Quanta

Publishing for three years now, Dan Appelquist's *Quanta* magazine (ISSN 1053-8496) is an electronically distributed journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy. As such, each issue contains fiction by amateur authors. *Quanta* is published in ASCII and PostScript. Submissions should be sent to **quanta@andrew.cmu.edu**. Requests to be added to the distribution list should be sent to one of the following depending on which version of the magazine you'd like to receive.

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Send mail only — no interactive messages or files please. The main FTP archive for *Quanta* issues and back issues is:

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Other Net Magazines

In addition to *InterText* and *Quanta,* there are lots of other net-distributed magazines out there. Here are a few we know about. If you know about more, feel free to drop us a line!

CORE is an entirely electronic journal dedicated to publishing the best, freshest prose and poetry being created in cyberspace. It is edited by the Rita Rouvalis. It appears in ASCII text format. For more information, send mail to **rita@world.std.com.**

DARGONZINE is an electronic magazine printing stories written for the Dargon Project, a shared-world anthology created by David "Orny" Liscomb in his now-retired magazine, *FSFNet*. The Dargon Project contains stories with a fantasy fiction/sword and sorcery flavor. *DargonZine* is available in ASCII format. For a subscription, please send a request to the editor, Dafydd, at **white@duvm.BITNET**. This request should contain your full user ID, as well as your full name. Internet subscribers will receive their issues in mail format.

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other noses slowly towards the injured fish. There is a flash and a spray of foam and a harsh buzzing. Rachel shrieks as line begins to run from her reel.

"Hit him," says Matt-the-Mate. "Hit 'em hard, pull up, pull up now!" Rachel pulls back and the hook sets. She grabs at the reel but Matt-the-Mate is right behind her.

"Don't waste your time. You won't be able to pull him an inch. Let him run. Let him tire himself out. Hoo-Hee, you got em on!" Then he calls up into the air, "Got a 'cuda on down here!" Everyone begins to crowd around my little sister, Matt-the-Mate keeping them at a healthy distance, giving her room to move.

"All lines up!" he shouts. "Lines up! He's moving, he's moving. Follow him around, little girl. Walk him around the boat." The fish has begun to pull towards the bow of the boat, dragging my sister along she walks around and a crowd follows her. I climb the stairs and look down. Her line disappears into the water at a sharp angle; the fish is diving. Along the other side of the boat the other barracuda keeps swimming as though unaware of its companion's absence.

Rachel fights the fish in the hot sun for forty-five minutes. Sometimes she is on her knees, laying against the bulwark. Twice she tries to give the rod to David, but Matt-the-Mate won't let her. He makes her hang on even though there are tears streaming down her face. After three quarters of an hour she has brought the fish to the surface and it swims alongside the boat, exhausted. Matt-the-Mate has her walk it to the back of the boat where a gate is opened and Matt-the-Mate and Bayan-the-Other-Mate gaff it through the side and pull it into the boat. The fish is huge, amazingly large. Five feet long, shaped like a loaf of bread, it is brown and silver and its teeth are many and curved into an evil looking smile. It lays on the deck of the boat, its mouth moving slowly. Once it starts flopping and smacking its mouth shut and people scream and jump back.

But Matt-the-Mate puts his foot on its head and holds it down while Bayan takes a picture of Rachel and the fish. Then Bayan kneels down in front of the fish and slits it open from its throat to its tail. Entrails begin to slip from the thin gap which looks like the cut of a razor blade through smooth, thick rubber. The fish flops tremendously but Matt-the-Mate keeps a good hold of its head and they shove it back over the side.

"Watch this," says Bayan, and leans over the railing to watch. "They're gonna tear each other to pieces. Heh heh."

The barracuda swims slowly in a tight circle, trailing blood and moving its head from side to side as though searching for something. From beneath the boat rises the second barracuda in a shimmering cloud. It bites down hard on its companion's side, quickly tearing a piece of flesh from it. Matt-the-Mate points and laughs.

"Now it'll get good," he says, but I am no longer watching. Rachel has come up the steps and is sitting on one of the long benches. She is covered with sweat and is resting her head in her arms. She breathes heavily and below I can hear splashing and laughter.

"These people are not nice to fish," I say.

"No," she replies, looking up at me. She looks at me for a long time without saying anything and then puts her head down on the rail.

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Is spending his summer working at the Brandywine Zoo in Wilmington, Delaware, where he gets along very well with the marmosets.

in this heedless manner for about half an hour, after which time the captain drops anchor — no doubt after consulting his sonar rig or something. Matt-the-Mate comes around and throws a bit of squid on everybody's hook and we drop them over the side. No sooner has my bait struck the bottom than something hits and my pole bends.

"Hey!" I call, "I got one on!" There is a sudden rush of exhilaration and Matt-the-Mate comes to stand beside me. I reel the line in. There's not much resistance and I can tell that it's a small fish. Looking down I can see an insignificant silver shape, maybe ten or fifteen feet down. This is my fish. I watch it as it gets closer to the surface. It breaks and I lift it out of the water. It is a sea bass, about nine inches long or so.

"I'll get that for you," says Matt-the-Mate.

"It's too small for anything — " I am saying when he grabs the fish in his gloved hand and removes the hook.

"Good for bait," he says laying the fish down on a table and cutting into it with a long knife. He cuts down behind the dorsal fin and then drags the blade along its spine, fillets the flesh from its body. The fish flops madly but Matt-the-Mate ignores this. He flips the fish and repeats the procedure. There is very little blood. He chops the meat into chunks, sticks one on my hook and walks away.

The fish looks up at me with that wide, round, black, unblinking eye for a long time, flapping slowly. His mouth gasping air that goes to nourish nothing; all that is flapping seems to be a spine and the visible row of thin ribs. His body is gone — to tempt and be consumed by a dozen other fish before that eye winks out, black within black.

"I'm sorry," I say to the fish. I am horrified and I can't stop looking at it. I know that this is my fault, that if I hadn't dropped my line into the water this bit of the world never would have been disrupted. I wish that I had not come.

"Ha!" says Matt-the-Mate, when he sees me staring at the fish finally. "That's nothin. I seen 'em live hours after ya cut em up. None of the organs is in the parts you use for bait. We just throw 'em back in — blood's good in the water." He picks up the fish and flings it into the sea. The fish floats, a white patch on the blue surface for a while, wiggling slowly. It is unable to right itself and swims sideways. From beneath it rises a long, brown, torpedo-shaped shadow — there is a flash of white and a furious splash and the fish is gone.

"Barracuda!" shouts Bayan from the bridge. "Big ol 'cuda!" I look up and see him pointing into the water. Later we see them, there are two, slowly circling the boat just below the surface, each maybe five feet long.

"Anybody feel like a swim? Hahaha!" cackles Matt-the-Mate. This breaks him up and there is much knee slapping on his part. A few minutes pass like this and then Matt-the-Mate notices that I haven't put my line back in the water.

"Hey," he says, slapping me on the back with his gloved hand, "can't catch 'em if you ain't got your line in the water. Gotta get your end in. Hahaha!" This sends him off on another laughing tirade. He shakes his head and walks around the corner.

Bayan comes down the steps half way and sits down, setting a can of Coors between his legs.

"You folks doin' all right?" he asks.

"Yes. We sure are," says David. "You do this every day?"

"Do what?" says Bayan listlessly, looking over at David.

"Fish, out on the water. Like this."

"Most days," says Bayan. He looks out into the water.

"Some days there's no customers?" asks David.

"Some days. Some days there's no charter."

"What do you do then?"

"Cut bait, drink beer," says Bayan.

I'm standing in the corner, holding onto my rod. The bait is swinging freely on the hook as the boat rocks up and down. It slaps me in the side of the face. I can feel the wet flesh and the metal of the hook in that instant. I touch my face and there is blood on my fingers: not my blood, it is mixed with scales. I tuck the hook into one of the eyelets on the rod.

About three minutes pass and David hooks a small green fish which has swallowed the hook and he looks at it helplessly, then around for Matt-the-Mate.

"Just rip it out," says Bayan from his seat on the steps. "Don't be afraid to hurt them fish, there's one fact about this world, and it's that organisms eat other organisms. So don't worry about that hook, don't worry bout them fish, just tear it right out. Nature is not pretty." He sits with his elbows resting on his knees, which are spread far apart, in a wide "V." He leans his shaggy head across us like some grizzled guru instructing neophytes.

I look away from the boat into the water and wonder if I could swim to shore. I can see the buildings plainly, but am not sure how far away they are. The sea is flat like a table. I guess that it is about half a mile. In the distance a school of porpoise pass, their backs moving out of the water in a semi-circle and then disappearing like the pistons of some Atlantean engine.

Meanwhile my little sister hooks a fish and we watch her fight to reel it in. Her rod bends and she is shouting and laughing with her mouth open. She has put white zinc sunblock on her nose, which protrudes incongruously from the dark lenses of her sunglasses. The butt of the rod is wedged high in her armpit and she pulls up and cranks down in turn. We all look over the side and finally a fish breaks the surface.

"Red snapper," says Matt-the-Mate, "good eatin' fish." He eyes it a bit. "Too small to keep. They gotta be thirteen inches ta keep. Ya gotta throw this one back. But let's ya catch somethin really big...." He takes the fish from her hook and sets it down. With his knife he cuts the fins from its body and then forces the hook through the spine and casts it back into the water.

"Watch this," he says. The snapper flaps in the water and swims in circles, trailing blood. Only twelve feet away we can see the circling shapes of the barracudas, two or three feet beneath the surface. They seem to notice a difference in the water almost immediately and begin to swim towards the snapper. One of the barracudas sinks out of sight and the

head and somebody sets them on fire with a match. You hold them over your head like the torch on the Statue of Liberty and you do this shot, like you drink the grain, and then you put your goddamn fingers out in your mouth and drink a chaser of fruit juice. And they were doing these things and this guy was already drunk, I mean, *wasted*, and here he was doing shots of Everclear.... Well anyway, 'bout his third shot he dips his fingers in the glass, holds them up in the air — your sister sets them on fire, right? So his fingers are flaming... he throws the shot into his mouth but he forgets to swallow it, shoves his fingers in there, and *BOOM!* Blows his face off."

"Not really," says my sister.

"Well," says David, "there was this huge fire ball and he burned all the hair off of his face, like his goddamn bangs and his eyelashes and his eyebrows, and they took the poor guy to the hospital. That's about the funniest damn thing I ever heard of."

"Pretty funny," I say. "The world's a dangerous place."

"Hey, you wanna go deep sea fishing today?" asks David.

"Fishing," I say. "Sure. Sounds good."

A map is produced and over breakfast some decisions are made as to the why's, where's, and how's. By the time the check comes we pretty much know what we're doing and we head out of Denny's into the Stuart sun, aimed for coastal waters.

Captain Joe is a scruffy looking character who ought to have been in *Jaws*. He sits in the fighting chair on the back of his boat the *Lady Skids* — whatever the hell that means — burned almost black by the sun, squinting at us through creviced eyes. He is probably fifty or sixty and he looks us over as though he knows we will never amount to anything like what he has — even if we live to be a thousand.

