptilian possum tail. Whenever Zak was hanging by his tail at such height, he preferred Sena to be touching it in some fashion, for he had never completely trusted it to not slip when he dozed off. The pair provided an odd silhouette in the cold moonshine about to be dissolved at the trailing edge of a late-winter night.

"Sena, do you remember what day this is? A splendid day it is for the ringtails, Nadine and Dunklin. And a splendid day, too, for a lovely little mouse couple—at least, according to the Canopy Connection."

"Zak, let's move. I want to be out of here before the banging starts."

“Of course you are talking about the ivory-billed woodpeckers, noble and novel creatures, freshly evolved, I hear. And I expect that fact puts them a notch or two up the evolutionary scale from the rest of us, including bobcats.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong, Zak. That’s bull, as you so often like to say.”

Mammalogical esoterica as it may seem, for possums, bull is always food for thought. It has a special meaning for them.

So Zak thought it over, and then he spoke. “Perhaps you are right, dear Sena. A freshly evolved species such as they represent might not yet have passed the survival-of-the-fittest test. Perhaps the clan is yet to prove itself. Bull, perhaps. And what an obnoxious amount of damage they do to the ashes and elms and pines. Bull indeed!”

“Zak, possums and bobcats are on different branches of the evolutionary tree from woodpeckers, which are no more ‘freshly evolved’ than we are. It’s not a scale. It’s a tree with lots of limbs and twigs on which the symphony of evolution plays its many lovely tunes. And while we are on the subject of trees, it’s the dead ones that the ivory bills pick on, so they are not doing any damage at all to the ashes and elms and pines.”

“Why not?” asked Zak.

“I just told you!”

“Incomprehensible,” mumbled Zak.

If the two friends disagreed, it was usually Zak who eventually gave in, as his train of thought invariably came around to the “incomprehensible” stage, which, of course, especially if compared to bobcats, might have been due to certain possum cranial restrictions. Whether or not those restrictions were real, they certainly were of no import, since the two friends knew that in the grand scheme they were both survivors and therefore equal, more or less.

The pair climbed down from the oak and struck out along the forest floor, where they trotted side by side toward the dim easterly glow of dawn, and as they trotted, there came from above a clamorous banging and cracking and prying commotion and a shower of bits of wood and bark from high up the trunk of a dead but ancient tree. It

was here that a pair of ivory bills had embarked on their morning beetle foraging. And as three fox squirrels were excitedly scurrying after one another along the living branches of the tall canopy, there also rained a mist of tiny flower parts from the earliest blossoms of impatient maples and elms. The canopy's day shift was now fully activated.

As the day progressed, Sena and Zak's long trot carried them through woodlands of oaks, gums, maples and pines and across deep ravines within which resided small running streams they had to jump. It carried them over gentle hills of mixed oak and pine and hickory and down into flat hardwood bottoms with larger streams they had to swim. It carried them through small prairies created many years before by both soil character and wildfires, and finally, it carried them on into the early evening where at last they were about to reach their destination, the edge of a prairie of more significant size than any Zak and Sena had seen during their long trek. The prairie lay to the west of a great lake whose waters were born of a river that flowed from the far north. So here was a land, a lovely land, of forest and prairie and lake and river.

As Zak and Sena soon found themselves approaching the interface between the forest and prairie, their anticipation began to rise, for here would be the designated site of a gathering of forest-folk for a wedding. Zak had to be present at all forest-folk weddings and preside over vows exchanged between groom and bride. This was because Zak, as a tiny naked baby possum, had fallen out of his upside-down sleeping mother's pouch late one night to become a helpless orphan. It was because he had not taken a firm tail-hold of the pouch's inner side wall as baby possums of that time normally did, and he just slipped free like a fat little glob of spit to land in a pile of leaves some fifty-five feet below. Finally, it was because he had been rescued and adopted by a family of gray squirrels who, like all their rodent cousins, spoke an archaic language that was strange to the rest of the forest-folk—a politely garbled and ever-so-slightly pig latin-like tongue.

It was not because Zak was a preacher or justice of the peace; it was because he was bilingual that he was called upon to attend to all forest-folk weddings. His bilinguistic ability was necessary because

whoever of the forest-folk were to be married, whether it be coyote couple or cougar couple or raccoon couple and so on, there was always a romantically inclined pair of rodents who became so enraptured by the coming event that they demanded to be included, thus creating a double wedding ceremony. And so it was that there was never a single, single wedding among the forest-folk. It was always at least double.

Of course, Zak's position attracted a certain prestige for himself, which built up a certain pride that had helped him to keep up the long trot over the course of the day with his bobtailed confidant, Sena, whom he always brought along as his guest on such occasions. Zak's pride in himself had impelled him to take his position so seriously that he had reasoned he needed a title, so he had appointed himself as Poet; and further discovering a need to justify the title of Poet, he had, some time ago, thought up a little rhyme that he recited at every single forest-folk double wedding.

"Dear sir, what on earth are you doing? This is highly irregular! Incomprehensible!" said Zak, as his bobcat companion clamped spike-pointed canines onto his tail and dragged him, writhing and hissing, into the bushes and away from the well-worn path that the two had recently entered.

"Saving your life, Zak," said Sena through his teeth, but his words were drowned by a thunderous noise from the path now filled with great russet legs and trunks and ivory tusks of a moving herd of southern red mastodons. When the last of the great creatures trotted by, Zak and Sena reentered the dusty path that would lead them to the site of the wedding.

"My dear Sena, that was just a pinch too close!" said Zak. "My concentration upon the important ceremonial duties as Poet precludes any onus on my part to protect us from harm; therefore, I suggest you keep a more watchful eye and listening ear and prune your reaction time a bit. And should you be interested, which surely you should, I suppose I could impart a few of my own observations to serve as guidance toward that end, else we might be forever sealed inside the clays of Rue Mastodonia. Now follow me, sir."

