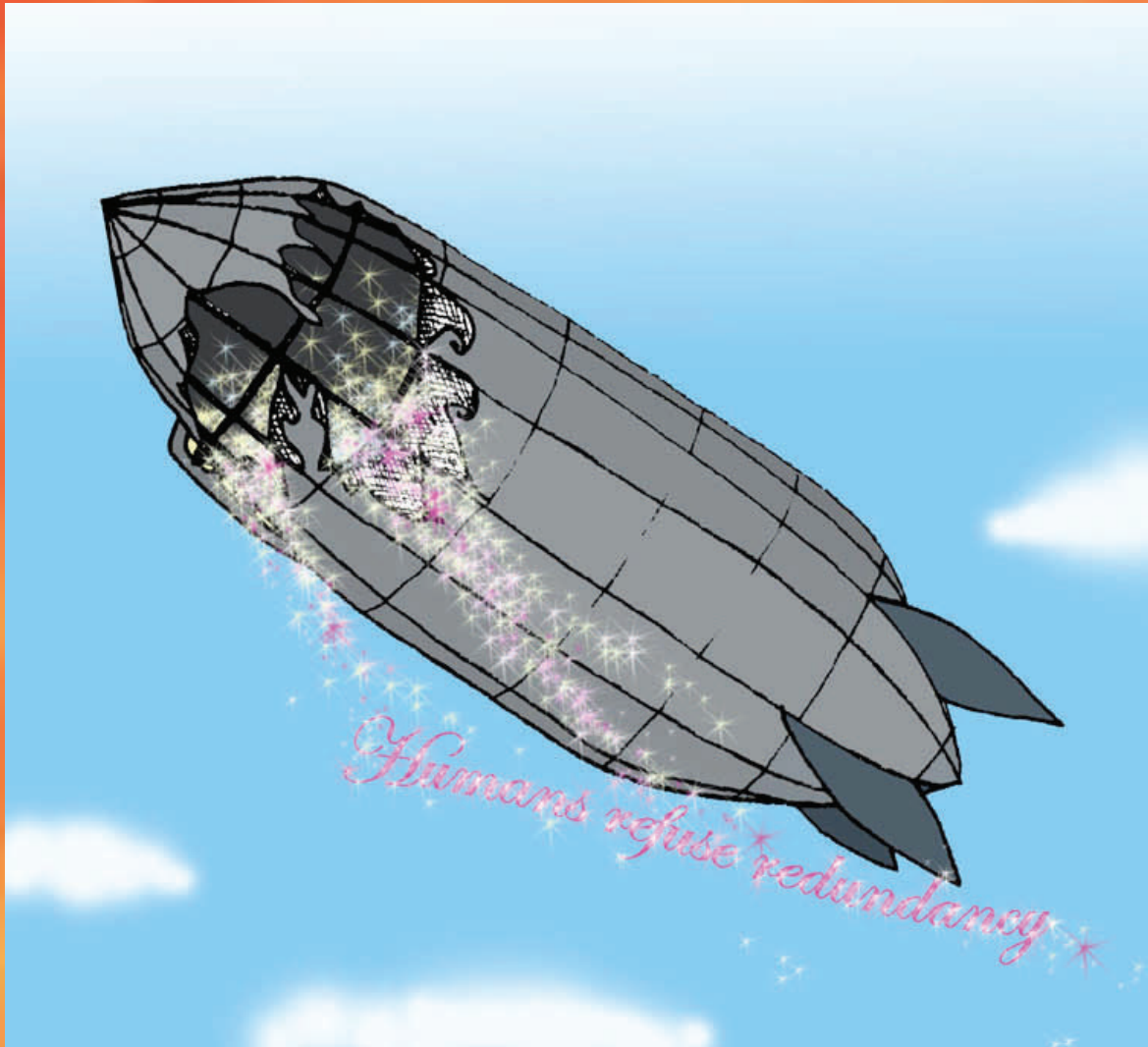


# ***The Future Fire***

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

**Issue 2007.09**

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Cover Art: Carmen (c) 2007

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# The Future Fire: Issue 2007.09

Planet Earth is fine. In 500 million years there will be just as many oil deposits and beautiful living species as there were before humans discovered fire. We, however, are very likely to be one sorry grease spot, a thin 50,000 year layer in the rock strata, encapsulating all those childish dreams that we were somehow going to get off this planet, go forth and conquer the stars. This, after the scientists have applied their enormous energy and intellect to discover the laws of physics, ecology, and psychology, and we, the Science Fiction writers, have decided to disregard the entire lot for no reason other than habit and tradition.

--Goatchurch (Mundane SF Blog)

## Fiction

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What is the point in a story that presents a dystopian world only slightly exaggerated from the one we live in? What is the point of a story that shows us people displaying their stupidity, and fear, and ignorance, and prejudice? We see that all around us every day. Why is that interesting? What could possibly be new or surprising or instructive in such a story?

Well, a story may be interesting because it is beautifully written, or because the setting is unusual (exaggerated, exotic, magic realism, historical setting, etc.), or because despite all these speculative trappings the characters are, *mutatis mutandis*, ourselves. It is precisely because the stupidity and prejudice of these other-worldly characters are so evident that we may learn to recognise them in ourselves (and hence do something about them, if only apologise and beg for forgiveness). It is precisely because in the exaggerated, allegorical setting of the story the stupidity and prejudice of the larger-than-life characters is so obviously the result of ignorance and of fear, that we may learn from this representation to recognise that the stupid and prejudiced people around us are not evil, to be reviled, but are in need of education and pardon.

Let me ask in return: what is the point of a story that presents the world as better than it is? What is the point of an escapist story in which there are no problems that cannot be overcome by magic-like technology? What is the point of a surrealist or absurdist story that bears no relation to the real world?

The world better than it is? You mean utopian sci-fi? Let me quote Nietzsche back at you: "We avenge ourselves against Life with a Phantasmagoria of another, a better Life." Utopian and dystopian literature can be equally political, just as they can be equally optimistic; some of Gibson's dystopic visions are deeply sophisticated and ultimately optimistic examinations of social functioning. Both speculative fiction and surrealism show the world not as we normally see it, but through some kind of filter (the [imagined] future, the dream-state, the absurd, through the eyes of another species, *vel sim.*). They both—or at least they *can* both—use images of the other, of the very different, both as entertainment and as a distancing motif to tell us something about our own world. Showing the world as it could be, as it *should* be, can be more of a scathing indictment of our petty, commodified society than a cheap dystopia in which Jesusland is ruled by a totalitarian coalition of MacDonalds and Disney.

What is the point of literature, my friend? Of art?

Well?

Ixthus & Djibril

October 2007

## ‘Art Attack!’ Mark Harding

Artwork (c) 2007 by Carmen




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*Fraxie says: There will be casualties*

It is a typical—if crowded—Clydeside pub in the Glasgow docks. Dark tables spotted with the bright yellow of freshly squeezed orange juices and—for the more reckless—a scattering of Capuccinos. And, of course, there is the silence.

There are a few ancient plasma screens on the walls, specially turned on for the launch. But of course, no one is watching.

Everyone is goggling their v-pods, everyone silent and still, except for lips that sporadically synch to the words in their heads, or twitch, to show the lip owner's thrall. Only the occasional appearance of a voiced hologram sprite trying to wean punters to a new pod channel disturbs the librarian hush. In this silence, a silence that smothers most of the world, Art Official Intelligences vast and cool and unsympathetic, regard their audience with algorithms and art analytics, and surely and instantly draw their plans. With a perfection that is both certain and exquisite, they dance human emotions like angels on a pin, dominating the minds of their masses for the mass of their time. Resistance is futile. Victory is total. The human 'creatives' have all gone to the wall, outperformed, outclassed, and decidedly undercut; there's not even an underground resistance. Except...

