InterText

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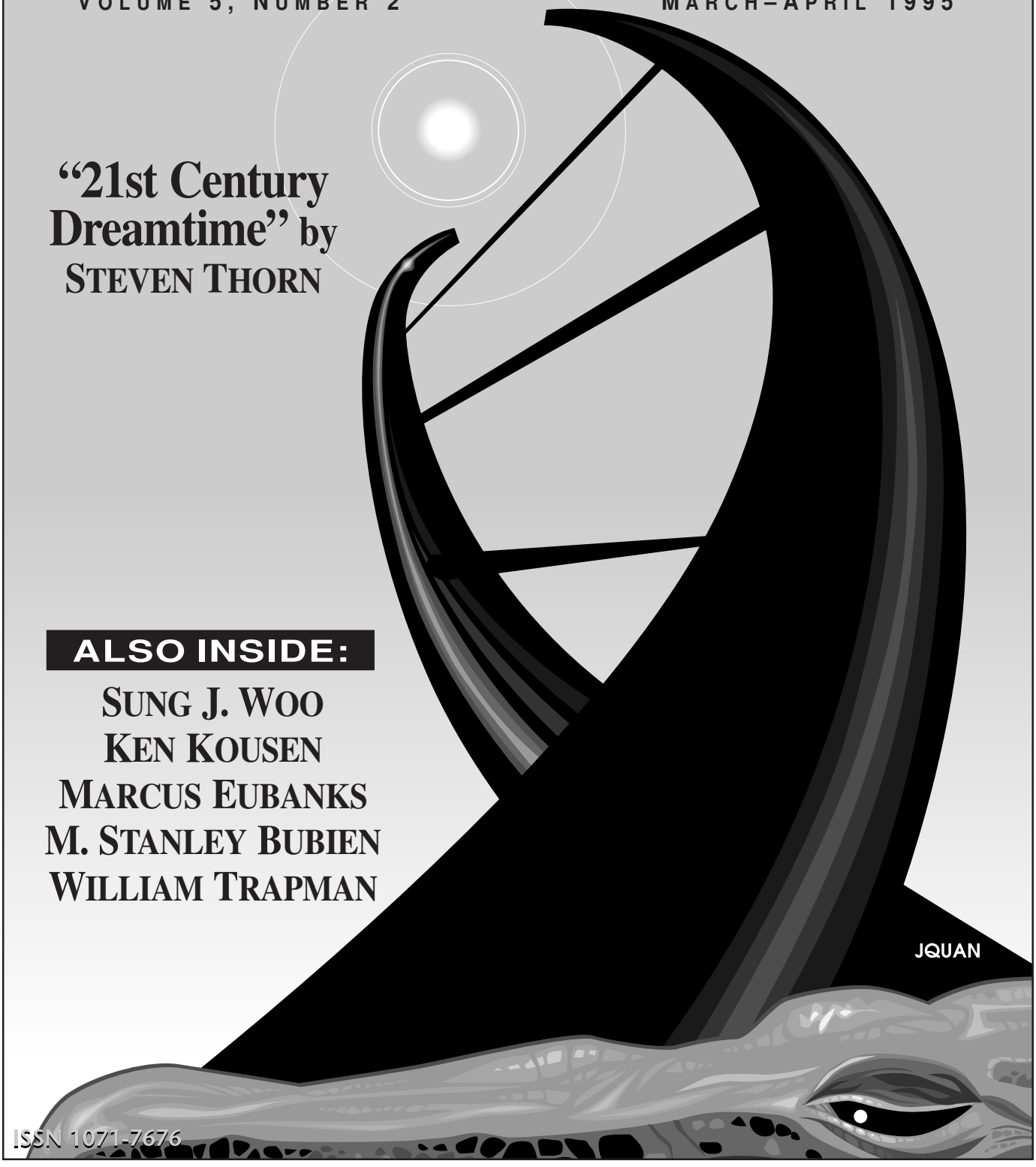

"21st Century Dreamtime" by STEVEN THORN

ALSO INSIDE:

SUNG J. WOO
KEN KOUSEN
MARCUS EUBANKS
M. STANLEY BUBIEN
WILLIAM TRAPMAN

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FirstText

JASON SNELL

A PAST AND FUTURE ON THE INTERNET

IN LOOKING BACK AT THE 23 issues of *InterText* that precede this one, I've discovered that just about every FirstText column I write seems to be discussing our anniversary. In the issue before our anniversary, I would write that our anniversary was coming up. The anniversary issue itself would include a column recounting how *InterText* began, a story I've probably told a half-dozen times in these pages by now. The issue after our anniversary, I'd spend some time ruminating on the fact that we had just had an anniversary. By my rough calculations, this means that half of my FirstText columns have discussed our anniversary.

Suffice it to say that this issue marks our fourth anniversary, which seems like no time at all and an eternity at the same time. In March of 1991 the online world seemed to be a small place—not geographically, because before we published our first issue we were an international publication, thanks to the subscription list we inherited from Jim McCabe's magazine *Athene*. *InterText* was created because I had decided that without my initiative, there wouldn't be any magazine for people writing fiction online to publish in except for *Quanta,* which limited itself to science fiction. These days, a fellow named John Labovitz spends untold hours updating his extremely large "E-Zine List," wherein you can find online publications covering just about every subject imaginable. And a large number of print publications are now online, from Ziff-Davis' slew of computer magazines to Time Warner publications like *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly* to the (often painfully) techno-hip *Wired.*

In our early days, few people besides college students and researchers had heard of the Internet. Now magazines devote cover space and untold thousands of words to every aspect of the Internet. At first, my parents thought *InterText* was some silly hobby I'd outgrow before I left college. Now my father pulls me aside to talk about the concept of authenticating Digital Cash over the Internet.

A glance at our mailing list database (still updated by hand, though in the past two months I've automated the process somewhat) also paints a picture of how the Net has changed. Early entries (relics of *Athene)* are bare BITnet addresses. Entries nowadays are more likely to come from domains like aol.com or prodigy.com. Our "notification" distribution list, most often used by people with FTP or World-Wide Web access, started at a few dozen but now inches closer to 1,000 every day. And as online services like America Online, CompuServe, eWorld, Microsoft Network, AT&T's Interchange, Prodigy, and Delphi creep out further into the Net (customers of most of these services will be on the Web by the end of 1995), the size and complexion of the online world will change even more.

YOU GET MY DRIFT. IN JUST FOUR YEARS, THERE HAVE been incredible changes in the electronic world around *InterText.* The question is, what place does *InterText* have in the wider world of the Net?

I'm no visionary. I can't answer that question. But the philosophy I take with me into our fifth year of publication is this: *InterText* is here to provide a place for readers to find good fiction, as well as a place for writers to publish good fiction. If the changing attitude of the Net toward commercial endeavors means some form of sponsorship will allow us to pay our writers, then all the better. But even if nothing changes, *InterText* sports a large readership (many small-press magazines reach only a few hundred subscribers), a *broad* readership (we have readers on all six populated continents), and a selective editorial process. Like print publications, *InterText* is particular about what we publish. We accept only a small fraction of the stories we're sent, and the stories we *do* publish are carefully edited before they reach readers. That's good news for readers, but it's also good for writers: it means being published in *InterText* says something. "Selling" a story to us isn't the same as selling a story to *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* but it means more than posting your story to alt.prose for all the world to ignore.

There's a lot of good short fiction out there, but a very limited number of places to find it (if you're a reader) or sell it (if you're a writer). *InterText* is, as it was four years ago, in the business of providing you with good reading. We'd like to think we've learned a lot in four years, and we feel our issues are much better now than they were in 1991. And as the Net expands, the quality of *InterText* should improve along with it.

Beyond that, I have no predictions. The Net will keep changing, and we'll have to change with it. We have no illusions that we're the only game in town, but we've been playing the game a (relatively) long time,and we've managed to be flexible in reacting to changes in the onlineworld.

Thanks for being with us, and a special thanks to those of you who've been here since the very beginning—you know who you are.

Now I've said my piece. No more talk of anniversaries from me—I *promise*—until next year.

SecondText

GEOFF DUNCAN

I'M READY FOR MY HOTLINK, MR. DE MILLE

AS JASON SNELL NOTES IN HIS COLUMN, THIS ISSUE of *InterText* marks the beginning of our fifth year of publication. As things go in the online world that doesn't make us antique, but it's still a respectable track record. Of course, for the moment, the numbers happen to work out in our favor: remember when you were four years old and bragged you were *twice* as old as that brat down the street? At that age, those two years difference were proportionately significant—and therefore worth bragging about.

Now bear with me.

During its life so far, *InterText* has managed to grow and build a modicum of credibility. We receive a fair bit of mail from people and organizations looking for advice on starting electronic publications, the subscription list has steadily grown, and while Jason and I used to (virtually) jump up and down each time the name appeared in print or we received a request for an interview, we're not nearly so rabid about it these days. *InterText* has acquired its own momentum. It's an interesting feeling when I see a news posting asking about online fiction and someone has already directed them to *InterText*. We'd like to think we've been improving our quality, we've managed to keep perhaps the most consistent publication schedule of the online fiction magazines, and with our first theme issue (May–June 1994), we somehow pulled off a project that's really yet to be equaled in the online fiction world. (And speaking of that world, the number and quality of other fiction magazines on the nets has grown rapidly in the last year, with some noteworthy newcomers. Welcome aboard!)

That said, now that the World-Wide Web has become the hula hoop of the online world, all manner of commercial publishers are setting up Web sites. The majority remind me of movie sets, where what *looks* like a building is just a plywood façade waiting for a good breeze. Most offer big, slow-to-download graphics, maybe a phone number or e-mail contact, and those ubiquitous "under construction" signs. But we're also seeing big-name hype 'n' tripe sites that offer info-candy and Internet hucksterism. A classic example was Paramount's site for the movie "Star Trek Generations" (now, thankfully, taken down). Another is the *Star Trek: Voyager* site they've replaced it with. Look—you can download QuickTime movies of television commercials! Too cool. Similarly, is it really worth pulling down over a megabyte of data just to listen to William Gibson reading the first few paragraphs of *Neuromancer* (preceded, of course, by some synth sounds and female moaning—er, singing—which I guess serves as an audio version of a Boris Vallejo dust jacket). While these items might have some appeal for truly die-hard fans, I think I'm safe in saying their contribution to the public good is somewhat… limited.

As commercial media conglomerates plug into the nets, they're relying on conservative, tried-and-true marketing methodologies to get attention, with little obvious understanding of the online world. They're using "star power" to pull people into their sites. A number of sites have set themselves up as the "only" authoritative source on various subjects, some in blatant contradiction of one another. And they don't necessarily know what they're doing: in about 10 minutes, I managed to find three sites claiming to have the "first" novel *ever* serialized on the nets. Sure—and I'm Elvis's love child.

Star power is a natural technique to use, especially since publishers already own copious rights to that material. But their manipulations are often incredibly obvious. You think Mick and the Boys have been writing tunes via e-mail for years? I'll bet dollars to donuts the Rolling Stones never saw a Unix prompt before some wanna-be digital hipster in their PR machine thought online promotion might be a good idea. For the most part, these concerns seem to think of the nets as another drop in the bucket of media saturation.

But there's a fundamental difference in the star power these companies use and the "fame" of the nets. People are "famous" on the nets because they've contributed something significant to network communities or network culture. A lot of things can do it: social activities, being an archiver or moderator, writing software, or simply having been in the right place at the right time. And some people are infamous on the nets, often for similar reasons.

That's why I'm tired of being told I should be *excited* about these sites, and why I'm tired of hearing how *innovative* they think they are. There are huge numbers of creative, insightful people who've been out here online for years. Some of these people do extraordinary work. *InterText* brings you a small—no, a *tiny*—selection of those people every other month. I'm sorry, but QuickTime movies of William Shatner just don't compare. If these companies are going to promote online, they're going to have to understand how "fame" is works online before they get any of my bandwidth. They're going to have to *contribute*.

Yes, fame is relative in the online world: someone who's a net god in one context is an uncouth newbie in another. But fame is relative in the real world too: my parents haven't the slightest clue who Mick Jagger might be. And you know what? Famous people on the nets have been out here two times, four times, five times—even 20 times—longer than Mick Jagger. Really. Just check the numbers.

21st Century Dreamtime

STEVEN THORN

A riddle: what do an ex-astronaut, an Australian aborigine, a giant stone sphere, and the planet Mars have in common?

THE SPHERE—*MY* SPHERE—IS BUILT OF STONE, CUT and measured orange sandstone blocks, washed through with yellows and reds, desert pastels, all cemented together with a flaking resinous substance the color of dried blood.

Over four meters in diameter, it rests in a bowl-shaped depression on a cliff. A meandering offshoot of the East Alligator River flows, murky brown and sluggish, a hundred meters below.

I found the sphere when I left Darwin nearly four months ago in the olive land-cruiser that now stands, wedged nose-first in a crack that zig-zags halfway across the jutting promontory.

The little I've learned of the sphere these past few months leaves me increasingly puzzled. It clearly predates white settlement, yet its construction would have required advanced tools and mathematics that the aborigines didn't possess.

Architecturally it seems related to the spiral minaret of Samarra—which I have never seen—and the Martian Helix, which I have. The stones are largest around the sphere's equator, and from there diminish upward and downward in spirals that end at the poles with pyramidal keystones. A circular opening in its southern hemisphere, though only a meter high, serves as the entrance.

It was through this entrance I would crawl each painted evening, returning from the river gorges that fragment this land as if, long ago, it was made of thick glass that had been shattered by a rain of hammer blows. I would moor my three-meter aluminum dinghy on the rocky beach below the cliff, rope together the crocodile carcasses hunted during the day, and walk up the narrow ledge that led to the top. Then, using the hand winch on the rear of the four-wheel drive, I'd haul the heavy saurians up and prepare them for Kundullajapininni, the enigmatic aboriginal who guts and tans them. Then the skins are ready for sale to representatives of exclusive French and Italian fashion houses. It's a lucrative, though illegal, business.

"What do you know about the sphere?" I asked him one star-fired moonless evening as we contemplated our first month's profits and the flickering campfire, and got drunk together.

"Maybe it's *tjuringa* for modern civilization. Maybe it's more personal than that," he said and laughed, his voice becoming as quiet as shifting sands, as deep flowing waters.

"*Churinga?* What's that?"

"Here." He threw a small stone to me, spiral-lined and colored much like the sphere. "A *tjuringa* for you, Spaceman."

"This is the Mars rock I gave you. You've carved it."

He opened his eyes wide, his teeth lit red by the fire, his pale palms weaving patterns in the darkness.

I studied the *churinga* while listening to the flow of his voice.

Architecturally it seems related to the spiral minaret of Samarra—which I have never seen—and the Martian Helix, which I have. The stones are largest around the sphere's equator, and diminish upward and downward in spirals that end with pyramidal keystones.

"You found the rock and it found you, so it is ever yours, Spaceman."