"Are you Captain Joe?" asks David as we get out of the car. "You charter, right?"

The captain nods.

"My name's Joe, too," says Joe with an idiot grin. The captain nods again.

"Hi," says my sister, squinting back at him. "I'm Rachel."

The captain says nothing, looking us over warily with a creased face like worn leather. His eyes are white-blue, like a pale sky and they are incongruous on his dark face, like that girl on the cover of that National Geographic. He seems strong yet tired and in his hands he is absently tying and untying a piece of twine.

"I'm Ernest Hemingway," I say, stepping forward and staring solidly into his eyes. The captain's face slowly splits in a huge grin and thirty teeth like white doors clap together in a mastication of a laugh.

"HoHoHo!" he bellows like a jolly Florida Santa Claus, slapping his leg. "Well by all means then, come aboard, Papa! What you after? Spoonbill? Swordfish? Sailfish? or Marlin? Cobia? Dolphin? Kings maybe? Blues? Grouper? How about Spanish Mackerel? We got it all, it's all out there, in the water. Water's blue, like your eyes are blue. Barracuda! Sharks! Eat you whole they will, won't they Papa?" he says, looking down at me with a stern but manageable eye.

"I'm Ernest Hemingway," I say, stepping forward. The captain's face slowly splits in a huge grin and thirty teeth like white doors clap together in a mastication of a laugh.

"Splashin' and hollerin'," I say out of the corner of my mouth, looking back at him, "and the eyes roll white when they bite down..."

Captain Joe laughs again and holds out his hand. I take it and he pulls me on board and the others after me.

My sister gives the captain two hundred dollars, which he counts, first wetting his thumb on a wide slab of tongue, then counting the fifties out loud.

"We got the two mates comin' aboard and then we're off." He clambers up the stairs and a few seconds later a loud boat whistle sounds. The captain returns and shortly a pair of even scruffier-looking characters approach and board the boat. The first is tall with long, curly brown hair and sunglasses. He introduces himself as Bayan. The captain jerks an impatient thumb at him and he immediately climbs the stairs. The second individual is a seasoned salt named Matt, who has short, poorly groomed hair and a beard almost two feet long. He is wearing blue overalls and one cotton work glove on his left hand. His eyes are permanently lost behind dark wire sunglasses and I wonder if he even had any eyes.

We get under way and Matt starts explaining how we're going to be fishing, what we're using for bait and all. Basic crap like that. All I'm worried about is not getting seasick, which is an experience I had once at the age of twelve. It is not one which I would care to repeat.

As we are crashing through the waves at speeds which can only be considered reckless, a flock of pelicans flies along side of the boat, flapping their wings easily and remaining motionless in the air, stationary ten feet away from where I stand at the rail. Matt throws things at them and curses. And I start to think, somewhere in the dank recesses of my head:

The pelican begins with its vengeance,
A terrible curse of thirst has begun,
His shipmates blame bad luck on Matt-the-Mate,
About his neck, the dead bird is hung....

Joe — the accountant, not the captain — is sitting on a bench upstairs looking rather green. I sit down a few feet from him, mostly because there's less wind up there behind the flying bridge and it's still outside. My sister and David are inside, I think, where somebody is handing out small orange bags of potato chips, that they may be thrown into the ocean and choke whales or something. The boat continues

When it gets late we turn out the lights, but the curtains are open a little and the light pours in yellow and bright and stark in a manner which is particular to motels. We're both sitting up in our beds, and the entire place feels like a motel. Even if I closed my eyes and shoved my fingers in my ears and pinched off my nose, I'd still know that I was in a motel somehow. The bed feels like a motel bed, the sheets feel crisp and cheap like motel sheets. I've already stolen the Gideon's Bible, which I do every time that I'm in a motel for some reason. I've got dozens of them. I don't know why, I suppose it's a character flaw. It's a lousy translation anyway.

My sister bounces a couple of times in bed and starts talking about the form of Zen she's been practicing, how she's been sitting zazen in the full lotus position with her legs bent up all crazy around her neck like pretzels. No one in my family was Zen before her, it requires far too much discipline. My sister's really practicing hard, though. From the way she's talking, I doubt that she's searching for, or even believes she will attain any form of enlightenment — whatever that may be — but she's a lot more peaceful than anyone else I know. My little sister is considerably more relaxed within self than I am. She's more forgiving and less cathartic. She's been able to forgive me in a way that I never have and let dead things pass.

We talk about what we want to do tomorrow. I say that I want to go snorkeling or go to Sloppy Joe's. She wants to go deep sea fishing.

I plop down on the bed, still laying on top of the covers. It is quiet for a long time. Then my little sister says in an amazingly quiet voice:

"Brad?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, really."

"You sounded so bad on the phone, you sounded awful."

"I'm sorry about that. I just got carried away, I mean, I overreacted to everything I guess. You know how I always exaggerate stuff... nothing happened and I made a big deal about it."

"You sounded like you lost... everything."

"Heh, no. Really I'm sorry, sis. Nothing happened. I'm okay. Okie-dokie. Sometimes I just get pissed at the world because it's not what I want it to be. That's all. No cause for alarm."

"No."

"Ya know…"

"What?"

"This is the first time that I've known you as a grown up. Like you're a real person now. I haven't really seen you since you were in high school."

"No."

"This is the first time I've ever met you, it seems like. I'm really sorry. I must have sounded like a wreck on the phone, but really nothing's wrong. I'm fine, though I'm afraid that I'm not a very likeable narrator."

Sometime during the course of the night I fall asleep.

The next morning we eat at Denny's again. The place is packed with octogenarians who all look at me weird. I'm getting tired of this so I start looking weird back at them. David tells us that his older brother Rob played Oingo or something on *The Banana Splits Show,* back in 1968 or whenever.

"Like sports?" he says to me.

"Nope," I reply, looking up into his sort of thin red face.

"There was this one guy, he owned a baseball team, I shouldn't say who he was, but we busted his parent company — when?"

"February," says Joe.

"Yeah," says David, "February. Joe and I went in, he had a seat in the futures exchange, and — "

"I don't understand any of the economics stuff," I say, "it's all over my head."

"Oh," says David, looking disappointed, as though the best part of the story had to do with decimal points and pork bellies. "Well, uh, after we busted him, like there were cops and treasury department agents crawling over this guy. He had a hundred and ten safes in his building and we pulled all the papers, everything and this guy was rotten, let me tell you, every scrap of paper we looked at, even the toilet paper, it was all adding up: this guy was crooked as a corkscrew. He was lookin', just from a preliminary standpoint mind you, at six, seven million dollars in fines. Your sister just threw him the hell out and set up in his office. He was sitting in this meeting room across the hall with two treasury police just shaking like a leaf and your sister was calling him in every ten minutes for files — she even sent him out for doughnuts — and he couldn't take it. He just hit the bottle, got completely sloshed. Plastered, this poor guy was, drinking whiskey or something, sloppy all over the place and when we closed up for the day to come back to the hotel he asks your sister if she wants to go out to some bar with him — what one?"

"Scaramuchi's," my sister says.

"Yeah," says David. "Scaramuchi's, ever heard of it?"

I shake my head.

"God, killer expensive this place. Well, anyway, she says yes, and they go out to this bar and he's there, young guy, maybe thirty five, watching his life going down the toilet. I guess she felt sorry for him or something."

My sister shrugs.

"And there's a couple other people from his company there, his golf buddies or what-not, and they start doing these drinks called Flaming Liberties."

"Statue of Liberty," says my little sister.

"What?"

"The drink is called a Statue of Liberty."

"Oh, right, yeah. Well anyway, this drink it's like a shot of Everclear, grain alcohol, like 190 proof or what-not, and you stick your two fingers in the shot glass, your index finger and your middle finger, and then you hold them over your

thing. So the kid starts to shoot pigeons, and he's really good at it, and the father marvels at how great the kid is at this and he's proud and happy and all."

"Yeah.... A football dad."

"And so one day, the kid brings his dad this story that he's written and the father is cowed, completely floored — the story is fantastic! It's amazing, the father has never seen anything like it, he's sure his kid is a genius, and he starts pushing him even more, slowly, subtly, like he's trying not to, but he is..."

"Yeah...."

"And the father keeps saying to the kid, 'Why don't you write something else? You can show it to me, and maybe I can help you with it. If you want to.' And the kid says, 'Yeah, sure dad, I will.' And the kid goes back to boarding school, and like two years later the father is in the kids room at home looking for something and he finds a book of short stories by somebody and the story that the kid says he wrote is in there, he plagiarized it, word for word, including the title, just to impress his old man."

"So what are you saying?"

"I don't know. That's my point, I'm not saying anything. Do I always have to be saying something? I can't be profound 24 hours a day. I mean, it's just a good story, and I've been thinking of Hemingway and of, you know, crashing through the waves and catching marlin and harpooning them and machine-gunning sharks that attack my catch.... I think like that sometimes. It's in my universe."

"This is pointless. Look, Bradley, I don't want to talk about this anymore. Maybe you think like Hemingway, maybe Hemingway's in your universe. It's nice to know that somebody is. But you don't have any space in your universe for me. You never have — you've always been alone with yourself and in love with yourself. I've made up my mind. We're through, you know. Forever. There's someone else in my life now, someone who doesn't fill me with empty spaces and dread and nihilism. I've given this a lot of thought. I don't love you. I've never really loved you. I'm sorry. I don't want to talk to you anymore."

About an hour later I hear the carload of economists pull up outside and three doors slam in rapid succession. Joe is talking about some contraceptive device they've been testing on chickens, he'd read about it in some agricultural magazine. It was some sort of body condom. Then I hear David remark: "For the hen-pecker?" They all laugh, and I can't help but snort myself from where I'm sitting on the bed, dripping wet hair into my journal.

My little sister comes into the room and I say "Hi," and am very glad to see her. She is smiling; we look for movies on T.V. There is one on with Adam West, the guy who used to be Batman. It's a campy thing about some race of aliens trying to recruit high school kids to go back to planet Mung with them or something. I'm not really paying too much attention, but it is funny and sad in parts. We watch this movie for a while and then my little sister wants to go out to eat. These attack accountants, they eat out a lot. We go. I am not hungry, but I eat an omelette stuffed with mushrooms anyway.

"I'm not really an anarchist. I don't believe the anarchists — they just dress really well."

My little sister had three books on her night table, the aforementioned *Fifth Column*, which I'd since thrown into the pool, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, and *Foucault's Pendulum.* When we get back to the motel, she sits down on her bed. I've always held that you can learn a lot about a person by knowing what books they're reading.

"What the hell are you reading *Catcher in the Rye* for?" she asks. She is going through the books on my night stand.

"It's a good book. Aren't I allowed to read good books?"

"Brad," she says heavily, giving me a sort of serious look. "I trust you, big bro, really I do, more than anybody else in the world, and sometimes when I think that I've done something really clever, I look back and think of something even more clever that you've done."

"Yeah?"

"Sometimes though I'm afraid that you're deluding yourself."