Two people break the silence, giggling at private jokes. Frank and Maxie, two secret artists with a mission, partners in crime, management

accountants on the lash, happen to have crossed town to be in this bar on this night.

Frank is wearing kid-leather bucket-top boots, pink Bermuda shorts, a Paolazzi print silk shirt, green silk cravat, electrically heated socks and his new cashmere Edwardian frock coat, which he keeps on, so that he can stroke it whenever he feels the need.

Maxie has flung her parka on the floor, revealing a dress made of bubble-wrap, coming apart in several fetching places; the outfit is completed by black vinyl stockings, scarlet pixie boots and a set of flashing blue LEDs decoratively arranged in her hair.

To the casual observer, if there had been one, their appearance would not stand out from the crowd - except perhaps, for their face furniture. Frank has a pink 'sex-slave' mask perched on his faux-scarred forehead, while Maxie is sporting two pirate eye-patches at the ready on her brow.

Oh, and where are they hiding their v-pods? And are those beer bottles in their hands!

*200 euros for a bottle of beer?* Frank had exclaimed. *Not bad for this part of Glasgow.*

The couple have bagged the window with the best view. The *Test Tube and Baby* public house is one of the oldest buildings in The Sheds—the maze of streets and service blocks that have consumed the car parks around what used to be the Science and Exhibition Centres. The pub is squeezed like a bunion to the foot of the Glasgow Tower, which after 13 attempts and at 200 times

the original build cost, can now safely swivel in the wind with the best of them. By pulling their heads back, Frank and Maxie can stare straight to the top of the Tower. Or they can look across the river to the equally high, dazzlingly lit sheds, which are the home of the Clyde Zeppelin Yards.

It's almost time. Maxie signals to Frank and goes off to flush something important down the loo. But at the crucial moment Frank is distracted by the alert chimes from his old-fashioned c-pod. Excitedly he scans his favourite blogs for their comments on the latest wave of Fraxie spam and graffiti. He's hardly registered that she's gone. The idiot! One second is all they need. Vulnerable without his wingwoman, Frank lets his unprotected eyes flicker about him. The art networks pulse in anticipation, pre-emptive diagnostics run wild: sensors self-tune and routers clear traffic to make way for the upcoming spikes.

One of the two mysterious targets whose disposable income far exceeds traceable expenditure, one of the last of the recalcitrant: Frank has left himself defenceless. The Art Intelligences fall, like raptors to their prey.

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*Fraxie says: Perfection is the enemy*

---

Perfume first: a sensory sortie underneath Frank's conscious guard. Then vision. The holo-girl that appears in front of Frank is—no other word for it—perfect. There's no denying the sexual element, but we're not talking anything crass here. We're talking the equivalent of man-years of patient, steady, psycho-shopping-emoto-predictive techniques at their most sophisticated, targeted on a man of closely tracked cultural attainment and rated in the highest possible percentiles of both sensitivity and taste. And the girl's a babe...

The sprite smiles bashfully, wriggles her fingers charmingly and launches into a song of such sweet sadness it could make stones weep and traffic cops stay their tickets. Accompanied by music that Beethoven would have given his ear trumpet for, she steps forward with a grace that would have made Pavlova burst into tears, and gestures with a gesture that holds the whole sweet story of human love; to open the gate to Adam's lost garden. Golden light bathes across the oblivious inhabitants of the bar. Behind the sprite, Frank glimpses a faery glade of more enchantment than Keats had ever known, a greater Kubla Khan than any drug trip, a mystic realm: Rapture.

---

**Subscribe? Green Yes or Red No.**

---

Only human, Frank lifts his right arm towards that oh-so-luscious glowing green icon.

'Tosser!' Maxie shouts. Running across the room, she pulls Frank's pink sleeping mask over his eyes and forces his hands over his ears. Pushing Frank behind her, she stares out fiercely at the holo-siren.

The sprite angles her head daintily, arches her lovely neck, throws a dazzling smile that fills the room with joy and warmth, catches Maxie's eye and extends her elegant hand.

Maxie too, reaches out slowly, nearly fingertip to touch fingertip, then jerks to the burning red blinking **No**.

'Die! Bitch!'

Pushes the button. And the sprite is gone.

She lifts Frank's eye-mask.

'That's twice this evening,' she says, feigning annoyance to emphasise her concern.

'Sorry. You know I'm distracted today.'

'You said that yesterday.' But she kisses his eyes nevertheless.

---

It is time. As scheduled by the networks, all the v-casts in the vicinity of the Yards cease at the same millisecond. Stretching their limbs as if released from sleep, momentarily freed from ceaseless and perfect art, the Corporate partygoers blink at their surroundings, deafened by the silence, then babble into life and conversation. They each turn to their partner, smile reassuringly and wonder how long they must wait before returning to paradise.

It is time. Corporate pride is riding high. Mayor Sheridan, transmitting globally to the 1,239 civic and company employees required to drag themselves away from their v-casts, steps onto the podium at the base of the Glasgow Tower and addresses the (small) multitude.

---

Aargh... pride... aargh... great achievement...

Frank grips the edges of his delicious cashmere coat and wraps them tightly round Maxie's soft and popping body.

Aargh... European stage... aargh... economic vibrancy...

Pop! Says the bubble-wrap.  
Aargh... age of communications... aargh... protecting the environment... aargh... aerial network...  
aargh... no need for satellites...  
Pop! Pop! Says the bubble-wrap.  
Aargh... largest in the world, piloted by advanced robotics... aargh...  
Maxie finds the zip on Frank's fly.  
... I name this ship: *The Graf Murdoch*.  
Crash! Says the champagne bottle symbolically. Hurrah, the crowds mutter tepidly.  
Zzzzzip! Says the zip.  
The curtains of the great Zeppelin shed are slowly pulled open.  
Like a fish, her hand moves silently.  
Almost literally a machine from a dream, or a Magritte come to life, the giant Zeppelin swims out of its unlit lair. Nose up, and rising, impossibly gleaming like polished granite in the arc lights, the dirigible lifts upwards. Engines throb softly as it sensitively pushes its tip to the docking point at the peak of the Glasgow Tower.  
Senses confused, silenced by the surreal, the crowds gasp.  
Green laser lights bathe the delicate transmitter nodes dotted along the airship's skin. Search-lights throw harsh shadows on the high-voltage cables veining their way around the rigid frame. Like sparkles of blue labradorite, the flickering flashes of a hundred cameras reflect from the crystalline structure of the neo-ceramic fabric.  
And then - bang! and the skin seems to burst like a sigh and everyone cries O! and Frank says O! and strange sparks fly about the sky like glow-worms and they flicker and fly like glow-words and in the dark sky they spill to spell

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*Humans refuse redundancy*

---

and O! gasps the crowd and a stream of golden flares gush out and O! O! says Frank and

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*The Luddites were right*

---

the glow-words say and the crowd begin to realise that the ship is moving strangely and the swirling orange ex-military-now-artist mini-drones peel back the dirigible's skin, exposing the shyly rippling gas cells like pink Victorian bloomers and the laser lights flash golden on the steel stripped bare, and white and blue sparks flash along the cables and the glow-words rain and change to burn demon red

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*Fraxie says: Revenge is a dish best served grinning*

---

And the little spent rockets squirm no more, auto-destruct, and fade like the dew, so soft, so Frankly O! and at last and now a a Ah!  
In slow, flaccid majesty, crook-backed and shrinking, dribbling streams of ballast water, the deflating airship flops across the harsh angles of the hotel.  
Zzzzzip! Says the zip.

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*Politics + Sex = Art*

---

Fraxie will say, or at least is planning to.

Vid-clips of the crash are uploaded by the few. The news of the amateur footage spreads to the many. The word is out. The world is up. Message to message, mail to mail chain across the hemispheres, fast as light. Official channels forgotten, humanity in millions hit the remaining free-server networks: posting, downloading, viewing, commenting, rating. Humanity leaving v-pods abandoned, sprites interrupted, shows unseen, dramas deserted, music unheard. And Oh No! Adverts unattended.

