

*Thomas de Zengotita*

*Fiction*

## The Other Side\*

by

Thomas de Zengotita

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At first only a few of us noticed, and we didn't talk about it until later—though most of us probably tried to check with someone early on. I know I did. Putting it as a matter of curiosity, in passing, but seriously, the way you might ask “Have you ever had a dream where you dreamed you woke up?” But of course, in that case, a lot of people say yes, and the others at least know what you mean.

All in all, it seemed like a good idea just to move on. Everything else was okay. Well, nothing was actually okay, because it was happening to everything, but nothing *else* was happening to anything, that's the point. So you could adjust. I mean, if one day you woke up and everything in the world was yellow, it would definitely be weird. But after awhile you might be able to just say “Hey, one-color world,” and go about your business. But that comparison doesn't really work because there would be major confusion in some areas, like recognizing beverages, if everything was yellow. Anyway, in the actual case, most of us made the adjustment and moved on.

Except that, after awhile, it got more—pronounced, would be a good word. At first, you were only glimpsing the edges of the other side of things. And even those were in hazy outline, like a degraded holograph. So you weren't 100% sure that you hadn't been seeing them all along, but just hadn't noticed. Sort of like, when you feel a slight pain or ache, you sometimes think that maybe it has been with you for some time after all. Or as if you realized, through some accidental circumstance, that your peripheral vision was broader than you had realized up until now. Only, of course, *your* periphery wasn't the issue in this case.

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\* *With acknowledgments to Edmund Husserl.*

So you could still tell jokes and enjoy life for a certain time, even as it became definite that your view of the other side of things was extending further and getting more solid. Color and texture, and so on. Some people stuck it out longer than others, though. Because it did get harder to cope.

In the early days, I went to a lot of movies. So did other people, I noticed. It was because things in the movies don't have any thickness to see around. So everything in the movies stayed normal, or as normal as things in the movies ever were. So it was quite a relief to go to the movies.

But later on, as the whole process advanced, and people were starting to lose it publicly and you really had to suck it up and hang tough just to navigate, I stopped going to the movies. It was too heartbreaking, the discrepancy. For me it was. When you went outside afterwards there was just no ignoring how drastic the change was. You couldn't help but notice that you were seeing a *lot* of the other side of everything. The disparity was so stark. For me anyway, the movies caused this intense longing for the simpler times I had taken for granted, so I stopped going.

But plenty of people reacted the opposite. They went more and more often. They went from one stall in the multiplex to the other to the other. If they could afford it. The movie theater people began to make sure that people bought another ticket each time, though. But they also began to stay open 24 hours, which was good for people who could afford it. And they built more of them too.

Other people stayed in their rooms a lot, in the dark with the TV or the VCR. After a certain point, the TV—the live TV—got really strange, though. There had obviously been some policy decision, and live TV people continued to pretend that nothing had changed. It got more and more obvious that they were pretending. You could see them trying not to look at things around them on the set. And they began to stare at their own monitors much more, to communicate with each other through the screens on the set much more. You could see that it was getting to be a struggle for them too. Not good to watch. Not helpful.

But just the VCR could be really good. If you had just the VCR on, and the rest of the room was dark, it was almost completely okay. You knew where stuff was, just being guided by shadowy shapes was enough, and everything *felt*

the same, so you could really be almost completely normal in a darkly shadowed room. That's why so many people just went ahead and put out their eyes in the later stages. Many did it in groups. They ritualized it and, afterwards, when they were all together, touching in the dark, they could really say good-bye. Except that some of those groups went into panic, so that was a gamble too. Any way you chose was going to be a gamble.