Rough gritty stone, perfectly spherical.

"Your *tjuringa* is the home of your spirit, a map of the pattern of your life."

Spiralling up and down, an impossibly continuous line, feeling it in conjunction with the minute variations on the stone's surface—an impossible minute braille, sending electric thrills up my fingertips, lighting haunted images, memories, in my mind.

"Accept this. Sing with me, *medicine man* of the *people descended from the spirits of the sky*. Sing with me. Become spirit brother of sun and moon, planets and stars. Sing with me."

And he began a chant, deep and resonant, that seared me to the bone.

"No!" I said bitterly, interrupting. "I *hate* the stars, the planets of the stars."

He chuckled then. "Oh well. 'Destinies once set can scarce be broken, but by the hand of death.' " A vaguely familiar quotation. "Don't repeat the words *medicine man* or *people descended from the spirits of the sky* to anyone." He had used the aboriginal words for those. "They are secret, sacred, *tabu*. It would be best if you forgot them."

After an uncertain silence, punctuated by the fire's crackling and the taste of whiskey, I said, "I'm sorry I couldn't accept." I offered the *churinga.* "It's just… just the past."

"No. What I have said holds true in any case. The *tjuringa* is ever yours. What happened to you, to the Mars Project? Why did it end?"

"Madness. I can't say. My secrets. My *tabu*."

"Ah well. Greater powers shape our lives than either of our societies' primitive rituals." He often mocked his own culture when we drank together. He had been born tribal, had attended the Australian National University (as had the medicine men of the last three generations of his tribe), and graduated with honors in medicine and philosophy. That's where he had been nicknamed K.J.

And that was the only time he answered my questions about the sphere with anything other than a strange look or a muttered aboriginal word. He was, to me, as mysterious as the sphere itself.

I WAS OUTSIDE CRACKING THE EMPTY BLUE DAWN with rifle fire when the autogiro appeared, a distant whirring insect, in my crosshairs. Coke cans and bottles exploded off the bullet-riddled hulk of the land cruiser as I let loose with the rifle. They lay scattered and ruined, fragments in the dirt like yesterday's forgotten dreams and remembered failures.

Harris, the Yank, and Kate.

I pulled the rim of the gray Akubra I was wearing over my eyes, protecting them from the dust swirling up as the 'giro swept in and came to rest just beyond the upturned land cruiser.

As I walked over to meet them, I reloaded the Ruger. They hopped out and walked toward me, Kate in jeans and white singlet, as beautiful as ever, Harris in a gray business suit, sweating even though the sun had not yet broken the horizon, grinning broadly with patent American insincerity.

"You're up early," I said as they hesitated. I slung the rifle over my shoulder. "How did you find me?"

Harris answered, "That aboriginal pal of yours said to follow the East Alligator River 'til we saw a patch of red desert in the middle of the jungle. He came into Darwin last week, sold some gator hides to a friend of mine."

"Crocodile skins," I corrected.

"Croc, gator, what the hell." He grinned again.

"So you found me. Why?"

"I was worried about you, Mark," said Kate. Harris slid his arm around her waist. Something between jealousy and hatred rose in my throat. I swallowed it.

"Going off on walkabout like that, not telling anyone. Thought you damned well killed yourself." Their eyes—his blue, hers gray—wandered over the land-cruiser.

"Unfortunately, I didn't damn well kill myself. You shouldn't have bothered coming here." I regretted saying it immediately, because Kate frowned and I realized she probably thought so too. I *did* want her to stay. I could put up with Harris and the emotions I thought I'd purged through rifle fire, alcohol and solitude, for just a few hours with Kate.

"What happened to you, to the Mars Project? Why did it end?"
"Madness. I can't say. My secrets. My *tabu*."

We had met one year after the Mars Project ended, with my three months of isolation finished and six months of rehabilitation ahead of me. We had been together for two years before coming to Darwin trying to trace the origins of a unique aboriginal artifact I'd bought, cheaply, at an auction in Brisbane.

It was cheap because most doubted its authenticity; two spheres, one slightly larger than the other, connected by a helix, carved out of a single piece of a dark, hard fined-grained wood. Aboriginal? Unlikely, said the assayers.

A strange, geometrically perfect scepter or club.

Strange to me because it summoned images, memories: through filtering glass, a blood-red, rock-strewn plain. Towering, twin spirals connected by sets of three bars 10 meters in length, each set indefinably patterned. Two vac-suited figures approaching from left and right. We form the points of a diminishing triangle around the Martian Helix.

Then… not even a scream. Static. Two vac-suits rippling as though the bodies within are turning inside-out. A blackness, consuming, feeling more like burning incandescent light. The image faded. I bought the scepter.

At Kate's suggestion we presented the Heritage Foundation with the artifact, and they presented us with a substantial research grant. After all, an anomic ex-astronaut can gain the kind of sympathy and publicity that cuts through the usual red tape, and an ex-astro's pension isn't that generous.

I loved her then. I loved her when she left me for Harris five months ago. I loved her now.

"Mark, are you still so serious, so dramatic about *everything?"* she asked.

Was I? I looked to the ground, where I was unconsciously tracing a circle in the red dirt with the toe of my boot. Were the powerful emotions that ran through me, that had motivated me since the end of my rehabilitation, just shallow melodrama?

I caused several ugly, embarrassing scenes during that last month in Darwin after Kate left me, and in a moment of clarity in the midst of a dizzying hangover, I stocked the land cruiser and left so my self-pity, bitter jealousy and anger wouldn't taint Kate's newfound happiness. A selfless act, I thought, a brave act of self-sacrifice for the woman I loved. Or, as I thought later in moments of drunken melancholy, the actions of an immature, emotionally self-indulgent, unsophisticated romantic fool.

Shallow melodrama? Only to those who lack a deeper sense of feeling, of understanding.

"Come on, Mark, lighten up. Let's talk things over. I've got a case of beer and a few quarts of Chivas in the 'giro." said Harris.

"Bring the scotch." I said, forcing a weak smile. He grinned and ducked back into the cab, then came out, still grinning, a bottle in his hand. Harris couldn't be *that* bad—after all, Kate loved him, or at least thought she did.

"WEIRD PLACE," KATE SAID AS WE PASSED THE strange monument of the land cruiser, with its bullet-riddled panels, dusted all around with the jewels of broken glass and torn Coke cans, the rope from the hand winch vanishing into the gorge, and the wide bowl with its curious globe. My monuments to possibility and enigma.

"What is it?" asked Kate as we approached.

"I don't really know. But you know what it's related to, don't you?" Kate touched her fingertips gently to the surface of the sphere, and a thrill rushed through me. I watched her intensely, edging between her and Harris.

"The scepter and the Helix." Kate had shared my obsession, had become part of it. Maybe that was why I felt so hurt, so bitter and betrayed—I had shared part of my delicately restructured soul with her. I placed my palm on the sphere close to her's, felt myself rocked by another emotional charge.

"I know the abs didn't build it, but it's too old to have been built by whites. I had a piece radiometrically dated and though that's only accurate up to a point, it dates back to the early paleolithic. No one's ever really explored this land properly, dug down to where its secrets are buried. There's been ages enough for a dozen civilizations to have flourished and died out here. Died without a trace. There's a lot of paradoxes, I know, but...."

I was again sharing my obsession with her. This was something between us, something that excluded Harris. If Kate had any ideas on the subject, she kept them to herself. Had I raved too fervently? Did I stare too intensely? Obviously she doubted everything I said and probably thought I was mad, otherwise she would have believed in the connection between the Helix and the scepter. Wasn't the sphere further proof?

"Looks like a crummy model of Mars," said Harris, reaching between Kate and me, pulling her hand from its intimate study of the texture of the sphere.

I crawled into the cool interior, followed by Kate, then Harris. I lit the gas lamp; hissing and flickering, it revealed the incongruous evidence of human habitation: a small gas-powered refrigerator; the back seat of the land cruiser, neatly covered in blankets; stacked and fallen paperbacks; Coke cans; tinned food; an albino crocodile's hide; bullets and bottles all pointing to the center of the floor as if by some curious magnetism; folded canvas chairs and two rifles leaning by the entrance.

I placed the Ruger with the other rifles and unfolded the chairs, while Harris and Kate puzzled at the unsettling, baffling effect of the interior of the sphere. Everything leaning at crazy angles and the illusory impact of spinning created by both the spiral pattern of the bricks, and the swirls and whorls in the colors of the stone, a chaos of indefinable pattern, giddied and disturbed them.

"Ice?" I asked as they sat, relieved, their sight now distracted by mundane things, though with that ever-wheeling universe fluttering on the edges of vision and consciousness.

Both nodded, I passed them glasses and sat myself. Harris poured the scotch, spilling it at first, again tricked by the angles.

"It fills to just above the entrance in the rainy season—you can see the water line. So I'll have to…" I was going to say I'd have to come back to Darwin soon anyway, but I stopped, because it occurred to me that the whole depressing situation had caught up with me again. I gulped the scotch, picked up the bottle and poured another. I sat avoiding Kate's eyes, avoiding my own reflection in the bottom of the glass.

Harris eventually broke the silence. "A friend of mine'd pay a fortune if we could dismantle this thing and ship it to the U.S." I decided to argue with him, score some points off him in Kate's eyes.

"That's all you Yanks do, exploit and plunder everything you get your hands on. No wonder half the rock paintings have been chiselled off the walls since the tourist invasion. You bastards think you own the place."

"As a matter of fact, we almost do," he said, face flushed with anger. We'd been friends once, for a while in Darwin. I don't think he understood why I was attacking him. "I just leased the mineral rights from the tribal council. It's no worse than what you're doing—illegally killing the wildlife."

"The government makes it illegal or legal at the drop of a hat. Anyway, hunting's man's work. It's not double-talking the abs out of their land by bribing crooked government officials. You think you can buy anything with your all-powerful bloody Yankee dollar."

"I can, and I have," he said quietly.

"Will you two please stop arguing," Kate said. Harris and I both looked at her. She turned to him and, whispering something, caressed his shoulder the way she used to caress mine. He grinned. I burned.

I stood, kicking back the canvas chair, and smashed the glass in my hand against the wall. Fragments.

"You Yanks are such hot shit? Let's see what you can do. I'm going hunting—either come with me or piss off." I grabbed the Ruger, then picked up the Winchester and tossed it violently at Harris. He caught it, accepting the challenge.

THE SUN BURNED BEHIND THE SPHERE NOW, filaments of light spread and danced around its silhouette. We stood trapped between the deep blue bowl of sky, the red cracked dish of land, the green-brown shimmering horizon, in the black shadow cast by this unlikely eclipse. Forgotten satellites on collision courses, our converging orbits hidden in emptiness.

We walked down into the still-cool shadow of the gorge, cancerous cells corrupting the land's veins. Harris jumped into the dinghy, Kate hesitated.

"Let's just leave, Harris, please!" She said as if I couldn't hear. "The sphere, the desert, they've driven him insane." The words fell dead on my ears. Nothing more could penetrate the armor of my inner turmoil.

"No," said Harris.

"Let's just leave, Harris, please!" She said as if I couldn't hear. "The sphere, the desert, they've driven him insane." The words fell dead on my ears. Nothing more could penetrate the armor of my inner turmoil.

I pushed and the dinghy slid into the water, stones grating on the smooth hull. I jumped in, rocking it, and ripped the cord. The outboard screamed as I over-revved, and we roared off dangerously, our wake lapping the corrugated walls of the gorge.

Kate screamed. Harris shouted, "Slow down, goddamn you! Slow down!" Echoes bellowed through the chasm as I cut the engine, not wishing to endanger Kate. Did I love her? Did I hate her? The dinghy slewed around a crooked elbow bend and clanged against the cliff wall.

"Look," I said, "There's no need to worry. I know these rivers like the lines in my palm."

"Just take it easy, OK?" Harris said, then mumbled, "Damn, I should've brought the scotch."

"OK. OK. A slow ride," I said, placating them. I knew where to head. The crocs would be moving downstream now, disturbed by the noise and shocked water. They knew when death was around, and would move away from it.

Slowly now, like bored, discomfited tourists, we broke from shadowy black water to where the sunlight sparkled on green.

Up ahead I saw bubble trails break the surface, signalling crocs underwater. I held the throttle at a dull throb, herding the beasts up a dead-end canal. Cliffs loomed above us, silent, watchful.

Harris sprang up and rapidly fired three wild shots, dangerously rocking the dinghy. Reverberations pounded back and forth like the cliff's rumbling anger.

"I saw one! A dark shadow under the water," Harris said, pointing with the rifle at the refuting water.

"Get down, you idiot," I said. "Don't stand up in the dinghy." Harris sat, still peering into the water. The crocs would be moving faster now, as death came closer. A dark stream clouded the green-gold water and Harris smiled.

"I hit one," he said.

"Don't shoot at 'em if they're under the surface."

"Why?" he asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"Because if you don't kill it with one shot, it's likely to leap out of the water and kill you." He grinned and laughed. I did too, though for different reasons. Kate sat quietly, frightened, or at least apprehensive.

We drifted into the lagoon that ended this canal. I cut the engine and felt my heart quicken to the rhythm of the water, thick with growth, that slapped and dragged at the boat. Lily pads smothered the surface, hid the depths. Gently swaying bull rushes fringed the sides. Dark algae crawled up the walls, coated the black wood that lay like the rotting corpse of some forgotten giant: fallen boulders against the far cliff his knobby skull; sharp stone ridges the bared bones of his broken, hollow rib cage; dead gum trees his skeletal hands clawing opposite sides of his grave; one knee, a stone arch lifting from the water, the other the snapped trunk of a once enormous tree; the bones of his feet a series of stone pillars that thrust from the water on each side of the entrance.

All clothed in glaucous algae, ragged swathes of dead brown weeds and bilious hanging moss: his torn and festering flesh. Buzzing clouds of insects rose and fell feasting on decaying vegetation.

This macabre apparition, the stagnation, the slow pulsation of the water, and the beat of a death chant filled me with despair, recalling my love, now dead, corrupted by a cancerous hatred and putrid jealousy that I had fed with self-pity until malignant. Now it pulsed within me, an adamantine fist clenching my withered heart. Harris and Kate sat quiet, oblivious to the vision.

Rushes to our left suddenly rustled. Harris fired as a dark shape slid into the water. Screeching birds flocked away over the cliff's edge. One remained, however—a cawing crow in the tangled branches of a swollen boabab tree above the giant's skull, the highest point of the escarpment. I aimed my rifle at it, and, still cawing, it flapped lazily away.

"Here," I said handing an oar to Harris, "paddle us up to that rock."

"I thought you said there'd be some crocs?" Harris said, snorting, as the dinghy nosed into the skull's half-submerged eyesocket. I stepped onto the boulder and pointed to the lily pads closing over our wake. "Look."

He stood and turned as dark menacing eyes, long snouts and serrated backs surfaced. They seemed to watch us with a cool, appraising intelligence.