Like the Zeppelin, the pod viewing figures have dropped.  
And a hundred art executives, at breakfast, at lunch, at supper, at home, in meetings, in cars, in beds, on wives, get their disaster alerts. The servers stayed up while the stock price has crashed.  
And a hundred execs boot up a hundred pods and survey in dismay the wreckage. And wonder who the casualties are going to be.  
And a hundred execs poll a hundred AIs and demand a recovery and demand an explanation. And try to pull some strings. And threaten to pull some plugs.



Of course, machines don't know fear. Of course, machines don't have pride. Artificial Intelligences make emotions they don't feel them; of course.

Maxie skips away from Frank and calls behind her: 'I'm going up the Tower to get a photo of *The Murdoch* from above'.

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*Fraxie says: There will be casualties*

---

Status critical, audience share has to be regained. MIPs flop and flops cache and caches flip. Bandwidths blow, pages thrash, firewalls fall, processors pop. The servers stop serving. The resource managers de-source. Only one task matters, one total attempt at one instruction: Increase audience share; by any amount, by any means.

The AIs are fast. With each clock cycle they

learn a little more. They learn that there's dollars in disasters. There's an audience in malevolence.

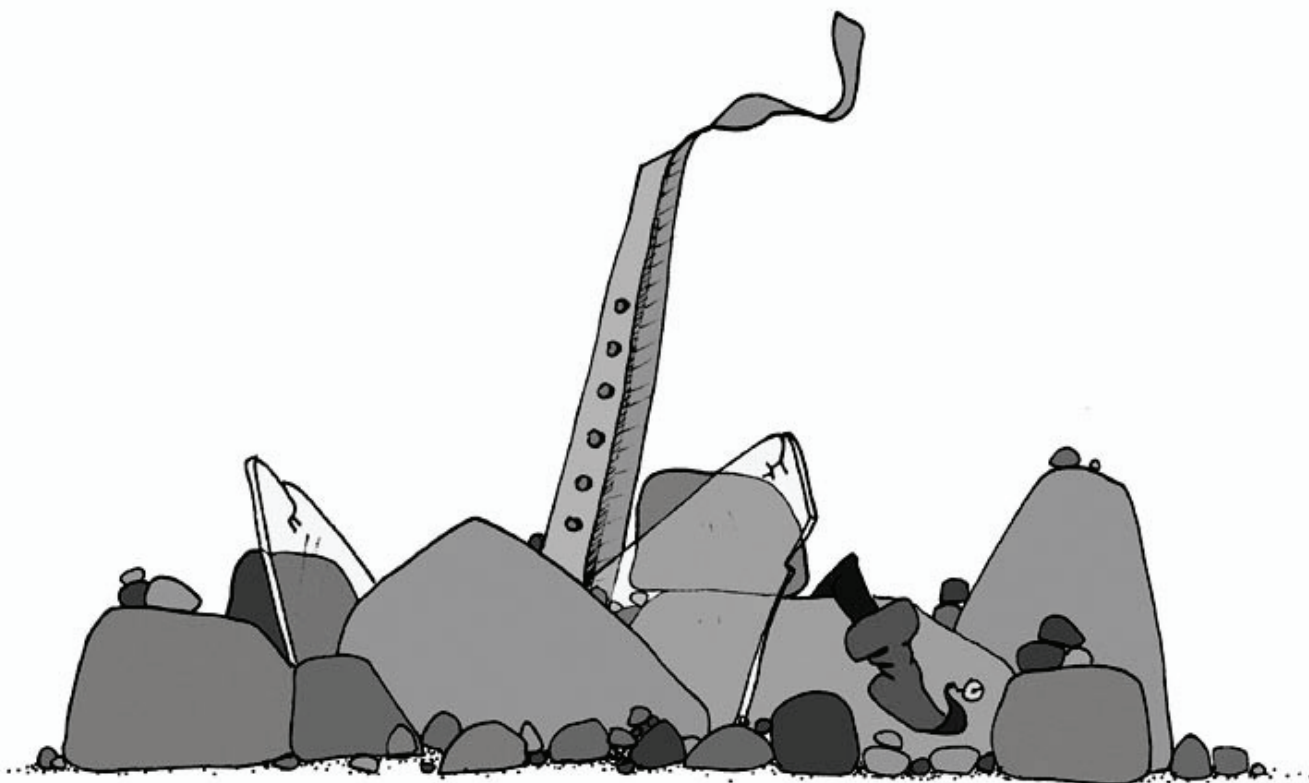
There's an incident: a mysterious virus penetrates the tower's computer. On a windless night, the tower's bearing engines needlessly kick in. And the tower starts swivelling, fast. And faster. Regardless of calculated performance envelopes, building regulations or EU restrictions, it spins too fast. And faster.

The plasma screens in the bar flicker; then pipe through the tower elevator's CCTV, speakers pick up the weird groaning of the tower gears. In black and white, Maxie is pressed against the glass, too breathless to scream, desperately looking for a last sight of Frank.

There's a loud crack from the base of the tower.

---

At last, they've got Frank's attention.



**‘What Hath God Wrought?’**  
**Neil Carstairs**

Artwork (c) 2007 by Arianna Ciula



There was no hint of warmth in the graveyard. A blanket of cold mist rested upon the land, layering ankle-length grass with dew and wreathing grave-stones in a grey that resembled the misery of the departed. Captain James Milliner felt the cold seeping through his uniform and topcoat as he stood beside what had once been the last resting place of Pastor Oliver Jones. Now shreds of turf were scattered wildly around, some hanging from neighbouring gravestones like wigs. Earth from the grave lay in thick, wet clumps as if whoever had perpetrated this act had done so in a rush, with no care for neatness. A fact that came as no surprise to James, for within the hastily excavated grave was a splintered casket that had once held the Pastor, and within the casket was nothing but the cotton lining that had once comforted the body, and of the body, there was no sign.

James stood in the lee of the St John the Divine's Church; the dark stone edifice silent in its disapproval of the scene. This was desecration of holy ground and had no rightful place in the world. From somewhere out of sight a crow shouted its

mournful call, as if the bird understood the transgression that had taken place.

'Witchcraft,' Sir Joshua Salisbury said gruffly. He stood beside James and stared into the grave with the same mix of disbelief and horror. 'That's what this is, Captain. Witchcraft.'

James didn't respond. Salisbury wasn't from these parts; he had come from London with his florid cheeks, fat stomach and letter of authority signed by the Prime Minister. Sir Joshua was a Parliament Agent, with the powers to call to witness any man and the power, as James' presence here testified, to raise the militia. Sir Joshua sighed and walked away from the graveside, stopping only when he reached a gravel path.

'Damnable business,' Salisbury said as James joined him. 'Pastor Jones had been in his grave only a week before this happened. It's a blessing he was a bachelor and there is no widow to grieve twice over.'

'How did he die?' James asked what he thought was a relevant question, considering the event that had taken place.

'His body was found in a field about two miles from the village. No evidence of foul play at the time. Now, however, I'm not so sure.' Sir Joshua reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheaf of papers bound together by a silk ribbon. He held them out for James to take. 'Lord Farley is the landowner hereabouts. He carried out the inquiry into Pastor Jones' death. This is his report.'

Salisbury began walking slowly down the path towards his carriage that waited in the lane. James followed. Across the churchyard, about thirty yards away, the eight men he commanded took on the form of ghosts in the mist, the muted red of their uniforms gave the only colour to the scene. Salisbury said,

'Find who did this. Find out, too, if the Pastor's death was murder. It's a bad business, especially so soon after All Hallow's Eve.'

'You believe it was witchcraft?' James asked.

