OZY

a story by C. P. Boyko

1:	1500000	WWJ
2:	1200000	NEF
3:	1000000	RTP
4:	750000	BQD
5:	500000	TYO
6:	250000	GMV
7:	150000	DSA
8:	100000	HIV
9:	75000	THG
10:	50000	MKE

The scores were fake. They were too even, too rounded. Tenth place, bottom rung, was exactly 50,000 points. Ninth was exactly 75,000. Eighth exactly 100,000. Fifth was not a point more nor less than half a million. First place would cost you exactly 1,500,000.

"It's goddamn impossible," said my brother after his first game. He'd scored 17,455.

If the highest scores seemed too big, the lowest were too small. The top ten were spaced out in neat exponential increments, like currency — or prizes.

Even at twelve, I was old enough to know that progress was made not in great, smooth leaps but in clumsy, painful steps. I'd played piano for six months, taken swimming lessons for three, and been a scout for about two weekends — and if I'd ever found myself stranded on an island ten metres from the mainland with nothing but a Swiss Army knife and a Casiotone keyboard, I'd have died of

hunger or poison ivy in about twelve hours flat and wouldn't even have been able to perform my own funeral dirge.

Genius was not a gift. Talent was not innate. Practise, and only practise, made perfect — which was just to say that the long road to perfection was paved with bumpy, potholed imperfection. If some kid calling himself "WWJ" had really scored one and a half million points, there should have been countless others who'd only made 1,450,000, 1,464,000, 1,485,975. For every Edmund Hillary who reached the peak there should have been dozens of frozen carcasses littering the mountainside below. The lack of evidence of any such carnage in the hygienic high-score list was proof of its artificiality.

And that offended something in me. I was insulted. And from my brother I'd learned a useful self-defence manoeuvre: Take every insult as a challenge.

I told him to give me a goddamn quarter.

"Suck a turd, midget."

I could tell by the mildness with which he said it that he was out of money. So were the others. We lingered around the machine like smitten suitors, jiggling its joysticks and tapping its buttons, already reminiscing over past exploits and sketching out the fiery mayhem we would unleash in the near future, until Mr. Kacvac, invoking his dead wife's long-suffering soul, told us to get out of the store. Our loitering was scaring away paying customers.

Everyone but me had great handles. Some — Donnie Werscezsky (DON), James Thomas (JIM), and my brother (LEO), to name but a few — had been blessed from birth with names exactly three letters long. Others — Gob McCaffrey and Pud Milligan, for instance — had had such names bestowed upon them by inadvertently generous peers. Even those whose names seemed at first glance to be as unabbreviatable as my own had little difficulty re-christening themselves.

Hank Lowenthal, who claimed British heritage and could quote entire scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as proof, embraced his pedigree with ANK. Sanjeet Kastanzi, who everyone called Sanj, had a number of options: SAN was safe if rather dull, ANJ was bold if a little risky, and KAS had a nice rough-and-tumble ring to it. (SNJ was tacitly off-limits; we all wanted our names to be sayable.) In the end he went — a little overweeningly, I thought — with JET.

And Theodore Mandel, a friend of my brother's, tried on labels like they were shoes. Indeed, I sometimes suspected that the challenge of textual condensation was the only reason he played — just as I sometimes suspected that the only reason he hung around with my brother, Leo, was so he could refer to the pair of them in rhyming third-person.

Theo tried on TEO first, then DOR. But you could see the self-dissatisfaction of the artist in his eyes. When he discovered that numerals were permissible he came up with 3OH ("Three-oh"), 3A4 ("Three-a-four"), and finally, his *chef d'oeuvre*, 0EO. The zero, he explained to everyone in the store, stood for the Greek letter theta, which, in the International Phonetic Alphabet, was the symbol for the "th" sound. We responded to this little lesson with a different sound. Marcel Kacvac (MUT), who we all looked up to in fear and awe because he was in high school and had a tattoo, a car, and acne, started calling Theo "Oreo" and then, because "Oreo" was not offensive enough to ever catch on, "Cookie." But Theo defused the danger by pretending to be delighted. For a week he insisted that everyone call him Cookie and for a week everyone refused. "Piss off, *Theo*" even became a schoolyard catchphrase. One night I used it to greet him at the door to our walk-up and was swatted for it later by my mom, who, seated upstairs in the kitchen, had neither heard him call me "Oozy" first, nor seen him ruffle my hair afterwards.