Then Harris fired, spasms of irrational fear shook him, and he fell backward into the water.

A four-meter croc slashed forward toward Harris, screaming and thrashing in the water. Another surfaced and snapped as Harris got a grip on the boat's edge. Kate screamed and shouted Harris' name.

I think I saw movement out of the corner of my eyes, but I shot the crocodile behind Harris as he hung halfway in the dinghy, then felt the crunching and tugging at my leg. I fell and started sliding down into the water.

Strangely, I was cool and calm, the pain in my leg seemed a distant remembered pain. Overhead, a crow circled and laughed. A flaming crescent sun broke the edge of the escarpment, a dark shape stood silhouetted there. I heard a booming, felt water cover my face, felt hands grip mine and felt no more.

Blurred memories: the boat slicing through water; the sky framed by cliffs; Kate crying; Harris somber and silent, and K.J. muttering and bandaging my foot?

The autogiro, a crow flying into the white hot disk of sun. Darwin below, a strange circuit board. Waking in Darwin Base Hospital, a searing pain in my left foot that was no longer there.

AFTER A MONTH IN HOSPITAL, ANOTHER IN REHAB, against my doctor's recommendation I left Darwin. I saw Kate the day before I left. She was going to the U.S. with Harris. She thanked me for saving his life. Is that what I did? And said he had deposited 20 thou in my account and promised more. He had signed over the 'giro to me as well. She said something about her contract being finished, her assignment, cancelled, over. Two years with her and I hadn't realized. She was from the Project.

I didn't care. I was past caring.

No longer sure of my ability to fly a 'giro, I hired a pilot and left Darwin, searching for the sphere, the patch of red desert in the middle of the sub-tropical jungle. I searched for weeks. I asked the tribal aborigines if they knew of it, knew of Kundullajapininni.

They knew of neither.

Now living back in Darwin, I feel disassociated from the images that run through my mind. They seem as vague, blurred and unreal as a half-remembered dream. But when my plastic and aluminum prosthetic foot takes the weight of my body and I feel the echoes of pain, I see fiery eclipses, fractured landscapes, helixes and spheres, skeletal giants and the slow-beating wings of a crow.

Delusions, says the doctor. But what delusions?

Of being the sole survivor of the Mars Project? Fantasies of being a crocodile hunter? An imagined aboriginal friend? An illusory relationship with a dream girl?

A car accident, they say. Injury, exposure, shock.

Trauma. A common enough occurrence, they say. But I hear them whispering about personality reconstruction and genetic fluctuation and remember it from before. Confusion. Fantasy. Therapy.

I turn the small, lined rock in my hands and study the dark specks on my fingertips, and I realize the truth, the connection. From the wardroom's window I watch the aborigines smile at each other with a confidence and knowledge that runs as deep, as ancient, as alien, and as strong as their genes.

So I wait.

STEVEN THORN

Grew up on the fringes of New South Wales country towns, in the Adelaide Hills, the streets of Sydney, and the roads in between. He left school at 16 and spent the next few years travelling around Australia before going to college. He studies writing, film, performance, and aboriginal cultures and beliefs. He has written and published science fiction, fantasy and horror stories in fanzines, student newspapers and other small print media. He also writes poetry and screenplays. This is his first electronic, international publication.

Nothing, Not a Thing

SUNG J. WOO

Some people have their lives mapped out to the last detail;
others take opportunities as they present themselves.
So what happens if there are no opportunities?

YOU FIND YOURSELF WEARING SUNGLASSES A LOT, even when the skies are thick with clouds. Your mother has not yet asked just why you wear your sunglasses all the time, but she's going to. She has that inquisitive look about her lately. If she were to ask, maybe you would lie to her, tell her that your eyes have suddenly become hyper-sensitive, that sunlight, even in low doses, does nasty things to your vision.

The real reason, of course, is that you wish to be unknown. Nothing frightens you more than running into someone you knew in high school. You've never been very good at ignoring people. Throughout your life, you've always found the need to say at least a friendly hello. Besides, ignoring your problems is no way to solve them. You've heard that at least a million times.

But there's no way you're going anywhere come Thanksgiving and near Christmas. That's when they're all back. You've already crossed off November 23rd to November 27th, and you're going to do your Christmas shopping very, very early. Maybe tomorrow.

Nothing frightens you more than running into someone you knew in high school. There's no way you're going anywhere come Thanksgiving and near Christmas. That's when they're all back.

"Why are you wearing your dark glasses?" your mother asks in the car. She never says sunglasses, always dark glasses—with that emphasis on the *dark*—as if they're innately bad. It's 6:43 PM. There's no sunlight at all.

You ready your mouth for a lie, but before you can say anything, you find yourself taking your sunglasses off. "I guess I forgot," you say, and breathe out a sigh so deep that you fog up the windshield.

YOU CARRY UP FOUR GROCERY BAGS TO YOUR parents' apartment. "You're going to break your back one day," your mother yells, so you take only two bags on the second trip. Only one bag remains, and your mother carries that one up herself.

She puts away one item after another while you wait. Ever since you can remember, your mother put the food away and you folded the paper bags into a neat pile. She saves those bags for the bathroom garbage and for other things. She is, as you often jokingly call her, the kitchen goddess.

While folding one bag after another, you suddenly remember how you used to cover your books with grocery bags back in grammar school. You always wrote the name of the class, your name, and the classroom number on those brown covers. You've been having these flashbacks a lot lately. You wonder if it's about time you take up Bingo and talk about how glorious the "old days" used to be.

You were lucky this time, not running into anyone you know at the supermarket. But you know it's going to happen sooner or later. You're going to run into someone you know, and you're going to have to tell them your whole sad story.

You close the door to your room and lie down on the bed face-first. It's not even noon yet, but you feel like you've run 30 miles. You never thought you'd be this tired at 23.

You blindly feel for the remote control, and your hands finally find it hiding between the folds of your comforter. You turn on the radio to hear some loudmouth DJ making fun of one of your favorite bands, but you do nothing about it. Actually, it's kind of funny.

You slowly turn over and face the ceiling. Your room was turned into a study while you were gone for these last four years. You can see your father's business books where your favorite novels used to sit. And a lot of his bookkeeping stuff is piled on your desk. You thought about moving it somewhere, but you no longer have a use for a desk. After all, your time in school is over.

Your college diploma hangs over your bed. It's one of those laminated jobs. After graduation, while you were hanging out and drinking your summer away on campus, your parents took your diploma and had it sealed into a plaque.

Your old toys decorate the top shelf of the bookcase on the wall. Your mother did that just before you came back from college, as if to signify that all was good and that you were welcomed back with open arms and warm hands. But when you look at those toys now, one Tonka truck after another, you feel relentlessly out of place. You feel the way Alice must have felt in Wonderland after she grew really huge in that house. Strangely, totally, utterly out of place.

YOU'VE BEEN BACK FROM COLLEGE FOR A MONTH and you still can't quite believe that you won't be going back to school. All your life you've gone to school. When September came, you were in a classroom, listening to the familiar buzz of a professorial filibuster.

The first week back, you were OK. It was like a vacation, like coming home for Spring Break. But for the last couple of days, you've been feeling empty and terribly lost, like a tongue poking around the spot where a tooth used to be.

You find yourself eating, sleeping, and watching a lot of television. You never watched television in college, never could find the time—and there was always something better to do—but now at home, alone, you cannot find a better companion. It is always there for you. Even when it's turned off, you can almost hear the voices of premieres and reruns, megastars and fadeaways, chattering endlessly in their electronic vernacular.

Of course, you could have gotten a job like some of your friends, who are now working in New York or San Francisco, some big city, typing at their keyboards and making deals with big business people everywhere. You tried, tried for a couple of places, going to interviews wearing your killer black suit and wing-tipped shoes, but nothing really piqued your interest. At that time, you really didn't care enough to do anything.

You don't feel so badly for yourself—for you are a young and healthy man—but you feel terrible for your parents. They invested almost a hundred thousand dollars for your higher education and now you are home with nothing, not a thing. On the weekends, when your parents are home from their jobs, you almost don't want to get the phone. Because every time you get it, it's one of your mother's friends. What is your son doing? Isn't he out of school? Oh, he doesn't have a job. My child? He's in Harvard med. She's with Chase Manhattan. He's doing this, she's doing that. You can only hear your mother's side of the conversation, and you know your mother is ashamed because her voice gets very soft and whimpery when she has to say her son is home and no, he doesn't have a job. Hearing her say that is like being pricked by a pin. It's not fatal, but it really smarts.

ANOTHER MISERABLE MONDAY COMES. YOU GO OUT every morning to jog a few miles, and you've done it for a month now, which must be a record. You run for 20 minutes, stretch for five, and do some push-ups and sit-ups.

By the time you are back in the apartment, both your father and your mother have left for work. Your mother always leaves some food behind for your lunch, and today's no exception. You've told her numerous times that she didn't have to do that, that you are certainly old enough to make your own lunch, but she doesn't listen. In her eyes, you're still just a baby.

Last night, before *The Simpsons* came on, you called Marty. He's about the only friend from college you talk to now. You've thought about calling other people, but it just isn't worth it. All they'd talk about is their new job and their new place and maybe a new love interest. You made the mistake of calling Chris a couple of weeks back, and he just blabbed and blabbed about how terrible his new job was and how he was getting only 32 grand for it.

Marty was one year your senior, and he's still living at home with his parents, working at a low-paying, dead-end publishing firm. Surprisingly enough, you kept in touch with him all last year. While you and Marty weren't very close in college, your friendship managed to grow through occasional phone calls and a barrage of e-mail. You even talked about renting an apartment together, once you landed a steady job.

You asked him for advice, and he told you to find some temporary employment agencies. "That's what I did when I got out of school," he said. "They find work for you. Companies hire temps because they don't have to shell out any benefits."

So you spend your morning with a bowl of Cheerios, a cup of decaf, and the Yellow Pages. You hunt for those temp agencies, and one catches your eye.

POWER-4 TEMPORARY SERVICES
Putting Quality to Work

There are a dozen more temp agencies, but you decide to call up P-4. You ask a woman named Rita if they have any time today to interview, and she tells you that Mondays are always out. You tell her to pen you in for tomorrow at 10, to which she agrees wholeheartedly.

After finishing your bowl of cereal, you start doing the dishes. Your mother told you not to do them, that it's her work, but you have been feeling so useless that you need to do something, anything—even something as mindless and menial as dishwashing—to find some reason for your present existence. After soaping, scrubbing, and rinsing, it's half past 11. You realize that your mother could do them at twice your speed, and probably do them a lot better.

THE CHEAPEST ANSWERING MACHINE YOU CAN FIND IS at Sears. It has one spy-sized cassette under a secret door and has two shiny buttons. You realize that you've never owned an answering machine before; your roommates and apartment-mates have always provided you with one.

According to Marty, having an answering machine was essential when you worked for a temp agency. The

place he used to work for called him all the time, asking him to call him back to take a job for a day or a week, or if he were really lucky, a month.

You look for this $24.95 wonder in a box, but it's nowhere to be found. You search the area, but it seems like they don't have any in stock.

"I don't think you'll find any other ones," a woman's voice says behind you. You recognize that voice, but you're not sure from where.

You turn around. "Do you work here?" you ask staring at this tall, gawky looking woman. She used to be your English teacher back in high school. "Oh, Ms. O'Brien," you say. "How are you?"

She says she's fine and how are you doing and what are you doing here, shouldn't you be in school?

"I'm finished with school," you say faintly, looking down at the answering machine.

"Oh," she says. "That's right, you graduated last May. Congratulations. And from such a fine school."

"Well…" you say, looking at the answering machine.

"You did graduate with a major in English, did you not?" You nod your head. "Good choice," she says, and offers you a smile. You smile, too. "What's the answering machine for?"

"It's for my mother," you say. "I've got to go. It was nice seeing you."

"You too," she says, and she's about to say something else but you turn and walk away. That's how you'll always remember her: her mouth half open, her voice stuck in her throat, her eyes wide with pity.

You run out of Sears and go to Radio Shack, whose cheapest answering machine runs for two bucks more. You pay the man and rush to your car, head down, sunglasses on.

INSIDE THE TESTING ROOM OF POWER-4 TEMPORARY Services, you transcribe a fake hand-written office memo on the word processor. It's not a terribly difficult task, but it's somewhat intimidating. You've never actually written a real office memo before, and it's been ages since you've had a real test—maybe two or three years. But it seems simple enough, and after clicking away for a couple of minutes, you tell Rita that you are finished.

"So soon?" she says. "Wow, what a typer." You realize that Rita is the nice one and Colleen is the bad one. It's almost like the good-cop-bad-cop charade they use in bad police flicks. Rita is bouncy, attentive, and smiles and frowns to your every response. Colleen, on the other hand, is serious, professional, and straightforward. Colleen's got killer eyes, though, a shade of brown that's at once familiar and mysterious.

"Let's take a look at the results," Colleen says, staring you down. The automated grading system gave you an accuracy rating of 67% and a speed rating of "Very Fast." Almost all the mistakes come from a lack of knowledge in business writing, so you point out this fact.

"A lot of people such as yourself," Colleen says, emphasizing and enjoying her emphasis on the word *yourself*, "they come in here and say they're really familiar with WordPerfect. Experts, no less. But all they've done on their computers in college is type term papers. Uh-uh," she says, wagging her index finger in front of your face as if you were a bratty little kid, "that's wrong. What you need in the real world is business writing skills."

"These mistakes," Rita says, scrutinizing the graded paper, "are the same mistakes I made when I first started."

"Anyway," Colleen says to you, "you're pretty good at typing, though. Maybe we can find you some data entry jobs. Meanwhile, let me set you up with these videos." She leads you into a tiny glassed room in the corner. A TV-VCR combo is mounted against the far wall.

You realize that Rita is the nice one and Colleen is the bad one. It's like the good-cop-bad-cop charade they use in police flicks. Rita is bouncy, attentive, and smiles and frowns to your every response. Colleen, on the other hand, is serious, professional, and straightforward.

She gives you a pair of workbooks. The first one is titled *Power-4 Philosophy.* After a brief introduction, idiot questions about the badly-acted scenarios follow.

"Watch the video and follow with the workbooks," she says, and closes the door. It's like watching a red-eye infomercial. Strong-jawed male with dark mane, cute blonde female with perfect makeup. You recognize the woman. She played a leathery lesbian in a porn video you saw couple of months back, "Dare to Wet Dream." It's weird seeing her in a business suit and talking so much.

In the video, whenever the woman talks, the guy looks at you and nods. Then he smiles for a few seconds. Then he goes back to nodding. And when he talks, she does the same thing. It's like watching a pair of used car salesmen trying to double up on a customer. Hey, she's good, real good. Yeah, but he's better, a real pro. No, really. No, really.

It's too much excitement for one day. The workbook has answers for the idiot questions in the back, so you just

copy them. You do the exact same for the second video, *Power-4 Quality Service.* It's the same duo, perfect man and perfect woman.

