InterText

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 6 NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1994

"Bad Sneakers"
by P.G. HURH

ALSO INSIDE:

CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON
JEFFREY OSIER
MARTIN ZURLA
RICHARD CUMYN
SUSAN STERN

JQUAN

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Contents

Departments

First*Text:* *Disc of Doom*
Jason Snell 3

Need to Know*:* *Fight Fan Mail With E-Mail*
Jason Snell 24

Short Fiction

More Dark than Night
Christopher O'Kennon *(psy3cho@cabell.vcu.edu)* 4

How to Roll a Perfect Cigarette
Jeffrey Osier *(jeffrey@cygnus.com)* 6

Porcelain Morning
Martin Zurla *(pecado@netcom.com)* 12

The Effort
Richard Cumyn *(aa038@cfn.cs.dal.ca)* 14

Sea Change
Susan Stern 18

Bad Sneakers
P.G. Hurh *(hurh@admail.fnal.gov)* 19

The *InterText* Staff

Editor
Jason Snell
jsnell@etext.org

Assistant Editor
Geoff Duncan
gaduncan@halcyon.com

Assistant Editor
Susan Grossman
c/o intertext@etext.org

Cover Artist
Jeff Quan
jquan@west.darkside.com

intertext@etext.org

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released January 15, 1995.**

Jason Snell

DISC OF DOOM

IN THE AWARD-WINNING STORY "Press Enter ■" by John Varley, a man cuts himself off from an increasingly threatening world by severing his main connections with the world—not people, but instead the electrical and telephone cables that run into his house from the outside world. In the end, he's left wondering if he's safe, because he's still hooked up to the sewer system.

All of us, no matter where we live, are tied into the infrastructure around us. The origins of that infrastructure are in decisions by communities to work together so that everyone could receive important services—fresh water, power, telephone, even things like cable television and perhaps, in the future, high-speed Internet access. But there's a trade-off—you get the services, but you also have to pay. With simple services like power and water, it may just be a financial transaction. But with information services, you end up paying money *and* receiving unwanted information: junk mail, unsolicited phone calls, junk faxes, even unsolicited junk e-mail. (If you haven't gotten some of this, consider yourself lucky.)

The marketeers who reach you do so because they've found out *how* to reach you. With a few exceptions, they've looked up your phone number in a telephone directory or bought your address from some company you do business with (be it your credit card company or a magazine you subscribe to). Nowadays, you can even buy a "white pages" of Internet e-mail addresses.

I bring this all up because over the past few months, I've discovered a frightening new product that anyone can buy: a telephone book on CD-ROM. For less than $100, you can get the names and phone numbers of just about everyone in the United States. (One company also sells a product that provides all the phone numbers in Australia, should I want to make some random calls to my good pals Down Under.)

Think about that for a second. Now *anyone* can find anybody, anywhere in America, as long as they have a listed telephone number. On the positive side, you can track down long-lost relatives and former significant others. On the negative side, you might track them down and realize *why* they're long-lost and/or former. I can just imagine the nightmares such a resource might cause—someone, long since married, might look up an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend and give them a call. Who knows what flames that might rekindle? Who knows what wicked temptations that little shiny disc might lead to?

But here's my favorite silly scenario, which has the added value of being something that I've actually tried. With a CD-ROM covering the western U.S. loaded, I type in the keywords *Round Table.* Up comes a list of every Round Table Pizza parlor in all of the western U.S. I enter the city keyword *Anchorage*, which gives me five Round Tables in Anchorage, Alaska.

Noting the three-digit prefix of one restaurant's phone number, I perform a new search, finding *all* the numbers in that prefix area and their corresponding names and addresses. Now all I have to do (and this part I *haven't* done, I swear) is phone the Round Table and order a couple large pies with pepperoni and extra cheese and have it sent to an unsuspecting Alaskan. I have seen the future of college pranks, and it's on CD.

However, despite all the privacy concerns I have about such products, these discs can really be valuable. Take this very issue of *InterText.* Due to some problems with a service provider, I was unable to reach one of our contributors, Martin Zurla, via e-mail. So, knowing from a note in his story submission that he lived in Los Angeles, I managed to look up his phone number (it took me 30 seconds at most) and punch that number into my telephone. Within a minute I was speaking personally to Martin Zurla. Now *that's* service.

Still, the disturbing part of my CD-ROM phone book experience was that I got to thinking about how there's very little I can do to protect my privacy. My telephone number is unlisted (so no pizzas, thanks), and I could theoretically call all my credit card companies and all the magazines I subscribe to and ask them to remove my name from the mailing list they sell to direct marketers. But how could you be sure that you could eradicate your name and personal information from every database? Not very likely.

And even if the sanctity of your mailbox and your telephone are unmolested, here's another one: what about your personal information? Here's an example for you: for a modest fee, anyone on the Internet can connect to a site on the World-Wide Web, enter in anybody's social security number, and get their complete credit history.

What's my point? Maybe just that as technology improves, it's up to all of us to guard our personal information carefully. Since we're all part of that community, all tied into the infrastructure in one way or another, we're going to fundamentally give up some of our privacy. The more conscious we are about what information we're giving away and what people might do with it once they've got it, the better off we'll all be.

But at least for this issue's sake, I'm sure glad Martin Zurla's phone number was listed.

Now, if you'll excuse me… someone's at the door. I sure hope it's not the pizza guy.

MORE DARK THAN NIGHT

BY CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON

• Morality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. But can it transform a crime of opportunity into a crime of compassion? •

THE SMELL HIT ME AS I JIMMIED THE WINDOW OPEN. I climbed in anyway, hoping I was wrong.

It's funny how life can be broken down into a small series of events, where a simple decision can alter the entire outcome. An *if* in the right place can change your perspective. *If* I'd been smart, I'd have immediately turned and left for parts unknown. *If* I'd gone for the living room window instead of the kitchen window, I may never have known she was there. *If* I'd decided to burgle the house on either side of hers (or even one halfway across the island in, say, Mililani Town), I could have avoided the whole thing.

As it happened, I found the woman in the kitchen, hanging from a rope, bare feet dangling above the floor. It was a botched hanging, common when folks try to kill themselves. In a proper hanging, the drop breaks the neck and knocks the victim unconscious—death is quick. But this woman hadn't given herself enough height. She had choked slowly. It probably took her five minutes.

As it happened, I found the woman in the kitchen, hanging from a rope, bare feet dangling above the floor. It was a botched hanging.

She was definitely dead. Her eyes bulged out like a cartoon character and her face and neck were dark red. Her mouth was open, the tongue hanging out like a sausage. Somehow, she swayed slightly, her body making tiny circles in the air.

She hadn't been dead long, probably no more than a few hours. The smell I had noticed was from her bowels and bladder letting go in those last moments of life. Some evolutionary throwback designed to make our bodies as unappetizing as possible before some saber-toothed tiger made a meal of them. Takes all the glory out of dying, if you know what I mean.

That's assuming there ever was any glory in dying.

I MADE MY WAY CAREFULLY AROUND THE BODY, NOT touching her and being even more careful than usual about fingerprints. It wouldn't do to give anyone the impression I was linked to this mess. Good ol' Five-Oh found burglars merely annoying, but if they thought a burglar was icing middle-class housewives things could get uncomfortable very quickly.

It was the refrigerator that stopped me. I'd seen these things in a hundred houses before this one. Crude drawings of palm trees, flowers and, most of all, horses. All done in crayon and held to the fronts of refrigerators with magnets shaped like fuzzy animals or cookies or other suburban bric-a-brac. The difference this time was the woman hanging from the light fixture behind me.

With a chill I recognized the scenario. Single parent—for some reason known only to Your Preferred Deity of Infinite Greatness—offs herself, leaving a child behind. I'd been that child once.

Now there was another.

I did something stupid. I turned to the dead woman, my stomach a cold stone rising in my throat, and hit her with the crowbar I had used on the window. I'm not sure how many times I hit her, knocking her body around like a piñata, cracking bones and not stopping until she struck the edge of the counter and jarred a stack of plates. The plates didn't hit the floor; a few just slid into the sink. But until then, the beating had been quiet and she certainly hadn't complained. Silence returned; I watched as the corpse swung, limp. My eyes were wet when I finally got myself under control.

Business as usual, I said to myself and crept into the living room on shaky legs.

No. Not quite. I was searching the house, not for the caches of valuables people think they've so cleverly hidden, but for people. I found a child's room, toys scattered around the floor but the bed made. A doll house rested in the pale light coming through the window, looking like a tenement cross-section with miniature furniture spilling out the sides. A little girl lived here, but judging from the bed, not tonight.

The master bedroom had the double bed I expected, unmade, but only half a closet of clothing, all female. The adjoining bathroom was littered with woman's gear, the medicine cabinet was lined with ointments, salves and pills. The pills were arranged more neatly than anything else in the bathroom. They were familiar. Valium. Xanax. Tranquilizers and sedatives.

Aside from myself, there was no living person in the house. The corpse was still spinning when I came back to the kitchen. I wasn't sure why I returned. There was something that needed to be done, something important. I stood there a long time, watching the woman slowly rock to a halt, not thinking of anything, until a red light

caught my attention. An answering machine. I pushed the button and waited for the tape to rewind.

"Kini, this is Hal. Don't pick up if you don't feel like it, the message is the same. Don't call me anymore. Don't write me anymore. I have my own life to live and the two of you don't figure into it. Just leave me alone."

There was a brief pause and a beep before the second message began. "Mommy, this is Keke. I'm at Amy's house now. Thanks for letting me sleep over. We're going to have pizza. Bye!"

The message ended with a final beep.

So the girl was spending the night at a friend's. I turned, looking at the woman again. The little girl will come home tomorrow to find Mommy's little surprise waiting in the kitchen. How *clever* of you, Mommy. How *wise* of you. To screw yourself and her at the same time. What a wonderful, self-centered, *vicious* trick.

I ran my hands through my hair, leaving trails in the black grease I use. It wasn't fair. The little girl hadn't done anything, any more than I had at her age. But now she'll find her mother hanging from her neck like a goose and she won't understand. No, that's not right—she'll understand too well. She'll understand the woman she put all her trust in has let her down. She'll understand her mother wanted to die more than she loved her own daughter. And she'll remember that lesson above all others.

Unless someone changed the lesson.

CUTTING HER DOWN WAS NO TROUBLE AT ALL. I wouldn't be able to make the rope burn look like a ligature strangulation—it wouldn't have looked right. So I taped her hands and feet together, careful not to bruise or break the skin. A wound delivered after a person has died is different from one delivered while the person is alive. While the damage I had done when I first found her would be curious, it wasn't impossible. But the rest had to look good. I taped the hands in a manner she wouldn't have been able to do herself and put the body on the master bed, wrapped it up in the sheets, and broke the lock on the bedroom door.

