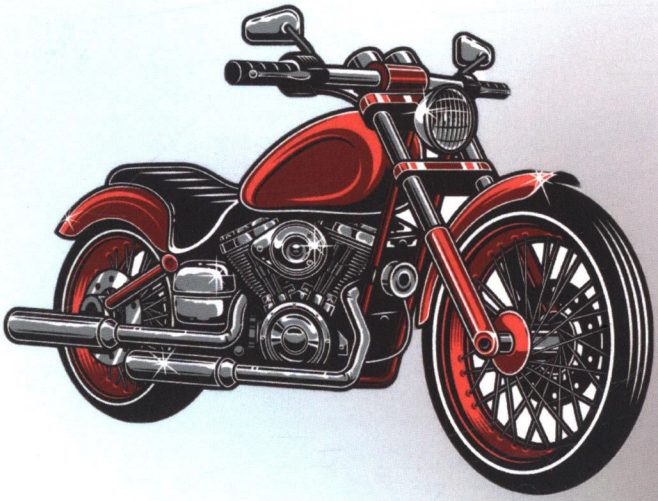
# THE RATLUE DIARIES

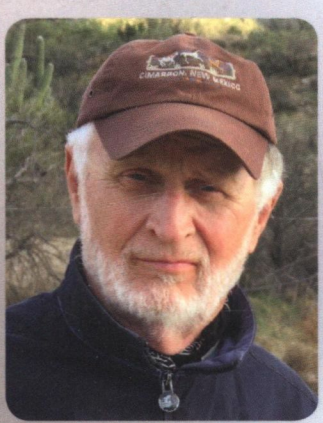
Two Poets & the Rocking K War
in Tucson, Arizona



Ken Lauter

THE RATLUE DIARIES is a fictionalized memoir about an environmental battle— a five-year struggle during the 1980s to defeat the urbanization of the Rincon Valley in Tucson, Arizona. The tale is told (in both poems and prose) by two poets, one of whom is the author's alter ego. The two characters become embroiled in the Rocking K War, so named after an old cattle ranch under threat of being transformed into two luxury hotels, golf courses, and 25,000 new houses.

In spite of vastly different social/educational backgrounds and personal histories, the two poets forge a strange and at times strained bond as they take on the real-estate cabal lusting to destroy an ecological treasure. They fight "in the trenches"— mobilizing resistance, attending public hearings, mounting a referendum, and enduring serious blowback from the millionaire land-shark behind the scheme.



KEN LAUTER received a BA in English from the University of Missouri at Kansas City, an MA in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan, and an ABD in 19th century British Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. He has published poems in a number of journals and several books, including: The Other Side, Before the Light, The Ghosts – Notes from a Field Study, Songs from Walnut Canyon, Grand Canyon Days, Searching for Mr. Stevens, The Structure of the Body, First Kingdoms – Poems from a Vanishing Landscape, Postcards from Paradise – A Tucson Spring, Vermeer in Words, New Mexico Notebook – Late Summer in the Mountains, and Time after Time – a Novel in Verse. He currently lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his wife, Judith.

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# ALSO BY KEN LAUTER

*Time After Time* - 2014

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*Late Summer in the Mountains* - 2014

*Postcards from Paradise – A Tucson Spring* - 2013

*Vermeer in Words* - 2013

*First Kingdoms –*
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*Grand Canyon Days* - 2011

*Songs from Walnut Canyon* - 2010

*The Ghosts – Notes from a Field Study* - 2009

*Before the Light* - 1987

*The Other Side* - 1973

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"Desperate Quest – A Poet Looks at Sustainability"
in *Toward a More Livable World: Social Dimensions of Sustainability*
Dr. Jerry Williams and Dr. William Forbes, eds. Stephen F.
Austin State University Press, 2012

*Knowing Their Names*
a one-act play for Steven Berkoff IanFisher.
com - 1999

"Laughter, Gender and Death in Berkoff 's *Coriolanus*"
IanFisher.com - 1999

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# THE RATLUE DIARIES

*Two Poets & the Rocking K War*
*in Tucson, Arizona*

## DEDICATION

*The Ratlue Diaries* is an account of events that occurred nearly 30 years ago in a long, grass-roots rebellion against the massive Rocking K Ranch rezoning, a scheme to urbanize the beautiful Rincon Valley 25 miles from downtown Tucson.

Many people were involved. Sharon Bronson and Pam Patton were among the earliest and fiercest. (Bronson went on to become a revered Pima County Supervisor and helped develop the award-winning Sonoran Desert Conservation plan.)