You imagine them ripping open their shirts: the guy with a yellow-and- orange P inscribed within an upside-down triangle on his pects, the woman with pink P tassels hanging from her nipples. It's so funny you double over laughing, earning an icy stare from Colleen.

THE ANSWERING MACHINE WAS SO CHEAP THAT IT didn't even let you record a greeting. All you were allowed to do was enter your seven-digit phone number, which was then melded into the Automatic Greeting Program. The sweet voice of a well-educated woman said, "You have reached XXX-XXXX. Please leave a message at the tone." It did the job. And when you get back from the temp agency interview, you find a message on the machine, your very first.

You play it and listen to some woman who called from Everglades Publishing looking for you. Everglades Publishing was one of two companies who interviewed you in the spring. Your heart beats a little harder as you dial the number.

"Hello, Mary Landis speaking," the phone says. You state your name and your business in your very best voice. She tells you that the assistant managing editor of *Upbeat* magazine would like to interview you. "Could you please come to our office in Manhattan?"

You're there. You're hip. You make an appointment for tomorrow. After you hang up, you head for the library. You have some serious catching up to do with past issues of *Upbeat*.

YOU TAKE A QUICK PEEK AT YOUR WRISTWATCH, AND you relax. You've been talking to Helen D. McDougall for more than an hour, and she still looks interested in everything you say. You're looking dashing today, even down to your socks, a 12-dollar pair of Ivy League argyle hosiery. When you cross your legs, Ms. McDougall, the assistant managing editor, compliments on your spiffy attire. You wave her off and laugh a finely controlled laughter, full of good intentions and genuine humility. You tell her a little more about your work with your college newspaper, about all the deadlines you had to meet, the pressures of being behind the night editor's desk.

Ms. McDougall tells you a little more about the job, an editorial researcher position. Lots of phone calls, some paperwork, but most of all, detail work, she tells you. You need the eyes of a jeweler—very, very careful—but not sluggish. And you need to be anal-retentive. *We pride ourselves in the accuracy of the reported material.*

It sounds like a boring job, but it would get you out of your parents' house. It doesn't pay very much—if you're looking to get rich in publishing, she tells you with a jackknifed smile, you're going to be very disappointed—but it would be room and board, and probably a bit left over for some used CDs.

She shakes your hand. "You're a really strong candidate," she says, and it actually seems genuine. She wouldn't be able to say it in that way if she didn't mean it.

"Thank you," you say, giving her a fairly hard handshake. You're still not too sure about shaking women's hands. With men, you shake as hard as you can. But with women, it really all depends on the woman and her attitude.

"Ms. Landis in Human Resources will be in touch with you very shortly," she says. "We need someone right away."

"Thanks again," you say, and close the door behind you. On your way to the elevator, you take in the surroundings. It's like all the other publishing houses you've ever been to. The senior editors and above have their own offices and the assistant editors live in their maze of cubicles. You'd probably have your own cubicle, too, and your own felt wall for pinning up little *New Yorker* cartoons.

It wouldn't be a great job, you think as you muse to the quiet hum of the elevator, but it would be a living. At least for a little while. And when you get this job, maybe you'll go back to Power-4 Temporary Services and tell Colleen she can shove her attitude up her fat butt.

YOU WATCH TALK SHOW AFTER TALK SHOW, THEN reruns of old shows like *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie.* You were never a fan of *Bewitched,* mostly because it was made after *Jeannie* and was a cheesy copy of a great idea. You hate that—copycats with no creative abilities of their own, vultures who feed on the leftovers of geniuses.

When you told your parents about the interview, they were ecstatic, especially your mother. After hearing the wonderful news, her whole tone was different in her phone conversations with her friends. She didn't even talk about you, but you could tell from her peppy little voice, slightly higher and faster, almost chipmunk-like, just how happy she was.

But now two weeks have passed and nothing. No phone calls, no messages. The answering machine just sits there doing nothing. Sort of like you. Except it doesn't eat as much.

You've done the dishes, the laundry, even cleaned the toilet with a scrub pad, left it so clean that it could be the star of a Ty-D-Bowl commercial. You rearranged the closet, which didn't need rearranging, but you wiped and

scoured and dusted and shined and now that closet is immaculate, hypo-allergenic, brilliant.

Your mother doesn't ask, but when she comes home from work, she has that look, that hopeful look. But all it takes is one glance at your face and she knows that nothing has happened.

But something did happen. You broke down and called Everglades yesterday afternoon, and Mary Landis told you that you were a very strong candidate but they hired someone else. Somebody who wasn't exactly more qualified, but "more directed for the position," whatever the hell that meant.

You hear the slow steps of your mother coming back from work. It's half past four, which is a bit earlier than usual. There is no longer that hopeful look about her face. She's already given up on Everglades Publishing, so there's no reason to tell her anything. She shuffles in and goes into the kitchen.

"Did you have enough for lunch?" she yells from the kitchen. "Yes, mom," you say sleepily. You've been watching TV since you got up. "You know that Marty called last night, right?" "No," you say, although you heard her answer the phone call. She comes out of the kitchen and goes to the answering machine. "I taped this note here for you," she says, bringing a ripped corner of a newspaper. You take it and put it in your pocket. She goes back into the kitchen, clanging pots and turning on the water.

"He told me he got a new job," she screamed from the kitchen. You never understood why she insisted on talking with the faucet running, because she could never hear what you were saying.

"Yeah," you say to yourself, vegetating on some PBS documentary on the birth of the universe.

"He says it pays pretty good," she yells again. "Yeah," you say again.

"Call him back. He said he hasn't talked to you in ages," she says. The bearded host guides you through a computer-drawn movie of the universe. It's going backward, and everything becomes smaller and smaller, then there's a humongous explosion. Or implosion. It's hard to tell when everything is going in reverse.

YOU GET BACK FROM YOUR DAILY RUN TO HEAR THE phone ringing. You somehow find the strength to rush up the stairs.

"Hello," you say into the phone, trying to silence the panting. "This is Colleen from P-4, and I think I'm talking to the right person." "You are," you say, and sit down on the couch. "Got a data entry job for you, but you have to start today. Can you do that?"

"Today?" you ask. Marty warned you that temp services were like this. Today's Friday, too. But then again, if wasn't as if you'd just had four previous days of back-breaking work.

"If you don't want it, I'll give it to someone else," she said. "Take it or leave it."

"All right, all right, I'll take it," you say. She gives you the address, the directions, and the name of the person you have to report to. After you hang up, you take a quick shower, eat a quick tuna sandwich, and quickly jump into your car. It's a 45-minute drive, and you wonder if this is really worth it for three measly days of grunt work.

You can't remember the last time you've done something as mindless as this. Enter item number then S then Y then N then N then F12, Return, thank you, next.

The directions are not correct. You pass three traffic lights instead of two after turning off the highway. Maybe Colleen was trying to screw you up, laughing hysterically in her office right now as she showed her awful videos to more overeducated and underemployed victims.

You finally get to Savon Equipment, a huge building at the end of Fulton Road. At least Colleen got that much right. You touch up your hair, straighten your tie, and head for the entrance.

YOU CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU'VE DONE something as mindless as this. Enter item number then S then Y then N then N then F12, RETURN, thank you, next. Over and over again. You're not entirely sure what you are really doing—for all you know, you may be typing the launch code sequence for an ICBM to North Korea.

You've become intimate with the keyboard and the computer screen, which is a familiar shade of amber. Colleen's eyes are exactly that color, you realize in the middle of one entry, but you keep on chugging away, one line after another. Your life has become quadchromatic: white, green, amber, and black. The sheets you are using are the wide, white-and-green computer printouts, the kind that computer geeks ogle and giggle at.

Barbara, the woman you reported to, was in charge of all facets of computer life in this company, and it shows. She's tired and groggy and talks frequently about her upcoming vacation. She has a foreign accent, probably Czechoslovakian, although you can't be sure. "My name is Bar-ba-ra," she said when introducing herself, pronouncing every syllable, and it dawned on you that Barbra Streisand was the only woman named Barbara whose spelling and pronunciation correlated.

You get up from your chair and stretch. After downing four cups of coffee, your bladder thuds for some relief.

Savon Equipment has some of the widest halls you've ever seen. You could probably walk these halls for a month without ever bumping into another human being. No wonder the workers look the way they do.

A man walks by you and looks at you funny. It's the tie, you think. Barbara was dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of faded jeans. It was Friday, Dress Down Day. You are probably the only guy in the whole place with a tie today. You briefly thought about taking it off, but then what would the people think? He had the tie on, and then he took it off. Wouldn't that be worse than just wearing it?

When you get back to work, a girl is sitting in the booth next to yours. She smiles in a friendly way and keeps your gaze until you break it. You make some idle conversation throughout the day while sizing her up. She's kind of cute, you think, maybe a little short. You have lunch together, and she plays with your food. She's a high school dropout, and she likes to smoke grass. Her name is also Barbara, but she pronounces it like everybody else.

SHE'S ONLY 16, BUT SHE KISSES BETTER THAN any girl you've ever been with. Her lips are strong and assertive. Her tongue is everywhere inside your mouth, probing, pushing, shoving. She tastes like honey.

The car is so hot that it's all fogged up inside. Barbara pushes you against the door, her hands inside your shirt, her long, strawberry-scented hair covering both of your faces.

You try to remember when you last made out in your car, and you realize that you've never done it. When you were in high school, you never had a girlfriend, and in college, there was always a room available somewhere.

She starts taking off her shirt, and you can see that she's not wearing a bra. They are sad little mounds, barely big enough for your hands, but you cup her breasts anyway.

And when she has her hands on your belt buckle, you start sobbing. She's off of you in a flash, as if shocked by electricity. She is silent, completely still, and watches you without blinking. She's pushed herself as far away as she can, smearing the condensation on the window.

"What's wrong?" she finally says. "Did I do something?" But you can't tell her anything because you're crying louder than ever, wailing away. You can't tell Barbara how low you feel, how you have no idea what you want to do with your life, how your mother can't stand the sight of you, how you thought about fucking her anyway even though it would be statutory rape. All you can do is let the tears flow on and on.

Eventually she comes to you—crawls to you slowly and carefully—to hold your quivering face against her bare breasts.

THE PHONE RINGS AND YOU LET THE ANSWERING machine pick it up.

"This is Colleen from P-4," it says, but you pick up the phone before she can finish. You turn the TV down with the remote, Gilligan's voice fading slowly to silence. It's another data entry job. She gives you the directions, which you copy onto the back of last week's *TV Guide.*

You leave the turnpike on Exit 15 and get on Route 46. You go for half a mile, trying to find Gate Drive. You make a left and search for a brown and white building immediately on your left.

You keep driving for a couple more minutes, but you can't find it anywhere. You eventually turn around, looking for a road sign. You're on Payne Drive. It was probably the fork a couple of miles back; maybe you should have veered right instead of left. You study the directions on the back of the *TV Guide,* but they tell you nothing you didn't know before.

You backtrack and try to find Route 46, but somehow you end up on Route 17. Route 17 looks just like Route 46. There is no difference.

SUNG J. WOO

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Flying Toasters

KEN KOUSEN

So when was the last time you were at a garage sale halfway around the world, offered someone a ride home, crash-landed in the middle of Ohio, and learned about some nifty antiques?

FRED FIRST SAW NANCY IN CARACAS, IN THE Venezuelan Free State, at an antique show featuring 20th-century bric-a-brac. Immediately, his heart was captured. Fred's eyes swept from the top of her spiraling blonde twirl-cut, down along her iridescent monokini (where they lingered in the obvious places), and finally reached her flats, upon which she bounced lightly. Of course, what *really* caught his attention was her long blue tail, which swished back and forth excitedly, and, thought Fred, excitingly.

For his part, Fred was unremarkable, decked out as he was in his standard, blue-pinstriped skinsuit, all business. He leaned forward hesitantly, partly to start a conversation and partly to get a glimpse at the treasures so amply filling Nancy's monokini. She abruptly straightened, however, with a shiny, flat metal object in her hands.

"Isn't this just *divine*?" she asked rhetorically. Fred looked about quickly, and decided she must be talking to him. He straightened in an attempt to look dignified.

"Hmm, yes, of course," he said.

Nancy turned to face him, revealing sparkling silver eyes. Fred was captured all over again.

"I've looked *everywhere* for one of these, and here they've got a set of four," she said. "The last two weeks I've been from one end of the east coast to the other, from Scotia to Atlantahassee to Rio. I thought I'd found one in Carolina, but it turned out to be a fake. I was glad, though, because I never could have gotten it through customs. Have you ever been to Carolina?"

"Sorry, no. But I—"

"Well, don't go!" she said emphatically. "They're always hurting for hard currency and they'll do *anything* they can to cheat you out of yours. And all you hear all day long is moaning about tobacco. Tobacco this, tobacco that. Honestly, if they hadn't wanted to be a one product economy, they shouldn't have seceded in the first place! If my message filters hadn't heard about their toaster, I *never* would have gone."

Fred observed her tail performed an astonishing set of loops and rolls as she spoke. Something she said caught his attention, however, and brought him back into the conversation.

"Toaster?" he said. "What's a toaster?"

Her tail stood straight up in the air, and he wondered if he hadn't asked the wrong question.

"Why, one of *these*," she said, thrusting the metal object at him. It was shaped roughly like a comm unit, rounded along its upper surface. Two gaping wide openings had been driven into it, which seemed absurdly large for data disks. From one corner dangled a long black cord, which presumably connected the unit to an external power source.

She held it up so he could see better, and he noticed that the sides had been polished to a glassy brightness. "It was used for baking bread," she said. "Back in the 20th century they were *amazingly* common kitchen items."

"I see," he said, trying hard to be enthusiastic. Not hard enough, he thought, because the light that animated her so brightly had already turned from him. He felt as though the sun had just gone behind a cloud, which in fact it had, Fred noted.

She turned away and motioned for the roboid to give her a price. The roboid was old, which fit the surroundings, and wasn't terribly sophisticated. It haggled a bit, but once it reached its narrowly defined limit, it was finished.

"Why, one of *these*," she said, thrusting the metal object at him. "It was used for baking bread. In the 20th century they were *amazingly* common kitchen items."

"Six hundred nacus," it droned.

"Oh, *please*," she said. "I've only got 400 nacus with me, and I need transit fare back to Hio. Would you accept Hio dollars?"

"Six hundred nacus. We are sorry, but we accept North American Currency Units only."

"Look, I'm the only customer here, and I haven't seen anyone else in the last two hours. Surely it would be better to sell *something* rather than *nothing*, right? Closing time is coming soon, the dome will go up, and you'll just be *stuck* with it."

"Six hundred nacus."

Her tail slashed from side to side in obvious anger. It struck Fred lightly, by accident, but the contact was enough to wake him from his complacency.

"Wait," he said, straightening up and resting a hand on her shoulder. The touch sent surges of power through him. "Maybe I can help."

She looked up at him, surprised, but hopeful.