I was supposed to have been OLD. O.L.D. really were my initials. Fortuitously, they spelled a recognizable word. And old was something I wanted to be anyway. OLD was perfect.

I crept onto the high-score screen with my very first quarter. Naturally I took this to be an omen, a sign that I'd been earmarked for greatness. But my triumph was short-lived.

LEO — whose hard-won 76,450 points had been propelled into the abyss by my seemingly effortless 78,495 — immediately pantsed me. This was to be expected, and wouldn't even have been humiliating if Mrs. Schrever, my brother's History teacher, hadn't been in the store at the time. Because she was, Mr. Kacvac felt obliged to reprimand my brother — and me — for our deplorable behaviour. Normally he didn't give a damn how we comported ourselves so long as merchandise got paid for. He believed Mutt's generation to be so far beyond redemption that it didn't even trouble him anymore. On the contrary, he seemed to relish each fresh confirmation of our wickedness. When there were no adult customers in the store he encouraged us to deride volunteerism, team sports, and homework. Once, home from school with a feigned illness, I wandered into his store in the middle of a weekday afternoon and Kacvac rewarded my waywardness with a free handful of gummi fruits. But that day, with Mrs. Schrever in the store, he had to condemn my brother's wanton cruelty and my obscene immodesty until the grown-up finally paid and left.

The charge of wilful obscenity was, I thought, a little unfair. It's not that I wouldn't, but *couldn't* pull up my pants right away. There was a high score that needed claiming; I had to enter my initials first.

Whether in my excitement or because everyone was laughing at the threadbare state of my skivvies, I overshot the D and put an E in its place. The mistake proved irrevocable. So I pretended I hadn't

made a mistake at all. When Theo demanded to know what the heck "Olé" was supposed to mean, I just shrugged enigmatically but with tight-lipped significance, as though we were really talking about some girl I'd banged, and whom I was too much of a gentleman, or depraved pervert, to slander by disclosing the garish details.

In the end it didn't matter. My low high score was wiped out, to my secret relief, a mere twenty minutes later by DON. OLE was dust.

But so was OLD. That name was now forever tainted. It was just as well, I realized. OLD was a stupid, terrible name. Mrs. Schrever was old. Mr. Kacvac was old. And did I really want it getting out that my middle name was "Leslie"?

OSS seemed the obvious choice but I didn't like it. It looked amputated. Standing on their own like that, the first three letters of my name gave no clue to their origin, their context, their pronunciation. Future generations would suppose that OSS rhymed with *floss* or *gloss* — words not known to strike fear into the human heart.

I could fix this problem by substituting Z's for the S's but I didn't like OZZ any better. It looked ugly and asymmetrical; the second Z was technically superfluous. Besides, I hated "Oz," with all its childish connotations: witches, wizards, flying monkeys, munchkins, a girl named Dorothy and a dog named Toto, for crying out loud. Yes, I had made a habit of kicking the shins of anyone who called me Oz and who was not my brother.

So what did that leave?

OSI? OZI? OZE?

Ossie's needs had been modest. He'd spent his meagre allowance on

little more than junk food, model airplanes, and elastic bands and paper clips — which he and Philip O'Toole (POT) stopped firing at human targets after Jill Alistair's mom complained to their moms.

OZY, on the other hand, was always on the lookout for money.