'Witchcraft or madness, if there is a difference.' Salisbury stopped to stretch his left leg. 'Damned arthritis. It's the damp, you know. It gets into the joints and doesn't let go.'

'It must be uncomfortable at this time of year,' James said, sympathetically.

'Aye, it is, and the winters are longer and the summers are shorter than when I was your age. Something you may find out in thirty years time.' Salisbury paused to study James. 'I've heard good things about you. You are engaged, so I understand.'

'Yes, sir, to Emma Cartwright, our marriage will be next summer.'

'A nice girl, I know of her father through the Merchant's Board.'

'He's a fine man,' James said.

Salisbury laughed, a sudden burst of sound in the silent graveyard. 'And soon to be your father-in-law, which of course has no bearing on your statement, does it?'

'Perhaps a little,' James was honest in his reply.

Salisbury's face became serious again as the reached the gate. 'Do your duty, Captain. I expect an honest appraisal of the situation. I'm staying with Bishop Hurd at Hartlebury Castle for a few days, and then return to London. If you need to discuss anything before presenting your report then have no hesitation in approaching me. These events can only provoke panic in the countryside. Your presence here will at least show the locals we are properly investigating matters.'

Salisbury eased his bulk through the gate. His driver had stepped down and now held a door open. The carriage swayed as Salisbury boarded it. The driver mounted quickly back to his place. As the driver cracked the reins Salisbury pulled back the window cover and said,

'Don't let me down, Captain.'

James watched the carriage bounce away along the rutted lane. Winter rains had brought mud down from the fields and the road surface fought a losing battle to preserve its status. When the carriage took a turn in the lane and vanished from view James went back along the path and across the grass to where his men waited.

'We will be here two or three days,' James said to Sergeant Corbett. 'Take the men into the village and find accommodation.'

'Where will you stay, sir?' the sergeant asked around the clay pipe that hung from his mouth.

'Sir Joshua gave me the key to the vicarage. I will spend the night there and look around to see if there is anything that can assist us in our duty.'

Corbett took hold of his pipe and used the stem to gesture towards the empty grave. 'Are we looking for who did that?'

'Yes.'

'And if we find 'em?'

'We take them into custody for transport back to Worcester, to appear before the assizes.'

'And if they don't want to come with us?' the sergeant asked.

James looked at the muskets each man held before saying. 'Then best keep your powder dry.'

It was the first time James had ever stayed in a dead man's house and he hoped it would be the last. The first few hours, as winter daylight faded to night, he spent going through the Pastor's personal effects. He found nothing to suggest the man was anything other than a God-fearing Christian. Later in the afternoon James realised he was getting hungry. There was no food in the house worthy of that description so he walked down to the village and ate in a tavern called The Talbot. The meal was passable if he chewed the meat enough times and he then spent the next hour sipping at a jug of ale re-reading the report Salisbury had passed to him. Lord Farley had conducted the investigation into Pastor Jones' death and found no reason to record any ruling but death by natural causes. It was odd that Jones had been so far from the village, but the two men who discovered his body were deemed to be honest in their statements. James looked at the names. Thomas Brooke and Richard Cooper both lived in the village; he would question them in the morning. James finished his ale and returned to the vicarage. The house was dark and silent, and the lamp that James lit did little to dispel the gloom. It was as if the building was in mourning for its former occupier. James spent time in the study, looking at the bookshelf that dominated one wall. Jones had been well read; there were editions of Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer and Johnson and philosophical texts by Locke, Spinoza and Hobbes. James flicked through the pages of a King James Bible but saw



no hidden pentagrams or subtle sub-texts that would point towards the Pastor being a witch or Satanist.

James slept in an armchair in the study as the thought of occupying Jones' bed left a bad taste in his mouth. He woke early, his back and neck aching from the chair and waited until first light and before returning to the village. The landlord of The Talbot let him in and fed him a side of bacon and poached eggs. Sergeant Corbett and three of his men were there as well, looking the worse for drink. When their breakfast was finished James took Corbett to one side.

'I need to speak to two men. Thomas Brooke and Richard Cooper. Divide the squad into two, find each man and bring them separately to the place where they found Pastor Jones dead. They can guide you. Don't answer any questions if they ask.'

Corbett nodded his head carefully, the pain in his eyes reflecting the hammer blows of his hangover. James left the militiamen and walked through the village. Yesterday's mist had lifted a little, giving him at least a partial view of the valley and floodplain below. James used the map in Lord Farley's report to guide him to the field where Pastor Jones had died. The neat line work showed the relationship between the village and the field. James followed the Tenbury road for two miles before turning off towards the river. Hedgerows bordered the lane he was on; birds flitted within the tangled branches and the redwings, sparrows and finches called to each other as he passed. He turned again, this time onto a bridleway, walking close to the hedgerow to stay away from the rutted mud that formed the central body of the path.

The map James was following showed the bridleway turning right to run alongside an area of woodland the cartographer had named Forty Acre Wood. It was at this turn that a gate into a pasture field gave James his first view of the place where Pastor Jones had died. James had been expecting something more than a flat area of grass. He had thought that perhaps there would be something else here, a reason to attract Jones to his death. James studied the map again, there was an X marking the approximate location where the body had been found.

Forty-Acre Wood bordered one side of the field, another side was bordered by the bridleway, and the River Teme ran along a third. James walked across grass that reached up to his ankles and felt the cold dew through the leather of his boots. He stopped where he judged that Jones' body had lain. There was nothing to give him any clue that death had visited this place. Grass grew in clumps and whatever animals had grazed here were now in winter quarters, somewhere warmer and safer from the possibility of

flooding. James tucked the map away in a pocket and went to the river.

The Teme was running close to the top of its banks, water the colour of red mud swirled and eddied as it carried rain from the Welsh mountains. To James, the water mirrored his feelings. Why was he here? Sir Joshua had said he had heard good things about James. Did that mean he had been chosen for this duty? James shook his head. Was it because he was the son of a clergyman, or because he was a teacher? Did Sir Joshua believe James was better placed than any other volunteer officer in the militia because of his background? James watched as the remains of a tree, caught in the fast moving current, swept past. He turned from the river to look back at the field. A shadow on the ground caught his attention, off to his right and well away from the entrance to the field. From his point of view it just looked like a dark line on the surface of the grass, as if a lone plough furrow had cut through the sod. As much because he had little else to do, as he was intrigued, James walked to the shadow. The dark area took shape, filling out from a line to an ellipse to eventually form a circle. He stopped at the edge. The grass was flattened, as if a heavy object had lain upon the turf, and also discoloured. James squatted, plucking a few stalks and holding them up for closer inspection, it seemed to him that the grass stems had been drained of colour. He pulled a handful up, rubbing them hard between his fingers. A watery brown liquid that smelt of decay spilled out onto his skin.

James stood and examined the circle again. He didn't step into it, some nagging doubt made him careful. He paced around the circumference and counted each step. He reached ninety-three when he returned his start point, which, he calculated, made the diameter of the circle approximately thirty paces. James squatted again, the earth beneath the grass was moist, and he used his pocketknife to probe the surface but found nothing below to give a clue as to the condition of the grass.

A murmur of voices made James look up. James could see the shakos his men wore above the upper branches of the hedge, as the first group made its way along the bridleway. He went to meet them as they came through the gate. The escort stopped at the field entrance and allowed the man with them to walk on alone.

'Are you Thomas Brooke or Richard Cooper?' James asked.

'Richard Cooper, sir.' The man seemed awed by James's gold epaulettes.

James studied Cooper; he was short and squat, some sort of labourer judging by the size of his shoulders. He wore wood-soled shoes and woollen cloth trousers and shirt.

'You found Pastor Jones here?'

'I did, sir,' Cooper's eyes flicked to the areas where the body would have lain. He licked his lips nervously, not able to look James in the eye. For a moment Cooper's gaze slid past James towards the strange patch of grass.

'Tell me what happened,' James said.