I paused at the postmortem lividity in her feet. After she had died, blood had pooled in the lowest portion of her body. Her feet had turned deep purplish-red color. They gave away that she had been moved after death, and I wondered if that was what I wanted.

I tried to reconstruct what the evidence might show. Forced entry into the bedroom. A struggle from the bedroom to the kitchen. (I would have to knock things around to make it look convincing.) She was taped up, and a poor job of hanging had been forced on her. After death, she had been knocked around, taken down, and left in the bedroom.

That might work. At least it was obvious someone else was involved. And although there wouldn't be any defensive wounds (there wasn't anything I could do about it), the scene did not scream of suicide.

All that remained was to make sure there were no suicide notes, take a few items of value, and make an anonymous phone call to Five-Oh. Then let the cops figure it out.

I didn't have to do it. I could have let it go. What does one girl's pain mean in the big scheme of things?

It just so happens it means a lot.

CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON psy3cho@cabell.vcu.edu

Is a graduate student in psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, after spending more than enough time in Hawaii to lose all of his money. He works in a psychiatric hospital, where he's found the main difference between the staff and the patients is that the staff members are the ones with the keys. His work has appeared in small press magazines such as *Beyond, Neophyte's '92 Anthology,* and the upcoming anthology *In Darkness Eternal* (Stygian Vortex Publications).

How to Roll a Perfect Cigarette

BY JEFFREY OSIER

• Practice, they say, makes perfect. Or does it? •

You have to start slowly. You can't just go out and buy some tobacco and practice. Tobacco doesn't come with instructions. Even gummed papers will elude you forever.

The technique comes very slowly, more slowly than you can imagine. You have to begin by admitting that you know nothing, and you have to realize that cigarette rolling is an art form. Like painting, it's something that takes a little concentration and a lot of willpower. Each cigarette is different. Few of your peers will recognize the care and practice that have gone into rolling a perfect cigarette. Expect no compliments. Do this for yourself and yourself alone.

You must begin much earlier than you originally intended. It must start when you're very young, much too young to appreciate even rudimentary artwork, much too young to smoke. Possibly during a holiday. Your parents will have given up smoking years before, never having learned this art at all but always having relied on the pre-rolled, machine-produced variety, most likely with synthetic filters, that are to real smoking what lawn flamingoes are to real artwork. As in a modern Christian Mass, there are hints and shadows of real mysteries, but in the end it's just habit. This is not smoking. This is dying.

At the holiday feasts that usually take place at your house, your parents' guests include relatives who haven't given up the habit. What you notice is the graceful way your uncle's blue-gray cigarette smoke wafts and clouds in the living-room air above your head. You exhale slowly, face upward, watching your breath mix with his and watching them swirl together. You glimpse something intangible. You play with his lighter, amazed at the way the spark begets the flame, and the intense control you have over the length and size of this flame. By adjusting the tiny lever on the side, you can make the flame so tiny you'd swear it wasn't there at all, or large enough to dance with your breath. You practice this in front of the foyer mirror until your mother discovers you.

What you notice is the graceful way your uncle's blue-gray cigarette smoke wafts and clouds in the living-room air. You exhale slowly, watching your breath mix with his. You glimpse something intangible.

Or perhaps it's your aunt's Zippo that catches your fancy, with its satisfying clicking and scratching and the final *whomp* when she closes it. You notice the smell from the Zippo even more than the smell from the tobacco she lights with it, a smell that will always remind you of Christmas or Thanksgiving, even more than the smell of the turkey roasting in the oven or the chink of poker chips after dinner while the cranberry sauce dries on the plates and you watch the same animated specials you've watched year after year on the same television. Smoke, of course, drifts in from the other room, tainting your sleepy visions with mysterious mists. You wonder why candles are so much less provocative.

These visions and smells and sounds will mark your growing years as much as anything else. When you're a gangly teenager you get a job sweeping out the shop where your father is a manager, a sheet-metal shop filled with raucous men and racks of sheared steel. These men make giant, dirty messes at their labor, and it takes a good portion of every weekend to sweep and wipe the floors and machinery clean. You wonder why anyone even bothers to clean, so quickly and thoroughly dirty the place gets. You go in on Saturdays with the shop foreman's son, who has grown up around a different crowd than you have and listens to a different sort of music. He's a few months older than you, and the two of you drive in together and work all day Saturday in the shop. You go in early. You and he divide the huge shop in two and each sweeps a different section. Sixteen months before you get the job, your father will have moved out of the house and the yard will have gone to the dogs, along with your generally happy mood and inquisitive turn of mind. You'll be 15, a freshman in a Catholic high school an hour's bus ride from home, entirely unsure of most things. Your hands will often be dirty.

But you only work on weekends, for now. Your workmate will prove to be an interesting companion, and as a school-year's worth of Saturdays progresses you

have many conversations while unloading bins of scrap metal into large containers. You start going in a little later, and once you get to work you end up sitting in the foreman's office eating candy bars for breakfast and talking about cars, which you've taken a sudden interest in, and girls. This will be much more interesting than work. You try to take as few Butterfingers and Baby Ruths from the stockpile as possible (the boss usually charges for such things, and discreetly, while his son isn't looking, you drop money into the bin). As you physical shape improves you do your work faster, and so does your companion, until you both can finish in five hours what used to take eight and you spend the remaining time lounging in the office.

At some point you discover that many of the cigarette butts you sweep up have a considerable amount of tobacco in them. Your morbid curiosity is piqued. You know that cigarettes are bad. The surgeon general's warning on the packages proves that, even if Mom didn't also say a lot. Besides, the folks you know who smoke are either sheet-metal workers, a lascivious breed, or relatives, neither of which you (consciously) wish to resemble. Still, tobacco is made even more attractive by its bad reputation. An idea forms in your mind like mothball shavings in an old suit jacket. There are matches in the welders' boxes. You don't see your companion for a good percentage of the day anyway, and so one day your curiosity gets the better of you. You find one of the cleaner specimens of used cigarette, and rather than suck on it at the same time you're lighting it you first light the ragged edges and then bring the inch-and-a-half-long butt to your mouth. It smells nothing like your uncle. Indeed, it smells nothing like tobacco; it smells like dirt and the oil-based sawdust you spread on each section of the shop before you sweep it, to keep the dust down. You curl your lips inward, touching only the filter to your dry peach fuzz, and attempt to inhale the smoldering stuff.

Disillusionment is relative. Sometimes it's just not believable.

Nothing happens. The cigarette has gone out while you contemplated your wicked deed. You're left with a vague feeling of guilt and paranoia, and you peek around the corner to see if your wanton behavior has been discovered. You decide that this is too dangerous, and you quickly resume sweeping.

A week or two later you find half a pack of cigarettes on someone's worktable. Marlboros. Irresistible. You've just got to know. So you heist one and put it into your mouth, just to try it out. It barely weighs anything, you notice, and its round, smooth end feels good on your tongue. Natural. For fun you measure it with a small calibrating tool in the shop. You find that it's roughly eight millimeters thick. If it were wire it'd be about 10 or 12 gauge, you reckon. Naturally as can be, you attempt to light the small tube in your mouth, bravely inhaling the flame this time, and it lights, just as it's supposed to. Inhaling the smoke, you cough; no one has told you that you're supposed to inhale air as well. Your eyes water. When they clear, you see T., the foreman's son, standing across the shop from you, laughing. You laugh as well. Saying nothing, he lights a cigarette as if he'd been doing it all his life.

That summer, the two of you work side by side 40 hours a week. You've given up on experimenting with old butts left by dirty union workers, especially since those union workers are there most of the time now as you work. Only on Saturdays do you and T. work alone, still eating Butterfingers washed down with Dr Pepper for breakfast, shooting the breeze in his dad's office, cranking up the old stereo.

One Saturday at lunchtime the two of you have been discussing the relative merits of drugs at parties and Ozzy Osbourne. You drive out to a local taco shop for food, and then you go up to explore a new housing project a few miles away. While you're parked he brings out a small length of tube, the likes of which you've not seen before. He pokes some gray-green shavings into one end and lights it, breathing in. He's explained this to you before and you've heard about it from others, but you've never seen it. Curious, you ask him what it feels like. His eyes are glazed, just a little bit. He hands you the pipe, and you, very afraid but unwilling to admit this, take a small breath from it. It tastes like nothing. You wonder if you've breathed any at all, but when you exhale you see a thin stream of smoke issuing from your mouth. Then you notice the taste, somewhere between oil and lawn mulch, rather sweet and filthy. You hand the pipe back to T. and wait to feel high, but you feel nothing. Not even disappointment. Numbness, perhaps. Many things make you numb these days, however, and you reflect that maybe this is how you're affected by drugs. Aspirin never seemed to do much, either.

Disillusionment is relative. Sometimes it's just not believable. When you're 16 you decide to try again. You and your buddy C. bravely purchase a package of Marlboros. You drive fast on the freeway, both of you with lit cigarettes in hand and feeling giddy, taking occasional puffs but not inhaling (you've made that mistake before). Well, maybe a little bit. When C. isn't watching, you breathe in at the same time the smoke is lying in your mouth, and exhale immediately. You feel your throat tighten, but you don't choke. This, you reflect, is an experiment. For fun you pull off the freeway and enter a drive-through car wash, and you and C. fill the car with

smoke as you pass through the sprays and brushes. At the end you open the doors and let the smoke billow out, and you both stand outside and laugh until tears form in your eyes. The car-wash attendant looks at you suspiciously.

From then on you keep a few cigarettes in your car. You don't smoke them, but they're there in case you want to. Once when you're going to pick up your girlfriend, B., your dashboard decides to fall apart and a dozen of the little white tubes fall out from the back of your glove box and onto the floor. You stop a block from her house and clean up every trace. You hide the cigarettes in the trunk only to throw them away a few days later, ashamed. At 16, you're ashamed of most things.

Nearly two years later, close to graduation, you trek up into the mountains for a weekend. You've been doing this often lately, always alone. You love the campfires, the solitude, the unending quiet. You visit observatories and canyons and meadows and write in your journal about things you find mysterious and painful and unsettling. You play guitar softly in the wilderness.