"Yes," he continued, mentally counting his own money. "I could lend you 200 nacus, and give you a ride home."

Her tail went up to half-mast, which he interpreted as hopeful caution.

"I don't know if I should," she said. "I don't even know your name."

"Fred Tannen," he said. He held out a hand to her. She tucked the toaster under one arm and took his hand, which made the previous power surge feel like popguns next to plasma cannons. Two hundred nacus was not too much to pay to stay near that feeling. Not at all.

"Nancy Adams," she said.

"I know I'm being rather forward, but I promise to be a gentleman. I'm a just minor executive with a multinational, and I was only stopping by here to pick up something for my daughter. My lift is out back, and I can surely spare the room."

The tail curled slightly, so he felt like he was making progress.

"Well, OK," she said, "but did you want to pick up something for your wife as well?"

"No, I wouldn't," he said. "I am not currently wedded, or I wouldn't be offering rides to beautiful young women." There, he thought, that was good. Get a compliment in and show her I'm available. Nice work.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I'd be delighted to accept your help. Once I'm back in Hio, I can get the money to pay you back."

"Fine, under one condition."

"Yes?"

"That you have dinner with me tonight."

The tail swished back and forth rapidly, but she smiled.

"Very well," she said.

THEY BOARDED HIS LIFT AT THE CARACAS SPACEPORT, after Nancy made appropriate complimentary noises about its shine and condition. Fred stored her gear with his in the sleeping compartment aft, except for the bag containing her toasters and his little doohickey he had picked up for his daughter. The roboid had called an "eggbeater."

They settled into the contoured pilot seats. Fred had wondered how Nancy would accommodate her tail, but she seemed content to simply slide it down between her legs and coil it in her lap. His temperature rose several degrees as he surreptitiously watched this maneuver. To cover up his reaction, he leaned over the computer interface and made a great show of concentrating on keying in her destination. After a minor delay, the tower gave them clearance to launch, with only a mild warning about the possibility of bad weather over the Midwest Territories.

The launch shook Nancy up a bit. Fred reflected that she no doubt normally traveled by transit liner, which was a much larger craft and gave a correspondingly smoother ride. He began to apologize for the air buffeting, but she waved him off.

"No, don't worry," she said. "This is *fun!* I've never ridden in a single family lift before. How long have you owned it?"

"Actually, I don't own it. It's a company vehicle."

"Really? I thought you said you were a *minor* executive."

Fred squirmed in his seat. "Well, there's minor, and there's minor. My former wife was a pilot for Star Ways, which is where I work, and they gave me this vehicle when she left."

A look of concern came over her face, which turned her eyes from silver to light blue. "Oh, I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"Oh no—it's not like it sounds. She was given command of the *Toreador* 10 years ago. You know, the interstellar craft taking all those settlers to Rigel?"

Nancy nodded.

"Well, it's a relativistic trip, so by the time she gets back she'll have aged only four years, but I'll be 172."

"How tragic," she said, resting her hand on his shoulder, which made Fred dizzy. "And leaving you with a daughter to raise all alone like that."

"Um, well, truth to tell, I can't be too upset. We knew this was a possibility when we got married. My wife was born to be an explorer. Besides, she didn't exactly leave me with a daughter."

"No?"

"No. Shyrra is actually a clone of my wife I'm raising with help from Star Ways. They've been great about the whole thing, both financially and otherwise. I'll tell you, though, it feels awfully weird raising my wife as a child. I'm really not looking forward to puberty."

"I'll bet."

"Yeah," Fred smiled. "The Freudian implications alone are staggering."

As the ship rose higher into the atmosphere, the thinning air shook them less and less and the sky became progressively darker. Fred and Nancy both gazed out the viewport, waiting for that brief time when they would clear the atmosphere and rotate into a descent angle. During that time they would be able to see the Earth below them, beautiful, blue, and majestic. When it happened, Fred cautiously reached out his hand to Nancy, who took it into her own. They remained like that, silent and connected, until the ship turned in such a way that the sun shone directly into the viewport. The computer automatically darkened it in response, and there was nothing to see until they rotated out of the way again.

"So tell me about yourself," Fred said hesitantly, releasing her hand. He reached over to a nearby, well-

worn knob and adjusted it, which filled the cabin with soft music. "What do you do," he said, "and why all the interest in toasters?"

Nancy laughed. "Me? I'm just an analyst working for the Midwest Territorial government. Crop price projections, that sort of thing. I guess all the time I spend studying forecasting grain got me interested in the old ways of using it."

"You mean in bread and stuff like that?"

"Right." She stood up to open the compartment over the viewport and carefully brought down the bag containing the toasters. She took one out and held it carefully. "You know, people used to use these *all* the time. They put bread in these slots and pushed this little handle, and it gets all hot inside, which bakes the bread. Eventually it would pop back up with the finished product. They called it 'toast,' naturally enough."

Fred regarded the little device skeptically. "I don't know," he said. "It looks like the innards would get pretty gamy."

"Not if you clean it, silly," she said. "It's not self-cleaning. You have to take it apart."

She handed him the toaster and leaned over him to point out the various latches and levers. Her proximity suddenly caused Fred to wonder about the efficiency of the air circulation.

"I'd show you how it works, but it needs a power source," she said.

Fred felt she was generating enough power herself, but he didn't think it was proper to say so. An idea struck him, though.

"Computer," he said, sitting up in his seat.

The computer responded with a short beep.

"Can you devise a power coupling for this object?" He placed the toaster in a small opening in the cabin, which served as an interface compartment for computer-manufactured devices. The light in the opening glowed on and off a few times.

The computer said, "Affirmative," and beeped again.

"Then do so—what's that, Nancy?"

"Your lift can do that?" asked Nancy incredulously.

"Top of the line," replied Fred.

"Please restate request," the computer said.

Nancy tugged at his sleeve. "We've got *four* of them," she said. "Let's plug them all in!" Sparkles appeared in her eyes, which Fred identified upon closer examination as flecks of gold swimming in the silver.

"Computer," Fred said, staring into Nancy's eyes. "Please generate four functional power couplings for this device."

"Working," said the computer, and it beeped.

Meanwhile, the ship began its descent into the atmosphere. The viewport cleared, but was quickly replaced by another color shift as the computer selectively activated a thin injected fluid layer to prevent overheating. This, combined with careful navigational adjustments, automatic communication with flight control systems, and the power conduit manufacturing process, dramatically reduced available computational resources. An light flashed on Fred's console indicating voice control was no longer available, but he didn't notice. The computer attempted to compensate by turning off the music and, conveniently, lowering the lights.

"Oh, how romantic," Nancy said as the lights dimmed. She leaned against Fred, which provided more than enough distraction to keep him from wondering why the lights went down.

Fred put his arm around Nancy as the computer flashed another warning and tried to correct their course through the atmosphere, which had been turning into a unusually steep descent. Finally, two of the power couplings were finished and dropped unceremoniously into the interface compartment.

The plop sound they made as they fell startled Nancy. "What was that?" she asked.

"A couple of our power couplings are ready! Get out the toasters!"

They removed two toasters from the bag and connected them to the couplings. Nancy depressed the levers on the side and the toasters immediately began to get warm.

The computer searched desperately for systems to offload, but the primary tasks of heat-shielding, navigation, and life support were all off-limits. The internal synthesis of the remaining power conduits could not be aborted. This left few choices for disconnect, but those available were taken with abandon.

The lights went completely out, along with the circulation fans, the built-in acceleration dampers in the couches, and the waste recycling pumps. This brought the power drain to within safe parameters, so the computer desisted just before power would have been removed from the toasters.

Suddenly, Fred and Nancy were plunged into darkness and silence, and were jostled randomly by the passage of the craft through the atmosphere.

"Oh my!" Nancy said. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," Fred replied, but began using his brain instead of another part of his anatomy for the first time since the trip started. He saw the indicator lights on the pilot's console. "We've lost power," he said. "We've got to shut down all unnecessary systems."

As he was about to contact the computer, the final two power couplings were finished, and plopped into the interface compartment. The lights came back on.

"Whew!" Nancy said. "That was *close.* Fred? What's the matter?"

Fred stared at the blackness in front of him, then gasped when he looked at the navigational viewscreen. The "possibility" of bad weather over the Hio region had developed into a raging thunderstorm, and the lift was plunging right into its heart.

Lightning arced around the ship, almost blinding them. The computer made adjustments as quickly as possible to handle the swirling air currents, but the ride began to get violent. "Strap in!" Fred shouted, dropping his toaster.

A series of lightning bolts hit the ship and thunder shook her hull. Fred and Nancy clung to each other for dear life. The ship's heat shields were vaporizing. The temperature inside the cabin rose rapidly.

A loud beep from the computer signaled the breakdown. Fred pulled himself away from her and read the displays. "Shield failure!" he shouted. "We've got to get out of here soon, or we'll burn up! Follow me!"

Fred and Nancy scrambled out of their seats and made their way unsteadily aft as the lift pitched and rocked. Lightning flashed, flooding the cabin with bursts of blinding illumination. Nancy used her tail to provide balance and kept them from falling by wrapping it around a passenger seat.

"There's an escape pod at tail," Fred said. "It's got its own shielding—if we can get to it, we might make it."

"My *toasters!* They'll burn up with the lift!"

Fred leaned back to grab one, unplugging both of them in the process. "Computer! Transfer power to the escape pod! Prepare for emergency evacuation!" A series of beeps answered him.

When they reached the pod entrance, Fred reached for the handle and immediately pulled his hand away. "It's too hot!" Fred motioned Nancy to the other side of the round door handle as he tore off the top of his skinsuit, wrapping it around the handle. Between them, they twisted the handle until it opened, then jumped inside.

The pod was small, but serviceable. Thick cushions lined all the walls to prevent injury. A wide couch lay in the center of the cabin. Rather than a limited number of individual couches, the designers had chosen to create a single couch capable of holding as many people as possible in an emergency.

Fred tossed the toaster to one side and they scrambled into the couch, which automatically strapped them in. "Computer!" Fred yelled, "release the escape pod!"

The computer replied with a single beep, and dropped the pod. They felt a sickening plummet and almost passed out, then the roar of the pod's thrusters kicked in. Wings unfolded from the sides, and a tail surface rose from the rear. The onboard piloting system engaged and stabilized their flight, spiraling away from the last known course of the lift and scanning for a level surface on the ground below. When it found one, it slowed their descent, lowered the gear, and banked toward it.

"Brace for crash landing," the piloting system intoned, as a deceleration chute was deployed.

The pod thumped hard, bounced twice, and scraped to a halt. The stabilizing thrusters suddenly went silent.

Fred and Nancy opened their eyes. "Are you OK?" Fred asked.

"I *think* so. How about you?"

"A bit bruised," Fred replied, "but all the parts are working."

Lying together curled on the couch, Nancy quickly became aware that Fred was telling the truth. She turned and smiled at him, and Fred was, once again, completely captured.

"Initiating distress signal," said the pod.

"Don't do that right now."

"Do you wish to override emergency proced—"

"Yes!" Fred looked deep into Nancy's eyes. "And, computer? Don't disturb us." As nature took its course, Fred was amazed at the interesting uses to which Nancy was able to put her tail. He seriously considered acquiring one of his own.

Later, Nancy started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Fred asked, defensively.

"Oh, not you, darling. You were *wonderful,"* she said, wrapping her tail around him. "But something funny just occurred to me."

"What's that?" he asked.

"I was telling you about toasters, right? Well, we were in the ship, and the walls got hot, and we were ejected, right? *Toast!"*

Fred laughed. "Still," he said, "bread rises when it's baked, right?"

"Sure, but that's different."

"Not in this case," he replied, and pulled her close again.

"Oh *my,*" she said. "I see what you mean."

KEN KOUSEN

Is a research engineer at United Technologies Research Center in East Hartford, Connecticut. This story marks his return to InterText *after a long absence. His previous stories have appeared in* Mystic Fiction, Nuthouse, *and the anthology* The Magic Within.

J o s i e

MARCUS EUBANKS

We hold that every action has an equal and opposite reaction: a zero-sum game. So can value be found in anything we do, or are all acts doomed to be cancelled out?

SHE GLANCED DOWN AT THE CLOCK ON THE DASH: 18:52. Still about three minutes from work and she didn't have to be on shift until 19:00. She had a big truck—a rough-looking Rover, about 15 years old. Its appearance was intentional; actually, the car was very carefully maintained. She refused to wash it, so the once-tasteful gunmetal paint job was now closer to a matte black. The windows, all but the windscreen, were dark enough to seem opaque from the outside, and years' worth of city filth only strengthened the impression.

The headlamps added illumination to a group of kids, late teens to early twenties, shooting hoops under a streetlight in the middle of the block. Some trick of the lighting made for a stage-like setting, rendering the shadows on the side of the street impenetrable lakes of pure black. Reflexively, she slowed down.

Her subconscious muttered quiet nothings to her as the car slowed. The group seemed to thicken before her as kids flowed in ones and twos from various shadows, quickly adding themselves to the game. In only a few seconds the group had become a mob. With a deep breath its periphery expanded, and she was among them. A tiny splash of reflected light on the roofliner caught her eye as a figure immediately ahead of her turned, bringing a sawed-off pump to bear even as she downshifted. The truck dipped once as someone reached for the mirror mount and landed on the passenger running board, but he rolled along the side and fell away as the beast abruptly leaped forward.

The animal mind of the group took time to react—it only gradually realized that something was wrong. Bodies tried to scramble out of the way when they heard the engine note change, but one didn't quite make it. She felt the transmitted shock as something bounced off the right fender, noting that neither the front nor rear end lifted as it would have if a tire had climbed over flesh. The pump went off to her side, pounding into the vehicle but not crazing the glass. Her friends had accused her of paranoia when she'd had the rear side windows replaced with steel and sprung for custom glass elsewhere, but incidents like this made her figure she'd gotten her money's worth.

THREE MINUTES LATER AND EIGHT BLOCKS AWAY, she locked her own 12-gauge pump into the rack and stowed the flak jacket in her locker. The jacket was better protection than the kevlar vest for which she was exchanging it, but she needed the additional mobility afforded by the arm cutouts. Even with metal detectors and professional security, this was a dangerous place to work. She grabbed a cup of burnt coffee, paused over the first too-hot sip as she collected her wits, and then stepped out into the melee.

"Hey Josie! Expand the market any on your way in?" Josie peered over the counter the voice had come from, taking in the sprawled-out form reclining there, feet on the desktop, eyebrows raised cynically over a coffee mug of his own.

"Fuck off, Carter, you're not funny. Just give me your report and get the hell out of here."

"OK, OK. Jeez." He tried to look hurt, but failed. He grinned archly. "Premenstrual again? Wasn't that last week? You're gonna be the beacon of pure joy tomorrow morning."

She sat down with him to run the list, thinking about the last time she'd had trouble coming in, only a couple of weeks back. She could picture the kid's face vividly as she replayed the scene, the malicious joy on his features turning to wordless astonishment as the gaping mouth of the Remington laid his chest open. There had been no question about creating a customer that night; that particular one went to the morgue.