I dismantled our sofas. I stuck my fingers inside payphones and pop machines. I trawled the gutters in our neighbourhood with my eyes. At night I stole quarters from my mother's purse and, in the morning, obfuscated my crime by demanding an advance on my allowance. (After all, no thief in his right mind would return to his victim the very next day as a supplicant.) I upturned my peanut butter jar and converted its former contents, my life savings, into a roll of pennies, two rolls of nickels, and a roll of dimes —nine dollars and fifty cents in all. At the bank I watched, red-faced, as the teller removed, with a long red fingernail, two quarters from a roll before handing it over to me. It felt like a slap on the hand. But my mood improved as soon as I stepped back out on the street with thirty-eight quarters in my pocket, weighing the left side of my cords down almost past my hip.

Unfortunately, there was no one in Kacvac's but Kacvac. I felt the need to flourish my fortune at someone, so I squandered one play — three whole lives — on a dozen gummi fruits. Fussily, but with good-humoured resignation, like someone who has grown weary of the bank's empty promises to make their coins easier to get at, I peeled a coin from the top of my roll and slid it across the counter like a checkers pro.

"Mazel tov," said Mr. Kacvac gloomily, and in his perpetually damp eyes I saw not the dysfunction of lachrymal glands — a medical condition that my mother had warned me not to mention — but a keen, unadulterated — and unadult — envy.

In no hurry to shatter my adversaries' records in their absence, I sauntered up to the machine, performed a few limbering calisthen-

ics, looked around the store, smiled companionably back at Mr. Kacvac, peeled off another quarter, and inserted it into the slot. *Ballistic Obliteration* chimed happily, like a baby robot gurgling at the sight of its mother. I exchanged a grim nod with my reflection in the store window, like two rugged highwaymen crossing paths out on some lonely mesa after midnight. Then I reached up over my head, gripped the joystick with one hand, and slapped the START button with the other.

It was not respect that we sought. Those who were better than you could not respect you, and those who were worse could not even like you. Those who did not play — my mother, our teachers, the President of the United States of America — did not really exist.

It was not respect that we were after but immortality. I dreamed of taking all ten high scores. I dreamed of an army of OZYs slaughtering anyone who would deny them their rightful place in eternity.

It never occurred to us that our high scores might not be immortal. They were as indelible as a Guinness World Record or the Permanent File that Principal Ballsack kept locked in the cabinet in his office — and which he promised to show no one but such colleges, potential employers, and juries as might someday need to be disabused of any notion of our goodness or worth. Our high scores were the high scores of all time and space. We assumed they would last forever.

For disabusing us of this notion, Roger Pembroke (ROG) was systematically ostracized: we put dead gophers in his locker, we squashed his lunches with our textbooks, we tied his gym shoes together and wrapped them around the football goalpost like a bola, and then — worst of all — we left him alone.

ROG had been one of the real contenders, one of the Obliterati. He'd been with us from the beginning. He'd been the first to "get HIV," with 104,895 points. He'd also been the first to kill the underwater-level boss, a giant robotic octopus that sprayed clouds of ink that would freeze you to your spot for five seconds while it — rather implausibly, I thought — lobbed fireballs at you.

Leo smacked me in the side of the head and said that obviously *grease* fires could burn underwater. Phil, who was supposed to be my best friend, backed him up, saying that everybody knew that the army had flame-throwers on their attack subs. I asked if he meant the navy, and Leo smacked me again.

"*Ow* — what was *that* for?"

"For being a smartass."

"I wasn't," I said truthfully. (*Wasn't* it the navy who had subs?) I felt the first prickle of tears gathering somewhere beneath the skin of my cheeks. It was not hardship or cruelty but injustice that made me emotional.

"Oh shit. I was just teasing. Don't pull a Kacvac on us."

One afternoon Roger was in striking distance of usurping Jim Thomas (JIM) for sixth place. We were all cheering him on. Jim Thomas was almost eighteen and, like MUT, far too old, in our opinion, to be competing. Shouldn't he have girls to bang? we asked ourselves.

