



little peach big apple

by karrie jacobs

something's in the air and I don't like it. It's not just the stink of New York in August. It's bigger than that. It's a sense that someone, somewhere, leapt off their end of the cosmic seesaw, leaving the other end to hit the ground much too hard. The world—politics, society, nature, everything—is, in a word, wack.

Ordinarily innocuous things begin to worry me. Like this peach they sell at my neighborhood D'Agostino supermarket. It's been redesigned. It's still red and yellow like a peach. It's still fuzzy like a peach. But the topology is all wrong. It looks as if it's been sat on or amputated. It's shaped like a small, lumpy bagel. In fact, this is a "donut peach."

I ask one of the clerks where this remodeled peach comes from. He goes off to confer with the produce manager. Another store employee starts telling me, "You know, they got a kind of wool now they can grow in different colors, right from the seed."

I say, "Don't you mean cotton? Wool doesn't come from seeds."

And he says, "No, wool. It's better than dyeing it because it's all natural this way."

The clerk returns and says "California."

I buy a couple of donut peaches and leave the store worrying that the guy really does mean wool.

"Is it a freestone or a clingstone peach?" asks the woman who answers the phones at the California Peach Advisory Board. I don't know the answer. She doesn't know from donut peaches.

Eventually, I catch up with Rob Bildner, who runs RLB, the produce distributor for D'Agostino. He tells me that the donut peach is actually from the State of Washington and that he's been stocking it for three or four years. "It's a white peach, with a small pit, very sweet," he says. "From a marketing point of view, it's been very successful. I like the way it handles. It's user friendly."

User friendly.

something's in the air and it's not just New York. I find myself in Kansas City, Missouri, where the flood waters have receded, leaving the land that was underwater dead and brown, and everywhere else a lush, deep green. I am here to speak at a creative conference—the theme is "Com-

mon Threads"—hosted by Hallmark, the greeting card company. Here are the people who produce cards that say, "May it help somehow to know that warm thoughts are with you." Here are people who don't use the word "wack" as an adjective. Here are genuinely nice people. Still, there is this feeling.

I am eating dinner in an atrium within a Neo-Classical art museum, the sky above framed by a lattice of concrete. I wind up sharing a table with a woman named Clar Evans, from Hallmark's Creative Resources department; Don Hall, whose father founded the greeting card company; and the filmmaker Godfrey Reggio.

Reggio is best known for a movie called *Koyaanisqatsi*, which was released about 10 years ago. The title comes from a Native American word meaning "world out of balance." Accompanied by a dramatic Philip Glass score, the film contrasts footage of a horrific man-made world with peaceful images of the natural world. I saw this movie at a screening in Phoenix, where I was the only member of the press who showed up. I sat all by myself in a shopping mall multiplex, being dazzled by the images of clouds racing through the sky in fast motion, and urban crowds, also moving much too fast. The idea was that there's something crazy about the speed of modern life and that all this frenzied activity is driving the world headlong toward destruction.

Anyway, here we are. Four very different people who, if we were discussing electoral politics, God, or television, would probably not agree on very much. But instead we're agreeing about this thing that we can't quite describe, this inchoate something that feels wrong.

reggio has an answer. The crumbling values, the increasing violence, the floods: all the symptoms have one root cause. Everything is going floeey because we're being held hostage by technology, forced to move at technology's unnatural pace. Someday, messy flesh-and-blood humans will be replaced by microchip simulacra of brains and genetic codes. Someday, he argues, technology is going to swallow us up.

The next day, Reggio lectures Hallmark's "creative leaders," delivering his apocalyptic vision in something that sounds a lot like a fire and

brimstone sermon, though he never mentions sin, Hell, or Satan. He does talk about Babel, how he believes that the emergence of a common global language of images is bringing us to a new Babel. He talks about technology as this thing that's bigger than we are, that controls us more than we control it. He says that the speed of the pulsing clocks that run computers now sets the pace for the world.

"Oh, come off it," I think. I don't much care for fire and brimstone. But I keep thinking and I realize why Reggio's talk is so disturbing. It's because even those of us who have argued passionately against the mindless embrace of technological progress have finally been completely seduced. We have exchanged our souls for Macintosh PowerBooks.

i'm writing on a powerbook now. My friends all have them. We talk about them as if they were our children or our pets. We have all bought in. And suddenly we have become far less critical of technological society than we were 10 years ago or five years ago or 10 minutes before we bought our beautiful little computers. This goes way beyond user-friendship. This is love.

"Not since *The Elements of Style* has one book had such a profound effect on writers. The Apple Macintosh PowerBook computer. It's giving hundreds of thousands of people around the world the freedom to work whenever and wherever they want." So says a PowerBook ad in the *New Yorker*.

Freedom is, naturally, what we all believe we're buying.

The ad goes on: "A PowerBook not only helps you write, it also lets you do something completely new: read your favorite books on disk. While this concept seems startlingly unusual at first, people who read books on disk discover surprising advantages."

The ad mentions a series of "Expanded Books," published by a company called Voyager, that are designed expressly to be read on PowerBooks. The idea of taking conventional books and making them electronic has always seemed barbarous to me. Also pointless. But, given my affection for my PowerBook with its high-resolution screen, I decide to try it.

Voyager sells a fantastic library of electronic books: *Backlash*, *Malcolm*

X, *The Tao of Pooh*.... I bring home a copy of *Revolution from Within* by Gloria Steinem. And I have fun marking pages with paper-clip icons, calling up footnotes with the click of a button, and making the computer count the number of times Steinem uses the term "self-hatred" (five). Reading, however, the altered state of consciousness one achieves when immersed in a book, doesn't take place. I contend that it isn't possible or desirable to do real reading (as opposed to research) on a computer screen.

Still, I suspect that our infatuation with the PowerBook will eventually push many of us past our uneasiness about electronic books. One day the same thing that happened at record stores, when all the LPs disappeared and were replaced with CDs—just like that—will happen at bookstores. Someday, no more books. Just disks. This is my vision of apocalypse.

Voyager also boasts a catalogue full of smart, hip CD-ROM products, movies you can play on your computer. And they sell something called *Take Five*, the "soothing, stretching CD-ROM."

"Do your shoulders ache?" asks the catalogue copy. "Are your wrists killing you? Is your stomach churning from too much stress? Are you sitting bleary-eyed in front of your monitor? Well, take a break from routine with *Take Five*! Now you can relieve everyday stress without leaving your desk or switching off your computer...."

And all I can think is, why can't we turn off the computer? Why can't we leave the desk? What's happened to our newfound freedom?

The answer is that we can't turn off our computer because more and more of our lives are enclosed in that little box. The computer keeps swallowing things up: our typewriter, our Rolodex, our fax machine, our telephone, our TV, our library, our personal lives (via computer bulletin boards). What's next? What's left? Suddenly, Reggio's vision of the bodiless electronic human doesn't seem so farfetched.

Suddenly I envision the human equivalent of the donut peach. Stackable. Sweet. Easy to handle. User friendly.

Who, I wonder, is the user and who is being used?

There is something in the air.