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E

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In 1911, Art Smith, The Bird Boy of Fort Wayne, created, with his new skywriting apparatus, this letter E over Driving Park (later to be renamed Memorial Park, the site of Smith's own memorial after his fatal crash in 1926) during a celebratory exhibition of his flying skills, concluding his first successful tour of the Midwest. Only days before, in Beresford, South Dakota, his prowess in his homebuilt craft had garnered him \$750, enough money for Smith to take a Pullman sleeper home to Fort Wayne. There was more than enough left over to schedule an appointment with the world-famous oculist in Chicago. Art Smith's father, James, had been, for years, going blind, and Art had promised him a visit to the highly regarded specialist in hopes of slowing, if not reversing, his father's degenerating vision the moment after his flying provided sufficient funds to do so. And now that time had come. But first, Art Smith led his father out into the meadow of Driving Park and invited him to lie down and gaze with clouded eyes upon the cloudless skies over Fort Wayne. The crowd that had gathered to witness the full program of aerial acrobatics Smith demonstrated now also gazed aloft as the bold letter took shape overhead. Mr. Smith, supine, when asked by a reporter from the *Journal Gazette* if he could read the writing in the sky that his son in his distant flying machine was still laboring to complete, replied, "No. No. It is all blank, empty, a sheet of white paper."



The crowd gathered that day on the east side of Fort Wayne easily saw the panoramic E, recognized instantly the initial letter of visual acuity floating above them in the way it was also suspended, gigantic, over the tapering column of other declining letters (C, D, F, L, N, O, P, T, Z) found upon the eye charts in the offices of their own, less famous, oculists of the city. The Dutch ophthalmologist Hermann Snellen devised his optotypes in 1862, and eye-care professionals stateside had long utilized his charts. Art Smith, The Bird Boy, continued his patient calligraphy. His father, spread-eagled on the grassy floor of the park, fixed his apparently unfixable eyes upon the blank slate of sky over his head. His son would say later that he believed his father's condition was brought on by the sun's incessant glare, his father working out-of-doors as a carpenter's assistant, his vision screwed down to mark the fine guidelines of the sawing. Perhaps the oculist in Chicago would suggest some kind of exercises for the eye. Art Smith imagined performing complicated feats of aerial dexterity, inscribing cursive trails of smoke that his father would follow from below, strengthening the subtle optic muscles' ability to track, the lenses to focus and magnify, to shutter and flood the retinal nerve with informative light. The crowd gathered that day grew fatigued with the seeing, craning their necks to see through the tidal sheets of light. Now, in the corners of their eyes, shadows, perhaps afterimages of their staring, appeared. A flock of turkey buzzards, *Cathartes aura*, circled, circling above them, homing in on the invisible scent of something dying or dead nearby. The citizens of Fort Wayne, as they stared at the drifting black birds, floating punctuation to the now new second and even larger letter that eclipsed the disappearing original E, shielded their eyes against the sun.



The third letter appeared to stretch for miles in all directions, curving gently at its far reaches, the fluid vapor seemingly draining over the horizons. Art Smith's father remained stretched out upon the lawn of Driving Park continuing to report, "Nothing. Nothing. Nothing." And again, "Nothing." The crowd gathered there (the *Journal Gazette* had estimated several hundred) now joined the elder Smith on the ground, dropping down in groups of threes or fours, families, clubs, whole curious church congregations. They were weary from the sustained awkward wrenching of their necks from the hours of watching Art zoom back and forth over their heads, composing the expanding E's one after the other. The field was blanketed with bodies, arrayed like patches on a crazy quilt. Those sighted could see clearly, of course, the long seemingly endless strokes of the letter's various linear runs. It appeared almost like the sky above them was being plowed, turned over to reveal furrows of clouds. Or perhaps the sky itself seemed to be imprisoned, barred behind the paralleling matrix, a confinement of space captured in smaller squares of space. The sun set beyond the city to the west. And as their collective eyes followed the blooming line heading in that direction, caught there too in the joint peripheral vision of the masses, a clutch of subtle sun dogs flared up, north and south, lodged in the teary corners of thousands of eyes. The optic phenomenon parenthetically haloed the light with more light. These spectaculars were lost, of course, on the blind eyes of Art Smith's father, who, the next day, left with his son for the appointment in Chicago, there to meet with the world famous oculist. In a skyscraper office building within the Loop, the Smiths learned, sadly, there was nothing to be done. Later, the finality of the news sinking in, they, father and son, gazed out the window of their room at the Palmer House, out through the slim fissure between the crowded buildings to the sliver of severely clear sky apparent over Lake Michigan, and both imagined for a moment the brilliant future of Art's life in the opulent and unoccluded air.