This time you've stopped and bought a small package of cheap cigars. To see what the ruckus is about. These are a brand labeled Backwoods, and in your flannel mood you decide that you have a Backwoods sentiment. You unpack one before the campfire, reading, and make an attempt at naturalness (your heart beating faster), you light it with a stick from the campfire. It tastes horrible. You settle back in your lawn chair with it anyway, sipping good stony mountain well water from your canteen and puffing on your Backwoods stogie, leaning just so for the imaginary camera you've sensed behind you since you were a pup. Another few puffs and you're ready for the real experiment. You take a small toke and inhale slightly, and suddenly your world becomes cloudy. Not at all what you expected. Coughing and looking for something to change the taste in your mouth, you chuckle at yourself and toss the lot of them into the fire. Yuck. Like sucking on a forest fire, you think, and you go back to reading, hoping the invisible cameraman ran out of film just then.

PIPE SMOKING HAS ALWAYS FASCINATED YOU. IT SMELLS so wonderful, and the people who smoke pipes seem so very different from those who smoke cigarettes and from those who smoke nothing at all. Over time you realize that perhaps they don't smoke from habit, the way cigarette smokers do, and that's a good thing. They smoke for some other reason. Maybe this reason you could understand, for the habit alone just never appealed to you.

You're 18 years old, and you've arrived home for the first time. Home is a campus apartment room, a double that you share with K. You and K., in your short relationship, have shared much. He's very much like you in many ways and very dissimilar in others. You're in Santa Cruz, California, walking through the Pacific Garden Mall one day when you chance upon a tobacco store and decide that you want to start smoking a pipe. K. shudders and follows you inside, grumbling that you won't be smoking it in *his* room, even though a weekend previous he had filled the place with friends and marijuana oxide. Just an experiment, you tell him, a mind opener. Everything in college is supposed to be a mind opener. Having no choice, he consents.

The experiment doesn't last long, however, as you simply can't keep the damned thing lit. It eventually goes the way of dryer socks and is lost in the shuffle, a good three-dollar pipe that's just simply disappeared. No matter. Once or twice you join your next-door neighbors in a cigarette while watching old Clint Eastwood movies, but not often. The smoke buzzes around in your head for a while, making things look strange, but coffee does pretty much the same thing. And besides, you've discovered alcohol.

Eventually, you discover love as well, and tobacco and alcohol fall by the wayside. At 19 you realize many things. You realize you've never dealt with your parents' divorce. You realize you don't know the first thing about sex. And you realize that being in love is very, very trying, a struggle that promises to take many years. And so you give up the experiment for a while and breathe a different intoxicant, one called *relationship.*

Two years and a lifetime later, things are quite different. You have a job driving a bus on campus, and it is springtime. Your relationship is waning, after lots of hard labor, and you're driving the last shift of the year, a Friday night after finals. Only two people ride your bus between five and ten P.M., and you and the other two drivers give up the ghost and park by the library and talk. This is the first time you have talked to someone other than your fiancee in a long, long time, and it is refreshing. One of the drivers has a pack of cigarettes, Camel Filters, and the three of you smoke cigarettes and talk for two hours about various things, and you feel good. You don't share your uncomfortable thoughts about your girlfriend. It never really seems like the right time.

A summer later, you finally break up with her. You move into an 1888 Victorian (Queen Anne, actually) in Capitola with D. and L., and things feel very strange. You haven't been honestly alone or had your own space in two years. This frightens you to death. You learn many things very quickly, you take on a third job, and you learn how to cook. Your apple pies are a cementing factor in your friendship with your roommates. You buy another pipe.

Many nights you spend walking around Capitola Village, sipping coffee with Irish Cream and trying to keep

your pipe lit. You buy an old corduroy jacket with patched sleeves, and you feel years older. When you turn 21 in December, a friend from home comes up and gets you very drunk in a bar in the Village, and when you stagger back to the house he passes out while you empty your gut in the bathroom and try to keep the tile from spinning.

But mostly you just wander. You have been a computer-software major for two years by now, but it doesn't seem as fulfilling or exciting as it did when you began. Things have changed, you reflect. You're not the person you were. On New Year's Eve, with all your roommates gone, you wander down to the Village and get mildly drunk on excellent wine and talk to the bartender about science fiction and wonder quietly why you never became a writer like you'd always dreamed you would. You walk back home in the freezing night, determined to make solid, practical New Years' resolutions in the morning, and shiver all night. The cold seeps into the house through cracks in the walls, and you awaken with frost on your beard.

You walk back home, determined to make solid, practical New Years' resolutions in the morning, and shiver all night.

Three months later you decide to be a musician. You're working three jobs and taking 18 units at school, but no matter; music sets your heart to pumping and your feet to tapping, and you reason that you may as well have a major in which you can enjoy the homework. You talk often with your ex-fiancee, who will have dated several men in your absence and will have chosen one to get engaged to. You feel a little left behind.

You get back in touch with an old friend from high school, H. (you call her E. sometimes, but that's a long story), who's been living an hour north in San Francisco for years but with whom you never really kept in contact. You realize that you love her, and that you have since you were 17. You dated her briefly then, but you never realized how strongly you felt about her. She's been engaged to another old friend from high school for as long as you've been at college, but they've broken up and she's moved to a tiny apartment in the Mission District with a friend from work. In addition to being a poetry student, she's a dispatcher for the San Francisco State University Police Department. You'll come to know a few of the police officers rather well during this summer, as you spend as much time in San Francisco as possible, waiting for her to decide that she loves you as much as you love her. Meanwhile, you work 80-hour weeks at two jobs and live in a dump on the Westside in Santa Cruz, your Capitola house being unavailable for the summer. You dream about her incessantly, obsessively. Of course, you puff on your pipe occasionally, and walk down to the beach with a glass of Highland single-malt whiskey, puffing and dreaming and agonizing. You realize that love is a many-splendored thing but difficult to deal with at times.

Also, you meet G. She is a roommate and sometime-friend of M., one of your truest friends. M. had to break the news to G. that he was gay while they were still a couple. After that they lived together, in the same room, for a year, neither of them dating anyone, she hating him, he hating himself. You realize that you have strange friends.

G. comes to visit you in your run-down Westside shack. She hasn't dated anyone since M., and the two of you decide to explore the possibility of your mutual attraction. This works out rather well, in a sense, as G. lives in Los Angeles, 400 miles away. You tell her about H., of course, wanting everything to be out in the open, wanting no illusions. She doesn't know that you smoke a pipe occasionally, or if she does it doesn't matter. You make beautiful love together on the floor and cook pasta afterward. This continues for much of the summer.

On September 15, a few days before school starts, you're at a James Taylor concert with H. You're old friends, after all, and she's appreciated your companionship this summer, what with the breakup and all. You sip hot chocolate and listen to "Fire and Rain," holding hands. You wonder if your heart is going to break open. She rubs your shoulders at intermission. You both laugh about a hole in your pants. You turn around to say something to her and look into her green eyes instead, speechless. Does she know what you're thinking? Will this finally be the time? You wonder, did you say that out loud? She leans toward your face, and her lips touch yours. Time stops. The world disappears, and all that exists is the young woman kissing you. James starts to sing again, but you don't notice. All you can see are her eyes, looking at you in wonder.

Her roommate has gone out of town for the weekend. You walk through the door to her tiny apartment and close it, following her into her bedroom. You've spent a summer's worth of sleepless nights here, pacing in your mind as she's slept next to you, getting up when your mind failed to find quiet, and drinking good San Francisco tap water sitting in your underwear in the kitchen, watching the city night from three floors up, waiting for the sun to rise. Those lonely mornings when you tried at poetry and failed at simple language have coalesced and built to this one moment, standing in her bedroom doorway, the cat rubbing your ankles. You kiss her neck and she moans softly. You take her in your arms. She pulls

you to the bed and unbuttons your shirt. You can hear your heart echoing off the walls, you can feel a cloud deep inside you about to burst into "Fire and Rain" as you remove her shoes. You spend another sleepless night in her apartment, but you never go to the kitchen.

Two days later you're back at work, back at home, sipping your whiskey and puffing occasionally on your pipe, staring at the wall with a profound sense of doom and destiny. You realize you live 78.4 miles from her house. You realize you have to break off whatever it is you have with G. You realize this won't be easy, but then, you reason, fate rarely is. You're getting better at keeping your pipe lit, however.

IT'S BEEN 22 YEARS AND YOU STILL HAVEN'T LEARNED to roll a decent cigarette; indeed, up to now you've never rolled one. You barely realize it. Your life is quite full these days. You practically give up pipe smoking. In fact, by December you've decided to give up school for a while. Music classes have been disillusioning and strenuous, and with H. living so far away you just don't have the energy for them any more. It's time for a break. You arrange to take a leave of absence from the university. Your academic advisor has seen this coming. He's seen you switch to three different majors, work as many as four jobs at once, and he understands your need for respite. *Come back when you're ready,* he says, signing a slip of paper. *Just make sure you come back.*

You can hear your heart echoing off the walls, you can feel a cloud deep inside you about to burst into "Fire and Rain" as you remove her shoes.

You spend January finishing your jobs. Then you pack your car and move to San Francisco. H.'s roommate had been wanting to move out anyway, to get closer to campus, so you and H. decide to make his room into a living room. You move your futon in. Your things are arranged in boxes all over the apartment.

You have three stacks of books as high as the ceiling. You have no job. You have no bookshelf. You have little money. Things are very strained. H. finally draws a line, and you're on the other side. You have been blind. You realize you've been living in a dream world with her, and the two of you share some very nasty words. For a week you retreat to the roof with a cigar in the evenings, waiting for a job to appear, wondering how things really are if they're not how they seem. You know that this is the end. So much for fate, you say to yourself. You try to reason out what has happened but get nowhere. The feeling of doom is very great.

You finally get a temporary job at the Pacific Stock Exchange. You come home one day to find her moving out. You lamely offer to help, and you hug her good-bye when she leaves dry-eyed. You go up to the roof and stare at nothing. As you sit in the window over the street three floors below and watch her drive away, you realize that *this* is fate.

You talk to her twice in the next week, and then not again for a long time. Things seem not black, but gray, lifeless as the pavement under your feet, lifeless as the gray people you travel to work with every morning on the subway. You begin to like the subway and the way it affects your mood. You resolve to stay single for a while.

You find a roommate. You interview several whose numbers you've gotten through a rental agency on Fillmore. You finally decide on one, M., and in March he moves in. He's a bartender on Union Street. A workmate of his, S., moves in a day later, needing a place to stay for a day or two while he finds a place to live. Two weeks later he's still there, and you and M. usher him into the household officially over beer and burritos in the Mission District. It's a little sticky, with three in so small an apartment, but you're all good natured, and it promises to keep the rent down.

Both M. and S. smoke heavily. S. sticks mainly to Camel Lights, while M. vacillates between Marlboros and a creative imported smoke called Death Cigarettes. They come in a black package with a skull-and-crossbones on the front and a large warning on the side: "If you smoke, stop. If you don't smoke, don't start." You find yourself borrowing cigarettes from them and loaning them your furniture. First a sleeping bag disappears, then a beanbag chair. The three of you live the raucous life of bachelors in San Francisco.