This was approximately one month after the machine had first appeared in Kacvac's, dumped, as though by some giant stork, at the front of the store between the rotating display of birthday cards and the three shopping carts that no one ever used because they were too wide for all but the frozen foods aisle. None of us ever really paused to wonder where the game had come from. Though battered and scuffed with age and rough use, it seemed to us to have simply mate-

rialized out of thin air, like some sort of divine challenge — like Arthur's sword in the stone. Some of us must have realized that Mr. Kacvac owned Kacvac's, but he never seemed like anything but a worn-out and mistreated employee in his own store. It was inconceivable that we had him to thank for *Ballistic Obliteration.*

A month after it appeared, the bottom five scores were history. MKE was long forgotten. THG's thing had fallen off. DSA had, of course, caught AIDS from HIV. We were unable to do much with GMV or TYO — which was suspicious. Indeed, with the exception of HIV, none of the default high scorers' names spelled anything even remotely dirty. They even seemed to have been chosen to rule out offensive acronyms. Not a single DIK or TIT or AZZ among them — another sure sign that they were fakes.

Then again, none of us ever resorted to such vulgarity either. We took the game, and our fame, too seriously. To pass up the chance to take personal credit for your score would be more than a tragic waste; it would be a gesture of disrespect, more obscene than any three-letter word could be. Donnie Werscezsky (DON) — who later became my principal rival, next to Gob McCaffrey (GOB) — did once enter POO after losing three lives in quick succession to the dragon on the lava level (who at least did not breathe water at you). But no one so much as smiled at POO. It had been a gesture of peevishness, we all knew, not rebelliousness. DON had two better scores on the list already, so maybe it didn't matter. But there were kids — my brother, for one — who'd have killed for what Donnie tossed so dismissively aside — namely, 589,140 points.

At the time of ROG's last game, the bottom five scores were 545,770, 532,225, 528,445, 500,000, and 476,610. They belonged to JIM, GOB, OZY, the imaginary TYO, and ROG himself. Watch-

ing him play were GOB, OZY, POT, and Wally Hersch, who never had a moniker because he never made it onto the high-scores list. The kid was hopeless. His hand and his eye were apparently operated by different brains altogether. And he never got any better despite all the quarters he plugged into the machine. We serious players respected neither his ineptitude nor his conspicuous wealth, so we never let him play unless we were all broke or he promised to lend us money — which he did gladly for anyone who would play doubles with him. But this we refused to do.

Two-person play was, at least among the Obliterati, tacitly prohibited. It was easier to get further when playing doubles, and while the points that piled up had to be split two ways, the extent of player one's contribution to player two's success and vice versa could never be teased apart. Doubles scores were an inaccurate and therefore invalid measure of one's skill. A *high* score that came out of a doubles game was deemed not just worthless but in fact immoral, because every illegitimate score displaced a legitimate one. It didn't matter if your partner *was* Wally — that is, if he contributed nothing, if he died off before you even got as far as the wild boar boss at the end of the forest level. It was a question of precision. Of honour.

I once walked into Kacvac's to find Donnie Werscezsky playing alone. I watched him for ten minutes. Suddenly he let out a shriek and swiftly committed hari kari.

"Why the hell'd you do *that*?" I wanted to know. "You were creeping up on bottom rung with two damn lives left."

"No shit — why d'you think I killed myself?"

Evidently Mutt Kacvac had been labouring over the machine when Donnie came into the store. MUT never played if anyone was around. He didn't like being watched. He was not a real contender, and he concealed his lack of skill behind a mask of derisive indifference. When Donnie came in, he suddenly remembered he had to be

somewhere and asked DON if he wanted to take over. Donnie hesitated, so Mutt casually crashed his ship into a toxic chemical vortex, then turned and strode out of the store without another word. Donnie couldn't bear to let most of a quarter go to waste. But nor could he claim a high score that was not completely, 100 per cent his own. When he backed away from the machine after his *felo de se*, he kept shaking his hands as though they were dripping wet and muttering to himself, "That was close, that was a real close call."

By the time Jim Thomas came into the store, Roger had 521,915 points. He'd secured ninth place and was sneaking up on me in eighth. He'd made it to the electricity level — a nightmare landscape of sparkling capacitators and fizzling dynamos swept with gleaming acid showers and arc lightning that only a few of us had ever seen with our own two eyes — and he'd done it without losing a single life. He had 521,915 points, his Faradization upgrade, ten nukes, a triple forcefield, and three ships left. He was on fire.

