Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!
—RUDYARD KIPLING, “A COUNTING-OUT SONG,”
IN LAND AND SEA TALES FOR SCOUTS AND GUIDES, 1923

The woman with cheerleading legs has been left for dead. She hot paces a roof, four days, three nights, her leaping fingers, helium arms rise & fall, pulling at the week-old baby in the bassinet, pointing to the eighty-two-year-old grandmother, fanning & raspy in the New Orleans Saints folding chair.

Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!

Three times a day the helicopter flies by in a low crawl. The grandmother insists on not being helpless, so she waves a white handkerchief that she puts on and takes off her head toward the cameraman and the pilot who remembers well the art of his mirrored-eyed posture in his low-flying helicopter: Bong Son, Dong Ha, Pleiku, Chu Lai. He makes a slow Vietcong dip & dive, a move known in Rescue as the Observation Pass.

The roof is surrounded by broken-levee water. The people are dark but not broken. Starving, abandoned, dehydrated, brown & cumulous, but not broken. The four-hundred-year-old anniversary of observation begins, again—

Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!
Catch a—
The woman with pom-pom legs waves her uneven homemade sign:

Pleas Help Pleas

and even if the e has been left off the *Pleas e*

do you know simply by looking at her that it has been left off because she can’t spell (and therefore is not worth saving) or was it because the water was rising so fast there wasn’t time?

*Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!*

*Catch a—a—*

The low-flying helicopter does not know the answer. It catches all of this on patriotic tape, but does not land, and does not drop dictionary, or ladder.

Regulations require an e be at the end of any *Pleas e* before any national response can be taken.

Therefore, it takes four days before the national council of observers will consider dropping one bottle of water, or one case of dehydrated baby formula, on the roof where the e has rolled off into the flood, (but obviously not splashed loud enough)
where four days later not the mother, not the baby girl, but the determined hanky waver, whom they were both named for, (and after) has now been covered up with a green plastic window awning, pushed over to the side right where the missing e was last seen.

*My mother said to pick The very best one!*

What else would you call it, Mr. Every-Child-Left-Behind.

Anyone you know ever left off or put on an e by mistake?

Potato  Po tato  e

In the future observation helicopters will leave the well-observed South and fly in Kanye-West-Was-Finally-Right formation. They will arrive over burning San Diego.

The fires there will be put out so well. The people there will wait in a civilized manner. And they will receive foie gras and free massage for all their trouble, while their houses don’t flood, but instead burn calmly to the ground.

The grandmothers were right about everything.
People who outlived bullwhips & Bull Connor, historically afraid of water and routinely fed to crocodiles, left in the sun on the sticky tar-heat of roofs to roast like pigs, surrounded by forty feet of churning water, in the summer of 2005, while the richest country in the world played the old observation game, studied the situation: wondered by committee what to do; counted, in private, by long historical division; speculated whether or not some people are surely born ready, accustomed to flood, famine, fear.

*My mother said to pick*
*The very best one*
*And you are not it!*

After all, it was only po’ New Orleans, old bastard city of funny spellers. Nonswimmers with squeeze-box accordion accents. Who would be left alive to care?