I frown at her. "Of course I'm deluding myself. I am deluged with delusion. All of it self-indulged. Of the most deluxe varieties. How am I deluding myself?"

"You're an idealist."

"Yeah."

"You're an anarchist."

"So?"

"But that doesn't work. It doesn't work outside of Walden Pond and it'll never work as long as there are more than thirty people on this planet. The vanguard is gone and the current leaders are deranged."

"I'm not really an anarchist." I can't think of anything to say, any way to explain anything to her. I suddenly feel very inarticulate. "I used to know this guy named Bateman, he was a chess player, still is — it's weird, all these things that have happened to me that you don't know about. It's been a long time. The thing is, he's crazy as a loon — Bateman that is — excellent chess player, but he talks to leaves — I mean the kind that fall from trees. He's crazy, completely, but we used to play chess all the time together. Anyway, he admitted to me once that he didn't like to play chess. He couldn't stand it, but he liked the way people looked at him when they knew that he was a professional chess player."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing. Whatever I'm saying I guess I'm not saying it very well. I'm not really an anarchist. I don't believe the anarchists. They just dress really well."

mood. But then David buys a paper and gives everybody a part of it while we're waiting for our food. I end up with the Lifestyles section which has a big article on Ernest Hemingway teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald's daughter, Helga or whatever, how to fish. Picture of him standing on the back of a boat with a machine gun. The caption says that he used the machine gun to shoot sharks while fishing in Key West.

"You know," I say, "while I'm here I'd like to go to Sloppy Joe's, that bar that belonged to Hemingway."

"You know," says my little sister, "Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park. His house is right down the street from mine, like a block away."

"That's cool," I say, "I never knew that."

"Yes," she says. "He called Oak Park 'the land of wide lawns and narrow minds.' "

"Ha ha. What did Oak Park think of that?"

"They named the library after him."

After breakfast I fold up the Hemingway article with the intent on taking it home and reading it, or at least hanging up the pictures on my bulletin board, but the maid is going to throw it out the next morning when she cleans the room.

My little sister and her squad of Stormtrooper Bookkeepers run off to work to make peoples' lives miserable, and I sit by the pool reading a tattered copy of *The Fifth Column,* which was on the night table, a spy thriller by Paine Harris called *Thunder of Erebrus*, as well as a rather quaint little book called *The Abortion* by Richard Brautigan. I'm so bored that I read about six pages from each at a time and then switch.

The sun broils down upon me and old people thrash around in the pool in front of me and I can never tell if they're drowning or not. Every couple of minutes I look up over the pages of the book and pick out the ones worth saving if they do start to drown. I figure that I probably wouldn't save any of them. But then I could be wrong.

On the ground by the pool tiny lizards dart out and snatch up huge, black, radioactive ants off of the concrete, chewing with thoughtful pause. The lizards are very swift and disappear beneath the sheltering branches of low shrubs.

I pick up my journal and write down some observations about the people in the pool. I think these observations are pretty shrewd and fairly articulate (if not disquietingly misanthropic), though unfortunately very Hemingway. My delusions of literary grandeur will however be put aside a week after I get back; the good people at Coma get extremely upset when they read these, especially a strange young girl with straw-yellow hair who for some odd reason thinks I am insulting her grandmother.

By four of the clock I have finished both *The Abortion* and *The Fifth Column*, but of all the things I was reading the one that I found most entertaining was the spy novel. I wonder about this and go back to the room.

I take a shower and notice that I have a pretty good burn started on my front and back. As always, my sides have not tanned, neither has my neck nor the underside of my chin. These white spots are in collusion with the iron shaped white patch on my chest. It's the 'I was reading a book' sun tan — the only kind I've been able to get.

I watch TV for a while and then write in my journal about an old woman and her granddaughter I had watched fighting at the airport. The woman was so old that she had forgotten that she was once young and the granddaughter was too young to imagine getting old. They sat facing one another, despising one another, and making no attempt at understanding one another's position.

Nothing there on television, so I grab my books and wander back to the pool, thinking to do a few laps or something. The pool is too small to do laps, but I want to get in the water for a while if only to justify my being in Florida.

"Hello?"

"Hello Dominique."

"Oh, hi. How are you?"

"Well, I'm under the delusion that I am Ernest Hemingway. I'm warning you now."

"It's the fair thing to do. Thanks. Hey, about last night—"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Sure, of course."

"I mean I'm sure you've got your reasons and all... I don't know. I just can't think about anything."

"Do you ever think of anything?"

"I am the architect of my own destruction. Sometimes I just can't do the right thing even when I know what it is, when I know I'm doing something wrong, something that I'll regret, I just go on and do it anyway. I mean, sometimes, well, most time I guess it looks like I don't care, but I do, I mean about everything. I care, I'm just not… there. Hey, I was a poet and was unaware of it…"

"I think that sometimes you don't know what you're looking for and that sometimes you don't know how to get it. I think that sometimes you won't talk to anybody and that pisses people off and they think you're a snob or something."

"That's not it at all. I mean, sometimes I won't talk to anybody, but that's because nobody knows what I'm thinking. And I can't articulate myself to anyone. Sometimes I'm not even thinking about anything, sometimes I'm just there and people look at me like I'm out of my tree or something. I feel like I've got to be doing something all the time or I'm letting someone down. Hey, have you read "Everything Always Reminds You of Something?" It's about this boy whose father is a famous writer. Not only is he a famous writer, but he's good at everything else too; everything he touches turns to gold. He's especially fond of sports, he shoots pigeons — they shoot clay ones now, but these were real — and he shoots them really well, like 99 for 100, and the last one limps, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know. Right."

"So the kid's got to live up to this father, who has tremendous expectations of him. The father's not pushy or anything, well, actually he is... just by being so great at everything, he's pushing his kid to be really great at some-

accountants come in and take over all the best offices in the building and start to dismantle the place by paperwork. There is a lot of sweating going on and sometimes, I suppose, people jump out of windows or run to Paraguay or call their mistresses and tell them to get the hell out of the condo before the accountants find out about it.

"Are you okay?" she says.

"Okay? I'm fine."

"You sound listless."

"I'm always listless. I'm having a crisis."

"Oh. Well, hey, why don't you come down here?" she says. There is genuine concern in her voice. "The weather's nicer and it's therapeutic."

"No money."

"Ha," she says and there's some giggling. I think that maybe there's somebody else in the room. She says, "Hold on." A click and a mechanical silence and I'm on hold for what seems like an hour. She comes back on the line. "You have five hours to get to the airport for the 7:20 to West Palm Beach. It's USAir and the flight number is 302. Is that okay?"

"Okay? That's great."

"Do you have any classes?"

"Classes? I don't need no stinking classes. Hell with classes."

I'm really glad I have a sister.

On the plane ride down I sit next to a zombie who sleeps the whole way and keeps retching, like he's about to hock up a hairball. I eat a lot of Eagle peanuts and write a letter to Dominique on the barf bag.

West Palm Beach: I'm going down the escalator towards baggage claim and I can recognize my sister by her feet because she's wearing really stupid shoes. The rest of her comes into view and she sees me and runs up the escalator and throws her arms around me and almost knocks me down.

My little sister is a secret agent. She works for the government in the Department of the Treasury. She poses as a naive investor who gets defrauded and then pulls out a gun and a badge and a calculator.

"Hi big bro! I missed you! I really have!"

"I missed you too, little sister."

"What's your crisis? You sounded so awful on the phone. Want to talk about it?"

"I don't know how. It's a moral crisis. I think. Maybe it's a generation thing. Are you suffering from angst, nihilism, boredom, and depression?"

"Ah, no," she says, "I suffer from Lawn Doctor, condo payments, and inadequate tax shelters." My little sister makes a lot of money.

"How long can you stay?" she says.

"I don't know. Until I go back."

"Won't they miss you at school?"

"They'll survive," I say.

She squeezes me really tightly and we walk outside. I'm blown away by the weather which is amazingly warm, while I'm dressed for New Jersey where it's about two degrees above freezing. We talk on the car ride back about stupid things, and then she says: "How's Dominique?"

I sort of grunt and look out the window.

"Is that your crisis? Did you guys break up or something?"

I think about this for a while. "We broke up, but I don't think that's my crisis."

"Do you and Dominique get along?"

"No. Not really."

"Wow. It's been how long now?"

"Off and on, five years."

"And it's not getting any better?"

I laugh. "Ha. It's never gotten any better. I've spent five years in an unrequited maelstrom of emotion and panic."

"You're being melodramatic."

"Of course I am."

"And you're not being fair."

"Of course I'm not. Dominique? No — she's not even part of it — it's me, there's something inside me, like a magnet, or a black hole that's pulling everything into this singularity — I have a feeling that my universe is about to implode. But that has nothing to do with..."

"With what?"

"With anything," then I add, "I don't know if it's me who's crazy, or if it's the people around me."

I look out the window again and I'm wondering what's wrong with me, or if there's anything wrong with me. I figure that there's nothing wrong with me.

We don't talk the rest of the way back to the motel. When we get there she introduces me to the Attack Accountants, David and Joe. David has red hair and freckles, so does my little sister. Joe is a stocky guy with black hair and glasses.

"He's a republican," my sister whispers in my ear as I shake hands with him. His hand is slimy. The two of them are sitting in Joe's room, watching some basketball game. Joe is talking about The Symposium and gets into a fight with my sister about absolute beauty and homosexuality, or five armed lovers, or something weird like that. I'm sitting on the edge of the huge bed not really paying attention, staring into the upper left hand corner of the television picture. Joe accusingly calls my sister Cartesian, and somebody says something about breakfast. As we get up my sister is saying: "Cartesian? Me? You stink, therefore you are."

Though I'm full of peanuts I go along with them to Denny's. About a billion old people live (expire?) in Stuart, which boasts an enormous billboard which bears only the isolated word *RETIREES!* in huge white-on-black letters just as you enter the town. All the old people are bloated and they keep looking at my long hair and calling me "ma'am." They are also all at Denny's. This doesn't put me in a good

"I don't know if there is an answer. I've either stumbled back through time, or I'm nuts, or I'm dreaming. There's no way to tell which it is, near as I can tell."

The boys came charging back through the room. This time they saw Wilkie and stopped.

The one with the six- shooter carefully aimed it right at Wilkie's nose.

"This is an atomic ray gun," he said.

"Stop it, boys."

"ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZam!" the boy said. "You're fried."

10.

Mr. President and Wiggins sat on the same cot in the shelter. Light from the doorway above fell on rows and rows of butter bean cans. The two men were so completely unable to choose between joy and despair that they had given up trying to decide, opting for silent reflection instead.

Finally, Wiggins cleared his throat.

"We could go get some chili dogs and beer."

Mr. President considered for a moment.

"Yes, I think that would be the best thing to do."

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Helps run the writing center at the University of Missouri, where he moonlights as a graduate student in English. He continues to write short fiction, even though people discourage this sort of behavior. His wife and daughter love him anyway.