Carter was in full swing, colorfully editorializing his way through the status report when she heard the alarm tone sound over the PA. She didn't need to listen to the words, but they sang themselves to her, an oft-repeated mantra. She knew which operator was working by the voice—this was the one who always sounded happy, carefully inflecting her words in rich, well-modulated tones. "Christ," she thought to herself. "The bitch could at least try to sound a bit bummed about it."

"Well, fuck me with a chainsaw!" That was Carter. "It's been like this all day. C'mon, I'll help you get this one started. You'll be totally swamped in a couple of hours." She smiled thanks at him, leaned back to stretch as she stole another swallow of coffee, and then got up to see what was coming in. It was 13 minutes after the shift change, so this was officially her baby.

It was all noise and confusion.

"Just shootin' hoops, man, and this big fuckin' black truck—"

"Respiration 32, pulse 140, pressure 70 over 5. I'm calling him a nine on the Glasgow scale—"

"Bitch drivin' didn't even slow down! Izzee gonna make it? Aw man aw man—"

"Christ, he's flailed on the right! Gimme four of positive pressure on the vent and get *him* the hell out of here!"

"Gonna kill that bitch, aw man aw—"

"Sir, you'll have to leave, no sir, I mean *now*. I'm sorry, but—"

"Mastoid hematoma and orbital bruising, 10-centimeter avulsed occipital laceration with a depressed fracture. Someone call neuro, call CT-scan—"

In the midst of it all Carter, worrying with the vent settings, glanced at her and cocked an eyebrow. "Black truck? That you, girl?"

She examined the tape on the endotracheal tube, decided it would do, then looked up at him, grimacing. She started to speak, stopped herself. Instead she rolled her eyes. "A girl's gotta work…."

MARCUS EUBANKS

Is an angry young medical student who has conceived an incredible passion for emergency medicine. He persists in his belief that he has the coolest job in the world.

Skin the Color of Blood

M. STANLEY BUBIEN

Just as humanity seems driven by greed, it also seems driven to demand an eye for an eye, blood for blood, and a wrong for a wrong.

RESERVATION NIGHT DARK LIKE A BLANKET STAINED in blackness. And in the darkness, bringing the comfort of stone, Lisa Jumping Bear lived a vision.

Through her mind she traveled across the scape. Her feet trod the bare earth, the dust of life, as she traversed its perimeter.

Tepid wind curled dust into her hair as it passed, its voice whispering through her, "Yours, yours, yours…" Then trailing off, out of her vision's reach.

A cloud descended, engulfing her with its wetness, taming the dust that had risen upon her. With the voice of the wind, it too spoke through her, "Yours, yours, yours…" Fading around her, only silence was left, joined with the gray, sunless sky.

Mud clung with dampness about her, a hardening clay covering her nakedness. Quiet as sand, its voice moved through her flesh, "Yours, yours, yours…" Slowly it became cast, solidifying itself within her.

Without a struggle, she became the stone.

Ages passed, the engine came. She felt it rumble through her rigid ears. She tasted the reek upon her taut lips. She felt the hammer fall upon her granite skin.

As it battled to shatter her, its voice thundered, "Mine, mine, mine…" Louder and louder it roared, until she was battered into lifeless dust upon the earth.

AWAKE! LISA JUMPING BEAR STILL FELT THE THUNder surround her. It grew briefly deeper then fell to silence.

She blinked water from her eyes, then bolted upright. Like the gust of the wind, she knew the sound—a car falling away from the road in violence.

Forcing the vision-confusion away and tasting nausea in its wake, the need for awareness was upon her.

She reached the telephone and dialed Emergency. Not recognizing the voice—not caring enough to recognize it—she spoke her address urgently, waited for the promise of help and hung up.

She pulled on her pants and T-shirt, grabbed a flashlight and a white sheet, then ran out the door.

THE NIGHT STILL BLANKETED THE LAND, BUT SHE knew where the car had flown from the road. Stepping to the edge of the hill, she curled the sheet into a marker and placed it at her feet.

Her gaze fell down the embankment, united with her light flashing across the scattered wreckage. Glimmers and reflections cast silent beacons back from glass shards and metal fragments. The sparkles danced a trail over the sloping descent, carrying Lisa's gaze to the crushed heap laying with wheels pointed skyward—a noiseless contrast to its thundering destruction.

Her feet left the solidity of the hilltop and wove their way downward toward the automobile. Dodging through the litter, her light glanced across a shrouded object. She altered her course.

In the dirt lay a boy barely measuring enough years to be a driver. He was on his back, arms outstretched and

legs folded beneath him. His face was battered and freshly scarred, covered with the thick crimson of the heavy bleeding from above his eyes.

Lisa knelt, considered the length of white cloth she had abandoned at the hilltop, then ripped a strand from the bottom of her shirt. With one hand she pulled the boy's severed hairline back upon his forehead and used the other to block the flow of blood with her cloth.

She felt the wetness stain her skin, but sensed a slackening in the bleeding.

Now, she would just wait.

But in her vision-drenched mind she knew not for whom she waited. Was it the bright light of promised help to arrive atop the hill? Or did she wait for death—standing close, considering its chance to pull the boy's soul from her reddening grasp?

THE LIGHT BROKE A PATH THROUGH THE NIGHT'S cover. Lisa heard the engine stop, the doors slam, the voices beckon from the roadside. She turned her flashlight to arc a signal toward the rescuers.

Appearing on the hilltop a silhouette motioned and then called, "I see ya there! We'll be right down!"

There were two. As they traversed the hill carrying lanterns, light reflected from their hair. The one hefting the medical gear was obviously blond. The other moved stiffly but quickly; Lisa guessed the color of his head was due to the weight of his years.

It was he who arrived first, unhindered by the equipment his companion was forced to shoulder down the hill. He bent to set his light down. "You the one who called?"

Lisa nodded, and he replied, "Well, it's OK now. You go ahead and move away, we'll take it from here."

Lisa searched the man for compassion, but the shadows danced a murky beat across his white face. The sight brought the return of nausea. She peered toward his eyes, but they stared back with the color of the night. The shadow dance began to move across his body, sending him into a rhythm of darkness played by an illusory drummer. He stood erect and loomed with the arms of a great bat ready to engulf her.

She forced the vision away.

"Young lady, I *said* we could handle it now." He stepped forward, bringing the scent of medicine with his breath.

"No!" she burst out, not used to the sound of her voice after so much consuming silence. "He can't… I can't let go. He'll bleed to death."

"No, he won't—we're here to keep that from happenin'. We'll stop that bleedin' and get him up to the ambulance."

"You can't…. His skin…. His head's been cut and I have to hold it together."

The second light and the equipment arrived. The blond brought his lantern nearer. "Little lady," the first man continued, "if you don't let me in there to look, I can't do a thing. Not a thing at all."

Lisa tried to read the man's eyes, but they remained black and silent. Blood ran from her hands as the boy's life leaked between her fingers.

She relented. "Come here close before I let go. I don't want to spill any more blood into the soil."

"Good." The man dropped down next to Lisa. "Johnson, come here with that light! I can't see a damned thing."

The blond stepped closer and held the lantern over the three figures on the earth. The light flickered briefly then subsided.

"OK," The elder said to Lisa after he took her place. "You can just step back now, you'll be out of my light." She obeyed as her feet pulled her two paces back.

"Now, I'm just gonna lift this back and look at the wound." He moved his hand away. Through the inconsistent light the gash across the boys head shown to be an endless chasm dug to the bone. Below the cut, illumination revealed now what blood had earlier hidden—battered cheeks, an unhinged jaw, a twisted, broken nose—blackened marks clouding his complexion.

"He can't… I can't let go. He'll bleed to death." "Little lady, if you don't let me in there to look, I can't do a thing. Not a thing at all."

Silence met her with the sight of the broken boy. But a sound, small and throaty, began to cut its way through to her. It came from the direction of the blond man. Before she could pinpoint the source it gained strength, built itself into a pealing thunder, and found her. Its grasp held her, echoed upon her, and jarred the nausea within.

A flood unleashed, the nausea rose up and washed over her, the roar of its fury mingling with the torrent from without. She felt the earth buckle under the resonating forces. Ground and sky fell away and she was left comfortless, floating through the landless blackness.

She was no longer standing over the boy's body, and her only companion—the booming thunder which rang in her ears—sought to break through her.

THE THUNDER TOOK ON FORM. BENEATH HER FEET, IT bent into splintered planks. Surrounding her, it rose up into the paneled walls of a bar. About her, it shaped itself into voices.

Its power gave substance to the motions about the room.

A crowd filled the wooded barroom. White, faceless voids oscillated as the thunder boomed from a corner jukebox. Each man wore a hat and boots and a woman on one arm. They carried cups so overflowing the liquid spilled upon the floor with the rhythm. All were dancing together.

They became aware of Lisa. Around her a writhing circle formed. Nearer with each beat the ring flowed until they threatened to crush her with their proximity. The rumbling music eased from the room, and the dancers halted.

Surrounded, Lisa tasted their closeness. A leather stench and medicine reek breathed from stale lungs.

With the clear-eyed stare of hatred, the crowed raised their fists to the ceiling. They stepped forward and let the weight of their thousand fists fall upon her. The arms rose and fell. The hammering repeated itself over and over, trying to shatter her like the earth.

Raising her hands for protection, Lisa saw they were not her own. Instead, the skin had a youthful roughness, with knuckles gnarled into the grip of a farm boy. They offered no protection from her enemy. Lisa's face bruised, her nose twisted shapelessly, her jaw cracked, and her legs collapsed as the pressure sent her to her knees.

Her assailants' eyes, still clear, now glowed with elation. With their flickering, the silence shattered as the throng broke into a roar of laughter.

From their throats Lisa recognized the sonic form which had carried her here. It beat against her chest with each blow of the thousand fists.

Lisa let her head bend, her body go limp, and she slid toward the floor. But it was not the barbed splinters of oaken planks which met her. It was a smooth, moist earth which embraced her fall.

SHE LIFTED HER FACE FROM THE DIRT AND SOUGHT the marks of her beating. Her touch found only soft skin, but her ears still rang with the horror of the wooded barroom.

Raising her head higher, her eyes caught the flickering scene. In front of her, she saw the specter of her vision, the source of the ringing in her ears. It took form in the scorning laughter pouring between the crooked teeth of the younger, blond man.

"That's Dark Feather's boy!" he laughed, pointing. "And ain't it just a shame. He's been scalped!"

"What?" the elder reared in surprise. "What the hell's so funny about that?"

"Dark Feather!" he said, as though the name would be explanation enough. He waited for an answer, and when there was only an empty stare, he continued. "Don't you know? The Skin who's been fightin' over them grazin' rights!"

They became caught up within themselves, forgetting, for the moment, Lisa's presence. "What?" the elder questioned. "We don't have time for this!"

"Ah, c'mon! I can't believe you don't know! You live in a hole or somethin'?"

"Watch it, boy! I'm warning you!"

"Yeah, yeah—Dark Feather's the one who been leadin' the Skins in rebellion. They's the ones not wantin' cows grazin' on rez land."

"I remember. Something about only Indian-owned cattle being allowed to graze." The elder put the bandage back in place and began to check the boy's eyes. "The white ranchers've been up in arms about it."

"Yeah. They told ol' man Dark Feather he was gonna regret it. Looks like they weren't kiddin' none either!"

The older man paused. "What're you saying?"

"Look at the bruises! I can see from here some of that blood's been dryin' for a while. Kid's been beaten."

The elder looked over the boy's face slowly. "I guess you're right…" He let his voice trail off as he considered the drying wounds. After a pause, he fell back to business, "Well, you quit your laughin' and get some wits about you! Grab me the disinfectant. I got to clean this wound. Then cut me some gauze so we can cover it and move him. We can worry about them bruises later." He bent to examine the boy more closely, checking for other injuries. After a moment, he realized the blond was simply staring at him.

"Why're you just standin' there? Didn't you hear me? I said get some disinfectant and cut some gauze!"

"I, uh…" The blond shifted his weight nervously. Then sucking confidence into his lungs, he said, "We ought to think about this."

"So while you're thinkin' give me some of that gauze!"

"Now look here—what might them ranchers do if we save the boy?"

"Why'd they do anything? It's our *job*."

"You know what I mean! Them ranchers are tryin' to send a message by this!" The blond waved his arm over the prostrate form. "If we save him, we'd be interferin' with that."

"This cut don't have nothin' to do with any message! Now stop talking and get to work!"

"Hold on, I tell ya! What if they do want him dead? When they find out we saved the kid's life, they'll be comin' after us!"

"No, they won't. We're just doin' our job."

"But let's say we don't do it. We just stand by and—"

The elder man turned. "You're talking about murder."

"Murder? Don't say that!" The blond replied with an audible shake in his voice. "It'd be… it's just… well, nature takin' it's course! I mean, *look* at him! He's probably gonna die anyway."

"I don't care, dammit! It ain't worth being guilty all my life for! Just because some fat-assed ranchers can't graze cattle on his daddy's land. It ain't worth it!"

"Stop bein' an ol' fool. Look at the future, will ya? Look at the consequences." The blond stepped back and put his hands in his pockets.

"I am lookin' at consequences! Right here on the ground!"

"I mean to the ranchers. Ol' Dark Feather's just the first of the trouble. Next thing you know they'll *all* be denyin' us the land. Then them ranchers ain't gonna have no place to go. They won't be able to support their families no more. Then what're they supposed to do? Starve?"

"That ain't our problem."

"Why you…" Stress inflected in the blond's words. "You're an ol' fool, aren't ya! How 'bout if I told them ranchers you said that? How you said you don't care for 'em tryin' to raise their families? How all you care about is your own self! And how all's you want is a swig from that bottle you carry around!"

"Her?" The blond retorted with a scornful glance. "What's she gonna say? Who's gonna believe her? It'd be her word 'gainst ours. And we're two law abidin', moral, Church-goin' citizens."

The elder stiffened and the blond continued. "Didn't think I knew 'bout that, did ya? You stink of it every day. I have to be downright *stupid* not to notice."

The elder stared silently, hands still clinging to the boy's bloodied head.

"Tell you what, ol' man," The blond said with a lilt. "I bet that boy gonna die no matter what. If he don't, I might talk to the hospital, too, tell 'em about some negligence here. How you been so drunk you couldn't do first aid proper."

Anger flashed from the old man, but the blond cut him short. "That is, unless you go along with me. Just do like I said and let nature take its course. Then you'll be home free."

The elder's gaze passed back and forth across the space between his assistant and the broken boy. He came to a decision. With an effort in his garbled voice, he said, "If you got it all figured out, what about her?" He lifted a reddened finger to point at Lisa's prostrate form.

"Her?" The blond retorted with a scornful glance at Lisa. "She's just a Skin! What's she gonna say? And who's gonna believe her anyway? It'd be her word 'gainst ours. And we're two law abidin', moral, Church-goin' citizens. They'd just laugh an' call her crazy."