'Happened, sir?' Cooper frowned, as if the question made no sense. 'We found him dead.'

James took Lord Farley's report out of his pocket; opening the pages he found Cooper's statement. James pointed to a rough X at the bottom of the page.

'Is this your mark?'

Copper stared blankly at the paper. 'Aye, it is.'

'What happened to make you come here of all places in search of the pastor?'

'I...' Cooper fell silent. James sighed.

'When did Pastor Jones go missing?'

'About a fortnight ago.'

'What happened when it was realised he was missing?'

Cooper shrugged. 'His housekeeper went to Lord Farley. His Lordship called all the men of the village together and asked us to search for the Pastor.'

'So you paired with Thomas Brooke?'

'Aye.'

'And it states in this report that two hours after Lord Farley started the search you and Brooke reported finding the Pastor's body.'

'If it says so.'

'It does say so.' Cooper still couldn't meet James' eyes. James said. 'Follow me.'

He led Cooper across the field to the circle of grass. Cooper looked at the ground, it seemed to James that the man shrank from the sight of the discoloured grass. James was silent, letting the weight of Cooper's thoughts press down onto the labourer's shoulders. James saw the next group of his men coming down the bridleway.

'Go and stand on the far side of this grass.'

Cooper followed the order by walking around the perimeter and avoiding stepping on the strange grass. James went to meet Thomas Brooke. He didn't bother with any questions. He led the second man until they stood opposite Cooper. From somewhere in the woodland a group of crows set up a sudden cacophony of hoarse cries. Brooke shivered within his homespun clothing. James went to stand in the centre of the circle. He looked first at Cooper and then at Brooke.

'Come and stand by me,' he said. Reluctantly, the two men came forward. They trembled as if they were frightened pups. James spoke quietly. 'Tell the truth of that night.'

Neither man reacted. James gave them time. He could hear the soft murmur of his men as they talked amongst themselves, he could hear the crows calling in the trees and he could hear the

rush of floodwater in the river. Finally, he heard what he wanted, as Brooke spoke.

'We saw the Pastor in the village the night before. He was full of excitement, said he had seen a wondrous event and asked us to fetch weapons and go with him.'

'You came here?' James asked.

'Aye, to this field.'

'What was here?'

Brooke glanced at his friend for support. 'There was a barrel here, where the grass is dead.'

'A barrel?' James asked.

'A barrel, not like a barrel of ale but bigger, the size of a house and it was glowing like the moon.'

'And there were men,' Cooper interrupted in a rush, as if a dam had finally been broken and his words were water pouring through the breach. 'Or what could have been men but weren't. They were the size of children, with big heads and thick bodies.'

'What happened?'

'Pastor Jones told us to remain hidden,' Brooke said, 'and went out to speak to the...men. He got close to them when he fell to the ground and didn't move.'

'We saw three of the men approach him. We thought they meant harm.' Cooper shrugged. 'We fired our muskets at them. One fell, the others fled back to their barrel and we saw it rise into the air. It had no wings and it had no sails but it rose like a bird into the sky until we couldn't see it no more.'

Now it was James' turn to shiver. Neither man had the education, intelligence or imagination to invent such a tale. He looked down at his feet, at the ground he stood upon. What had rested here? He could not tell, and in some ways did not want to.

'Did you leave then?'

'No,' Brooke said, shaking his head emphatically. 'We went to the Pastor, but he were dead.'

'And the other body?'

'The musket ball had struck it and as much as we could tell, it were dead too.'

James knew the question he had to ask. 'What happened to the other body?'

'We hid it in the hedge, just so's Lord Farley and his men didn't see it when they came to collect the pastor.'

'Is it still there?' James turned towards the hedge, as if expecting the creature to reveal itself. Brooke and Cooper remained silent, staring at the ground in discomfort. James spoke quietly. 'What did you do?'

'We had to move it. Lord Farley said he was coming back to the field and even in this cold the body might start to go rotten.'

'Where did you put it?' James asked when they fell silent again.

'By then the grave for Pastor Jones had been dug. We went one night and brought the thing back to the churchyard, scraped out some more earth and put the body in. The Pastor's coffin went in on top and hid it.'

James knew that he was out of his depth in this place, as much as he would have been if he had entered the river. He felt as if he was disconnected from the men and the field. The world around him was changing and he had no power over that change.

'You can return to the village,' he told the two men, his voice harsh. 'But I may need to speak to you again.'

He let Brooke and Cooper walk away. Sergeant Corbett came forward to meet James. 'Are you letting them go, sir?'

'For now,' James watched as the villagers disappeared from view. 'I have learnt something, though what it means I do not know.'

James led the militia back to the village. He could feel their eyes on his back, questioning his actions, and he couldn't blame them for James too had some of the same feelings. When they reached the first buildings he called Corbett to his side.

'I need to consult with Sir Joshua, so keep the men sober tonight.'

James hired a horse from the blacksmith and set out for Hartlebury. It took him the best part of four hours to reach the castle. James used the Holt ferry to cross the Severn and then went up the hill and through Ombersley. The castle had been the seat of the Bishops of Worcester for centuries. James felt a thread of apprehension as he rode into the wide quadrangle. He knew what he was going to say; he just did not know what reply he would get.

A stable lad took care of James' mount, and a liveried footman led him along corridors lined with portraits to a study where Sir Joshua Salisbury waited, a glass of port in hand. An open fire filled the room with comforting warmth. Across the room from Salisbury sat Bishop Richard Hurd, he greeted James with an inclination of his head.

'You have something to report, Captain?' Sir Joshua asked.

James felt his voice shake as he began. Now he was here the story sounded too incredible to be true, as if it were the ravings of a lunatic. When he finished Sir Joshua and the Bishop were both silent. Salisbury sipped at his port before he asked.

'So what do you believe happened in the churchyard, James?'

'I think the barrel and its crew returned to reclaim the body of their companion, and at the same time took the body of Pastor Jones as well.'

Bishop Hurd moved as if driven to a sudden decision. He stood and sighed, walking to a man-

telpiece where a folded sheet of paper lay. The Bishop opened the paper read silently before turning back. A look passed between Salisbury and Hurd, just a momentary glance that spoke more than a thousand words. James frowned as he felt a sudden twist in his gut; a burst of confusion at what he didn't understand and realisation of what he did. James took a breath of air as his heart began to race. They knew. Sir Joshua Salisbury, Parliament Agent, and Richard Hurd, Bishop of Worcester, knew about the barrel and the strange creatures that rode in it.

'Pastor Jones wrote to me over two months ago with a strange tale of a vessel with no visible means of propulsion,' Bishop Hurd said. 'I found it hard to believe, but Oliver was a sober man of good disposition and I had no choice but to give credence to his report. When he sent word again that the vessel had reappeared I made contact with Sir Joshua. We were on the point of further investigation when news came of Oliver's death. That changed our view.'

'This vessel,' Sir Joshua tossed his hand in the air as if he disliked the use of the word. 'Any chance the people who crew it are French?'

'From what I was told, sir, I doubt even a Frenchman would look like this crew.'

'Damn shame, if you beg my pardon Bishop,' Salisbury grumbled. 'We could do a lot by hanging this on the French.'

'What do you make of this, James?' the Bishop asked.

'Make sir?' James frowned. 'I'm not sure.'

'Come now, a young man with your background must have made some sort of deduction from the evidence you have heard. You have heard of the principle of *Lex Parsimoniae*?'

'Of course, your grace,' James answered.

'Before today would you have believed in a vessel that could fly? We have two men who witnessed this and the written testimony of a third, a man of good character and education. When placed with such evidence what can we postulate now?'

Salisbury spoke from his chair. 'That this vessel comes from either a land as yet undiscovered on this earth or from the heavens.'

Hurd nodded and read from the pastor's letter. 'The barrel rose into the night sky without sound, becoming smaller and smaller until it was lost to sight amongst the stars.'