THE NIHILIST

BY KYLE CASSIDY

• We're part of a living web, intricately bonded to others and the earth. And when we can't understand the point to our lives, sometimes we understand the bait on our hooks... •

IT'S MIDNIGHT AND DOMINIQUE WANTS TO GO TO THE RAT. She wants to be around a lot of people.

"Yes, go out," she says, "like to a bar or somewhere. I'm tired of hanging around here... and I have a baby-sitter."

We meet a bunch of annoying people and a horrible band is playing good songs. I run into this guy whom I used to live with; I haven't seen him in a long time and we start talking. Dominique buys me a beer in a plastic cup. I listen to the band and I'm relatively happy. We're there for an hour and they turn the lights on. It's pretty late and the bar starts to close. Nivin and Sandy's friends are sitting in the corner, maybe twenty of them. It was dark before and I hadn't noticed them. "We're going over to Nivin and Sandy's," says one of them.

I ask Dominique if she wants to go back there, and she says "Yes," and that she'll wait outside for me. She is talking to some guy at the door. I sit down with a small woman with black hair, dressed in overalls. "I'll see you guys over at Nivin and Sandy's then," I say, and wave.

Dominique is sitting outside the bar watching television. We get up and walk back to the car.

"Do you want to know what our problem is?" Dominique says suddenly. "Do you want to know why I don't love you?"

"No. I don't want to know," I say. I get out of the car and slam the door. "It's pointless. I don't care. I really don't anymore."

I start back across 322, heading for my house. She's yelling at me across the street: "Remember this! You're walking out on me! You're the one who's walking away from this relationship!"

I get home and it's about two o'clock. I sit around the apartment for a while holding my face in both hands, like I'm trying the Vulcan Mind Meld on myself, and then I call my sister in Oak Park, Illinois. She's not home and her answering service gives me a number in Florida. I call her at the Holiday Inn in this town called Stuart.

"Hey, what's up Big Bro?" she says. That's what she's called me since she was about five. Before that she called me "Beehee," which was her best attempt at enunciating the difficult collection of consonants and vowels in my name. She doesn't sound as though she were asleep.

"Nothing," I say. I haven't talked to her in a long time; apart from holidays I haven't seen her in seven years and I hardly know what to say. "What are you doing?"

"We're busting a firm here in Stuart," she says. My little sister is a secret agent. She works for the government in the Department of the Treasury. I say it like that because it sounds glamorous. What she does is pose as a naive investor with a lot of money and go to brokerage firms and get defrauded and then pull out a gun and a badge and a calculator. A bang and a crash and a whole squad of SWAT

Wiggins considered for a moment. The outside death or the inside death. "With all due respect, sir," he said. "Go to heck."

Mr. President was too shocked to move.

7.

The sheriff drove through town, past the police station, past the bank on the corner, past the Hotel Weston, which was still a hotel, and past Rumpel's Hardware. Weston used to be a river town. It was just about to blossom with prosperity, like all the other river towns did in the mid-nineteenth century, when along came the flood of '51 and the Missouri River, the spastic snake, lurched three-quarters of a mile west. Weston was too stunned to grow. Mr. Rumpel was sitting on the front porch. He was already old, which was somewhat reassuring to Wilkie, who had wandered into his store during his one visit to Weston. Mr. Rumpel was ancient then, his eyes watery and clouded. Mr. Rumpel waved as the sheriff's car went past. The sheriff drove around the block and cruised through town again.

"Where are we going?" Wilkie asked. "I thought the county court house was in Platte City."

"I got some business to attend to here. You aren't in any rush are you? Don't got any appointment to get to, do you?" He laughed and flicked another cigarette.

"Nice car," Wilkie said. "New?"

"Nope. Had it two years," the sheriff said. "Guy who was before me paid too much for it, which is one of the reasons he ain't sheriff anymore. I'm thinking about trading it. Forty-nine Fords don't last. Friend of mine had one that shucked a trannie at 10,000 miles."

On the third trip around the block he looked up and down the street quickly and pulled into the driveway of an old white house. He drove the car into the back yard and parked it behind a shaggy lilac clump.

A woman who looked very tired and very sane answered the back door. She was leaning toward the sheriff as if to kiss him but stopped short when she saw Wilkie.

"Who's this?"

"Just some guy who wandered into Martha's store with singed hair, lost," the sheriff said. "Don't worry. He'll stay in the kitchen." He turned to Wilkie. "You just stay put. Don't forget, I can arrest you if I want."

"Arrest me for what?"

"Vagrancy. And don't think I won't."

"Good Lord, Ray. Being burnt and lost doesn't make a man a vagrant," the woman said. "Did you even ask him where he lives? He's new at this, mister. Don't take it personal. Besides, honey, the boys are still here. Their Aunt Donna woke up with cramps."

"Christ, Ruth Mary, when am I going to get a break? Life's a crap game and I just rolled snake-eyes."

"Oh, don't be a cry-baby. What's your name, young man? Come in and I'll get us some cokes. Don't have any ice, I'm afraid, but it'll help some. Wet your whistle. Supposed to hit 90 today, I hear."

Ruth Mary sometimes hid from Ray and the boys in the storm cellar behind the house. It was a comfortable place, stocked with canned goods and candles and cases of Coke in case a really big storm or some other disaster came along. She also had hidden there, behind the shelves, books. A Tolstoy, two Henry James, and Gone with the Wind. She thought Ray might marry her someday and she wanted to get her reading done.

8.

Mr. President stood at the top of the shelter stairs, the last bolt in the last door in his hand. He was trying not to breath, trying to pick up any hint of what was beyond the door. What would the devastation look like? Would there be bodies all around, broken and ghastly, or did the fire consume them? Would the ash of human remains be in the air, coat his throat, choke him? He almost returned to the shelter. He couldn't hear anything. That could be good, could be bad, he thought. I might be about to die. He pushed the door open.

The sun was shining. The limousine was where they'd left it, sans hub caps. Mr. President was glad, for a moment, to be alive. He called to Wiggins and told him everything was OK. Then he realized that the worst possible thing had happened. It had been a false alarm.

He was going to look like an ass on CNN.

He passed Wiggins, who was grinning giddily at the sun, on his way back down the steps.

"Have someone send me something that goes well with butter beans," he said.

"But, sir. But, sir, everything is fine," Wiggins said. "Oh, I see, sir." He climbed into the limousine turned on the radio. Nothing. The battery was either dead, or missing.

9.

"Are you sure you've never been in an asylum?" Ruth Mary said. "You sound like you came right out of one of those science fiction comics my boys read."

Ray's hand was resting on his gun. He was squinting through the smoke from his cigarette. He hadn't said much, but he'd muttered a little while Wilkie told his story.

"I think it's odd that you were in May there and you ended up in June here," Ruth Mary said. "Don't you think that's odd?"

Wilkie agreed. That was the oddest thing from his perspective, too. Ray stabbed out one cigarette and lit another. "He's a fruit-cake, Ruth Mary. How am I going to explain something like this? I'll be impeached."

Two boys came running through the room. One of them was chasing the other with a six-shooter aimed at the back of his brother's head.

Ruth Mary's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to wake up all of a sudden and realize that this was just a dream, are you? That's been done, you know."

"Yeah, and where would it leave us?" Ray said.

Wilkie said he didn't think waking up was the answer.

When he saw a copy of *1984* sitting on the counselors' table, he took it and spent the rest of camp hiding behind the john, reading.

He went home without having learned to canoe or play volleyball, but he had a acquired a dread of the future.

"Can I ask you something?" Wilkie said. The boy looked to be about eight or nine. Probably still fairly honest, he figured. "What town is this?"

"Weston."

Weston was about 25 miles north of Kansas City. Being in the general vicinity of where he thought he should have been was comforting. He'd read about Weston once, a feature story about ante-bellum homes and quaint wineries and old tobacco barns and herds of tourists. It was a place that had for so long not bothered to change that it had become valuable. People came from all over to buy Korean knickknacks displayed in refurbished old buildings. People paid money to wander through 150-year-old homes that had been restored to their original condition and decor, only cleaner.

Mr. President seriously considered making a run for it. The thought of twisting on this concrete floor, clawing for oxygen was more horrible than any violence.

"Just curious. How old are you?"

"Ten." The boy was still fiddling with the zipper. He picked up a piece of wire and was using it to prod the mechanism.

"When were you born?"

"January."

"That makes you four months old," Wilkie said, winking.

The boy looked at Wilkie and frowned. He dropped the wire and counted off five fingers, silently reciting.

"Five months," he said. "That makes me five months old. Except I'm ten, really."

The kid not only lacked a sense of humor, Wilkie though, but he apparently didn't know the difference between May and June. "What year were you born?"

"Shit," the boy said, and dodged quickly through the junk and around the corner of the building. Wilkie turned around. The sheriff was standing, legs spread, hands on hips, cigarette hanging from mouth, eyes squinting.

"You done with your business yet?"

The restroom no cleaner than any other he'd ever been in. The blue paint was peeling from the cinder block walls. The toilet was choked with paper and cigarette butts. Someone had emptied an ashtray. There was a spare roll of toilet paper in the urinal, soaked.

Wilkie found this reassuring. He thought it went a long way toward supporting his theory that nostalgia was essentially dangerous and wrong.

He knew he wasn't where or when he was supposed to be by a few miles and a few years. It was good to know that gas station restrooms were dirty, nevertheless.

What was most unsettling was the missing month.

6.

Mr. President and Wiggins sat on opposite sides of the shelter. Wiggins had dragged one of the cots over near the door and was looking for a pillow when the lights went out. Both men felt their stomachs clutch and each turned, eyes as wide as they could go, toward the other, unable to see anything but the shapeless night. But only Mr. President said anything.

"Shit."

Mr. President drank too much at his inaugural celebration. He looked like he was going to tip over at one point, so his aides suggested that he take a break to freshen up. He said sure why the hell not and walked into the women's restroom. He tried to retreat, but a bottleneck of Secret Service agents had formed at the door. News photographers swarmed, jaws snapping their gum.

Mr. President and Wiggins remained quiet, barely breathing the dark air, for some time, waiting for the emergency generator to come on and return the light. Finally, Mr. President observed that if the lights were out, the ventilators were not working.

Another extended silence ensued. Both men watched the dark air for signs of thickening. Soon both were convinced that the air was becoming soupy. They labored for breath. They panted.

Wiggins felt the panic of the end in the sluggish air. He wanted to get past the panic and die peacefully. He wanted to feel the liberation of no return. Wiggins had driven for Mr. President for eight years. One night, when Mr. President had only been Mr. Governor, he inadvertently signaled right and turned left. He never forgot the terror he felt when the limousine came to a stop, wounded and rocking gently, and he never forgot Mr. President's kindness and understanding. "Could have happened to anyone, old boy," he'd said and patted Wiggins on the shoulder. Now Wiggins would be glad when nothing could be done and nothing would matter, when Mr. President would be nothing more than his twin, a pile of bone and flesh not distinguishable in any important way from his own.