It wasn't transparency, that's the what you think when it's first described, that things are going transparent, starting at the edges and then spreading further around. That wouldn't have been a comfortable experience either, of course, but at least it's conceivable. I remember once, when things were pretty well advanced but not up to any major threshold, some of us were starting to form groups, and we were talking to this woman who was still insisting that she didn't notice anything specific, just a mood of disorientation. A lot of people went through a long stage of that, by the way. Something like that famous psychology experiment where you give people playing cards that are normal except the hearts are colored black and the clubs are colored red. People just go ahead and play poker or canasta or whatever, apparently without noticing. But their blood pressure and galvanic skin responses go haywire, and they get irritable and anxious and they want to stop playing all the time, but they never realize why. Sort of like that, except of course, you couldn't stop playing in this case.

Anyway, about this woman, I'm pretty sure she was just in denial. Her body language had that wound-up stretching quality and her eyes tended to rest at unlikely angles on the sky or some other blank expanse. When she had to deal directly with your face or with some object, her eyes had that stare-right-past-it look that allowed you to see something just enough to be able to use it without acknowledging it particularly. But I couldn't be sure, of course; you couldn't see what other people were seeing, so you could never be sure. Anyway, we were trying to describe it to her and she seemed to be trying to understand. She kept saying things like "You mean things are getting thinner and you can see through them?"

She was trying to strike a bargain. If we would accept her description, she might be willing to admit the whole business. Otherwise, she wasn't going to see it. But our group was committed. We were not one of the soft groups. That's not it, we said, you just see around, you see the other side. But that's impossible, she kept saying, my eyes are on this side. That was the big item for

her, her own eyes—her outlook, so to speak. Sometimes she would touch her eyes. People like her didn't last.

But transparent things were good to look at, by the way. At least at first they were. Especially if whatever was around you wasn't distinct from other things around you. Like in a room with the same wall paper all over, or sitting in the bushes. Then you could see the beginnings of the other side of the transparent thing—say a glass ball—but what you saw through it wasn't that different from what you saw through your side, so the overall experience was pretty normal. When things got more advanced, though, you didn't ever want to look at a transparent thing, of course. Or mirrors.

Rushing water, say in fountains or waterfalls, was good too. Also fire. Seeing the other side of them was like seeing more of the same. But *more*. That feeling you used to get in normal times, watching a stream or campfire—the same feeling, but richer. That kind of thing became a point of pride for the hard groups. Others might gather under some phony explanation, but, in the hard groups, you were expected to meet it straight on and even revel in it. It was this feeling that, if you could just ride it, go with it—then you would reap some reward. And also the feeling that it didn't matter what you did anyway, so you might as well enjoy it for as long as you could. You can see the macho-masochism potential. The ultimate analogy would be jumping off a really tall building and deciding to enjoy the fall.

So when we discovered intense experience enhancements, like rushing water or fires, we spent hours extolling the sensations and our own daring. Actually, I didn't last with my hard group past a certain point. It got too forced. But it was a brave choice, you have to admit that.

Another good thing was to be in the desert or by the ocean. Wide open spaces, in other words. If you looked into the distance and not at your immediate surroundings, well, the effect of expansion and release that you got in normal times had only been a muffled intimation. Large objects in the distance, mountains, say, and, most of all, the horizon itself on a clear day, the folding over and around of one's vision on so grand a scale—it was like a dream of flying, soaring, but you were a great flock.

So a lot of people gathered on beaches and deserts. When these places started to jam up, of course it defeated the purpose. There were crowd control problems, sanitation and so on—so that whole movement didn't last long.

Some people just went out in boats, just went out to sea with supplies. I don't know how it went for them in the later stages.

And, yes, night got to be very welcome. That became when most people went out and mingled and did their errands. Of course, there had always been a welcome kind of night, the kind that comes after a really oppressive hot day, with gentle breezes stirring the trees in the dark around you when you step outside. Night in general got to be more like that. The dawn got to be what you dreaded. On some level, you kept expecting things to be alright again when you woke up. But they never were. That was bad.