Silence bent through the darkness. The quiet gave Lisa back some of the strength the vision had drained away. Without thinking about the consequences, Lisa pushed her way up from the earth. Though standing made her sway, she bent her head and charged at the younger man. She caught him in the side, butting her head into the soft part below his ribs. The air burst from the man's lungs as her momentum knocked him to the ground. She sprawled along side of him, briefly losing the strength that had propelled her along.

She stood up, and turned to face the elder man and the boy. But before her eyes could focus, a bony fist hammered into her face. She knew nothing for a moment, then looked up from the ground yet again.

"You bitch!" the blond screamed, kicking into Lisa's stomach.

"Stop it, damn you!" the elder yelled. "How do you expect to explain away two bodies? Now get a hold of yourself!"

The blond stared down at Lisa with a black scowl and heavy breath. He wiped spittle from the side of his mouth and turned back toward the elder. "Yeah. All right. I'll leave the bitch alone."

When he turned his back, Lisa forced herself onto her feet. Uphill into the darkness, she fled. With pain biting into her stomach at each stride, she ran back to the top of the slope.

DARKNESS SHROUDED LISA'S HOME—COVERED FROM without, filled from within.

After forcing the door open, she could not bring herself to find the light switch. It didn't matter, though. Her mind knew her destination even through the lightless room.

Lisa felt the closet air stale and cold upon her skin. It poured over her as she reached into the stillness. Cold and stale again the touch that came to her fingertips. But heavy the burden she hefted from the must-laden shelves.

Her hands trembled across its smoothness. Remembering the warmth after her grandfather used it and laid it into her young arms; the force as it pushed against her shoulder, threatening to knock her to the ground with its power.

She snapped the stock from the barrel and felt the two cylinders which rested flush to the hollow.

Her grandfather's voice returned to her. "Always keep it ready," he had said.

As she locked the pieces back together, she recalled the sun's glint off her grandfather's eyes when he spoke those words. It was a joyless sight.

Stepping outside into the starless night to wait, her heart weighed heavier than the metal she bore in her arms.

OUTSIDE, THE BLACKNESS OF NIGHT LAID UPON HER heart and drowned everything around her. So dank her thoughts that upon hearing the first steps of the men pulling their burden up the slope—they swayed under the mass of a portable litter—she welcomed their presence.

Distance and stillness shrouded everything as light poured from the rear ambulance doors. She held ground until the men pushed the litter up and in—held until she saw the soiled cloth pulled up across the boy's body and over his head, hiding the lifelessness within.

Steeling herself like a stone upon a mountain top, she readied. But before moving into the light she heard the two men speaking.

"…and there ain't no reason not for us both to take credit. Why probably them ranchers'd be downright pleased. I bet them boys'd even give us some reward. Maybe a piece of the action we could call our own." The words flooded from the blond to rush over the elder. The only response was the occasional grunt of mild agreement. "A piece of rez space to live on. Why, sure it'd still *be* rez land, but I could have a little cabin an' land to graze on. The Skins'd think nothin' of it after this." He waved one hand into the ambulance and over the mute body. "Yeah, a piece of Skin land I could call my own! Might be theirs on paper, but this'd make it mine. There ain't no way me or them ranchers'd let them Skins take what's by rights mine."

The words seared pain in Lisa's ears. Reluctance burned away and she rushed forward into the light, hefting the gun toward the two men. Her aim fell upon the younger and she began to squeeze the trigger.

The two saw her enter from the shadows. Both recognized the threat she wielded. When the younger saw his fate pointing at him in the double-barreled steel, he pushed out his arms as if they would stop the gunshot.

"No!" he said. "No, no. Don't. That's not… That's not a good idea. Don't shoot I tell ya, don't shoot!"

As his voice fluctuated, Lisa felt the bile rise from her stomach once again. This time, though, she was ready; she would not allow the vision to overwhelm. Recalling the rock upon the mountain, her body solidified, her muscles became cast, and her finger rigid upon the trigger.

The young man's whimpering amplified in her ears. It began to rumble, bending itself into a great beast shaped of sound. The thunder had come again. It beat upon her heart like a hammer, threatening to shatter her to dust.

Through the roar, she pushed her mind into focus. Now! Now she would act. Defying the solidity of her stance, she flexed her finger. Force of will bent it back slowly against the rigidity of her own form.

The thunder reacted to her movement. As the trigger slid, the sound pounded upon her harder and harder. But with the hammering upon her flesh, she felt herself move more freely. Her joints loosened in their action and the resistance of the firing pin weakened.

An instant before contact, she tasted the reek of medicine stench upon her lips. It polluted her. It stripped her of control. It unleashed the force of the vision to rush over and carry her away.

THE VISION TOOK HER AGAIN TO A FAR-OFF PLACE. A grave sight. She stood upon the decayed body of a broken man. His arms were flung wide, a black opening was torn through his ribcage, and patches of blond hair clung to his skull. In the hollow sockets that once were eyes, a bone-white glare flashed. They spoke a word that Lisa heard with her soul. "Hatred," they said.

While she studied it, the body began to take on life—the chest filled in, pieces of hair grew in from decayed patches. Flesh sprung upon the skeletal cheeks, smoothing in their tanned flush. The brow rose and the nose took form.

Reborn. It had transformed itself in many ways. From blond patches to black locks. From featureless to recognizable. From man to woman. Yet as the life washed into the body, the eyes remained hollow sockets.

Lisa looked upon her own broken body lying in the grave. Tearing her gaze aside, she caught sight of the shell casing, discharged and smoking in the dust. A voice came to her as the shell cooled. "Hatred," it said.

The voice was her own.

Unbidden, a tear formed in Lisa's eye. Like a stream through stony banks it trickled down her cheek. At once the scene collapsed about her; a silent rush of wind blew through her and carried her back to the dim standoff.

The rumbling returned, but now its voice was terrifying with a song of victory.

Her finger had slid too far to stop. With the final hammer beat, she let herself fall to the dust of the earth. As she crumbled, the gun roared and a flash blasted away the night for one brief instant.

STILLNESS MET THE THREE FIGURES. GLASS LAY shattered around them from the shotgun blast. The metal atop the ambulance was buckled and pocked from the explosive force.

It was the young blond who stirred first. Looking up he saw the damage above his head. He turned to Lisa as she erected herself again, and he met a blackened gaze which burned through his heart. Averting his eyes, he realized the gun pointed at the ground, one barrel spent and smoking. Awkwardly the blond man questioned, "Why…?"

Lisa answered with an unblinking stare.

Again he questioned, "What do you want from me?"

This time, Lisa gave her answer aloud. The gun remained steady as she spoke, "I would ask the boy's life back."

"I can't do that. Ain't mine to give."

Lisa paused, fire leaping from her gaze like the flash of shotgun. "It wasn't yours to take either."

The man's lips tightened, as if laughter would never escape from them again. Though Lisa raised the gun a second time, he didn't protest—he just let his head bow, his eyes cast to the ground.

"Know this," she said to the two. "The truth of the night is etched upon the earth. As long as you two walk the land, it will be the witness of your guilt."

She waited a moment to see if they understood. "Leave this place." She told them and turned away. With the lowered gun, she stepped into the shroud of the night.

Moments passed. She heard the engine howl to life, but refused to watch them go. As their sound faded away, she bent the gun at the center to break stock and barrel once more. She removed the unexpelled cylinder. Twirling it in her hand, she weighed its power and knew the one thing alone it could bring.

Her fist tightened, then her arm cocked back and she cast it over the hill. The shell vanished into the abysmal void. But before it clattered upon the wreckage in the valley, she had turned and strode away.

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The Spirits We Know

WILLIAM TRAPMAN

Everyone has their personal demons, whether they begin life among snow-capped mountains in the American west, the green hills and fields of Ireland, or anywhere in between.

He flickered on the edge of my vision as I picked up my bag and walked into JFK. *You won't be able to keep up with a 747,* I thought, and an hour later I was flying higher than he ever could.

I should have felt free. But what I really felt was lonesome.

I got off at Shannon, where the immigration officer was a big red face under untidy thinning hair. Friendly, easygoing, professionally disarming.

"Business or holidays, sir?" he asked. His hands, broad and weathered, flicked through the pages of my passport. Maybe he farmed in his spare time. Jenny's people had been farmers; mine too.

"Just a short holiday," I said.

He stamped the document. "I hope you enjoy it, sir."

The rental car was small, but I smelled the newness and thought of an old truck with a sagging bumper, and of an old man and a mixed-up young boy. I turned on the motor, shifted awkwardly into gear with my left hand, and drove out of the parking lot. A sticker on the windshield reminded me that here, they drive on the left.

Now and again, without thinking, I looked skyward.

Green and rolling fields gave way to harsher land with rough stone walls instead of hedge rows. It was an environment different from both New York and Wyoming—a place without the noise of one or the dust of the other.

It rained differently here, too—sudden fine mists of wetness catching windshield wipers unawares. In New York it rains acid out of clouds invisible from the bottom of the skyscraper canyons, and in Wyoming what rain there is tastes angry. I got out of the car once and the Irish mist that trickled down my face was sweet.

I found the ocean, first in brief snatches beyond seafront villages, then below high cliffs which marked the western edge of the land. From that height the ocean seemed peaceful and slow-moving, until I saw how fiercely it chewed at the base of the cliff. I'd had to walk a path along the side of the precipice, inside a fence of stone flags laid on their edges. Beyond these were flat grassless areas of clifftop, some with people lying down to look over the edge. At the top of the path I sat out on one myself and looked across the ocean.

Jenny's ocean. The other side of the ocean she'd walked into. The only way she knew to go home. The sun

came out suddenly, gently warming my back, and then a voice intruded.

"There's nothing to see out *there*."

I turned to find backlit hair haloed red, and everything inside me went wild until the sun hid itself again. Then her face came out of shadow, I saw that she was someone *else* with red hair—someone with smiling green eyes, wearing a bright rain slicker. A small backpack hung from her shoulder. The sound of the wind on the clifftop had prevented me from hearing her coming.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," she said, and waved out over the sea. "You were looking the wrong way for the best scenery."

I shrugged, rather ungraciously; I didn't want distraction. "It depends on how far you can see."

"And how far can *you* see?"

"Wherever I've been." It wasn't my usual style, but my tone was unmistakably dismissive.

"Sorry," she said, and gave me a little wave before walking back to the path, clambering easily over the stone flag fence, her red hair floating against the sky.

I turned back to the ocean. The crashing surf was soundless from 700 feet above it, but the keening and mewling of the seabirds on the cliffs were the songs of the wake I'd come to keep.

I CAME BACK DOWN THE PATHWAY PAST A weathered man posing for photographs with a donkey. On its back was a small dog wearing a cap, with a pipe in its mouth. I guess it's easier to show friends back home a picture of foolishness than to try and understand and explain a different culture.

I drove from the parking lot after a quick look at a map, turned left and found myself on the wrong side of the road with an approaching motorist panicking on his brakes. Swerving back, I gave the guy a suitably chastened look; he muttered something I couldn't hear and didn't need to. A bit further, a hitchhiker stuck out a thumb, and, still a bit shaken, I pulled over.

"Hi, going towards Galway?" she asked, bending to window level. "Oh—" green eyes grinned, "—the man with the long-distance vision."

This time I smiled back, thinking absently about second chances. "Sure. Get in."

When she'd done so, she held out a hand. "I'm Finnoula. Finnoula Regan."

"Mike," I said, accepting a firm and friendly clasp. "Mike Rainwater." I put the car in motion again. "Hey, I'm sorry I was short with you on the clifftop."

"That's OK. It was your space. I've used the cliffs to clear my head too."

I glanced over; she caught my look and smiled again, open and incurious.

"What's Galway like?" I asked.

"It's nice. Lively…. It's a university town with lots of young people. Great crack."

I gaped at her and the car swerved slightly.

She burst out laughing. "No, not what you think… 'crack' means fun, enjoying yourself, music and drinking." She paused and looked thoughtful, and *there* was the resemblance again. "If you don't mind taking a small detour for lunch, I'll show you."

SHE BROUGHT ME TO A LITTLE PIERSIDE PUB, WHICH was full, mostly with foreigners enjoying the music and the food. We ordered salmon on coarse Irish bread and Finnoula asked for a glass of beer. I had a Coke.

"I don't drink," I told her when she suggested I try a beer. "It's a genetic thing. Low tolerance to alcohol."

"Genetic?"

"Native Americans and alcohol don't mix very well."

She was puzzled. "Native Americans? Oh… Indians?"

I nodded. "Yes, but we prefer 'Native Americans.' "

She looked at me, openly curious. "You're the first I've met," she said, "as far as I know."

"And how would you know?" I'd had this conversation once before.

"I don't know. Your skin isn't really red, just… outdoorsy. Your features, maybe—they're not European." Her eyes glinted mischievously. "Maybe you shouldn't have stopped wearing feathers?"

"Maybe you should still be riding donkeys," I retorted.

She laughed. *"Touché.* Sorry."

She looked at me, openly curious. "You're the first Native American I've met," she said, "as far as I know." "And how would you know?"

We let it go and listened to the music, but she was obviously still thinking about it. "How does it work out in your job?" she asked when the musicians took a break. "Is there prejudice, like as if you were black?"

I work on Wall Street, where a Sioux is unusual in an environment of Jews and WASPs who tend to keep things in the family. But I had made it my business to become very good at what I did, and as long as I produced I was tolerated, I told her. "I don't get invited to certain parties, but it's no big deal."

It *had* been at one time, when I'd scholarshipped my way through a college too good for my breed; when hard work brought me high grades, which disturbed some of my financially and racially advantaged classmates. When comments about 'good dead injuns' held real malice and

a couple of physical confrontations made me wonder if they wanted to make it really happen. There were some depressing times.

The early times of the eagle.

BACK ON THE ROAD SHE TOLD ME SOMETHING ABOUT herself. She was 21, an only child, and worked as a computer programmer. And her parents had split a month after her last birthday.

"They had it so well organized. I realized they'd only been waiting until I turned 21," she murmured. "They tried to be so damned *civilized* about it, but I know now the marriage probably ended years ago. They'd stayed together for my sake."

"That's bad?"

"Yes. They didn't think about how *I'd* feel, knowing I was the only reason they'd stayed together living what must have been empty lives."

"And how *do* you feel?"

She looked at me and winced. "Mixed up. I was angry with them and said things that maybe I shouldn't have. That's why I'm over here, trying to clear my head."

Two of us doing the same thing. "I'm sorry I didn't let you share my space."

She grinned at that, which was better. For both of us.

WE DROVE THROUGH LAYERED HILLS OF UNCOVERED limestone, the color of the clouds which sometimes came down over them. I'd not seen anything like it.

"There's plant life here that's not found anywhere else," she told me, and brought me to a perfumery which concentrated the scent of rare flowers. We went to a cave with bones of bears ("There haven't been bears in Ireland for five thousand years!"), and then she brought me to something which threw me right back to home.