Mr. President seriously considered making a run for it. Panic scared him more than death. The thought of twisting on this concrete floor, clawing for oxygen was more horrible than any violence. If the blast had not been too close and if there wasn't a firestorm outside and if the car hadn't been incinerated or vandalized, they might be able to make it to another shelter without exposing themselves to much radiation. If they held their breath. If they made good time.

"I'm not going to just sit here and choke on your breath, Wiggins," Mr. President said. "I think we should head for the Command Bunker, where we should have been in the first place."

cans of butter beans on the first shelf. On the second shelf he found cans of butter beans. He was reaching for a can on the third shelf when he suddenly realized that history, if it still existed, would hunt him down, bag him, and mount his name over the toilet. He had hesitated. He'd driven the leader of the free world to a second-rate bomb shelter. By the time his hand touched the can of buttered beans he knew that his only hope was that history had perished in the apocalypse.

3.

Wilkie shook his head. A puff of dust surrounded him. He spit twice and looked around. He was standing in the middle of a blacktop road. Just in front of him was a small store. He had no idea where he was. A few seconds earlier he had been sitting in a Kansas City coffee shop. He was dunking a bagel in his coffee then he was dusting himself off in front of a country store, feeling a little dizzy. He hoped the place had a phone.

"Do you have a phone?" he asked the big woman behind the counter.

"Pay phone," she said, and pointed to a relic on the wall. "Cost you a nickel."

"A nickel?"

"Hey, buddy, you don't get something for nothing," she said. "By the way, your hair's smoking."

Wilkie had been to college. For a while. His second course had been The History of Technology. The professor was a personable fellow who smiled as he described medieval medical technology and its effectiveness in combating the plague. "Death got better reviews back then," he said. His motto was "Progress through technology," which he admitted he'd swiped from an Audi commercial. He laughed at the students who pointed out that technology was causing pollution and other world problems. "Luddites!" he said. "If you hate technology so much, why don't you turn off your air conditioners and sell your cars. Give the money to the poor! By God, old Ned Lud must be smiling now, wherever he is." It was the last history class Wilkie took. He left it with a healthy fear of the past.

Wilkie flinched and looked up. He didn't quite catch sight of his hair, but slender noose of smoke curled down around his nose. He batted his head. Masochistic slapstick. Slappity slap slap slap. The woman frowned. Slap.

"Here." She tossed a damp rag at him. He patted his hair with it until the smoke seemed to stop flirting at the edge of his vision when he moved. He was out.

"Want me to call an ambulance? They got a new one up in Platte City," she said. "They'd probably love to take it for a spin."

"No. I think I'm OK," Wilkie said. He walked out the door, stood on the porch for a moment and considered: he didn't know exactly where he was. He didn't have a car. He'd been through something, he didn't know what. He walked back into the store.

"I guess I do need a little help."

"Tell you what," the woman said. "I'll call the sheriff. He's new, too. Just elected him last month. He needs the practice."

4.

Little girls in big girl poses. They looked uncomfortable, their smiles oddly frozen, their eyes directed off-camera. Were they looking at an adult, searching for the crinkle around the eyes, any sign of approval? or for permission to relax, for permission to get dressed, to go out and play? Mr. President leafed through the pictures twice. He couldn't think of anything to say at first.

Wiggins placed a small trash can next to the bed. Mr. President let the photos drop into the container.

"Aren't these shelters supposed to be secure?" Mr. President asked. "I think we've got a security problem here. Did you check that door?"

Wiggins assured him that the door was locked.

"What kind of scum would… Jesus," Mr. President said. "My brother had a daughter. If he saw those —"

Wiggins said nothing. He had two daughters, one of whom grew up and had two babies of her own, boys. Wiggins had once taken the boys fishing in Maine. One of them fell out of a tree and landed in the lake. The boy's brother had pulled him out. He was OK. He hadn't even stopped breathing. But their mother never let them go fishing with him again. She said no offense, Dad, but there's just too much of them in me.

Wiggins found peace through tomatoes. He grew them in plastic cat food buckets he got from his neighbor. He spent hours pruning the leafy growth on the theory that if the plant had fewer leaves to mind it could apply more of its energy to the fruit. His tomatoes turned out fine every year.

5.

The sheriff's car reminded Wilkie of a hippopotamus, round and wallowy. Some guys could identify the make, model and year of every car built between 1940 and 1985 (after which they all started to look alike), but he wasn't one of them. This car wasn't like anything built in his driving lifetime. The sheriff flicked his cigarette out the window and pulled the car into a Standard station. He told the fat boy to pump her full. The gas pump rattled like an old clothes dryer. Wilkie asked the sheriff if he could use the restroom.

"It don't bother me any if you do."

The restroom door was at the back of the building. Wilkie rounded the corner and came upon a mountain of worn out tires, leaking batteries, rusted tailpipes, and bent chrome molding. A boy was peeing on the tires.

"Restroom out of order?" Wilkie said.

"Holy shit!" the boy said, and lurched backward, struggling with his zipper. "No sir, just go on in there, it's fine." The zipper wouldn't slide.

When Wilkie was nine he had been sent against his will to summer camp. He knew he would be bored, and he was.

POST-NUCLEAR HORRIFICS

BY ERIC CRUMP

• If you believe the world is coming to an end, does it actually matter if the sky is falling? •

1.

THE MORNING PAPER WAS COVERING PART OF HIS EGGS. Banking scandal. Arms talks. Crumbling empires. The waitress was standing right behind him, reciting to the two men at the next table the same list of specials she had recited to him a minute ago, the same she had recited, recited, recited all morning long. Wilkie was nervous. Civil unrest here and there. Cold war over. A photo of four geese crossing a road. A gunman on the loose. He clenched his fist under the table. Unclenched. A child was under a nearby booth banging two spoons together. The men in the next table were arguing. A photo of a burning man falling from a burning building. Wilkie tipped his head to get a better listen.

"Who said I wanted to be happy?" one of the men said. "Who said happiness was the purpose? You haven't been around much have you?" He snapped his magazine, folded it back on itself, and held it up to his face. Wilkie picked up his doughnut. He stopped at the same cafe every afternoon, drank two cups of coffee, and took notes in his journal. He jotted descriptions of the weather, bits of dialogue overheard, and speculations about the characters who frequented the place.

The second man leaned forward, chewing hard on a piece of bacon. "You can't just give up like this. The only person who can defeat you is you. Don't you see?"

"I hope Number Two got to the launch sequencer in time," he said. "I hope everything from Beijing to Baghdad is smoking." "Sea of flames, sir. I'm sure of it," said Wiggins.

The first man put the magazine down, buttered his roll and shoved it, whole, into his mouth. "Thmph mphmm mffmth." Bread bulged from the man's mouth, and crumbs tinkered down his shirt. "Phmmth mphthmm!"

"You're pretty funny for a chronic depressive," the second man said.

The man gulped the wad of bread and turned to Wilkie. "Mind if I borrow your paper for a second?"

The headline on paper said *Arms Agreement Bombs!* The man tossed the paper at his companion. It landed on his scrambled eggs. The other man began to harangue and harangue. Wilkie looked out the window. A woman with a baby carriage strolled past. A kid on a bicycle passed her. The sun was bright. The waitress was reciting the specials again. The child was crying. The cook shouted "Order up!" The man at the next table began to crescendo. Someone somewhere broke a glass. Wilkie lifted his doughnut halfway to his mouth and paused. Something was unraveling, something he couldn't see was unraveling. Or about to explode.

2.

Mr. President still had his dark glasses on, even though he'd made it to the underground shelter well before the blast. He bit his fingernails ferociously.

"I hope Number Two got to the launch sequencer in time," he said. "I hope everything from Beijing to Baghdad is smoking."

"Sea of flames, sir. I'm sure of it," said Wiggins. He felt compelled to be agreeable. He had made the mistake of stopping the limo as a light turned from yellow to red and as a result, Mr. President had not been able to make it to the Presidential Command Bunker, but had been forced to take cover in an auxiliary shelter originally designed for neighborhood bureaucrats.

Mr. President was known on Capitol Hill as The Veto King. He was secretly proud. During one session he vetoed fifty-seven percent of the measures enacted by Congress. All but five of his vetoes were overridden. He had *VK* stitched into his monogrammed towels.

The bunker had plenty of food and water in it, but no strategic command communications facilities, not so much as a walkie talkie. They'd been in the shelter for twenty minutes and the time had been spent in eerie, uncomfortable silence, punctuated only by Mr. President's occasional lament that he hadn't gotten to initiate the firing sequence. Finally, Mr. President changed the subject.

"Awfully quiet in here, don't you think, Wiggins?"

"Yessir." Wiggins was standing at attention. Mr. President was sitting on a cot.

"Don't you think it would have been noisier? I always thought it would be pretty noisy."

"The shelter is no doubt designed to keep the noise out, sir."

"Ah. You're probably right," Mr. President said. "Say, are you getting hungry? What have we got to eat here?"

Mr. President put Wiggins at ease and ordered him to find the inventory list. The list reported a six-month supply of canned ham, canned tomatoes, canned peaches, canned yams, canned asparagus, and soda crackers. Wiggins found

MERCY STREET

BY RIDLEY MCINTYRE

• Technology advances faster than our laws or common morality. Clever as we are, can we support the human costs of our ingenuity? •

THIS STREET IS HOLLOW. A TUBE FULL OF NOTHING. Empty. Lonely. Like a star. Neon so bright and shiny that it dazzles in the sunlight. Concrete sparkling diamonds across my eyes. Stars in the sunlight.

Sees other stars and believes in friends. Lies. There are no friends. No enemies. No souls. The sky is full of holes. Hollow holes like this street.

Hollow boy he cries. Shedding water as if a skin. Sheds until his eyes burn and he's a ball, wracked with pain. Pain inside. Wearing a grief mask, or some pale reflection. There he stays. Lost in a maze. A wilderness of empty soul. Every twist and turn a dead end of the mind. A riddle that doesn't matter. Never makes sense.

"Understand me. Do you understand?"

Despite the one way connection I have with him, I have to shake my head.

"Then learn."

THERE'S A CAMERA-EYE VIEW OF THE WORLD. LOOKING through a kaleidoscope. Fish-eye technicolor tunnel-vision of this street. The car is sleek. A joy rider. Young boy full of old ideals. Gonna join Metropol, this kid. Gonna be somebody.

He's too small. His feet barely reach the pedals and he can't see where the hood ends and the nightlights begin. Company car. His friends laughing and screwing around in the back.

"Faster, man! Push it to the floor." They goad him and he smiles. Two feet on the accelerator pedal, he closes his eyes. Senses the danger. The wall races to the car and the car is still. The hood crushes. His face smashed against the steering wheel. The crash bag inflates above his head. The engine burns. He can hear his friends screaming as they go over him. Through the glass. Out into space. Then he hears no more.

LOST IN WHAT HE WAS, MEMORY FALLS ON HIM FROM ON high. Raw bile history burns his throat. Burn in red flames, friends. So-called friends that never were. Just like they burned him. Just like the nearest star burns his skin. Hardens him. Turns him to ash. He crumbles before its gaze. Nothing but a void of chrome and electronics. A brain lost to technology. And there he stands, a living corpse shell of a boy. Sweet smile, spike hair, baby eyes no more. The past has burned the chaff away.