In the last stages, the only way you knew the difference between your side and the other side of anything was through your body habits. If you let it alone, your body knew what it would feel if you touched a thing—for example, that you would get a grip on the handle if you reached for the cup this way or that. But you had to take it for granted. That's what I learned the hard way from being with someone when he started to touch things just for the reassurance. Once he began to do that, he got into this guessing game with himself about which side was facing his body and very quickly lost his ability to distinguish between the sides. In one afternoon, actually. I tried to distract him when I realized what was happening, but he was locked in by then. He would guess right a few times, and the relief would start to flow, and the desire for more relief would drive him to another flurry of touching, at which point, of course, he would miss a few and the fear would come back in that “Oh, god, please, not again” way that can be so wearing—and back he would go to testing, lining things up one by one after he had figured out with his hands which side was which, trying to memorize for each thing which side was which so that maybe he could *learn* how to tell the difference again. Impossible to do it that way, of course. It was a knack.

When he started trying to get me to help him figure it out, I had to cut him loose. There was no way I could risk it. But that's how I learned the importance of taking it for granted in my actions that I knew which side was which.

Connected with this was not looking at any part of your own body—obviously never in a mirror, but also not in the course of your routine activities. The key parts to avoid were your hands and forearms, above all, but also your feet and legs if you had to look down for some reason. Luckily, this requirement dovetailed with learning how use your eyes in a general way to

supervise overall performance, locating things, selecting what to reach for and so on, and then letting your hands do the detail work. So you would need to be letting your body habits determine which side of a thing you were on at exactly the very instant when you needed to turn your eyes away so as not to see your own limbs. You got in this groove of looking away just as you reached out or stepped down or whatever it was. That coincidence of requirements was really what made it possible to continue functioning in the later stages.

Touching your own body parts, on the other hand, as opposed to looking at them, was probably the most grounding thing you could do. Touching anything was good, of course. That quickly became the source of your moment-to-moment faith. If you had ever wondered how blind people could possibly “read” those little Braille dots in the elevator, you didn’t wonder anymore! Stroking and holding things in public was acceptable right from the beginning. You could continue to conduct normal transactions with someone who was doing that—it didn’t really disrupt the interaction any more than if they had an unusual haircut, say, or an especially striking fashion accessory. But touching your own body parts was different because it wasn’t so easy to overlook in social situations, so for a long time people mostly did that in private or at least in the dark. Then it became okay to do in crowds, because of the anonymity. In the end, it didn’t matter any more and people did whatever they needed to do.

Of course, if you were just rubbing your hands together or stroking your arms or keeping them folded snugly, that was okay anywhere right from the beginning. It just got more common. What wasn’t publicly acceptable for a long time was feeling slowly all over and around as far as possible, the way people learned to do almost by instinct, feeling not just with your hands but with your arms, and especially all over your face and head, and your legs and feet feeling each other, and also pressing your back, your spine, really hard against something solid. Your spine became very important.

Reciprocal touching in social situations, handshaking and so on, that ended quickly. It led to clinging and violence. Besides, there were pairs and groups forming everywhere for all that. Almost everyone who lasted gravitated into the touching groups during the last stages. But, though comforting, such groups were risky, subject to obsessive pacts or outbursts of impulse that couldn’t be contained. The most durable groups prohibited both looking and touching, relying instead on conversation—and, of course, the singing. They

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stayed together and found some peace, right up to the end. I was in one of those groups, thank God. It just worked out that way, by accidental encounter. We gave ourselves in gratitude to music, and to words, which took no sides. We dwelt together in our voices and the stories that we told, stories of our world remembered. There were many beautiful moments.

*Thomas de Zengotita is a contributing editor at Harper's magazine. He teaches at The Dalton School and at the Draper Graduate Program at New York University. His most recent essay, "The Romance of Empire," appeared in Harper's, July 2003. "Hannah's Birthday" is forthcoming in Fiction, Summer 2003. He is working on a book for Bloomsbury called Mediated, due out in the Fall of 2004.*