You take to hanging out in the restaurant/bar they both work in. In fact, after working as a cab driver for a short period of time, you find a job as a bartender back at a posh Italian place on Union Square, and suddenly you have fewer money problems. You don't make a lot, not enough to cover school debts nor pay off the Visa card you inflated on a road trip the previous year and never managed to deflate, but you make enough to buy your new friends drinks and tip them heavily when they work. You give them rides home at two o'clock in the morning, and eventually you get to know everyone in the bar on Union Street. It's a happy, social place. When you walk in, they find you a drink before you sit down. You realize slowly that you like this. As the months give way to summer, you find that you like working in your bar downtown, and that you like the crowd in the bar on Union Street.

You still only smoke occasionally, but with increasing frequency. You find you enjoy it. You find you meet

many new people, even if just for a moment, when they ask you for a light. You find that habits can make people brave, and while you don't want the habit you wonder if maybe you could learn the bravado.

Your first chance to practice comes when you meet D. She's a cocktail waitress at the bar and a nursing student. She has captivating eyes, a punchy attitude, and a fascinating swirl as she walks. She's neither dainty nor insincere. You get the feeling that she likes you, but you're not sure. S. would dearly love to set you up with her and tries, to no avail. Late one night, D. is complaining about a paper that is due soon (this is June), and you offer to give her a hand with it. It suddenly seems you were once a writing tutor. She offers to buy you coffee for your help, and a few mornings later the two of you spend six hours drinking one cup of coffee and talking about everything in the world except writing.

You make camp at Green River, and in a fit of creative logic you light an unfiltered Camel. The mosquitoes shy away.

Something about D. amazes you. You don't feel obsessed with her, you don't feel lost, you just feel—attracted. You like her very much. A few nights later the two of you discuss this, and you express your mutual attraction for seven hours until sunlight begins to show behind her window shades and you're both too tired to move. You're busy exploring the intricate details of the tattoo she has on her shoulder when the alarm goes off, and you both giggle at the rising sun.

Work simply flies by. Most evenings you spend working behind the bar, making cappuccinos and martinis and running out of ice, and then after work you maybe give someone a ride home and then head out to Union Street to visit M. and S. and, of course, D. You feel happy. Life is in balance.

D. smokes Marlboros or Camel Lights, but she wants to teach you how to roll your own cigarettes, just because she thinks you'd like it. It's that kind of thinking that makes you feel giddy. You wonder where all this is going to lead, you wonder when the fun will run out and the hard work begin. It doesn't.

When D.'s not around, S. takes over your training, though you just can't seem to get it. Pipes are so much easier, you explain. S. points out that you can't smoke a pipe in a bar and tries again to teach you. S. says that pipes make you look pretentious. He says *trust me, this'll make you look cool.* You compromise by rolling pipe tobacco into cigarettes.

Rule number 1: When you're learning something new, make things easy on yourself. Pipe tobacco is not the same as cigarette tobacco. S. explains this in great detail. You enjoy being difficult. You practice occasionally but not energetically. You're too much at peace for this.

Well, almost at peace. You're anxious to get back to school, to graduate. Your academic advisor's words come back to you. After careful consideration, you realize you could graduate with a degree in creative writing in a single year more. You decide to get away from the city, to go back to school in September. D. just smiles. She knew you were leaving. Her happiness for you makes you hate leaving. You are quietly torn.

But leave you do. You go to Utah for a week before school starts. You arrive in Moab, Gateway to Canyonlands, and realize that you're thinking more and more about D. You've talked to H. twice over the entire summer, and you realize how quickly things can change. H. is dating a married cop now. You wonder how many mistakes you've made living in the city and how many you made by leaving.

The waitress in the pub in Moab where you scrounge dinner looks a lot like D. You watch her for hours, half expecting her to come over with D.'s "Hey, how are ya" and sit down next to you. She never does. You stay until one in the morning, and then you wander to bed and sleep restlessly.

The next day you make cappuccino on a mountaintop and try to forget things, try to blend into the Utah wilderness. It doesn't work. You drive northwest and make camp at Green River and discover that you are being eaten alive by mosquitoes. They avoid the smoke from your campfire, however, and in a sudden fit of creative logic you light an unfiltered Camel. The mosquitoes shy away. You watch a thunderstorm move in with the coming evening. You dream all night with thunder in your ears and rain palpitating your tent, and you wake refreshed.

School begins uneventfully. You move in with old roommates, D. and S., and, interestingly enough, K., your friend from freshman year. This will be a good year, you mutter to yourself. You decide to smoke a lot less, even though you never smoked much. You try calling D., but the conversations seem stale. She never once calls you back. Eventually, you quit calling.

Then you meet J., who dated K. for a while. You and J. get to talking. She's 19, a soccer player, and nothing like you. You find this attractive. She keeps half a pack of Marlboro Lights in her car, in case she gets to feeling rebellious. You begin to get a familiar feeling of doom. She reminds you very much of a fiancee you had a lifetime or two ago. Before you realize it, you get heavily involved with J. You begin to puff your pipe on the side. You still don't know how to roll a decent cigarette. The fall and winter play themselves through, and things with

J. get volatile. Explosive. They finally end in February, and you realize that you feel like hell. You've got your bus-driving job back, but you're quite broke and your Visa is maxed out. Your self-image is maxed out. You haven't talked with anyone from San Francisco in months. You're wondering what life is going to be like after you graduate. You decide to move out of California then.

You've gotten to be quite close with B., another bus driver. B. is a fascinating guy. He smokes more than you ever have or will. He's sailed from Hawaii to California and spent a season in Thailand, and you begin to realize that that hardly describes him. He teaches you how to roll a decent cigarette.

This is when you finally learn. You don't realize it now, but it has taken the previous lifetime to get to this point. You have to be ready. You have to open your mind, or else that point never comes. You're out of money, about to graduate, incredibly burnt on relationships and life, but at least you can now roll a decent cigarette.

You take the paper gently in your hands, concentrating, and place a few pinches of tobacco inside, loosely, just enough to fill the paper. You realize that you always tried too hard before, and that you always used much more tobacco than you really needed to. Place your fingertips on the edges of the paper, and roll the ends of the paper together, gently now, and you can feel the mass inside beginning to take shape. Quietly fold the paper over with your thumbs, don't worry about the bits sticking out the ends, and roll the whole thing up. It's simple if you let it be. Touch the opposite side with your tongue, don't slobber, and hold it tight against the roll. If it's meant to stick, it'll stick. Remember that. If it doesn't, you can always start over. *Right on, man,* B. will say. *Good deal.*

And practice. Try doing it one-handed. And when you've graduated from college and haven't moved out of California, when you've gotten a job that doesn't pay enough and you're working too much and still bouncing checks to your landlord, when all your closest friends are a long-distance phone call away (except B., who's traveling through the South Pacific), and you just don't have the energy to get it together, remember that once in a while, given adequate concentration and practice and a little caring, you can roll a perfect cigarette. It's that simple. You were just making it difficult before.

JEFFREY OSIER jeffrey@cygnus.com

Is a senior editor and technical writer for Cygnus Support in Mountain View, California, in addition to being vice president of the Zen Internet Group. He has been writing without rest for 11 years; this is his first major non-technical publication. He says no one will ever find out how much of this story is true and how much is fiction.

PORCELAIN MORNING

BY MARTIN ZURLA

• Not all go gently into that good night. •

I CAN SEE THE GRAY SUN SLIDING SOFTLY THROUGH THE kitchen window, through the curtains, a gray, delicate sun hiding from the close morning hours. The table is covered with that same orange-brown cloth dotted with yellow daisies. The house is damp inside and the cloth is wet from spilled coffee and cream.

It wasn't so long, not so very long ago that we'd talk, make plans for vacations, for rides to the mountains and crystal beaches. We were gay, important with strong wishes and fancy schemes. And all the while we'd fool the whole world by sleeping late and drinking coffee mixed with cinnamon.

But there were phantoms then too. They'd creep out of the rotted woodwork and cracked, peeling enamel. I could see them. It was always in the early mornings as I sat at this kitchen table watching shadows dissolve and merge, rearranging themselves against the draped dishrag and hanging pot holders. I see them now.

Do you remember those mornings?

Wasn't it as if those early mornings were pressed tightly against our chests, sealed somewhere behind our most fragile flesh?

But the sun is hazy, almost crazy now.

Notice the difference?

Even death and damnation are phantoms, furtive branches knocking hard against our bedroom window blowing the lace curtains to the side, painting fairies and mysteries on the blank wall.

But like I said, I haven't had those dreams in such a long, very long time; not since the crows started raging

like tigers. Can you imagine crows; those black alabaster crows in such a city as this? Can you imagine other things too?

See the curtains, the ones I hung over the kitchen windows. You laughed when they fell down.

You laughed all the time.

Did I tell who's here? It's as if there is a small, delicate, very fragile child sitting on the outside windowsill gently pushing both his tiny white hands against the yellow-cream curtains; the curtains with the doily trim and rose-petaled borders. He almost speaks, or rather whispers, about his aging. He's saying to me and the loud smashing traffic that he's not a child at all, but a very old—no, *ancient* man, a circus oddity, a freak of Nature's whims and a victim of self-imposed despair. He tells me he's an Egyptian hieroglyphic image with webbed feet and snorting nostrils carved into eternity, almost timeless, bottomless. Do you hear his heart beating inside his hollow chest, rattling beside his seashell bones, shaking, pounding desperately inside his small, frail self? Listen as he whimpers against the irreligious morning.

Do you hear his heart beating inside his hollow chest, rattling beside his seashell bones, shaking, pounding desperately inside his small, frail self? Listen as he whimpers against the irreligious morning.

Do you remember those oh so white mornings?

And you used to be so white, so clean from our early-morning showers with the soap dish overflowing from the dripping faucet with the leaking metal tubes; those chrome-covered snakes that wound themselves out of the green porcelain tub. How they would snidely slide and sneak up the pink tiled wall spouting steam and heated holy water, water turning to venom, turning to haze that dissolved itself into the glass drain flowing down to the ocean and coming back again through the copper skins spewing forth crystal seaweed and monsters.

And you used to be so white.

Our lives battered together beside the morning rains each Saturday as we sat perched beneath the coffee-colored plastic tea shade. That's when our memories were cast in pale-blue consistency and marshmallow sailing ships. Oh, we were most irreverent then, in our memories; back then when pushcarts sang along Delancey Street as my steel-wool knickers knocked against the nicks and cuts from yesterday's very unholy stickball game. Oh, how we'd shout, "We shoulda won but didn't 'cause Michael Maloney is a lousy first baseman and Augie Augustus can't hit the broad side'a Sullivan Street."