Now something inside him has died. The part that washed against the shores of life but could only grab sand, torn away. Rip tide. World now an empty space. A world without feelings. Nothing but fast strong currents leading to deep-water holes. Hollow holes like this street.

"You really don't give a shit, do you?" Dirt runs down his face in thin lines. Greasy smears across his silver skin. "You really don't care who I am."

I'm silent. Utterly silent.

HE NEVER REALLY WAKES UP. NOT IN THE PHYSICAL SENSE. They switch his eyes on and he can see. They don't let him have a mirror. They don't let him touch himself. Through digital hearing he listens to the doctors. Full prosthetic rehabilitation. A technological marvel.

Don't want it. Want to be dead. Want to be anything but this.

The doctors reassure him. They tell him that he'll get used to it. That the bad feelings and the nightmares will pass. Others have and so will he. Sterile tasteless hands show him off to students. Look at what we made. Once a dead boy, now a living machine. No one cares. No one there wants him to be alive. They just want to look. Look at what we made.

Once a whole person. A young boy with old ideals. Now hollow. Like this street.

THIS STREET IS SALT. TRANSFORMING. TEARS RAINING down across the concrete. Like blood. Like a red storm — purifies. Constantly changing. Warping in and out in a continuous heat haze. Evaporates into nothing. And the salt trails behind. A bug swarm on the tail of a scirocco wind. Leaving behind only the sound of crying. Echoes in the darkness. Empty voices. Lonely. Like a lost boy.

Sees other boys. Ghosts of memory. Across the street. The street is full of them. Consumed by them. They are everything. And he believes in friends. Convinces himself. They're real. They're all real. And so am I.

"I care." I take his link from my head and my dreams are my own again.

Kiss him and he tastes of mercy. Rain salt mercy washing me clean. Dry. Soul desert kiss. But warm lips. Warm steel lips and I close my eyes to him. Warm him. Warn him. Convince him.

You're not so alone.

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Was born in London, England and now studies Communications at Coventry University. His ambitions are to escape to Canada before he gets conscripted and to make some sense of the Real World.

random, unpredictable violence. But for all of that, how many of us have ever seen someone point a gun at another person, much less at ourselves? I was unable to respond. I couldn't escape the denial that it wasn't happening, that I was watching this scene in a movie or on TV. I was locked there, unblinking, numb with fear. My heart was beating fast. I heard a humming electrical current of self-preservation telling me to move, run for the door, hide behind something.

But I didn't. I did something else, something very uncharacteristic and stupid. Since that day I've wondered why I did it, and the only thing I can figure is that I knew if I did nothing the father would shoot the owner and the owner would be dead. I did not want to see a man die. So I spoke the only word I could remember, the only word in my vocabulary at that precise moment:

"No."

That was all: just "no," just once. It shattered the moment as though someone had thrown a rock through the laundromat's front window, except for the sound because it was dead silent. In that silence, I could see the sound of my one syllable register in the head of the father. And when he heard it, he moved without thinking. I could see that. He just pivoted toward me in a single plane, his outstretched arms wheeling in an arc in front of him like the turret of a battleship.

He shot me once in the chest.

The doctors said that he just missed killing me. That may be, but I was dead. I knew it unequivocally in every part of my mind. I don't remember falling, only being on the hard floor of the laundromat looking up at the fluorescent light tubes on the ceiling, pushing myself along on the floor with my heels, the redness closing in around the edges, knowing I was dead and thinking only one final absurd thought: who's going to dry my load?

I don't remember anything after that. They tell me the owner grabbed the gun from the father and I guess no one else got hurt. I stayed in the hospital for a few weeks and by the time I got out the father had been sent to Huntsville for two years. I didn't care. In fact, I didn't want him to go to jail at all. Who can say which of us could get desperate or crazy enough to do something like that? He hadn't meant to do me any particular harm other than a general rage I imagine he probably felt toward society.

My wife never told me I shouldn't have gone to that place, that I didn't have to go, that I had no business trying to peek into those people's lives. She just came every afternoon while I was in the hospital, and sat in my room and watched her soap operas on the TV over my bed. The same ones every day: *Days of Our Lives, Another World,* and *Santa Barbara.* Watching every day, I began to feel myself tugged into the rhythm of the endless ebb and flow of the characters and their small world, like watching a tiger pace in a zoo cage. I became lulled by their perfect, trivial lives unscarred by any tragedy worse than failed love.

I haven't been back to the laundromat since. In fact I haven't been out of the house much at all. The college gave me a generous leave. At first some of my colleagues and students came by to visit, but they don't much anymore.

My wife still watches the soaps, but I'm onto something better. Her brother got a job in a place where they make copies of the tapes from security cameras. You know, the ones you see when you go in banks and Circle-Ks, braced on the walls, panning from one side of the room to the other. He can get me as many as I want and I take a lot.

All the interest of watching people with none of the danger: the best of both worlds, and it's all real. Eventually I'll get a publishable study out of them, but for now I just watch them for hours at a time. People coming and going in a black and white world, choosing cans of beer, filling out deposits slips, buying lottery tickets. And all the time I'm watching: miles away, weeks later, over their heads, out of their lives.

And they never have a clue.

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Is a regular contributor to *InterText.* His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Window, Spectrum, Malcontent, Epiphany,* the *Lone Star Literary Quarterly* and *Elements.* A resident of Texas, Mark is also the author of a collection of short stories titled *Riddle* (Argo Press, Austin, Texas, 1992).

"Hey, now, y'all git on outta here, an' keep out lak I done told you already."

The kids paused in mid-step and stared at this big, rough white man who looked about as friendly as a pit bull. I couldn't see that he had any grounds to be so upset, but I figured it was his joint and he seemed to have some gripe with these kids, so who was I to say? Maybe he'd been chasing them out ten times a day all week.

Whatever the case, the kids stood there staring at him, all of their fresh bluster and banter gone, evaporated in a wave of fear of this white man who was older and bigger and maybe a little crazy.

The owner took a step toward the kids. They broke and ran for the door, disappearing back toward the apartments next door. Everyone in the laundromat—me, the Mexicans, the lady folding her wash, even the guy playing the video game—had fallen silent and watched with careful interest. When the kids were gone, the owner looked from one to the other of us and said to no one in particular, "Goddamn kids. They come from that projec' yonder. They ain't got no sense. They're in here all the time. All the damn time runnin' up and down the place. They don' never do nothin' but scare off my good customers." He shook his head in disgust. "Goddammit!"

"I told your kids the same thang I tell 'em ever' damn day. I told 'em to get the hell outta my laundry-mat 'cause they ain't up to no good."

The woman folding her clothes stared at him like she couldn't figure out what planet he'd fallen off of. The Mexican men didn't seem to understand what he'd said and the guy playing the video game pumped in another quarter and nodded his head sympathetically.

I nodded too because I understood what the guy felt like. He was clearly a redneck full of hate, but he was trying to run a business and he felt abused. I could see that. He must have thought I was the most agreeable to his position, so he shuffled over to me and kept talking in his too-loud voice:

"Them damn people don't want nothin' but a hand-out. They want someone to take care of them. They ain't working and they ain't watchin' their damn kids either. I'll tell you somethin': them kids ain't gon' 'mount to nothin'. Them people's just a bunch of trash is all."

I kept on nodding, though more out of politeness because I felt what he was saying was out of line. They were children, after all, and children are supposed to be rambunctious. I figure they all act a little wild once in a while. That doesn't mean they're bound to grow up bad. But I kept my mouth closed. I'm not one to argue with someone about their point of view. They're entitled to that, aren't they?

All the same, I was glad when the woman who had been folding her laundry spoke up, erupted in fact, like a volcano: "Hey, mister," she said, looking up at him from where she sat. "You ain't got no right to be sayin' that noise 'bout them kids. Huh-uh. You got a right to keep 'em out your place if they ain't bein' cooper'tive, but you don't go sayin' they trash or none of that talk, now. You could jinx those children you go talkin' that way. And the Good Lord knows they got enough against 'em as it is."

The woman delivered this speech with one arm akimbo, her hand doubled against her vast hip, using her other hand to point a dimple-knuckled finger at the owner. He stood looking at the woman with something between awe and dismay. No doubt he was not used to being talked to this way, especially by a black woman. The laundromat was very quiet. The Mexicans had stopped talking, the computer game had stopped exploding. The only sound was the low churning rumble of the washing machines and the clicking of buttons and snaps in the dryers. We all seemed to share an uneasiness, I guess because we regarded the owner as a temperamental man, easily capable of violence if provoked.

The owner seemed about to respond to the woman, his mouth starting to open, when the door of the laundromat flew open again.

I knew there would be trouble as soon as I saw the man coming in, his eyes glaring with the fury of years of pent-up anger. I don't believe I saw his gun until later, but I knew something was going to happen. His face was mask-like, stiff with hatred. Without so much as a glance at anyone else in the laundromat, he stalked straight over and jammed his face into the owner's like an indignant ballplayer confronting an umpire.

"Hey man," he yelled at the owner. "What the *fuck* did you say to my kids?"

The word "fuck" shot out of his mouth like a bullet. I would have been even more terrified than I was, except the owner just looked at the guy with his same old laconic, half-lidded expression. The owner must have to deal with crazies all the time. He'll know how to handle this guy.

"I told your kids the same thang I tell 'em ever' damn day. I told 'em to get the hell outta my laundry-mat 'cause they ain't up to no good."

"You got my kids all upset, man. My wife is upset, too. I don't need you upsettin' my family." I thought I could hear a plaintive tone beneath the father's anger.

"Go home an' calm down, hoss. You ain't got nothin' to be all hot 'an bothered about."

"Nothin'?" said the father, his voice so high it seemed to squeak. "Nothin'? Hey, white man, you call this nothin'?"

It seemed to me I saw the gun earlier, but I don't know how because at that moment the father stepped back one pace and as he did, pulled up his shirt and yanked the thing out of his pants. He held it in both hands, pointed stiff-armed at the owner's chest. The owner looked down at the thing like it was a fifty and the guy wanted change. His eyes never lost their sleepy look.

So much of our disposable culture — movies, television, pulp novels, comic books — depends on this drama of

I don't care. I never know what I might find at the laundromat. It's like an avant-garde play where the props stay the same, but the cast and script change every week.

I WENT DOWN TO DO MY LAUNDRY WITH A SMALL BASKET of clothes (after all, we do most of the real wash at home). I go to the Kwik Wash in the Piggly Wiggly strip shopping center over on Woodland Avenue. Woodland is something of a dividing line between two parts of town. On one side are mostly blacks and some Mexicans. On the other side there are mostly whites who feel very threatened by the blacks who have begun to make enough to buy houses across the avenue. To add to that, the city's just come along and put in a low-to-moderate income housing project on the Avenue right beside the laundry. It's a little tense in that area, but you know what they say about how fools rush in.