Others on the front lines included Ron Bernee, Micheheti Brown, Dave Divine, Tres English, Sandel English, Dick Edison, Mary Edison, Dave Elwood, Don Gabriel, Anne Graham, Lyn Harris, Mike Harris, Candy Hazen, Bryant Nodine, Beth Oder, Alice Ott, Dennis Ott, Susan Sangston, Mary Shanz, the late Genny Sonnet, Ben Watkins, and Jean Yoshino. To all of them, as well as those I may have forgotten, and the thousands who signed the petitions to put Rocking K on the ballot, I say: *salud!*

* * *

Although based on real events, this is a work of fiction: I play myself in this drama, while Ratlue is an alter ego who helped me re-examine this part of my life. As for the others, the names have been changed to protect the innocent, and the guilty know who they are.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

As always, I am deeply indebted to my wife, the poet and neuro-scientist Judith Lauter. Her creative editorial contributions to this project have improved it in every way.

# THE RATLUE DIARIES

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Ken Lauter

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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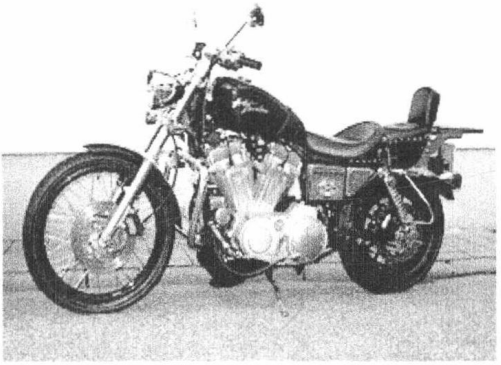

Ratlue's ride – a '71 Harley Davidson Sportster 880

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful un-educated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life...

Walt Whitman - Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

* * *

It's a strange world. Some people get rich and others eat shit and die. Who knows? If there is in fact, a heaven and a hell, all we know for sure is that hell will be a viciously overcrowded version of Phoenix.

Hunter S. Thompson
*Gonzo Papers, Vol. 2: Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the '80s*

(Entries written by hand in Ratlue's notebook)

# PRELUDE -
## *Bad News in Paradise*

On a late May Saturday morning, cool breezes ruffle the curtains of the bedroom window. Floating up from sleep, I hear a mourning dove, calling *coo-ooo, coo-ooo.* It's perched in the big palo verde at the front of the house, a male bird making courtship calls before launching himself into a short flight that ends in a sloping glide back to the tree, flaring his white-tipped tail feathers for any female nearby to notice and (he hopes) relish.

Then comes the soft chirring of a Gambel's quail, a female with several peeping chicks. The bird family is heading to the small cement pool beneath a tall, armless saguaro just outside our front door. They sip and flutter in the water for five minutes or so before zipping back to the safety of mesquite and prickly pear.

One year earlier, my wife and I had regained this Sonoran paradise after a 15-year exile. We were married in Tucson in 1966, in the old Pima County Courthouse, with its beautiful Spanish colonial blue-tiled dome, colonnades, and bubbling fountain in the courtyard. I was 23 then, my bride 22, and for four years the desert and mountains of Tucson were home—but in 1970, we had to leave for grad school. With the Old Pueblo disappearing in the rear-view mirror of our U-Haul, we vowed to return as soon as possible—two or three years tops, we thought.

Somehow that two or three turned into fifteen. Most of our exile was spent in St Louis, with muggy summers, bad winters, clogged traffic, air pollution, urban decay, and racial strife. We dreamed of the desert repeatedly and hatched schemes of return; but one thing kept leading to another, spinning years into a mirage in which Sonora grew more and more dim.

Then, out of the blue in 1985, a miracle: job opportunities for both of us in Tucson. Suddenly, we were back—where, in a fog of déjà vu, we walked, talked, ate, worked, made love, slept, and re-visited local glories like Sabino Canyon and Mt. Lemmon. You *could* go home again! God was in his heaven, all was right with the world.

Back to that Saturday morning. I walk out into the desert heat to get the mail—past the saguaro, the little drinking pool, the palo verde hung with pale-gold blossoms. At the roadside, I stop and look around: to the east, the Rincon Mountains and blue-gray Mica Peak; to the north, a mesquite bosque and foothills rolling away, thick

with saguaro, rising toward the high distant ridges of the Catalina Mountains.

From the mailbox, I grab a handful of junk mail, bills, a rejection letter from a poetry journal, and a large brown envelope:

PIMA COUNTY PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
NOTICE OF REZONING APPLICATION FOR
THE ROCKING K RANCH AND ADJOINING LANDS

The sun suddenly grows hotter, beads of sweat pop out on my brow. Turning back to the house, I hear something strange, almost ghostly—a motorcycle engine. That guttural growl can only be a Harley. I peer up and down the street but see nothing. The motor revs again. I can't localize it. Is it coming from the north, south, east, or west? It seems to be everywhere and nowhere, almost as if it were inside me—then nothing but the sound of wind across the mesa.



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