When the Bowery played itself like a tuba and bass drum and Mulberry Street filled the wet afternoon with Italian ices piled thick like my mama's breasts; with vendors of all sorts selling this and that; and there was always Mister Silverman's tiny tailor shop where, if you got there early enough on Monday mornings to be his first customer, me and my father could bargain a suit or knickers down to a livable, most believable price. But what was a buck and a quarter back then, anyway?

Fifty years ago when there were lions and tigers in the streets; he-wolves and she-wolves marching through the sewers and hiding behind trash cans and garden walls; when everyone smelled of onions and roses; when grandmothers would breathe heavily into our faces filling the air with freshly-cut peppers and staining our souls with crushed garlic; when we'd laugh and sing.

And you were so white.

But now the coffee is cold, cold from sitting unattended. It's black this morning as the sun's haze pushes, tugs aside the billowing curtains painting itself against the kitchen walls and smog-stained window panes.

And I am old now.

Desperate we were then; knocking ourselves against each other; entrapped in constant contact; chest beating beside each other until our brains fell out and our souls collided. Desperate, oh so damn desperate we were about each other; so connected in our frail lovemaking, in our childhood imaginations, our endless procrastination about ourselves.

Yes, you use to be so white in the mornings.

But I am old now; missing you more than my youth, more than my pale, frigid self pressed against my aching bones.

Oh, why did you go, your cancer taking you too, much too early in our timelessness. It crept through your body tearing your soul to shreds, my heart to pieces.

I am old now in time, in years, an old man that can no longer live this life without you.

And I watched as you lay, years and years decaying before my eyes, drifting away in front of my heart; your lungs rasping, grasping for breath. And then they covered you yesterday and took you away. And I am an old man now, have seen too much. For 50 years, we spun together, fastened together as no other king and queen. And your going wasn't your fault, not really. Yet I hate you, damn you for it as I now damn this cold, hard, porcelain morning; and your cancer, your cheeks melting with age and death; your frail, sweet flesh flying from your loins.

And I am an old man now anyway, and that in itself is a sin, a desperate mistake. My head lies here on our kitchen table banging itself against the soiled tablecloth,

against the angels that sang at your funeral, at your grave still warm, at your moisture wet against my sighs, my promises, all those promises never really kept, only wished for deep in the bottom of the evening.

Will we pass in our deaths, you going your way, and me mine? Fifty years a twosome, a gruesome together memory never forgiving our separate ways.

And now I take myself up into the winter lightening, out into the blazing fires of my constant damnation. Down, diving deep inside the rotted graves and marble headstones I see your eyes forever fled past my heartbeat, my life that will be no more.

MARTIN ZURLA pecado@netcom.com

Is the founder and Artistic Director of the Raft Theatre in New York City. His play *Old Friends* won the Forest A. Roberts Playwrights Award; his play *February, The Present* won the Stanley Drama Award. He has twice received the Theater of Renewal Award, and twice won the Colorado University Playwrights Competition. He recently published a series of one-act plays titled *Aftermath: The Vietnam Experience* (Open Passages).

THE EFFORT

BY RICHARD CUMYN

• Humanity may find that nearly anything can be recycled, if it tries hard enough. However, hope must be made fresh every time. •

THE WOMAN FELT THE MEAGER HEAT DRAINING UP past her through the hole cut in the ceiling of the corroded tank. She crouched as she called, cocking her head to one side to see.

"Ian, I know you're up there with him! You get yourself down here. Father, let the boy come down—he'll catch his death up in that place with you."

The dirty soles of two bare feet appeared in the hole and the boy dropped like a cat.

"It's not cold at all," he said. "I put a tarp over me and we lit a real fire lamp. The air up there feels good inside me when I breathe."

She did not reply, but took him by the hand and guided him out of the chamber ahead of her through a crawl space. Doubled over, they hurried down a short sloping tunnel that opened into a room with floor and walls of gray concrete.

"You missed the scavenger pack again," she said as she drew a curtain across the tunnel entrance. "Your group left without you."

"He was telling me about the different smells. I could feel them on my tongue, even."

"You hush now. They're going to seal off that silly hole of his and put in nutrispores. He'll have to sleep down here again where it's safe."

"Spores. I'm sick of spores." His grandfather had been telling him about meat with names like *chicken* and *beef.* Grandfather's favorites were roast pork and bacon that sizzled and spat on the fire. Fire was hot.

"He's filling your head with nonsense. You pick up your gear and get along. They took Getty Passage to where the hot spring comes up at Exxon Hub. They're working at the new site."

The boy ducked his head into a large cardboard box that was lined up on its side with a dozen others. They were each reinforced with wood frames and insulated with hair cuttings rolled in newsprint. He pulled out an army-green canvas duffle bag with a shoulder strap held by a thick metal clasp. The bag was only slightly smaller than he was. His mother smoothed his hair.

"Why can't I stay with him today?" he said halfheartedly.

"American Express, you blind bat. Look!" He pushed the boy's head down until his surgical mask touched the corner of a credit card poking out of the shredded clot.

"You may be sick of them, but spores is all we got left. You got to get along now and do your bit for the Effort. Go find us a mine."

Ian shouldered his bag and crossed the hard floor to a dry stone cistern with a ladder lying across its mouth. A fragile light emanated from within.

"Be careful," she said. "Stay where it's lit. There've been sightings down that way recently."

He lowered the ladder, gave his mother an unsmiling marionette's wave, and disappeared.

Recessed in the walls of the ancient storm sewer, pots of phosphorescent nutrispores lit Ian's way. He stopped to pluck three tendrils off one of the plants that grew in a thick bed of lime-green moss. The tiny lights at their ends, weaker than fireflies, diminished as he sucked the moisture from the colorless tubes, then chewed them as he might straw, each tendril in turn hanging from the corner of his mouth. He pictured Huckleberry Finn drifting free on the Mississippi, his straw hat shading his head from the sun like his grandfather had told him.

"Now Jim," he said aloud, "I don't see that you being a flesh-eating savage prevents us from traveling together on this here raft. You just mind your manners."

"Find your calm center, boys, and concentrate. Slow, even breathing. Heart rate down to 50. Your culling and sorting must be controlled. Conserve, boys, conserve."

He found his work group where a new dump had been unearthed near the junction of three tunnels. He saw burly Sedge and bookish Morrison, his best friends at school, and Mr. Dowser, the pack leader, who had been his teacher two years before in the fifth grade. Nine boys in all were spaced along a curving wall of compacted refuse. The contents of plastic bags seeped from the green, orange, and white skins. Newspaper stacks, rusted metal cans, and flattened soft-drink bottles made synthetic strata.

"Helmet and mask, Ian, come on. The Effort is impoverished by your tardiness," said Dowser, skeletal and translucent in short sleeves and tartan kilt.

Ian knew the spiel by heart. The Effort depended on the labor of every person to scavenge enough synthetic or petroleum-derived plastics each day to keep the nutrispores alive. The spores had been adapted from marine environments at the end of the '40s; the hybrid nutrispore was found to live symbiotically with an edible moss. Its bacteria decomposed complex polymers into a fertile mulch for the moss, while its light triggered photosynthesis. In return, the spores sucked sustenance from decaying moss culture.

In the beginning, after fossil fuels were outlawed and before reserves were exhausted, crude petroleum products were fed directly to the nutrispores. Like birch bark on a campfire, the spores had consumed these voraciously, giving off short-lived, garish light and oxygen-rich breath. Plastic decomposed slower, giving weaker light, thinner air and tasteless greens. But it was all that was left.

Dowser strode to the end of the line, where a boy had just thrown a handful of disposable diaper wadding onto his discard pile. A fat rat scurried between the man's planted boots.

"American Express, you blind bat. Look!" He pushed the back of the boy's head down until his green surgical mask touched the corner of a credit card poking out of the shredded clot.

"Dowser's dick glows in the dark," Sedge whispered to Ian beside him.

"He promised us tomorrow after school off if we bring in 70 kilos," said Morrison. "He said the girls' pack is bringing in that much every day."

"Is that you talking, Morrison? You know it wastes oxygen," said Mr. Dowser loud enough for all to hear. "Find your calm center, boys, and concentrate. Slow, even breathing. Heart rate down to 50. Your culling and sorting must be controlled. Conserve, boys, conserve."

"Waste not, want not," Sedge mocked under his breath.

Ian shivered as he picked out pieces of green garbage bag and diaper lining and added them to his duffle bag. The smaller the pieces, the better; bulky soft drink bottles would have to be cut into mulch by hand.

As he culled, Sedge whispered conspiratorially about the various transgressions he had committed that day. He had, for example, urinated freely on a nutrispore bush, its glow brightening briefly with the added fuel. Ian thought the blatant waste of recyclable water was outrageous.

"Geraldine was picking at the other end of the tunnel. You should've seen her face when she got an eyeful."

Ian's face reddened at the sound of her name.

"I told her you were still a *hunka-hunka burning love* for her," said Sedge. Morrison and another boy snickered at the ancient expression, from Ian's grandfather's time. Ian pushed the leering Sedge away from him and walked away from the excavation.

"I have to down-respirate, Mr. Dowser," he said and rolled onto a cot set up beside a portable water purifier.

"Ducking again, Ian?"

"No, sir, I was hyperventilating. You said—"

"I said to find your meditative center and concentrate on holding it. You're avoiding work detail and you know it. If you aren't devoted to the Effort…"

"But I am, sir. I am. Sometimes, I don't know, I lose touch."

"Would you rather fend for yourself at Surface where it's 60 below and nothing grows?"

"No."

"It's that grandfather of yours," Dowser continued. "He has poisoned your sense of responsibility to the Effort. After all, he was alive back then. The decadence of his generation is as much to blame for this as anyone's. His people lost the sun."

"That's not true," said Ian angrily, sitting up. "My grandfather was a Green. He fought in the Counterdoom

Movement against the Industrial Bloc. Just because he's old doesn't mean—"

"Quiet, boy. You've said enough. You're using my air."

Ian glared at the man for a moment, then stood up, looking past him to the wall of centuries-old garbage. The other boys, their gray faces shiny with perspiration, had turned to watch. In their eyes, Ian saw defeat and the bloodless, phosphorous hatred for Dowser, for the layers of trash that had once been warmed by the sun, for the ever-expanding labyrinth that led nowhere.

"Now get back to work, slacker."

"Leave him alone," said Sedge. "He was only resting to conserve oxygen."

"We'll tell them the truth. We'll say the cannibals got them. You know that the bodies are never found." "You killed him." "It was him or us."