Gob, Phil, Wally, and I fell silent. Even the buzzing coolers in the produce section seemed to hold their breath. JIM, our current scoring leader, pretended not to notice what was happening. He made a lazy circuit of the store like an old lady searching for discounts. He stood in front of Mr. Kacvac and deliberated out loud over which brand of cigarettes he should try today. In the end he bought nothing but a newspaper, which he folded and tucked under his arm before finally strolling, as though quite by chance, in our direction.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a video game," Gob said. "Never seen one?"

Casually, and with the inattentive air of someone lighting a pipe, Jim asked, "And how's old Rog doing?"

"Fine," Phil said.

"Amazing, actually," Wally said. "He's got ninth place."

Roger muttered something under his breath.

Jim stooped forward, turned his head to one side, and blinked rapidly. "Hmm? What's that he said?"

"Eighth place," Gob said. "He just got eighth."

"There goes Ossie," said Phil.

I exhaled. Something tight in my chest loosened up.

"Suck a turd," I said.

"Holy, what kind of power-up is *that*?" asked Wally.

"He's right on your ass, Jim," said Phil, "and he's got three lives."

At that moment, Roger's ship exploded. He swore loudly. Mr. Kacvac, perched on his stool behind the counter, looked up from his crossword puzzle and cleared his throat threateningly. (Mrs. Howard, a friend of my mother's, was palpating lettuce heads in the produce section.) Out of respect for the dead, and not because we were cowed by Kacvac, we fell silent for a minute. Jim, who'd been about to say something, let his mouth hang open like someone anticipating a delicacy. He brought his lips together at last:

"Two," he said. You could tell the word tasted good. "Two lives left."

Phil sent Gob a quick commiserative glance. "He's on you. He's right on you. Oh man, he's — that's it. You're toast."

"Nice one," said Gob.

"He's got seventh place now," Wally explained. "He just passed Gob."

"Seventh place," said Phil, "and he's got two lives left."

Roger's ship erupted into flames. He swore. This time Kacvac cleared his throat inquisitively, as though politely inquiring which of us would most like to be kicked out first.

"You guys are goddamn jinxing me," Roger said under his breath. "Stop saying how many lives I have goddamn left."

"Why?" said Jim brightly. "What's the matter? Are we *jinxing* you?"

He was chuckling but there was an uneasiness in his voice. His eyes, like the rest of ours, were locked on the screen, where Roger's score continued bit by excruciating bit to rise.

"How many lives do you have left anyway? One? Just one?"

As though on cue, Roger's ship hurtled into a giant electrified razor-wire barrier and blew into pieces.

He did not swear. He slammed his palms down on the buttons and spun around to glower at Jim.

Jim grinned. Gob, Phil, Wally, and I gasped in horror. Roger's game wasn't over yet. He needed less than four thousand points to beat Jim and *he had turned his back on the game*.

He was back at the controls before we could scream at him, but the one- or two-second interruption proved fatal. Before he knew what was happening, his right wing had been grazed by a deadly blue will-o-the-wisp, sending a geyser of black smoke up into the poisonous atmosphere. Roger pulled away too late and too hard: overcompensating in space for what he'd failed to do in time, he rocketed from one side of the screen to the other and came too close to a giant electromagnet, a device that looked as harmless as a giant bedspring but was as deadly as a coiled cobra. The magnet pulled him in slowly, almost gently. Then it injected him with a billion volts. The screen went white.

GAME OVER.

545,385 points. Seventh place.

Roger spun around. Jim was bent double, clutching his newspaper to his chest. It looked to me like he was only pretending to laugh.

"You goddamn jinxed me."

Jim straightened, took a deep breath, and fanned himself with his paper. At length he brought his eyes to focus uncertainly, as though without recognition, on Roger.

"*Twice,*" said Roger through his teeth.