I had tried other laundromats but none of them seemed to have quite the same mix of people as the Kwik Wash. There are plenty in our neighborhood, for instance, but we live close to campus and most of the people who use those are students. You can see them any hour of the day scratching their hung-over heads or burying their noses in fat textbooks, clutching their pink and yellow highlighters. I figure I see enough students during the week to become intimately familiar with their habits.

That morning I got to the laundromat at around 11. I was a little disappointed that there weren't many people there yet. Of course, the owner was the same as ever, doing his usual business: wandering around, checking the soap boxes in the vending machines, putting the lids up on the washers nobody was using, checking the dryers for those anti-static things that always get stuck to your clothes. He nodded at me when I went in. He was a gruff sort, though I never had any trouble with him. His usual outfit was a greasy undershirt and thrift store pants a couple of sizes too big for him. He had an unshaven grizzly look and he chain-smoked in spite of his "no smoking" sign. His sign was a variant of the ones with a circle and a slash: inside it said "smoking, soliciting, loitering, pets" and underneath it "Please supervise your children."

All things considered, he ran a good clean laundromat and I figured that was all that mattered. In my book, there are way too many people who don't give a damn about quality anymore. They slide by with as little as they can and then expect to get paid for it. The way I see it, you take the money, you do the job, regardless of how little you make.

Aside from the owner there were only two other people in the laundromat. One was a huge black woman — she must have weighed 400 pounds — sitting in one of the plastic chairs by the window with her basket on the floor between her legs. As she folded the laundry out of the basket she made neat stacks in the chairs on either side of her. She didn't look up when I went in.

The other was a white man with one leg who was hard at work banging on one of the two video games. He was a lanky middle-aged fellow with a deep tan and horn-rimmed glasses who looked like he had seen some hard living. He had his crutch propped up against the side of the machine and the empty leg of his blue work pants was neatly folded and pinned up. He leaned against the machine and concentrated on working the joystick and levers. The machine made exploding noises and machine gun rattles that sounded like they were coming from the other side of a thick door. Every couple of minutes he would pound his fist on the machine and say, "Son of a bitch!" and then reach into his pocket to pull out another quarter and keep going.

I set my basket on the floor beside the first available machine. I put all the clothes in, dump in some detergent I carry in a yogurt container, and put three quarters in the little vertical slots. I love the *chung-chung* feel of the coin slot when you slide it into the machine and then out again. It makes me think of the bolt action of a rifle, though I have to say I've never worked one.

I had just gotten my load going and was leaning against the machine when two Mexican men came in. One of them had his clothes in a pillowcase with a faded flower print pattern on it. The other was carrying an olive drab duffle bag like army surplus stores sell. They were about the same age — mid-thirties, I guessed — and they were dressed similarly in faded jeans and boots, though one wore a Sea World T-shirt that had a picture of Shamu and the other had on a plaid western shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps for buttons and on the pockets. They were talking their Spanish ninety miles a minute and laughing up a storm. After they started their clothes they leaned against their machines and kept right on talking. I'm not afraid to say that it bothers me when Mexican people speak Spanish in public. It's rude and, besides, I have never understood how Mexicans can live in this country and not learn the language. You'd think they'd want to so they could compete for jobs. But competition is an American trait and I guess they live by a different standard.

Slowly they worked their way over to the vending machine area. There were two vending machines, one for snacks and one for cokes. The snack machine had a heavy grating in front of the display glass to keep people from smashing it in and stealing a bag of Tom's Cheese Doodles or a peanut plank. The coke machine had big bars across it, though there was an opening for the coin slot and where the drinks came out. The Mexicans both bought cokes and stood there drinking them while they jabbered on in Spanish.

Just then, the glass door on the west side of the laundromat flew open and two black kids ran in, a girl and a boy, no older than seven or eight. They were laughing and yelling really loud. They chased each other under the big high tables with metal legs you use to fold your clothes. They didn't seem particularly destructive, but I could see the owner get nervous right away. He stopped in the middle of one of his little chores and waved a fat sausage finger at the kids and shouted across the room.

just as the train stops. The doors slide open and he steps onto the platform. The doors close. He is gone.

I look down at my hand. It's a Polaroid. As the image solidifies I see my face, but I don't recognize myself. I see a man drowning in fear. A man with desperate, lost eyes. A man who is still a child.

AT THE SURFACE I FIND A PHONE BOOTH. MY HANDS FEEL like paws as I search my body for change. I bat my jacket pocket, feeling the shape of my tie when I hear the clink and hiss of metal. I claw my tie out and coins tumble in a streak onto the ground.

The tie unravels like a snake in my hand, and wrapped in the center of its coils is the long purple crystal.

I stand with my forehead against the glass for ten minutes before I dial her number. I can feel a train pass beneath the street. It feels like an earthquake and I am the epicenter. I have a hard time holding the receiver to my ear. It rings six times and she answers. Her voice is quiet and soggy from sleep.

"Hello?"

I don't speak, but grip the crystal until it bites into my hand.

"Hello?"

For some reason I am sobbing.

"Who is this?"

"I think I love you," I say.

She is silent, but her silence is warm.

JON SEAMAN jes@unislc.slc.unisys.com

Jon Seaman says he turned to technical writing rather than face jail, but who are you going to believe: him or us? He has a BFA in Theater and is a published playwright whose works include "Lenses" and "Autumn." "Epicenter" originally appeared in *Shades* magazine.

INNOCENT BYSTANDER

BY MARK SMITH

• When researchers get too close to their work, they risk losing their objectivity. But as one sociologist discovers, there's no such thing as an "outside observer"... •

THE THING THAT GETS ME ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IS this: I didn't have to do my wash at the laundromat. I make a good living. We have a big house with a laundry room complete with a washer and dryer. My wife always thought I was crazy for going out to a laundromat. But then, my wife would never leave the house if she didn't have to. That's how we're different, how we each cope with all the free time there is in our lives. We never got around to having children and now we're both too set in our ways to consider it. And living in a Texas town full of nothing but unemployed redneck racists — with whom we have nothing in common — we have learned to take our entertainment where we find it. Which is not usually at the Twinplex in the Target Mall.

So now my wife's idea of fun is to sit in front of the television all day watching soap operas and reading paperback novels. She says it's escape, pretends she's slumming, but I think it's more than that. She's an expert on the soaps, you might say. Even reads *Soap Opera Digest.* She knows the private lives of all the stars, why so-and-so really left *Days of Our Lives* and that sort of thing. I find that depressing. I told her that's just a superficial fantasy world driven by sentimentality where the only emotions are lust and jealousy and even those ring false.

I prefer the theater of real people I find at the laundromat. Real people are my specialty actually, my vocation. I'm a sociology professor at the teacher's college in town so watching people, studying them, is sort of an ongoing lab for me. And there's no place I've found — except possibly bus stations — better than laundromats for watching people. I tell this to my students all the time. I try to get them to go out and watch people, learn why they act the way they do, how their lives are a factor of their environment. I give them research assignments to go to laundromats, bus stations, thrift stores, soup kitchens. They look at me with just about the same expression as my wife when I head out the door with a load. Their idea of field study extends to bars and coffee shops in the immediate campus area.

I never know what I might find at the laundromat. It's like an avant-garde play where the props stay the same, but the cast and script change every week.

I try to study the rock, but I can't break focus from her radiation. She has me and she knows it. She pushes her hot gaze inside me. The momentary fusion slows time and for a second my body pulses and tingles. "What bothers me?"

"There are things you don't understand, things you can't control." She gently reaches and takes my hand. She closes it around the crystal. She smiles.

THERE IS PERSPIRATION AROUND MY COLLAR. IT FEELS LIKE the train stops every ten feet. I'm comatose drunk. I feel at the edge of spinning and my vision begins to tumble. I want to close my eyes, but the subway butcher is watching me with eyes like boiling mercury, waiting, his hands on the glowing zipper of his bag. Two cheese slices with fresh oregano and parmesian. Why couldn't I stay with her? My eyes are changing to heavy puddles of lead. Why am I on this Midnight Meat Train? Why did she do this to me?

SHE DRESSES ME BY THE FRONT DOOR. WE ARE QUIET. There is a comfort to this ritual, a childlike comfort I desperately need. My fingers are alcohol-blunt and I can't manage my shoelaces.

She patiently ties them while I stare down at her. A pink light, spilling through the curtains, exposes the naked length of her back. I follow the light with my eyes. A single thought erodes through the gossamer layers of wine. She gives and I take. She gives and gives and I take.

She rises and adjusts my jacket. With each careful tug on the fabric, I feel her need. I should stay. I know I should stay, but my hand touches the door knob. I feel a snap of static electricity, a realization, and the fading sting of both. Her scheme didn't work. I didn't pass out. I've drunk like a champion and I'm standing, ready to walk out the door.

This is when she begs. This is when she begs and I kiss her softly on the forehead. This is when I say I'll call, and walk out into the night.

"Wait..." she says.

She's going to beg. She'll beg and I'll know everything is not changing. I am relieved. We will complete the ritual.

"...You forgot your tie." She hurries to the bedroom.

Her voice is like chloroform. I am sensationless, anesthetized. I am hollow.

She puts the tie in my jacket pocket. She straightens the clasp of my belt. She smiles. She softly kisses my forehead.

"I'll call you," she says.

Suddenly, I'm outside in the night.

I'M KING OF PIZZALAND. I'M OILY AND FAT. SHE'S MY Anorexic Queen, feeding me each bite, never taking one for herself until I remember to nod at her. But I don't nod, I eat. That's my job as Pizza King: to eat, to gorge myself, to become a round planet while everyone around me starves.

Somewhere far in the distance, on the opaque fringe of this dream, I feel a scratching — a faint sound of a heel scraping the ground. It begins to move closer, echoing louder with each step. Then I feel him. He's coming for me. A thin windshield explodes into my face, a subconscious detonation.

Abruptly I wake. Every cell in my body oscillates and collides. It's not a dream, I feel him coming. A dim, pale light trembles above me. I feel him.

He emerges from blackness in the back of the car. The trembling light strobes his movement. All I see is the bag, swinging like a pendulum at his side, and his silver eyes.

In my mind, I see the husk of my body hanging upside down from a meat hook.

I look at the other passengers for help, but they ignore me. Then everything stops. I am too numb, too fucking drunk to move. He is standing over me. I can't take my eyes off the bag.

"You were sleeping. That isn't very smart."

His voice is a cold, thick fog that envelopes me.

"You were staring at me. You know who I am, don't you?"

I can't answer.

He crouches down. We are face to face. His sliver eyes are dissecting me. He whispers, "You know what I do, don't you?"

I nod slightly.

"I'm flattered. Not too many people recognize me. I'm usually finished before anyone notices I was there."

I feel dizzy. I mumble, "Why me?"

"It's my gift, you understand, to show how people look on the inside. I'd say right now you're pretty much inside-out. It won't take long."

"You were staring at me. You know who I am, don't you?" I can't answer. He crouches down. We are face to face. His sliver eyes are dissecting me. "You know what I do, don't you?"

I understand. I understand I'm getting exactly what I deserve. He unzips the bag. I squeeze my eyes shut. I hear him take something from the bag. I wait.