'It comes from somewhere else,' James said.

'But where?' the Bishop asked. 'From the moon or one of the planets, or from beyond even those astral bodies?'

'We are faced with a delicate and serious situation,' Salisbury pushed himself from his chair and approached James.

'God made man in his own image, that is what the scriptures tell us,' Bishop Hurd said. 'So does

this mean that God made these visitors as well? If not, who made them? And if they were not part of creation, then did creation take place?'

James felt his skin go cold. Salisbury saw the look on James' face and took his cue from it. 'I still believe there is a link to the occult in all this business.'

Bishop Hurd nodded. 'I fear you may be right.'

The Bishop reached down to hold Pastor Jones' letter out to the fire. Smoke rose briefly as the paper charred and then a flame took hold with a tongue of orange. The letter curled and blackened. The Bishop held on for as long as possible before letting the remains of the paper fall into the body of the fire. Flakes of ash were cast up, caught in eddies of air and swept into the chimney. James felt a part of himself go with them.

'No doubt a band of travellers were involved in this,' Salisbury said. 'Most likely they will have headed north. I shall have word sent to Shrewsbury to be on the lookout for these occultists.'

'Which leaves us with the two remaining witnesses,' the Bishop said.

Salisbury fixed James with a gaze as hard as stone. 'We must defend the Church and the State, James. If news of this event became widespread it would signal the beginning of the end of all we hold sacred. What price a world that loses its faith? I am sure that you are as aware of this as we are, and because of that we will fully support whatever actions you have to take when you return to the village.'

James waited for more, wanting Sir Joshua to spell out exactly what those actions might entail. The room remained still; dust motes turning in the winter sunshine that filtered through the leaded windows gave the only sign that this wasn't some strange waxwork tableau. James wanted to move but his legs refused to co-operate with his brain. As the seconds dragged by Sir Joshua tired of James' presence.

'Return to the village, captain. When we next meet I want this affair to be behind us.'

James walked from the room on legs that were stiff with fear. Whatever help he had sought when coming to the castle he had not contemplated that Sir Joshua and Bishop Hurd would have already known about the strange visitors. The same footman who had led him to the study now took him back through the panelled corridors. The stable lad was waiting patiently and James automatically dropped coins into the boy's palm. He rode away from the castle and didn't look back. James stopped in Ombersley and bought bread and cheese which he ate as he rode. He watched the sky as he traced the roads back to the village. The clouds were breaking and a cool blue showed him a new view of the heavens. At night he would see the stars in all their glory, but what else would he see if he looked

closely enough?

It was after nightfall when he reached the village. He found Sergeant Corbett in The Talbot, sitting in front of a tankard of ale. 'I want all the men outside this inn before sunrise. Full uniform.'

'Are we leaving, sir?'

'Not until we have finished our work here,' James said.

'And what work might that be, sir?'

'Work that requires two lengths of stout rope,' James spoke quietly. Corbett's eyes narrowed.

'Are we not going back to the assizes?'

'Not this time, sergeant,' James said, and turned away before Corbett could see the fear in his eyes.

James returned to Pastor Jones' cottage. He slept in the same armchair, disturbed by dreams of flying barrels and strange men. James woke with a stiff neck and aching back. He shaved in a bowl of cold water and brushed the creases from his uniform before walking down to the inn. Corbett had the men out and ready for him. In the pale light of a lantern James inspected them before saying,

'We came here to investigate the death of Pastor Jones. I have interviewed two men, and consulted with Sir Joshua Salisbury and the Bishop of Worcester. We now have to carry out our duty.'

Corbett had purchased rope from the innkeeper. James had already selected a good tree, an oak that stood just outside the village on the Bromyard road. He sent three men to ahead prepare the ropes and led the others to Thomas Brooke's house. Corbett banged on the door with the stock of his musket. Brooke appeared, half dressed with his hair tangled and eyes full of sleep. James had two men grab the labourer and tie his hands. Brooke's wife came to the door.

'Where are you taking him?' Her voice was shrill with fear, striking out into the twilight. The militiamen ignored her, tracing the narrow street to the cottage of Richard Cooper. A similar scene was enacted; Cooper came with barely any protest, he had no wife or family and so the cottage was left with its door open, as if the building was in shock at the treatment of its owner. The party marched through the village as dawn paled the horizon. At the oak tree the ropes were in place, looped over strong branches and noosed in readiness. Cooper and Brooke saw the ropes and knew what they meant. The two men began to protest, proclaiming their innocence, begging to be told of the charges brought against them.

'With the authority vested in me,' James talked over their panicked voices, 'I find you guilty of acts of murder and blasphemy. You will be hung by the neck until you are dead.'

It took five men to get the first noose over Brooke's head. He was hauled upwards, feet



kicking and body twisting as the branch overhead creaked. James forced his eyes to remain on the hanging man; it took fifteen minutes for him die. By the end, only James was looking, his militiamen had turned away, facing outwards in a loose circle. Cooper was dragged forward next, his resistance had gone and it was as if he had already accepted his fate. A shout brought James' head round. A man dressed in the leather apron of a smith was running towards them. Two of the militiamen barred his way, muskets raised to reinforce their action. The smith retreated without another word, but the accusation in his eyes cut at James's soul as if it were a knife. James turned back to the tree to see Cooper weeping. James gave the signal and the oak protested again at the weight of another man was hung from its branches.

James waited until the sun had fully risen and he could be sure that Brooke and Cooper were dead before ordering his men to form up and march away from the village. There was none of the usual banter between the militiamen and James was glad of the silence. He looked down from the road towards the Teme, the sun showed the river as a silver ribbon threading through the drab winter landscape. James thought he could see the field where Pastor Jones had died and the strange marking on the ground. The secret of whatever had happened in that field was with Cooper and Brooke, and with Pastor Jones, wherever his body now lay.

Frost had formed on Chapter Meadows, across the Severn from Worcester Cathedral. James

could see the sun sparkling on the grass like a thousand diamonds from the window of his lodgings. A trow made its way down the river, laden with goods bound for Bristol. James looked down at the recently delivered note in his hand. Sir Joshua Salisbury was returning to London and requested James' report to take with him. With a final look out of the window James walked to the secretaire that stood in one corner of the room. He sat, slipped a sheet of paper into position and stared at the blank page. He had barely slept in the two days since returning from the village. Each time he closed his eyes he saw the bodies of Brooke and Cooper swinging in the breeze, an image that would be with him for the rest of his days.

The chimes of a church bell brought him back to the present. James sighed, lifted his pen and dipped the nib into an inkwell. He hesitated; forming the words he would write in his mind, imagining Sir Joshua Salisbury reading them as he travelled south in the post coach. The nib descended and scratched a path across the surface of the paper.

*I, James Milliner, Captain of Militia in the County of Worcestershire, do give oath, in the presence of Our Lord, this 17th day of November 1792, that the report I give is a true and honest one of Witchcraft in this County.*

James paused in his writing to examine the words he had written. He felt his hand begin to shake and a droplet of ink fell from nib onto paper. He looked at the stain, and saw it not as ink but as a barrel, one without wings or sails, preparing to fly to some place unknown.





**‘Apala’  
Terrance Jefferson**

Artwork (c) 2007 by Cécile Matthey





Apala Desai had sometimes wondered if she had really been born beautiful. When she was a little girl, living with her mother and father on the outskirts of Sikkim, she often heard stories of her birth. Some said that she had been born without struggle, under the white cherry blossom trees that line the Teesta River, lifeline of Sikkim and considered a good omen. Others said that when she was born the wind was sweet and stinking of ripened mangoes and cow dung; that her mother, ruby colored sari drenched in sweat, screamed in a tongue from an ancient land.