"It's a *dolmen,* a stone age burial site." Four large rocks sat in a massive but delicate construction that looked poised to fly from its rocky field. "There are lots of them in Ireland, and in Britain. Some say they have magical properties."

I put my hand against one of the upright stones. *"We* have places which feel like this—" I said quietly "—they are places of… communication."

She didn't laugh. "Communication with what?"

"Memories, and things beyond memory."

I felt her green eyes scanning right through me. "You're a deep one, Mike Rainwater," she said eventually.

As we walked back to the car I thought once that a high shadow flickered just beyond my vision. But I didn't look up.

"I'M GOING TO STAY WITH A FRIEND FROM COLLEGE." She was poised at the half-open door of the car.

"Thanks for the company," I said, "and for the tour. Maybe we'll see each other again sometime?"

I didn't expect to. And then I did one of those impulsive things which don't come from rational thinking.

"Come with me tomorrow," I said.

She nodded, and I was surprised.

"Four in the morning," I warned, expecting a change of mind.

"OK," she said, then smiled, touched my hand briefly, and got out of the car into the bustle of the Galway evening.

I SAT ON A LIMESTONE SLAB A LITTLE BACK FROM THE dolmen and waited for the sun. She was beside me, bundled in a warm jacket.

"You're not going closer?"

I shook my head. "It's not necessary."

It was like a sound which kind of sneaked in and built slowly, growing under the lightening sky, and when the sun slipped up from behind the eastern hills and cast the shadow of the dolmen around me, the stones relayed its song. The ancient music enveloped me like the old robe of buffalo skins in which I had taken my tribal initiation vows, bringing me away into the past. It lasted until the sun cleared the stones, and it was long enough for Jenny to tell me that she hadn't meant to do it, and to properly say her goodbyes. And then she was gone.

I looked at Finnoula.

"Finished?" she asked quietly.

I nodded. "Could you hear?"

She shook her head.

A pity. She would have liked Jenny.

WE HAD BREAKFAST IN A LOCAL HOTEL, THE FIRST customers of the day. She waited until we were finished to tell me she was going to Dublin on the afternoon train. To see her father. The prospect was bothering her.

"You don't know what to say to him?" I asked. "You're scared?"

"It's difficult for me to talk to either of them just now. Somehow…" she paused, searching. "Somehow I feel *guilty."*

I looked at her for a few moments, then signalled the waitress to bring the check. On the road I told her about my grandfather.

"He raised me. My parents died when I was small, killed when their old truck went off the road. He was the one who pushed me into regular school, instead of the one for people like us. One day I came back upset after somebody called me a no-good redskin—" It all welled up again. "Know what I was feeling? *Guilty.* Guilty for *being* an Indian. I was feeling ashamed because history had written us as the bad guys."

"That feeling wasn't rational," she murmured.

I grinned at her. "No, it wasn't. Is yours?"

Then she smiled too—tentatively, but it was there. "No, it's not." She reached across and squeezed my arm. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. And remember, you still *have* parents to talk to."

I DON'T LIKE RAILWAY STATIONS MUCH; TOO OFTEN they're places of saying goodbye. But we had time for coffee.

"How did *you* handle the guilt problem?" she asked.

I added sugar to my cup and stirred. "My grandfather took me on a trip into the Tetons, high up until we could stand on a ledge and see back down over Wyoming. Then he told me simple truths. That my people had been there long before the people who taunted me. That we had a civilization in this land much older than theirs. That though the white men had taken the land, they couldn't take our souls."

"He sounds like a wise man," she said. "But it doesn't sound like enough to solve all your problems."

I nodded. "You're right. But he also gave me something else that day."

We were high, but he was higher still, circling in the air currents around the peak. My mind's eye provided detail which distance hid…. talons and beak razor sharp, eyes which could find a mouse hundreds of feet below, a majesty befitting his place in the kingdom of life.

"That is your soul, Michael," my grandfather said softly. "That eagle will always be near when you need him, when you have difficulty finding yourself. Look up and you'll see him."

The bird dropped a wing and came swooping down towards us. I made ready to run but my grandfather held my arm firmly. "Do not be afraid of your soul," he murmured.

The eagle came so close that we could feel on our faces the wind of his slowly beating wings, and I could see the beak and talons and eyes which I'd only imagined before. He circled us once, then gave a strident call and rose back up into the blue above the Tetons.

"I haven't felt guilty or afraid since then," I said when I'd told her about him. "Call it superstition if you want, but I believed in that eagle."

"Have you seen him often?" she asked.

I nodded. "Several times, in school and later in New York when I needed sorting out. I'd look at the skyscrapers and see him wheeling around the peaks of the city."

Until he failed me: when Jenny went, I blamed him. I needed something to blame, even though it had been inevitable. A genetic thing, a low tolerance to life. And one night, when the demons of fear had momentarily overcome her, she had gone to the ocean and walked in until her red hair floated lifeless on the waves.

I had asked him to help her and he'd failed me, and afterwards I wanted to be free of him to curse him. But there is no freedom from the spirits we know.

"There was a girl… Jenny, an Irish girl, in New York," I told Finnoula. "Neither of us fitted perfectly in our lives. Both of us were lonesome for our homes and our own people. But we had also both said our goodbyes and we had to make good."

I had my eagle, but Jenny had a different bird, a raven that sat on her shoulder. That's what she called her depression.

"She'd been dumped by a guy, her husband, in the small village where she came from. She felt… ashamed. She became convinced it was her fault, that she hadn't tried hard enough. She ran away, from her village and her shame." I paused, remembering the helplessness, hers and mine. "We became friends, and I was trying to help her see that she couldn't hold herself responsible for what happened, but one night when I wasn't there, she drowned herself."

I looked at Finnoula and saw the woman that Jenny could have been. "I came here to be sure she got home."

"My grandfather took me high up until we could stand and see back down over Wyoming. He told me that though the white men had taken the land, they couldn't take our souls."

The public address system blared a call for the Dublin train and she stood up. "I have to go, Mike." She came close and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks, again," she whispered, then she drew her head back and looked at me. "Will you be coming to Dublin?"

I shook my head. "I've only another couple of days, and there's something I have to do before I go back. But I'll come here again."

"We don't have eagles in Ireland now," she said softly, a little sadly. "We used to."

I hugged her and she felt warm and soft and very close. "They're inside of us, Finnoula," I whispered. "We just have to let them fly."

She waved to me until the train disappeared around the first bend. And then there was only the locomotive's horn mourning me a fading last goodbye.

THE VILLAGE WAS TINY, A STRAGGLE OF HOUSES tight into a bay, with a small finger of pier pointing toward

America. When I drove in, I knew every house and the hidden people behind each window.

There was no family to see; Jenny had told me her parents had died some years before she left. And an only brother had gone to Australia since then. When her crisis came, there was no one close.

I parked the car near the pier and walked slowly through the main street, and it was as if Jenny was beside me pointing out her happy times. I recognized the house she'd grown up in, now closed and dilapidated, with a 'For Sale' sign that also looked tired. A school seemed too new to be the one she'd talked of, and then I found the original one-room building was now a library. A church at the end of a laneway stood guard on a graveyard and I creaked open an iron gate which echoed the final hopes of generations.

I found her parents' grave and said goodbye for her.

I met a few people as I walked back in a cool wind coming off the sea, but none paid me much attention. Most seemed to be old. It was like the tribal villages back home, where the young people had left because there was nothing for them.

On the pier I stood for a few minutes looking at the bay. Waves staggered in from the ocean, falling exhausted onto a rocky beach from which the child Jenny had paddled and swam, and on which years later the woman Jenny had decided to run from her raven. But it had followed her to the other side of the ocean.

I went back to the car and took a small box from the trunk. When I stood on the end of the pier and scattered her ashes into the waves, the raven finally flew from her shoulder.

THE MORNING BEFORE I LEFT, I WAITED ON THE clifftop. Soon I heard the sun begin to rise behind me, and, as the music got louder, a speck on the horizon grew.

Eventually I could feel on my face the wind of his slowly beating wings.

WILLIAM TRAPMAN

Is a journalist and broadcaster from County Kildare, Ireland. He has been writing short stories and plays since the mid-'80s. He is the author of the published short story collection Mariseo's House and Other Stories, *and is currently working on a novel based on an Irish Celtic background.*

From Paper to the Internet: PROJECT GUTENBERG

WE LIVE IN A DIGITAL WORLD OVERFLOWING with analog information. For every e-mail message a person receives, there's usually a corresponding voice mail item, a fax message, and probably a large heap of "snail mail" or a package delivered to you courtesy of your friendly postal employee.

Quite an industry has sprung up around the need to convert that analog information into digital. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) systems transform faxes and paper messages into ASCII text (or—better yet—styled text, complete with a font which closely matches the original). Voice recognition systems translate the human voice into a form more capable of being sent over a slow modem link or placed in a searchable database.

Though these tools can seem impressive, they're still not smart enough to take human beings out of the process. Even the best OCR packages still make enough mistakes to force someone to check over the entire result for errors. And when it comes to something as sensitive as converting works of *literature* to digital form, the time commitment required to make sure the work is rendered faithfully begins to soar.

Enter Michael Hart, who, in 1971, began a project to convert public domain texts—ones whose copyrights had expired—to digital form. While early attempts didn't bear very much fruit (only a few small texts were converted back then), in 1991 his project, named after the man who sparked the printing revolution, finally took root.

To date, Hart and his 500 Project Gutenberg volunteers have converted almost 250 texts, ranging from the U.S. Declaration of Independence to *Frankenstein* to part of a turn-of-the-century version of the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica*, into plain ASCII text, readable by users of just about any computer on the planet.

Though at first converting a book from page to hard drive might seem a simple matter of running it through an OCR package (or typing it in by hand) and editing out typographical errors, Project Gutenberg insists on a rigorous production process. First, source material (chosen by the volunteers themselves; Hart says he has his own favorites, but "I don't want *my* biases, much as I may love them, to effect things too much.") must be old enough to be out of copyright—Project Gutenberg runs a copyright check on a work before volunteers even begin work on creating an etext.

Second, Gutenberg volunteers try to make their plain ASCII texts as readable as possible. All Gutenberg texts are unformatted, with carriage returns at the end of every line. While plain text doesn't allow editors very many tricks—no special characters, no altering the spaces between letters, words, and lines—Gutenberg's guidelines do encourage editors to break their lines at the ends of complete thoughts or with punctuation marks. For example, take this passage from *Frankenstein:*

```
How slowly the time passes here, encompassed as I am by frost and
snow! Yet a second step is taken towards my enterprise. I have
hired a vessel and am occupied in collecting my sailors; those
whom I have already engaged appear to be men on whom I can depend
and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage.
```

which might read better (and more poetically) as:

```
How slowly the time passes here,
encompassed as I am by frost and snow!
Yet a second step is taken towards my enterprise.
I have hired a vessel and am occupied in collecting my sailors;
those whom I have already engaged appear to be men on whom
I can depend and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage.
```

After a while, it seems, one gets in the habit of thinking carefully about how to break ASCII text at the end of lines. Hart himself seems to take this habit to the extreme—every line of text he writes (except those at the end of a paragraph) is exactly the same length. Some of us choose our words after carefully weighing their meaning; Hart seems to weigh their meaning *and* their length.

A band of 500 volunteers is transferring—by hand—the contents of the world's libraries into easy-to-read ASCII text one book at a time.

Finally, editions are reviewed by Hart himself, and then the "Gutenberg etext" is released to the world as version 1.0. As the work is disseminated and errors are discovered, volunteers will release new versions of the texts every so often.

While systems like the World Wide Web's HTML and Ian Feldman's Setext (used by *InterText* and *TidBITS*) allow creators of electronic texts to create texts without line breaks and add attributes like italics and bolding, Gutenberg relies on plain text. Hart's rationale is that while standards may come and go, ASCII is forever.

"Only two authors of hundreds I have spoken with actually say it may make a difference whether their works were emphasized in a particular way, so most of the time

it wouldn't make any difference," he says. But Hart indicates that Gutenberg would be willing to post books in some mark-up format, as long as "Plain Vanilla ASCII" editions always remain available.

Of greater concern to Hart and Project Gutenberg are possible changes in copyright laws. Currently, a copyright expires after the creator of a work has been dead for 50 years. The more that length extends, Hart says, the less information will be available to "the Information Poor"—people who don't have the ability to pay for searching through or reading copyrighted material. Right now any text created before 1920 is in the public domain, and new works will begin coming into the public domain this year. But the United States Congress is considering legislation that would extend the copyright moratorium so that post-1919 works wouldn't begin entering the public domain until 2015, and there's no guarantee that copyright protection will be extended even further before 2015 comes along—long after the original creators of a work have profited off it, died, and left their estates to others who have also profited.

"Adding another 20 years to the copyright incarceration of information won't help the Information Rich so much as it may move an Information Poor person over twice as far into the Dark Ages, by making them wait an additional 20 years for free access to information," Hart says.

The philosophy of making texts available to the information poor is what drives Hart and Project Gutenberg, and that's why the texts are available in ASCII. Essentially anyone with a computer—even if the computer is of the 15-year-old, garage-sale variety—can read Gutenberg etexts. If a computer has even the most rudimentary searching ability, it can be used to search Gutenberg etexts for relevant passages. In the end, an unlimited number of people will be able to choose from a large electronic library of texts while paying very little for the privilege. As CD-ROM technology expands and decreases in price, whole libraries of information will be available on just a few CD-ROMs at low cost.

It's a world-view that seems to be shared by Project Gutenberg's volunteers, who share Hart's enthusiasm for the project. "There's a wonderful feeling I get from seeing a book posted on the Internet and knowing I played a part in its existence," says Christy Phillips, a Gutenberg volunteer from Syracuse, New York. "Once in a while, I also will get e-mail from someone who read one of the books I helped create or edit, and that, too, makes me feel the work is all worthwhile."

For Hart, the birth of every new electronic text is cause for celebration. "I feel as if I have discovered Archimedes' Lever," he says, "and am jacking up a whole world just a little with each book."

—Jason Snell

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The easiest ways to find out more about Project Gutenberg are to subscribe to the GUTNBERG mailing list by sending mail to listserv@uiucvmd.bitnet *with the message "SUB GUTNBERG [YOUR NAME]" (no quotes) in the body, or by reading the mailing list's counterpart, the Usenet newsgroup* bit.listserv.gutnberg. *On the Internet, Project Gutenberg etexts can be found at* mrcnext.cso.uiuc.edu *in* /pub/etext, *or on* ftp.etext.org *in* /pub/Gutenberg. *Hypertext lists of Gutenberg etexts are available at* http://med-amsa.bu.edu/Gutenberg/Welcome.html *and* http://info.cern.ch/hypertext/DataSources/bySubject/Literature/Gutenberg/Overview.html.

A mime is a wonderful thing to waste.