

SQUEALER

Mouthpiece for a generation.

BY ROBERT NATHAN CORRELL

“Hey George!”
A blast of cool, processed air entered the room as my new boss strolled in.

I stopped typing. “The name’s Ben.”

“Not today.” He threw another requisition on top of the towering stack of papers already on the desk. “New request just came in over the squealer. It’s a priority — something about farm animals.”

I glanced over the sheet. “Sure. Just give me whatever sample you’ve got of this guy’s writing and I’ll get on it as soon as I finish this.”

“We don’t have anything. Just a list of titles and a name. This guy’s stuff must have got lost at the beginning of the Big Crash. There are no samples. Go wild. And do it now. That,” he indicated my current project, “can wait. Two days.”

“Two? I usually have at least four to pound one of these out.”

“Not this time. I told you — it’s urgent.”

“Looks like he did a book on livestock and what else, some kind of single-year history? What’s the rush?”

The boss sighed. “Some idiot let an old beta version of the Omnipedia out on the web and there are links to this guy all over it. Download requests are hitting us from e-readers all over the country. You’re it, George.”

“Hey, Ben — the guys and I are going out for a drink to catch the daily newsview. Want to come?”

I stopped typing and sighed. “Not today, Muriel. Priority request. Boss says he needs it yesterday.”

“Seriously? Look at you — sweating it out in this little closet on that ancient P. O. S. all damn day ... why do you put up with it?”

“Boss says it’s verisimilitude. You guys all get to use those telepathic scribes, but that doesn’t sound the same as what you get out of a typewriter. Something about cadence.” I shook my head. “Besides, those things record everything that goes through your head. Doesn’t that bother you?”

She laughed. “Thinking seditious thoughts? Or just trying to make out your grocery list for the week? Whatever — this is a dead-end job. You

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Follow Futures on
Facebook at:
go.nature.com/mtoodm



should ask for a promotion to tech writing or something. You could get an office next to mine upstairs. At least we don’t have to dig through these piles of paper.” She prodded the swaying stacks of copy with disgust.

I shook my head. “You all go on. I’ll catch up with you later. Maybe Wednesday.”

“You really love this crap, don’t you? The deadlines, the typewriter, the stories ... If you weren’t just churning out those prop pieces about duty to state and the virtues of hard work, I’d think you were the only real writer left in the country.”

“Don’t say that, Muriel.” I looked out the door with an exaggerated motion and smiled. “Someone could hear.”

That night I walked back to the apartment, past shuttered stores and boarded-up old tenements. It was still long before curfew

and some people were about. A few were entering a dimly lit dive to catch the three hours of newsview that were mandated each night, while others tapped and scratched at their electronic tablets. I wondered if they were reading anything of mine. Maybe some Burroughs or Asimov — those had been fun to do. I rubbed my head. This afternoon had not gone so well and I wished I had gone with Muriel and the others after all. The words just wouldn’t come. Not writer’s block, but something about my assignment’s title that tickled the back of my mind and wouldn’t let go.

After an hour or so of digging through the hidden compartment under my bed, I found the answer. It was in the stack of old volumes I picked out of my grandmother’s storage unit the year before. A decaying paperback with a pig and a horse on the cover, barely visible beneath mould and water stains. I held it, running a finger across the pages and watching them flake away. What a trick — a bit of sleight of hand, electronic legerdemain. The boss once told me: “Just too much was lost in the Crash. So much of our history.

And the idea that it’s just gone would be too much for most people to believe.” I looked at the book in my hand and laughed. I was replacing entire texts with real bits of fiction, and there was no one to know the difference but a dying generation and their failing memories. And me. I looked around my nice place. A real bed. Kitchenette. My own bathroom. Even Muriel didn’t have one of those. On the newsview, a government drone dropped bombs on some Nomad shacks, while the occupants were marched away at rifle-point. Re-settlement, re-education. But I never saw a man who could write a good propaganda piece in a work camp. And I meant to be writing for a long, long time. Turning, I pushed the book down the incinerator chute and began heading back to the office, off to write a young adult novel about the exciting adventures of a patriotic farmer and his loyal farm creatures, all toiling for the greater good. This, for instant delivery to the tablet computers of would-be revolutionaries and faux counterculture icons all over the nation, each of them looking for the ideas that could change their world. ■

Robert Nathan Correll is a postdoctoral fellow in cardiovascular biology who lives in Kentucky. He does not own an e-reader.