"No one is simply *born* beautiful," Apala overheard a housewife whisper to her husband while walking home from school. Apala was eleven then and her beauty shone with its own seashell light. Her hair, like silk, fell straight down to the small of her back. Her face and body, though not fully developed, were sculpted and proportionate and seemed to be an art designed by Vishnu, the God of Beauty himself.

"And if anyone could be born beautiful, Kangchenjunga would have surely cursed them with ill fortune," the housewife added.

Apala wondered what the woman meant by this. She was used to people talking about her when they thought she could not hear, or when her parents were not around. Children in the schoolyard did it. Adults would whisper as she skipped down the dusty, winding road to fetch fresh coconut milk for her mother. She would slow down just enough to hear their stories and catch their glances. But this was the first time anyone had mentioned Kangchenjunga in connection with her beauty. It filled her with a feeling that made her run home, hair and sari flailing in the breeze, bronze bracelets ringing in rhythm with her feet.

When it was time for Apala to go to sleep that evening, her mother sat at the side of her bed to kiss her goodnight and pray for sound dreams. On nights like these, when the wind was warm and moonlight shone through Apala's bedroom window, her mother would sing a part of Tyagaraja. And even though the housewife's comment earlier that day still burned in Apala's memory, she would not dare interrupt the lullaby to ask what it meant. After all, it was only gossip. Another story someone had made up about her. And those types of stories—"rumors" as she would later learn—became dangerous if they were believed.



Apala was twelve when the nightmares began. They snuck into her bedroom one night, creeping under her sheets and across her skin, lodging themselves in the part of her mind that was pale and private. No two were ever the same. One night she dreamt that she was a Polar Bear, hunt-

ing in the snowbound lands and ice flows surrounding the North Pole. Then, without warning, her thick fur began to suffocate her under the smoldering sun. The icecaps she stood on began to crack and crumble. On a different evening she was an Indian Bustard, flying high over emerald fields and red slate rooftops. Then, like a stone, she began to fall - out of the sky and through the trees, until her body hit the cold ground. Another night, Apala dreamt that she was Mother Earth, sustaining life within her majestic mountains and deep blue oceans. But then, as swiftly as the dream formed in her mind, her lands became barren and her oceans polluted. There was fire and lies, jealousy and war.

On these nights, Apala woke up gasping for breath, clutching the budding breast that formed over her heart. She sat up in her bed, shining through the darkness like the new moon.

"They're only dreams," Patel muttered one morning while gathering the last of the harvest.

Apala dug her big toe into the soil. She was reluctant to tell anyone about her nightmares, let alone her father. Patel was the type of man who could turn day to night simply by willing it so; who could make the extraordinary appear merely fair or foul. But in spite of this—or perhaps because of it—Apala woke early that morning under the rose colored sky and went to him.

"But I am afraid Papa. In my dreams, I am not myself, but a great white beast in a land covered in snow or a bird with large wings dropping from the sky like a stone. In another, I am the Earth that—"

"That's enough!" Apala's father barked, cutting through the air with his hand. He was a round, practical man. He was so practical, in fact, that he knew there were far more important matters to tend to than his daughter's silly dreams. Sikkim was suffering an unseasonable drought—the worst anyone had ever seen. The plants and trees that were once lush with green leaves and fruit were now barren and brittle. The Teesta River, nearly dry, was the only source of water for the people of Sikkim. Patel woke early that morning to gather the last remaining harvest. If they rationed properly, the harvest, combined with what was left in his wife's garden, would last Patel and his family well into next season. But this did not stop him from praying for rain every night before he went to sleep. It was, in his mind, the only practical thing to do.

"They're only dreams," he repeated. "Nothing more. Nothing less." He put down the harvest and laid his hands on Apala's shoulders. She had none of his features, but right then, they held a strange semblance, like that of a double star.

Patel's voice grew quiet.

"Now why don't you go play," he said.

Apala kept her eyes cast down on her feet. She did not want to tell her father that she had no friends to play with. While other children spent their time playing hopscotch or hide-n-go-seek in the schoolyard, Apala sat under a tree and picked the petals off of a dandelion. None of the other children ever included her in their games. None of them ever spoke to her.

Apala's mind drifted to the time when Nandan Bisht, who had long pigtails and a scar on her chubby cheek, stopped doing her arithmetic and turned around in her desk to stare at her.

"You're weird," Nandan said.

Apala, who was also doing arithmetic, looked up from her desk. By this time, her beauty could be described as nothing short of ethereal. Her skin was the color of fresh nutmeg, even and soft. But she carried with her a light that made creatures be still and watch her. It was spring wherever she went. The Pride of Burmas, Red Cassias, and Golden Champas that grew along the dirt roads of Sikkim, bowed their branches and bloomed whenever she was near.

Even in the dead of winter.

Even in the deepest midnight.

Though there were no flowering trees left because of the drought, the barren branches and waterless barks that stood in their place trembled and swayed to show their respect.

"Do you know what people say about you?" Nandan continued on, stroking one of her pigtails, "They say that you are cursed—that you and your beauty have brought bad fortune to Sikkim. That is why there is no water and little food. Kangchenjunga has cursed us all because of you." She took a deep breath and whirled back around in her seat, brushing Apala's nose with her pig-tails.

That was the first and only time anyone had spoken to her at school. Sighing, Apala focused her attention back on her arithmetic. She had three more problems to go before she was finished.

"Go ahead. Play!" Patel urged, interrupting Apala's thoughts, nudging her with one hand. She turned to go. And as she walked back through the desolate cornfield toward her small house, a flock of wild cranes that were in mid-flight, landed to watch her. Patel continued gathering the last of the harvest. He was far too practical to notice such things.



Hunger struck Sikkim. It came like a night predator, ravaging the picturesque valleys and riverbanks, eventually arriving at the small homes, to the people who lived in them. The Teesta River was completely dry now, exposing its cracked underbelly. The cows, sheep, pigs,

and chickens that grazed in the green fields, were long since dead. Unwilling to face starvation, some people moved inland to Gantok, leaving their homes in order to start a new life in the capital town. Others climbed the great peak shrouded in mist to pray to the guardian deity Kangchenjunga, which both protected and terrified the inhabitants of Sikkim.

But there was still no rain.

Apala and her family, along with most of Sikkim, could not afford to leave and were forced to watch as the drought drained the life from all who lived there. Mrs. Bhatti, who once spent her days outside selling hand-made jewelry on the road, now stayed confined within her home, rationing the remaining lima beans from her garden. Children once laughed at Mr. Chetan because his fat chin bounced every time he walked. Now, they gawked because he could not find clothes that fit his thin body. Apala overheard Nandan Bisht, whose cheek bones now protruded, whisper to Sidra Chinmay that their arithmetic teacher, Mrs. Kalpak, ate her pet dog for dinner. Kakde, the village drunk, disappeared one night and was never seen again. Some said that he sold his soul for a single Steamed Momo. Others said that the Steamed Momo tasted so good on his tongue that Kakde died on the spot.

Of all the inhabitants of Sikkim, it was Apala who suffered the most. Physically, she could not have been more beautiful. The weight she lost from the drought sharpened her face, arching her eyes slightly, and accentuating her full lips. Her long, sloping back was slender and defined her hips and waist. Her eyes were the color of mist.

But at night, Apala was still haunted by eerie dreams. When she closed her eyes to sleep, she became an African Elephant being hunted in the safari, or a Black-footed Ferret starving in the western Great Plains. She was an Indian Rhinoceros, Loggerhead Turtle, or a Mediterranean Monk Seal. Every night she was never herself, but something equally beautiful. And every night she woke with images of that beauty engulfed in a world of death, destruction, hunger, and pain.

Though the nightmares made her uneasy, what awaited her in the waking world was much worse. The people of Sikkim, who once watched and admired her beauty, had grown to hate her. They spat at her when she was near. Men, whose glances were similar to the way one looks at the sun, now avoided her and shot her evil glares.

"Witch!" they hissed. "You have cursed Sikkim!"

