

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

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It is a Wednesday night in this time, this most recent iteration of the new world order, and Clark, born Maureen Jane Clark in September 1971, stands at the Centipede machine in the Empty Bottle, thirty years old, still trapped in the history of empires, a Camel in her mouth, her right hand on the trackball, her left on the fire button, twitching out rapidfire death to any creature that disturbs the brightly-colored mushroom field on her screen. *Thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump* goes the soundtrack, except when one of those bouncing spiders appears, and then it goes *oogly oogly oogly*. Die, Clark thinks. She has already scored over 40,000 points.

She is in Centipede gamespace. She learned how to negotiate the rules of its environment way back when she was twelve, at a machine that lived at the 7-11 on the corner. She never forgot the strategies she learned then, during that training funded with allowance quarters. Still, in a few minutes she will lose her last exterminating ship, and she will gather herself out of gamespace, and while she wends her way through the milling crowd, the structures that grad school built in her mind will reestablish themselves, and by the time she finds Elliot at the bar, she will have partially analyzed the game's system of meaning. She will have considered how the goal of the player is to restore order to a turbulent world, to return that assailed space back to an idyllic prehistory, no centipede, no plummeting fleas, just a ship alone in the garden. The game cries back to Eden.

She knows that this is a human yearning. For thousands of years, people have longed to recreate an untroubled world. Lately as much as ever. Words in the air: *America has lost its innocence*. She reads the news: Feds in the airports, ID cards for the immigrants, wiretaps in the phones. Anything that could make the world safe again is up for discussion. But there is no Eden to return to. There never was an untroubled world, there is no primal state to recreate. America was never innocent. At age fifteen she saw skinheads throw a cinderblock through her friend's driver's-side window; they dragged him out of the car, shoved him up against the wall and broke his nose. The world has never been safe.

And she knows what happens in the name of Edens. She watched prisons rise as an instrument of social control in the 80's; and watched people celebrate the rebirth of the city in the 1990's, once an entire class had been decimated. *We can never be guaranteed safety*, Clark thinks, *only additional layers of control*. She will watch carefully this time. She will resist what needs to be resisted.

Finger on the Fire button.