"You shut your trap, you little weasel, or I'll have you both on report for wasting air! Don't you realize how close we are to extinction? Don't you know that *you* are putting the whole colony in jeopardy? You boys are the survivors. In your hands lies the continuation of humanity. Think of it!"

Dowser paused to gauge the effect of his words on the group. Their eyes on him were wary.

"Back to culling, lads. For the Effort."

"Why?" asked Morrison in a voice like shattering glass.

"Why? *Why?!"* Color rose in Dowser's face. "I don't have to tell you why!"

"Why?" echoed Sedge who triggered a childish chant in the rest of them. "Why? Why?"

"Be quiet!" cried Dowser.

The chant careened crazily in the low dirt passage. The boys began to circle Dowser, raising their voices each time they asked the question in unison, intensely pleased with themselves. Suddenly Dowser grabbed Morrison by the hair and flung him into the garbage wall where he fell stunned. The boys stopped and were silent.

"Worthless lot! I should leave you all here for the cannib—"

Dowser dropped face-down as Sedge clubbed him at the base of the skull with a length of metal pipe. Still as statues, the boys watched his naked, blue-veined haunches twitch, exposed where the tartan had ridden up around his waist, until a boy's scream sent them scattering down the dark passages. Ian stopped when he thought he had gone a safe distance—he looked behind him to see Dowser and Morrison's bodies being dragged away into the blackness.

Sedge ran up to him. "They're supper now. Come on!"

"People will ask questions," said Ian.

"We'll tell them the truth. We'll say the cannibals got them. You know that bodies are never found."

"You killed him."

"It was him or us."

Sedge looked triumphant in the nutrispore light. The sound of fleeing feet receded. At once Ian's mind was large and dark and resonant with sadness. The answer filled him.

"We shouldn't have done it," he said. "There was no call for it."

"You're going to snitch, aren't you?" said Sedge.

"No," said Ian, feeling the air grow thin.

"Just the same, how do I know I can trust you?"

"Just leave me alone," Ian said and he began to walk away, feeling Sedge's eyes on him.

"We're all fresh meat, Ian! We're all just biding our time!" he heard Sedge call after him. "It was him or us!"

The other boys knew also, but they wouldn't tell. And Ian couldn't make Sedge believe he wouldn't tell. His stomach clenched with the knowledge that he might not be able to stop himself.

Ian called to his mother for the ladder and climbed back up through the cistern. Seated at the communal table was a woman dressed in a green jumpsuit.

"You're back early," said his mother. "This is my son, Ian."

"He let us go early," said Ian.

"Where is your duffle bag?" asked the officer.

"We're not finished at that site. We'll be back tomorrow."

"It should have been locked up. Every gram of plastic translates into another 20 minutes of survival."

Ian turned to his mother. "Where's grandfather?"

"Where do you think?" she said, glancing upward. As her son turned toward the septic tank passage, she added, "Did you bring anything back?" The officer glanced at Ian's mother suspiciously. "For the household spores. You won't find contraband here, Miss. Ever since his father disappeared, Ian's been the provider."

"I'm sorry. I forgot," said the boy. "May I go up?"

"This officer has come to inspect for heat seepage. I've told her all about his idiotic hole. You get the old fool to come down, Ian."

"You'll be held accountable for excessive loss, of course," said the woman.

Ian left the women making arrangements for the hole to be sealed. He scrambled along the tunnel to the tank and called up for his grandfather. A rope ladder dropped down. As he pulled himself into the igloo, the cold startled his lungs and he ducked quickly under the pile of

fabric and canvas surrounding the old man. His hat, eyebrows, and beard were encrusted with frost. The blocks of the round snow house were outlined in the light.

"Full moon tonight, Ian."

His grandfather had told him about the natural satellite, but whenever he had searched for it at night through the igloo's air hole, the cloud cover had made it impossible to detect.

"How can you tell?"

"I can feel it, boy, in the blood."

"I want to live up here with you. I hate it down there. You can't breathe."

"But I don't live here. This is just the place where I have chosen to die."

"No," said the boy without passion, unimpressed by his denial. Ian knew that the old man was feeble. "I'll die with you, then. It's right. They're going to cover the hole."

"It can't be right, Ian. We don't put aside life before it is time."

"But I'll never see the sun. I'll never swim in the blue-green ocean at Lauderdale. My skin will never turn brown." He rolled up his sleeve and slapped his forearm. The outline of his palm remained pink on fish-belly white for a few seconds.

"Bundle yourself well and help me outside. I want to show you something."

Ian put on the clothing that had been saved so carefully for so long: fur-lined boots, seal skin pants, thick mittens, a long hooded coat fringed in fur, and a leather mask that had a thin slit for the eyes. He followed his grandfather at a crawl through the narrow snow entrance. Outside in a silvery dusk he helped the old man to stand. Ian squinted to adjust to the brighter light and inhaled shallow, painful breaths through his mask. Although his fingers and toes began to tingle with warning of the intense cold, the open space all around him made him giddy. He opened his arms wide and spun in place until he fell backwards in the snow. His grandfather laughed along with him.

"This is not the end, Ian. Feel it. Feel the far-off pulse of the earth. Its lungs and heart are not stopped forever."

Ian pressed his rabbit skin mittens palm-down on the crust. It was true. It was there. He could feel the throb, so different from the scurrying of human rats under the ground.

"We killed someone today, grandfather. I don't want to go back."

No answer came. "Grandfather?" he repeated.

The old man had dropped to a cross-legged sitting position facing him. His eyes were closed.

"I can feel the sun, Ian," he whispered. "It's time."

Ian ran and embraced him, stretched out to cover his whole length, frantic to revive him with his own body heat. He struggled to his feet and began to haul his grandfather backwards, mukluk heels dragging, toward the igloo. When he slipped and fell, he opened the old man's mouth and blew warmed air into his lungs. Exhausted after only a few minutes, he stopped.

"I will stay with you," he vowed.

As he said this the cloud cover parted and the full icy light of the moon flooded the ground. He held up his hand against it, squinting. His body began to shake with cold. His feet and hands were useless blocks. In the moonlight, his grandfather's face was ghastly. Then, as quickly as the light had come, it was dark again.

He heard his mother's voice, that tired, resigned whine honed to an argumentative edge. She alternated between calling for him and demanding something of someone near her. A flickering blue light came from inside the igloo where Ian heard the clanging of metal on metal. Through the shelter's hole he saw a shower of red sparks. It must be serious, he thought, for them to use a combustion torch like that. There was still time, then, if they were using fire.

Slowly, with the light of the awful, enduring moon still filling his head and the feeling draining from his extremities, Ian crawled on hands and knees back toward the igloo.

RICHARD CUMYN aa038@cfn.cs.dal.ca

Is the author of the short story collection *The Limit of Delta Y Over Delta X* (Goose Lane Editions, 1994). He lives and writes in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

SEA CHANGE

BY SUSAN STERN

• *"I hear the songs the mermaids sing*
and know they sing not for me." •

THEY SAY AROUND HERE THAT DROWNED MEN ARE stolen by water spirits who take them to dwell in underwater castles forever. They say manatees have the souls of mermaids. They say that a woman's blood, dropped into water, summons selkie boys who beget children on human women, leaving mother bereft and child of neither earth nor sea. They say many things. Some of them are true.

They say around here that once a year, on Midsummer Night's Eve, selkies who are seals the rest of the time come up out of the water and take the form of women. And they sit on the rocks, combing their hair. And if you find one of their discarded seal skins and take it home with you and hide it, then the selkie is bound to you until she finds her skin. And she may even love you a little, but she never stops looking for her skin. And she always finds it. It may take her a hundred years, but she finds it, and returns to the sea. Always.

Words are a human thing. I never needed to call anything by a word until I was human. When I saw my child, and they lay her on my breast, I had a word. I called her beautiful. And perfect.

Tonight I have a human body. Tonight I have human legs, human hands. Tonight I will walk on my human feet to the place I lived as a human, and I will leave a gift for my child. A gift from the sea, for my child.

Words are a human thing. I never needed to call anything by a word until I was human. When I saw my child, and they lay her on my breast, I had a word. I called her beautiful. And perfect. But the midwife said to my husband, *That child will never belong to you. Look at her hands.* So we looked, and he saw that they were strung, finger to finger, with webs so thin that the light shone through. *Cut them*, he said. *I want my child to be perfect*. So they cut them. I cried when they cut the webs.

Perfect, he said. And she grows more perfectly beautiful every day, in her human body. But I have swum along the margin of the shore and listened to him walking and talking, and seen into the child's mind, and her mind is as empty of thoughts as a seal's. She rocks in the fireplace with her hands over her face, and she cries to be let outside into the rain. She yearns for the water. He won't let her near the sea. Because he's convinced himself that I drowned. I watch him walking up and down the beach, grieving, looking out over the water—for what, he does not know. Yet he knows. Deep down, outside what he's willing to remember, he knows.

These four years since I walked back into the sea, since I found my skin and walked back into it, I have felt like a cord stretched between that house and the sea, neither of sea nor land anymore. My people don't hold on to their children, and never was a selkie born who knew the meaning of the word *love*. But my child is back there and I feel her all the time, until I am stretched so thin I know I will break.

I should have hated my husband. He hid my skin and wouldn't tell me where it was, because he didn't want me to go. So I was trapped inside this human body, with my animal mind and my human mind slowly coming together until I had no idea what I was anymore.

He had a word. A human word. Love. And at first my mind was an animal's mind, empty except for instinct, to eat, to sleep, to *escape,* but he filled it slowly with this word, this love, until the word took shape and became a soul.

We used to make love on the beach, out here in the summer. This human thing, this making love—how can you make love if it isn't there? How can you unmake it if it is?

Regret. Regret is a human thing. Never was a selkie born who could regret, but I am no longer…

One day he walked into the beach house, and I was sitting with my hands against the fireplace. Listening. I could almost hear it calling me—my skin—until he walked in here with his big, clumsy human feet. He took me in his arms and said, *Why, my love? Why do you want to leave?*

I couldn't answer him; not then. But later there were three stones missing from the fireplace, and I at the door with two sealskins in my arms… I slapped him. He tried to take them from me and I slapped him. And while he stood there, hardly able to believe it, I snatched up the skins and ran. But I stopped at the gate and I said a cruel thing to him. *I almost loved you,* I told him. *I would have stayed, if only you'd have let me leave.*

Four summers ago tonight I walked into the sea, and the child I left him is five. Five, and she has no human words, no human thoughts. They have a word.