"Open your eyes — just for a second. Open your eyes."

My eyes fall open. I am blinded by a flash, and then another. After a few seconds he presses something into my hand.

"This time it's free, because you knew me, but next time it'll cost you. I'm getting famous, you know."

My eyes adjust and he stuffs the object back in his bag.

"I always keep one. I figure you owe it to me. Hell, you never know, someday you just might buy it back." He stands

EPICENTER

BY JON SEAMAN

• Sometimes life is a force of habit: eat this, do that, go there. And sometimes the smallest experiences let us see our habits for what they are. But larger experiences can do the same thing...•

IT'S FOUR A.M. I'M RIDING THE SUBWAY. I'M DRUNK. There are three people in my car. I'm watching them. Particularly, I watch the man in the leather overcoat. I watch that man because he carries a heavy gym bag. I watch that man because he has silver eyes. I watch that man because he is watching me.

"MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN," SHE SAYS, LIGHTING A CANDLE.

"Midnight what?"

"Midnight Meat Train." She pours more wine into my glass. "It's a horror story."

I drink. "Sounds more like a porno."

"Very funny." She sets the bottle on the nightstand. "I want to read it to you."

"You do?"

She inches closer. "Yes, I do."

"Why?"

She smiles. She skates the tip of her index finger in figure eights down my neck and onto my chest. "So on the subway home tonight, you'll think about it."

I drink and after a moment say, "Tonight? You aren't asking me to stay?"

She pauses, slides away, and pulls the sheet over her head. The candlelight makes a dark outline of her body. "You've never stayed once. Not one time. Even if I beg, and I'm tired of begging."

Her voice bounces all around me. For a moment I feel cold. I crawl above her, pulling at the sheet, trying not to spill my wine. I choose laughter. "Not even a little? I like it when you beg."

Her face is pressed taut against the fabric and I watch her lips shape words beneath it. Her voice drifts up to me like black smoke, stinging my eyes, choking me.

"No, I'm not asking you to stay ever again."

I let the cover go. I try to stare through the sheet and into her mind.

Eventually she drags the cover away from her face and looks up at me. "If you stay, it has to be your decision."

I take a big swallow of wine. I take another.

Her lips tighten. She is waiting.

I turn my head toward the window. "I can smell pizza from that place across the street. You hungry?"

There is silence. She reaches around my knee and takes the bottle from the nightstand. She tugs the glass from my fingers, tops it up, and pushes it back to me.

I look down into her eyes. I should explain. I should apologize. But I say, "Why the hell would you want me to think about some horror story?"

Her eyes close for a moment and then open slowly. She smiles.

THE MAN IN THE OVERCOAT USES EVERY SECOND SLOWLY, murdering me with his eyes, his expert butcher-knife eyes. I feel naked except for the wine on my breath. I'm forty-five minutes from home. The train is slow and old and scrapes through the dark tunnels on its hands and knees. I should move to another car. I should get off at the next stop and escape to the surface of the city. I don't move. I can't. His eyes magnetize me. I feel naked. I need a slice of pizza. The train stumbles and stumbles and stumbles. I start to shake. Between two ceaseless motions I am epileptic. I need a slice of pizza.

SHE SETS THE BOOK CAREFULLY ON THE SIDE OF THE BED. "What do you think?"

With my big toe, I push the book until it falls onto the floor. "It's the most repulsive story I've ever heard."

"Don't you believe it could be true?"

"Some guy cutting up people on the subway... to feed his deformed children that live under the city?" I gulp down the rest of the wine. "It's fucking ridiculous."

"Does it bother you?"

I take a long purple crystal from a basket on the nightstand. "What do you keep these rocks for?"

"They're crystals. They channel power from the earth. You didn't answer my question."

I hold the crystal up to the candle and follow a reflection along its geometry. "You don't believe that bullshit, do you?"

She leans close to my face and says nothing for a moment. I turn my head and look at her. It's like staring into arc welding. Her face is a river of current and sparks. Her voice burns quietly into me. "It bothers you, doesn't it?"

I turn my head and look at her. It's like staring into arc welding. Her face is a river of current and sparks. Her voice burns quietly into me. "It bothers you, doesn't it?"

F I R S T *T E X T*

Jason Snell

EPISODE 13: HE ASKS FOR MONEY

TWO MONTHS *ALREADY?*

Yikes.

Part of me wonders what I'm doing here now, writing an introduction to the issue of *InterText* which I've worked the *least* on ever. Because of an extremely busy schedule — designing and laying out a magazine and several newspapers at school, in addition to taking a final exam — Geoff Duncan did far more than his share of the work on this issue, including multiple copy edits of the stories and lay-out of the issue.

But, yes, I *have* read the stories in this issue, and I'm glad to say that I'm impressed. We lead off this time with Jon Seaman's chilling "Epicenter." We're also lucky to have the quite odd "Post-Nuclear Horrifics" by Eric Crump, along with new stories from regular contributors Mark Smith, Ridley McIntyre, and Kyle Cassidy.

During the time when these stories were percolating through the electronic veins of *InterText*, I was also busy securing employment for this summer. I'll be working at a large computer magazine located here in the Bay Area, and that's all I'm saying. Scan the staff boxes if you really want to know which one — suffice it to say that it sounds like a good job, and I'm looking forward to starting it.

This job searching has also gotten me to thinking about the future of the magazine, since I'm a little under a year away from losing network access altogether. (The way I figure it, my accounts at Berkeley will be good through August 1994 or thereabouts.) After that, I'll do everything I can to retain net access, which means I'll probably pay for an account on a public access UNIX system.

This means money. And this leads me to propose something that Dan Appelquist proposed for readers of *Quanta* more than a year ago: a system similar to "shareware" software.

InterText is and will always remain free. But if you enjoy *InterText* and have some money to spare, please feel free to send a $5 check to keep the magazine going in the future. Hey, most magazines cost anywhere from $12 a year to way beyond that. Consider us a bargain at $5!

All money will go toward *InterText:* paying for network accounts, paper and toner for all the *InterText* copies Geoff and I print out, magnetic media to safeguard our back issues, connect time to upload our issues to other computer networks, etc. Though the temptation is there, I won't be putting any of the $5 checks in the Jason-n-Jeff Maui Condo Retirement Fund.

If you'd like to contribute to InterText, send your check (made out to Jason Snell) to: 21645 Parrotts Ferry Road, Sonora, California, 95370. I'm planning on moving to a new apartment in the next month, and so the above address seems the most stable.

Oh, and one last note — for those of you viewing the PostScript edition of InterText, you'll note that our cover art this issue is by Jeff Quan, who was last heard from when he did the cover of our *first* issue. We're glad to have Jeff, who works for the *Oakland Tribune* and does some freelancing for *MacWEEK* magazine, aboard again. He'll likely be doing our covers for the foreseeable future.

That's all for this brief note. Heck — you're not here to read this column, anyway. You're here to read stories, and we've got some nice ones. Get to it.

JASON SNELL recently finished his first year at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, and has a coveted Communication B.A. from UC San Diego. Between school, work, and editing *InterText,* he sometimes considers writing more fiction and enjoys using his Macintosh PowerBook. He also likes to drink iced tea and mention monkeys in conversation as much as humanly possible.

InterText

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released on July 15, 1993.**

InterText

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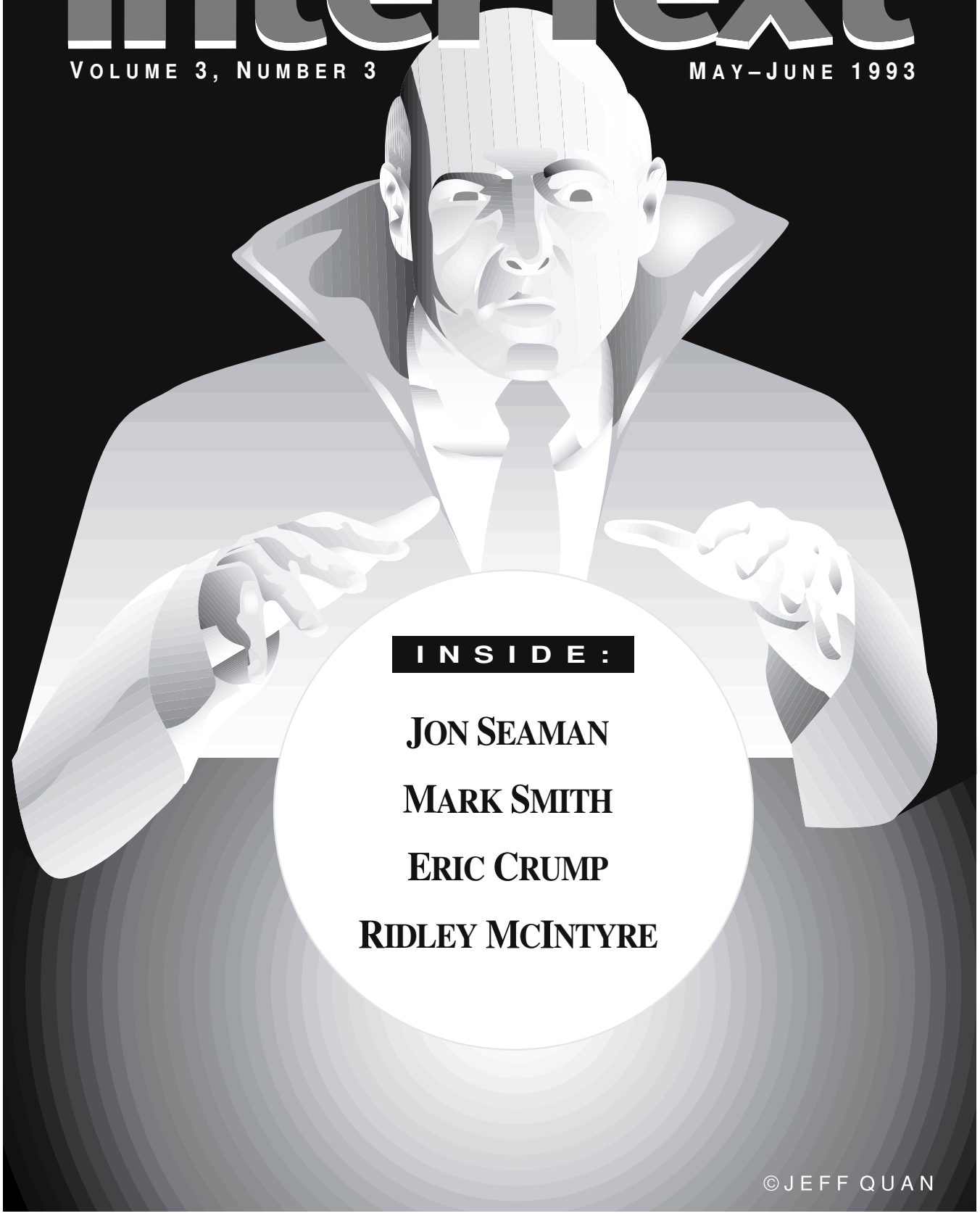

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