"Hey Roger," said Wally. "Your name . . ."

The game gave you thirty seconds to enter your initials. Roger had twenty left.

He made no move. Jim stopped smiling. This was serious.

Roger was going to throw his score away. He *was* throwing it away. We were watching him do it. He was hurtling towards the edge of a cliff and defying anyone to intervene. He just stood there, glaring at Jim.

Jim glared back. He was angry now too. But he was nervous as well. His eyes kept darting to the screen. Fifteen seconds.

I couldn't breathe. Wally looked ready to pee himself. Phil had to put an arm out to prevent him from rushing forward to enter the R, O, and G on Roger's behalf.

Ten seconds.

Jim flinched first. The spell was broken. A goofy, panic-stricken grin spread across his face. He lunged past Roger, dropping his newspaper, grabbed the joystick and began jiggling it madly. He managed to tap out the last letter — an M — with less than a second to spare. Then he stepped back to admire, and invite the rest of us to admire, his work.

Phil, Gob, and I were too upset to speak. Wally appeared to be working himself up to a Kacvac. Roger just peered wordlessly at the screen.

Jim sensed he'd committed a faux pas. He became defensive. "Hey, it's just a joke. He was going to waste it. Jeez, it's just a *game.*"

Mr. Kacvac had time to say "Hey, you kids — " before Roger

reached around behind the machine and pulled the plug out of the wall. Wally shrieked. Gob closed his eyes. Jim Thomas's face went white. Then he stepped forward and punched Roger neatly and expertly in the stomach, like a paramedic administering the Heimlich manoeuvre. Roger reeled back, then tipped forward, using his momentum to head-butt Jim in the chest. They collapsed together into the display of birthday cards. Mr. Kacvac sprang over the counter and, perhaps by invoking his dead wife's name, or perhaps by brandishing a baseball bat, convinced all of us to come back another time.

I couldn't stay away long. The next day, under the pretense of having been delegated by my mother to purchase some goat's milk, I was able on my way out — empty-handed as planned — to confirm my fears.

MKE, THG, HIV, and DSA had made miraculous recoveries.

ROG, JIM, GOB, and OZY were no more.

Gone. Just like that. Without a trace. In the blink of an eye. Forever.

So what was the point?

That night I lay in bed, struggling to fill my mind with the idea of forever. I took a single summer day spent rambling through our neighbourhood with Phil, taking apart bugs, collecting pop cans, melting popsicles on our tongues, browsing through his dad's old CB radio catalogues, practising our ventriloquism, throwing rocks at stray cats, chalking our names on sidewalks exposed to the naked sky — I took one day like that and tried to hold it in my head all at once. Then I shrunk it down to a dot, a mere speck, and populated the va-

cated space with a hundred dots, a thousand specks. A sandstorm of days — as many as I'd ever see in all my life. I compressed the dust cloud too, squeezed it down into a tiny cube and pushed it to the very edge of my imagination. I began lining cubes up next to it, slowly at first, only one or two at a time, to give me a chance to grasp the enormity of the addition. Then I began adding half a dozen blocks at once, then half a dozen half-dozens, then a long undifferentiated row of blocks spanning the entire width of the space behind my eyes, then half a dozen rows, then half a dozen half-dozens.

I sensed that I was cheating; for each time I moved to a higher level, the detail of the lower levels went out of focus, so that I was no longer really multiplying the multiplied multiples of multiplied multiples but just pushing around individual blocks again, solid pieces that could only regain their plurality at the cost of their unity, parts of a whole that I could not simultaneously see as wholes of yet smaller parts. But I continued until I realized that everything I'd imagined so far, every multiplication I'd performed, could itself be condensed to a single infinitesimal cube and put through the very same process, from start to finish. And *that* entire process could be taken as a unit and run through itself, and so on, and so on, forever and ever. There it was: no matter how long you imagined forever to be, your idea of it was to the real forever as a split second was to your idea of it. This truism remained true even if you took it into account when formulating your idea of forever. Even if you took *that* into account. And that. And so on, forever and ever.