They have given him a choice, and tomorrow he must make a decision. You can't keep that child at home, they said. She's barely human. And he walks up and down the beach, agonizing over the decision he's already made, because he doesn't want her to go. Because he knows, deep down, that she is no human thing. That she has no words because she never had them. That her mind is filled with the sound of the sea and the voices of seals, and that her soul is tearing itself to pieces like the white waves breaking on the black rocks. But I have seen that the webbing has grown back on her hands. Her perfect hands.

Tonight, this midsummer night's eve, I will walk on my human legs up to the house where I lived as a human, and I will leave the gift that confirms his decision, what he knows he must do, what I should have done.

The second skin.

SUSAN STERN

Lives at Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, where she collaborates in the creation of CD-ROM products about animals. She's sure she'll find the other sealskin one day soon.

BAD SNEAKERS

BY P.G. HURH

• It's 11 o'clock. Do you know where your souls are? •

I LOOK DOWN AT MY NEW SHOES WHILE I ABSENTLY finger the transistor radio in the breast pocket of my army jacket. The shoes are new, but they're cheap—red canvas with white rubber soles. I push off my toes and bob up and down a couple of times. I can hear the shoes squeak slightly on the wet pavement. They're bad sneakers, but they're the best I've had in a long time.

The rain's coming down in a light drizzle, pulling smog out of the sky and sprinkling it on my back in little patters. It feels good.

I look up Canal Street and see a few others like me shambling toward the station. I sigh and start on my way again, still fiddling with the radio. It won't do any good, I know. I sold the battery—that's how I could afford these shoes. Twenty dollars for a nine-volt battery. Seems like a lot to me.

The New Lifers gave me the radio this morning. I was sitting in front of the Hancock, legs spread out in front of me with the heating sun just beginning to make it uncomfortable. The rich couple walked toward me, arms around each other. I would have said they were strolling, but they also had a purpose in their stride, like they had someplace to go but were in no hurry to get there. The woman was gazing around as they walked, looking at the tops of buildings, window awnings, deserted storefronts, even out toward the lake. She was taking it all in.

Her partner was smiling too, but instead of looking around at the city, he was watching her face. It was like they were out for a walk in the park, instead of slogging along through deserted city streets on a hot Sunday. Both of them were dressed all in white, the man sweating in a crisp suit with turned up collar and the woman floating in a gauze-like dress.

"Here," he said, offering the small brown radio. "I won't be needing this where we're going." He waved it around a little in front of my face and finally dropped it onto my lap. I snorted, trying to find humor in his condescension.

I remember the way the man flipped the antique plastic radio over in his hand. He looked at it with fondness and tossed it back into the air. It turned over slowly and smacked back into his hand. They were close enough for me to hear what the man said then. He said, "I don't think they'll ever reproduce that feeling in the AbovePlane."

"What feeling is that?" his companion asked.

"That feeling I get when I flip Uncle John's radio in the air, watch it turn over and then snap back into my hand." He flipped the radio again, emphasizing the snap. "You just can't reproduce that."

"Have faith, dear. The Lord works in mysterious ways."

I thought that they hadn't even noticed me laying there even though they had to step out of their way to avoid me. That's the way it is with New Lifers. I've seen them before, headed towards the new pier out on Lake Michigan, the AbovePlane Odeon. Especially about a week ago—they came in droves. All wearing their white outfits and strolling along looking out above everything and everyone. They were determined, it seemed, to only see the pleasant things in life. They looked right over us street folk.

I was wrong about this couple, though. As they passed me, the man turned around and looked down. "Here," he said, offering the small brown radio. "I won't be needing this where we're going." He waved it around a little in front of my face and finally dropped it onto my lap. It bounced off my leg and clattered to the sidewalk. I stared up at the white-suited figure, and he spoke again. "Guess *you've* already given up all your material possessions."

"What? That? Ain't worth nothin'." Jack's speech hesitated and then he turned around slowly. "Hey," he said. "That thing got a battery?"

He turned and quickly trotted to catch up with the woman.

I snorted, trying to find humor in his condescension. "Hey!" I yelled after them. But they disappeared around the corner, and I laughed to myself.

It started to rain then.

I'M WALKING ALONG THE SIDE OF THE OLD NORTH Western train station now, my bad sneakers squeaking me forward. I picture the image of the front doors even before I turn the corner. In my mind they're as they used to be: panes of flat glass and flashy windows, two sets of revolving doors on either side.

My feet stutter to a halt when I see the piles of junk jammed in the doors. Cardboard and cold plastic sheets have turned them into a pair of grimy hutches, homes for the homeless. But the homes are empty, builders and occupants perhaps the promise of a better place, as I am.

I pass on by the mess and push through one of the flat glass doors. Cool air hits my wet clothes and a chill runs through me. I shiver like a wet dog and let go of the door handle. Ahead of me are two escalators. It is impossible to tell which is going up and which is headed down, since neither is moving. Several people, wet and tattered like me, climb the steep corrugated stairs. Some are clutching possessions close to their bodies, others empty-handed.

As I watch, an older woman with a green scarf pulled about her head stumbles. The man behind her hesitates for a moment and sets his wrinkled brown paper bag on the escalator handrail. He steadies the woman with his arms. They both begin to move up together.

The bag slides down the handrail for a couple of feet and then falls off the edge. When it hits the floor, the helping man doesn't even look behind him.

Around the base of the escalators are gathered various junk vehicles. Shopping carts, small wagons, and even a gardening wheelbarrow clutter the floor. I pick a route around these and start up the unmoving stairs. As I climb, I look over the handrail to see how far the paper bag had dropped. Pretty far.

My hand goes for the radio in my pocket. I look at it and give it a flip. Without the battery, it doesn't quite have the same snap. I place it on the handrail, expecting it to slide but it doesn't. I almost leave it behind, but then, on second thought, I slip it back into my pocket. Maybe it will be of some use in the suburbs. I give the silent dial a turn and wonder if I really should have sold the battery at Jack's.

The owner of the pawn shop was an acquaintance of mine—he had given me a good price for my wedding ring. But when I entered the shop this morning, radio in hand, he just glared at me and walked quickly behind his fenced in counter.

"Hey, Jack!" I grinned.

"What is it, Charlie?" he growled as he stretched to jam some package he was carrying to a higher shelf.

"Got an antique radio for you, if you want it."

Jack turned and peered out through the chain-link. "What? That?" he exclaimed roughly. "That ain't worth nothin'. Ain't nothin' worth nothin' anymore."

"Jack, man. This thing must be 40 years old, and listen." I switched on the unit. "It still works!" The radio put out a weak fizzle of static and then latched onto a transmitting frequency. The excited words of an evangelist jockey backed by the vibrating notes of a pipe organ sprang forth, loud in the dusty shop.

"…believe it. The one true Word of our Lord. Give up your earthly possessions, let go of your devilish greed and jealousy! Come join the AbovePlane, the New Lifers! All are equal in the eyes of God…"

I flicked the radio off. Jack had turned his back on me and returned to his inventory. "Not even a couple of bucks, Jack?"

"Nope, not for that—" Jack hesitated, and then he turned around slowly. "Hey," he said. "That thing got a battery?"

I turned the radio over in my hand. "Course it does. I told you it was ancient, didn't I?" I snapped open the battery compartment and pulled out the small nine-volt

rechargeable. I let the battery dangle by its leads so Jack could take a look.

"How much you want for it?"

"Twenty bucks."

"You got it." He slid a 20-dollar bill under the security fence.

"You don't even want the radio?"

"Nope, just this." Jack waved the battery at me and then turned to store it away in a drawer behind him.

"Why, Jack?"

"Don't know. Just a hunch I got, Charlie."

Maybe I should have held out for more. But then, I didn't have the slightest clue that he'd even want that lousy battery. It's always been like that all my life. I'm not a stupid guy. I just can't make people out. I can't figure out what makes them do what they do. Generally, I just follow along and do what everyone else is doing. I figure they must have a pretty good reason.

Not Jack, though. He always did his own thing. Maybe that's why he still runs his shop here, in the middle of an empty city.

I turned to leave, but a thought struck me and I walked back to the counter. "Hey, Jack? You ever think about this AbovePlane stuff?"

"What, Charlie?" Jack let out a sigh and stuck his pen behind his ear. "What now?"

"You know. All this New Lifer stuff… do you buy it?"

"Fuck, Charlie. That's just a bunch of bullshit to get us to migrate out of the city." Jack leaned back and slid a skinny leg over the seat of a high stool. "Way I see it, Charlie, all that talk about leaving your possessions behind? It don't make any sense. In that AbovePlane place, they're supposed to reproduce the world in its entirety, only 'lectronically. You don't really even have a body, I guess. Seems to me, Charlie, any world, 'lectronic or not, is going to have possessions of some kind. There'll still be the rich and the poor, the know-alls and know-nots, the pretty and the ugly. Thing is, son, human is human."

"In that AbovePlane place, they're supposed to reproduce the world in its entirety, only 'lectronically. You don't really even have a body, I guess. Thing is, human is human."

I thought about what he said for a moment, but before I could reply he lifted his leg off the stool and made like he was going to walk into the darkness of his back office. He hesitated though and half turned to me.

"My wife joined the New Lifers," Jack said without emotion. "She went in on the first Wave. Haven't heard from her since. Maybe she's in some kind of automatic heaven, maybe not. All I know is that all that talk about whole suburbs joining up and leaving their homes has got to be hogwash. Some political media shit just to push all of us out to some government project or something…" Jack turned to face me completely. "You heading out to the 'burbs too, Charlie?"

He must have read the hesitation on my face because, without me even saying anything, he screwed up his face and said, "Can't you see the hole they're digging just for you?"

When I didn't reply, he just turned back around and disappeared into his dingy office. I wanted to ask him who *they* were, but I didn't want to upset him further. I quickly shoved the twenty in one of my pockets and headed for the front door. *That Jack,* I thought. *He sure does his own thing.*

THERE'S ONLY TWO TRAINS IN THE ENTIRE STATION. From far away, they look like toys. But as I near, they fill my vision and I can't see more than one car without turning my head. The train doors are wide open and warm yellow light spills out of each one. In several doorways I can see dark human figures.

I hurry to the nearest train door and step up. Inside, I press past two people and climb up the stairs. I find an empty seat and then look down at the people on the lower level.

For the most part, they're like me. Clothes layered on, stain over stain. Skin patchy with dust. Faces somber, yet proud. But as I look closer, I also see the differences. The woman with a nervous tic at the corner of her eye. A young man in sandals reading a thick and torn book. Two children in a shoving match for the window seat. Me in an orange stocking knit cap and a green army jacket fiddling with a defunct transistor radio.