“Spare me,” Sena said to himself as the pair approached the site of the gathering, where the red mastodons were already waiting for them.

“Felicitations, friends,” said Big Tal, a very large young mastodon bull. “But my sir!” Tal said, looking down at Zak with a serious expression. “We almost ran down a portly possum and a cat back up the trail. Poet, I hope that wasn’t you and Sena.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Sena cut in, a bit embarrassed by the affair in the path and, feline-like, not wishing to divulge any vulnerability of cat-possum travel combinations. Of course, Zak did not bother to counter, as he knew without a doubt that “portly possum” could not possibly describe him.

“Good,” Tal said. “I didn’t think you two would stumble into the path of moving mastodons. Well, Zak, Big Tal at your service.”

“At ease, dear boy. You may remain on standby for the moment,” said Zak.

Zak and Sena were able at last to relax and begin socializing with the immense congregation of creatures, all except for the rodents, politely conversing among themselves in the common language of the forest-folk. The various rodent species, of course, were just as politely jabbering in their own peculiar way.

“Zeh-Zeh-ick, Ak! Gooyon dooka azeemar?” shouted Sprunkit, who was perched on a pine root with his four wives and seventeen chipmunk children.

“Hello, Zak,” said Opal, a sleek young she-bobcat sitting among a small group of feline females in the shadows of the forest’s edge, who at once leaned to her long-tailed, spotted jaguar companion. “It seems the single life is agreeable with Sena. He is looking fit, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps, but why must he run around with an uppity possum?” said the jaguar.

“Madam, he is our poet,” said Opal.

“Ha, ZaaaaAAK!”

“Who was that?” said the startled jag, just as the previous owner of the salutation, a bobwhite quail, strutted out from between her stout legs.

And so it went: “Hello, Zak!” “Greetings, Zak,” and on and on, from cats, otters, red wolves, foxes, nuthatches, thrushes, moles, and many more feathered and furry folk. Not all the forest clans were represented, however, for the reptiles and amphibians were still asleep, only to wake up a little later in the year, indignant at the news that a wedding had been held in their absence, and without the very necessary ingredient of a tree frog symphony.

“All right, Poet,” said Old Ok, a respected old gray-faced black bear who served as a kind of aide-de-camp for Zak at these proceedings. “The ringtails are ready to begin, and, oh yes, there is also a pair of fulvous harvest mice who seem to wish to make it a double.”

“Very well,” said Zak, with all the certitude of a preeminent commander in chief. “We shall begin. Up, Tal!”

At the command, the mastodon lowered his head, and Zak climbed onto one of his great tusks, and as he was taken aloft, he quickly assumed the upside-down hanging-possum position. Zak considered this position essential because, with his blood pooled in his pointed head, he figured that his ability to remember his important ceremonial lines would become enhanced.

Indeed, it was true that he needed all the help he could get, as—with his nose pointing to the ground—the forest-folk, the wedding, the world, and the soon-to-be-wed couples were likewise upside-down, which had a distinctly bewildering effect. The handsome ringtail couple with bespectacled eyes and upright, black-and-white-banded bushy tails and the prim pair of fulvous harvest mice with their upright little naked whip tails were also bewildered, staring into the eyes of the upside-down poet swinging by his tail from a mastodon’s tusk.

After Zak got his bearings, he hissed at the crowd for silence, and then he spoke. “My dear ones of our forest, herewith are we gathered in our punctilious gaiety for the hallowed funicular conjunction of our esteemed ringtail cousins, Nadine and Dunklin, and our most faithful fulvous harvest mouse kin, Sika and Shypop. And so I ask unto you, Nadine and Dunklin and Sika and Shypop, do you four mates take your respective mates to be your respective soul

mates? Do not answer that. And do you promise to love, honor, and redundantly cherish and obey her or him, whichever the case may be—respectively, of course—from this day forward and thence on into the future, too?”

At the cue of an affirmative nod from the poet, in unison, Nadine and Dunklin said, “I do,” and Sika and Shypop said, “Dyoo.”

“Now you shall point your noses to the sky and listen,” said Zak. And after a short pause:

“O where art thou Didelphis hagge
Whose rotund belly boasteth bagge
Wherein a suckling son once clung
Thou spreadeth milk upon his tongue
And foible-tailed the naked rat
Grew to the bignesse of a cat
With sable ear and snout of swine
O Mother dear marsupid fine
Now, the brides and grooms may kiss their grooms and brides!”

At that moment, there was a low flyover of twenty-nine screaming red-tailed hawks. Everyone looked up in awe at the big birds with rusty tails spread like fans, and as their cries faded in the distance, there came from the canopy above, the eerie, mournful music of a hundred squalling gray squirrels who served as background for a melodious winter chorus of wrens, siskins, grosbeaks, kinglets, cardinals, and purple and golden finches, not merely making their usual winter season chirps but blaring forth with their full mating songs that they, as individuals, would sing on their breeding grounds later in the year.

“It’s so beautiful it makes me glad to be alive just so I can be around to hear it,” said Opal.

“So what about this poem, Opal?” inquired the jaguar. “Is it a statement or a question? And what does it mean? And what does it have to do with a wedding?”

“Zak says that poetry isn’t really good if it makes sense to everyone and that only those forest-folk with open hearts and minds can decipher its internal rhythm.”

“What do you mean ‘internal rhythm’?”

“How should I know?” said the she-bobcat. “But that’s what Zak says.”

“I see,” mumbled the dubious jag.

Sena, with a whiff of pride, watched in admiration as his possum companion’s thick, gray winter coat began to glow orange in the light of the setting sun. If the marriage couples were the stars in the play, then Zak was certainly the star supporting actor.