Forever, then. Forever was how long dead people stayed dead. It was how long my dad and my mom's dad and my aunt Sharon and Leo's hamster, Delorna, and Theo Mandel's mother and Jill Alistair's brother Geoff and Mr. Kacvac's wife, Eleanora, would stay dead. Forever was how long gone things stayed gone. It was how

long my switchblade would stay at the bottom of Konomoke Lake, how long my magnifying glass would stay smashed (thanks, Leo), how long the key I'd lost to our old apartment building would stay lost, how long our cool old car would stay sold to a fat salesman from Wisconsin. It was how long the Alistairs' house would stay burned down, it was how long World War II would stay finished, and it was how long JIM and ROG and OZY would stay gone from the *Ballistic Obliteration* high-scores list. It wouldn't matter when the power went out or when the plug was pulled. It didn't matter if it happened tomorrow or a hundred years from tomorrow. Forever would wait.

Every message is a message to the future. The feverish, grandiloquent *billet doux* stashed with trembling hand in the coat pocket of the girl you're in love with; the casual note to your wife jotted in haste and posted to the fridge before you leave in the morning; the drunken, desultory jeremiad left on your ex's answering machine — they will be read or listened to, if they are read or listened to at all, by people of the future. Even the thought scribbled carelessly in the margin of whatever novel you're reading is a variety of time travel. Every mark we make, every trace we leave is a broadcast sent out into forever. We think of our footsteps as receding behind us, but really they are beacons sent out before us.

So listen:

I was good at something once. Great, even. It was a long time ago. I was twelve. Now I'm forty-three and not good at much of anything.

I'm not complaining. You're only forty-three and not good at

anything for a short time. But you will have once been twelve and good at something forever.

I can't prove it, of course. I have no evidence, no documentation. Three weeks after I obliterated Gob McCaffrey's top score by a margin that should have established my supremacy for — well, for a very long time, our neighbourhood experienced a brief power failure at about 4:30 in the morning. My mother's alarm did not go off; the three of us slept late — a real treat for Leo and me but a catastrophe for Mom, who crashed into our room bellowing and clutching her head as if bombs were being dropped on the neighbourhood.

We had to pass Kacvac's on our unhurried way to school.

Power failure. Blackout. 12:00, 12:00, 12:00.

I had to go inside. Leo swore at me and continued on to school, not because he minded being late but because the decision to be late, or to do anything else, always had to be made by him.

They were gone, of course. All of them, gone forever.

Or were they? Might there not persist, etched upon the air we breathe, though we haven't the sensitivity to detect it or the wit to decode it, the mark of some mark, the trace of some trace?

The universe is thought to be without memory, existing only for an eternally renewed split second. Like a sprung trap, the immediate past is supposed to inexorably propel the present into the immediate future. But I think what the past really does is stand nearby, at the present's elbow, and whisper in its ear, give it counsel, suggest how a future might be made. We listen but we don't always hear everything. Not the first time. Not right away. But there might be echoes.

I put a quarter on the counter. Mr. Kacvac held out the pail of gummi fruits. I counted five, showed him. He glanced at his wristwatch. It must have been well past nine.

"Oh, go on," he said. "Take a handful." And he slid my quarter back across the counter.

I stood before the machine, the coin resting in my cupped palm.

Forever would wait. So, let it wait.

I dropped the quarter into my left front pocket. "Later," I promised, and hurried to school.

JIM and ROG, LEO and 0EO, GOB and OZY — they're gone now. Only briefly did they stir from the dust. For a short time, a time that seemed long while it lasted, they made marks that were read and left traces that were followed by others who made marks and left traces of their own. Among the marks they left were the following.

BALLISTIC OBLITERATION
** HALL OF FAME **
TOP TEN HIGH SCORES

10:	98505	MUT
9:	212005	JET
8:	299385	0EO
7:	398510	LEO
6:	545385	ROG
5:	545770	JIM
4:	784605	POT
3:	1246325	DON
2:	1597425	GOB
1:	2069100	OZY