As I scan the passengers, I catch the eye of another rider. His eyes seem to light up as he recognizes me. It's Eddie from over by the stadium. He nods his head towards me and a clump of greasy black hair shifts, revealing a widening bald spot. He smooths it over and grins up at me. Then he turns to the window as the train shudders and starts to move.

I spent a whole night under the northeast ramp of the Loop with Eddie once. It had been raining and neither of us wanted to get wet, plus we had a bottle of Tickle Pink. We spent the night getting drunk and as we got drunk, we talked about what it was like. It was Eddie's idea that as you got drunk, you went into your own little world just a little bit different than everyone else's. That way you saw the same things except differently than you did when you were sober. He called this creating your own reality. He also said that when you got drunk with another person

you both could talk yourselves into the same little reality. Eddie seemed really sure of this and it seemed to make sense to me, so I told him to go ahead and create our own little reality just for us, just for that night… and he said he already had.

The train is going straight through to the end, I think to myself after about 15 minutes. Train stations rush right by and the train never slows. *Shouldn't take much longer to get to the end of the line. Probably only another 15 minutes or so.*

I feel like I should be nervous, not knowing what's waiting for me once we get there. But I'm not. I look around at the other passengers and they seem to give me strength. *We're all in this rushing metal cylinder together,* their faces seem to say. Even Tourettes Tommy over in the balcony seat across from me has silenced his ravings for this ride, his lips just barely moving.

The train slows after a time and I get up from my seat and move toward the exit with the others. Someone shoves me from behind just as the train groans to a stop and my nose pushes up into the sweaty neck of a large woman in front of me. I turn to yell at the person who shoved me, but when I see it's just a kid I smile and move forward with the others.

By the time I'm off the train most of the passengers have scattered from the Geneva station and are wandering toward the dusky outlines of frame houses and trees. The air blows clear and cool on me and I find that my jacket has dried during the trip. I step out off the concrete platform and walk briskly to the glow of a corner street light. Others pass me, looking at the large houses that line the wide avenue. Trees hang their branches low over us and rustle in the wind.

I see Eddie on the porch of an old, majestic house. He knocks tentatively and, when no one answers, opens the door and disappears inside. The glow of an electric lamp flickers on from inside and shines out onto the porch. I look away and head further up the avenue. Others are approaching the silent homes, some in groups of four or five. The light rattle of knuckles on wood joins the surrounding chorus of crickets as they knock and enter. No one is here to protest this mass immigration.

I walk away from the others and eventually turn down a few side streets until I'm walking in a more middle-class neighborhood. Small, older houses line both sides of the street and just beyond the houses on my right is a wide river with trees along its bank. I can hear it gurgle up against its banks softly.

A few of the houses are occupied, or at least I think they are. Some of the windows are lit up and I can even hear a few voices floating from off the front porches. The voices sound content.

I stop walking and look around me. The house on my right seems empty, lawn grass long with river weeds sticking up even higher. Its windows are dark and small. I can barely see them in the evening's dim light. It seems like a nice place. Perhaps a little damp so near the river.

I walk up to the front door and knock. It seems I can tell from the hollow echo that no one is home. I enter, my hand searching for a light switch on the immediate right. I find one and flip it up. The room lights up with a yellow glow from the hanging light in the small foyer.

I step through the foyer and find a small living room with brown furniture. Covering half of the near wall is a telescreen. Over it are two interlocked silver crosses and a small engraved sign reading *We can only become one on the AbovePlane.* And underneath the screen, *Ascension to the New Life is only assured by the Departure of the Old Life.*

I quickly check through the other rooms, finding some signs of stale life in each one—a smear of bluish toothpaste on a white towel, a black, shiny slipper peaking out from under the bed. In each room hangs the interlocked crosses and a small blank telescreen.

The screen displays a pair of gargantuan locked crosses. They rotate slowly in three dimensions. Under the symbol is a rapidly increasing nine digit number followed by the words *Souls Saved By The New Life*.

The refrigerator has a few items in it, including three bottles of expensive-looking beer. I pick one out, grab the magnetized bottle opener from the front of the fridge, and walk back out to the living room.

The remote control is a complex arrangement of colored buttons. Someone has painted silver interlocking crosses on its back. I pick a large red button on the front and the wide telescreen across from me blares to life. I sit down on the couch and open the beer.

The screen displays a pair of gargantuan locked crosses. They rotate slowly in three dimensions. Under the symbol is a rapidly increasing nine digit number followed by the words *Souls Saved By The New Life*. I take a sip of my beer and watch the number click over to the one billion soul mark. When it does, the screen glows white for an instant and an ominously deep and mechanical voice speaks from the screen.

"Maximum capacity of the AbovePlane World Odeon reached."

The screen then blinks a series of words at me. They illuminate the room with a strobing glow:

Admittance Now Restricted

To Authorized Souls Only
Only
Only

Suddenly the telescreen flicks to a field of static snow. The screen's pixels flutter through a random pattern of grays and whites. I think I see a face imaged there. Maybe my wife's… maybe my own.

Then, abruptly, the power fails. The screen darkens and the lights go out. I hear the refrigerator in the kitchen wind down to a clicking halt.

I take another sip of beer and put my feet up on the end of the couch. I look at my pair of bad sneakers in the afterimage glow of the telescreen and pull the transistor radio out from my pocket. I remember the man dressed in white that gave it to me and wonder if this is his house… if this is his old life. I smile and thumb the volume dial back and forth. I wonder if they finally got rid of us or if we got rid of them.

I flip the radio up into the air and feel it smack back into my hand. I close my fingers over it in the darkness and swallow a mouthful of warming beer. Through an open window I can hear the raised voices of my new neighborhood as people gather outside in the street. Some sound scared, others are just angry at the power loss. Someone suggests building a bonfire. I smile again and get up to join them. As I walk out onto the porch, I hear a woman's voice ask if anyone's got a radio. I raise my little brown transistor up in one hand and come off the porch, bad sneakers squeaking loudly. No one seems to notice me, so I cough noisily. Bodies turn to look at me, faces bright in the moonlight. Somebody shines a flashlight on my face. I smile at them and ask if anyone's got a battery.

P.G. HURH hurh@admail.fnal.gov

Is a mechanical design engineer at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois. In his spare time, he likes to sample good beer, play his bass guitar, ride his bike, and design instrumentation and beam-feedback devices for high-energy particle accelerators.

INTERTEXT

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR WRITERS

All the stories that appear in *InterText* come via electronic submission. Anyone can submit a story, regardless of age, race, gender, educational status, corporate affiliation, favorite flavor of Snapple, etc.

All genres of writing are considered for publication. *InterText* has published "mainstream"-style stories, as well as fantasy, humor, and science fiction. We would like to keep the magazine as diverse as possible.

Stories should be under 15,000 words, though rare exceptions to this rule can be made.

Submissions may be made in plain ASCII text, RTF format, or binhexed Macintosh word processor documents.

We will consider humor, essays, and other nonfiction articles. However, we are primarily a fiction magazine and are very selective with nonfiction pieces. Writers are encouraged to contact the magazine before submitting such material. *InterText* does *not*, as a rule, accept poetry submissions.

Send all submissions to **intertext@etext.org**. Please include your full name and a stable electronic address with all submissions. If you do not have stable e-mail access, please include a mailing address and telephone number.

Editors will typically respond to a submission within a week after the *following* issue of *InterText* is released, meaning a maximum turnaround of about two months.

For a complete copy of our writers guidelines, send a request to **intertext@etext.org**.

FIGHT FAN MAIL WITH E-MAIL: *Creators and Consumers On-line*

IN A WORLD WHERE THE LINE BETWEEN creator and consumer has always been clear, especially when it comes to such items as newspapers, magazines, books, and television shows, perhaps the way that electronic publications like *InterText* handle feedback is different. In this magazine you'll find the electronic mail addresses of most of our editors and contributors. Readers feel free to comment on every aspect of the magazine, and of course, this issue's readers will often become *next* issue's contributors.

On-line Triple Threat: *Babylon 5's Straczynski*

In traditional media, however, the only real means of feedback has been postal mail or the occasional irate telephone call. But as creators become more on-line savvy, they're beginning to actively discuss their creations with their audience electronically.

Perhaps the best example of this new dialogue is J. Michael Straczynski, the executive producer and creator of the syndicated science fiction drama *Babylon 5.* A veteran of on-line services and BBSes, Straczynski relates to fans of his show in GEnie's Science Fiction & Fantasy Roundtable #2, CompuServe's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum, and USENET's rec.arts.sf.tv.babylon5. While many of the responses Straczynski gives are simple "thank yous" to electronic fan letters, he also tries to explain alleged plot holes and give hints on where his series' overarching story might be leading.

While tantalizing information on the future of a TV series might be reason enough for fans to log on, what Straczynski gets out of his interaction with fans (including wading through hundreds of messages every day) is less tangible. But he says his on-line fans help keep him honest.

"The best thing about the net is that it forces you to ask questions," he wrote on USENET. "The job of the writer is to come up with every possible question about your character and your world, and answer it, giving both greater verisimilitude. Nobody can come up with *every* conceivable question, but on the nets, you get questions you never *dreamed* of. Which helps."

Straczynski may be the best example of a creator appearing regularly on-line to exchange information with his audience (though one-time-only live chats on commercial on-line services are becoming a chic phenomenon), but he's hardly the only one out there. While musician Richard Thompson isn't a reader of the Internet mailing list devoted to him ("They're worse than critics," Thompson said of the list. "They're *amateur* critics."), musician Suzanne Vega *is* a subscriber to her own discussion list.

Bob Mould, leader of the rock band Sugar, e-mails messages to his fans on an irregular basis from an e-mail address listed prominently in the liner notes of Sugar's latest album. Mould's an on-line veteran, too—when asked about rumors that Hüsker Dü, his previous band, had broken up because of a failed relationship between him and drummer Grant Hart, Mould's response was that the rumor was so bizarre he "hadn't even heard that one on the Internet before."

Bizarre rumors and strange characters are, of course, part of the trouble with going public on-line. Straczynski has had several run-ins with on-line antagonists; some creators solve that problem by "lurking"—listening to the talk without making their appearance known.

But for those who can stand the heat—and that number seems to be growing every day—the in-depth discussions with consumers of their art can be valuable for the creators, too.

—Jason Snell

INTERTEXT

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- **World-Wide Web:** Our issues and a hypertext index with links to every story we've published are at URL: *http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/*
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- **America Online:** Access keyword PDA, then select *Palmtop Paperbacks/Electronic Articles & Newsletters* or via Internet FTP (see above) at keyword FTP
- **GEnie:** In the library of Science Fiction & Fantasy Roundtable #3, found by typing SFRT3 at any prompt.

No, the man with the overbite and Neolithic tattoo is *not* our employee.