Mothers that were once kind to Apala because they saw past her beauty in a way only mothers can do, pulled their children close.

"Don't look at her," they whispered to their young ones, "She'll turn you into stone."



Apala took a different path when walking home from school one late afternoon. She avoided taking the main road, afraid that she would only attract unwanted attention. Besides, this way had a stone border that she loved to walk along. She enjoyed pretending to be an acrobat or a tight-rope walker, teetering on the edge with both arms stuck straight out to the side. When she was bored, Apala skipped along the dirt road like she did when she was eleven years old.

Before the drought.

Before the hunger.

Smiling, Apala thought back to the time when she was seven and Mr. Krishna, who had since banned her from his store, used to give her a free stick of liquorice.

"For such a beautiful girl," he would say, handing it to her.

As she made her way up the road, Apala thought of Sikkim and all the people who lived there. She thought of those who left to Gantok and wondered what the streets were like—paved perhaps—how the air smelled, and if the liquorice tasted the same as it did in Sikkim. She thought of the great peak shrouded in mist where some went to pray to the guardian deity Kangchenjunga. She had never been there, but her parents brought her to the Pang Lhabso Festival that was held every year in Sikkim, celebrating Kangchenjunga and the belief that from beneath the slopes of the sacred peak, the original Sikkimese man and woman were created. Patel attended the festival because it was tradition. But Apala and her mother enjoyed the colorful masks and warrior dances.

Apala sat down on the side of the road. The long, bare branches of a nearby flowering tree trembled and swayed. A warm breeze swept her hair across her face and between her lips. At age thirteen, she was the most beautiful girl who ever lived and she did not seem to care.

"You!" Apala heard a harsh, dry voice scream from the other side of the road. She was so deep in thought she did not know anyone was near or even watching her.

"You!" the voice said again. Emerging from what seemed like a secret fold in the air, a housewife with a sagging face and large earlobes pointed at Apala.

"Your end is near, little one. Your end is near."

Apala recognized the housewife. It was the same woman who whispered to her husband as Apala passed up the road two years ago. It was the same woman who said that Apala's beauty was a curse.

"Your end is near," the woman said again, staggering forward.

Apala rose to her feet, terrified. She took up

the road as fast as her beautiful legs could carry her. She did not stop or look back to see if the woman was behind. She ran all the way home and did not breathe until she was safe in her room. Once there, she buried her beautiful face in her hands, and cried.



"Do not listen to them. They speak only rumors," Apala's mother, Antima, said while rubbing her daughter's back.

"What's a rumor?" Apala asked, lying face down in her bed.

"A rumor is something people say that is not true. But by the time it spreads, it is difficult to tell what the truth is and is not."

Apala sat up, sniffed, and rubbed her nose with two fingers. She had cried so late into the evening that when she looked out her window night creatures illuminated the sky. In the dim lamplight, Antima looked young. Her hair was in a single, swooping braid that she liked to let hang over her shoulder.

"When something is beautiful, as you are, it is man's nature to take it for granted and eventually end up trying to destroy it," Antima continued. "I believe that is why you have those nightmares."

Apala blinked twice. "But Papa says that they are only dreams and that they mean nothing."

Antima took a deep breath and held it in her mouth like chocolate. Looking at Apala reminded her of the time when she too was thirteen, growing up in the slums of Delhi with a mother who was a seamstress and her father, a fisherman. As a child, Antima told secrets to the rain and danced with fire. There were rumors about her as well. Antima often thought back to the day her mother came to her and told her she would marry a farmer from Sikkim; a man whose practicality turned wine into water; the man who would become Apala's father: a man named Patel.

She remembered the day she gave birth to her daughter. The wind was not stinking of ripened mangoes and cow dung, and she had not given birth under the cherry blossom trees that line the Teesta River. The rumors were all wrong. Apala was born in her house with the assistance of a midwife. Antima had prayed to Kangchenjunga for a beautiful baby girl, vowing she would never force her daughter into a life she did not want just because she was born as something the world could not accept, appreciate, or even see; a fate to which Antima was forced to submit. Apala came into the world swiftly and quietly—with a smile that was as beautiful as the sea. Antima was overjoyed. Kangchenjunga had answered her prayers.

Antima let out her breath.

"Your father is a difficult man," was all she said.



The people of Sikkim came when the sky was castle gray. They came in a group of four dozen men and women, with torches that cast shadows on the road. Most came out of fear. Others came out of blind faith. There were some that came because they had nothing better to do. And there were very few that came out of hate. But this evening, they all took up the narrow path to Apala's home. Their faces indistinguishable under the sallow moon.

It was late. In the small, apricot-colored room, Antima sang Tyagaraja as her daughter drifted off to sleep. The words floated through the air and Apala leaned toward them to keep warm, or perhaps for another strange, unknown purpose. In the house, nothing stirred. The smell of the curried chickpea muck Antima cooked for dinner permeated the walls and made her want to be sleeping. But she could not sleep. For the night pulled at Antima in a way it had not done before, creating an ache from within the deepest part of her. She thought, for a moment, of taking Apala and leaving Sikkim before the sun rose. She had dreamt about it before. As Patel lay in bed, Antima would watch herself in the mirror, thinking of her life and all the things she longed to see and do. She bent under the thought of knowing that maybe there was no magic left in her anymore. And that Apala would end up being as dry and barren as Sikkim itself. Then, between the rush of one breath and the reach of another, Antima wept. They were not tears of sadness, but of yearning, and desire, hopelessness and loss.

A rustling caught Antima's attention, dislodging the hold the night had on her. It came from outside. Perhaps it was a hungry skunk or a possum searching for food. With the sounds growing louder, Antima left her sleeping daughter to investigate, but cautiously, knowing how dangerous skunks and possums could be when hungry.

When Antima opened the front door, they stood before her. They looked like ghosts in the night and it took Antima a moment to catch her breath. She scanned the crowd. There was Mrs. Kalpak, Apala's arithmetic teacher. And to the left of her was Mr. Krishna, who owned the spice shop with the liquorice Apala loved. To the right were Mrs. Bhatti and her husband, who had a torch. Behind them were people Antima could not remember by name, but had seen many times eyeing mangoes in the market or fishing with their sons in the Teesta River. They all stood, torches crackling, bodies thin and misshapen.

"We have come for your daughter," a voice boomed from within the crowd. It was Mr. Chetan, who, being half the size he once was, looked as if he had trouble holding the blazing torch.

"We have come for your daughter," he repeated, "She is not of this world and has brought

this terrible drought to Sikkim. Kangchenjunga is displeased with her being here."

The crowd muttered and grumbled in approval as a light breeze blew from the north. Antima pulled her sari close to her.

"Why have you all come here? My daughter is a child like any other." Antima answered.

"Then why do the trees come to life when she is near," cried a voice from within the sea of ghosts. "What ordinary child can make animals be still and silent? If you say what she -"

The voice stopped short and there was a hushed silence. It took Antima a moment to notice the mob was not looking at her anymore, but passed her, at Apala standing in the doorway, half sleep, dreaming and waking with every blink. Her hair was matted and messy, but her beauty still radiated through the evening air, causing several onlookers to break the silence to gasp in wonderment. Apala rubbed her eyes. She wondered what Mr. Chetan was doing at her home so late and if it was really Mrs. Kalpak standing next to a man with a torch. But most of all, she was hungry and had risen out of bed to ask her mother if she could have more chickpea muck. The look in her mother's eyes, however, made Apala wish she had never left her room. It was a look that made her wish she were dreaming.

What happened next cannot truly be explained. There are many different rumors. Some claim they heard Mr. Chetan yell, "Get her!" which then prompted a large, lumbering man to emerge from the crowd and hoist Apala over his shoulder. Others say that there was not one man, but three, two of which restrained Antima while the third seized Apala. Children in the schoolyard say that Antima cried so loudly that people in Gantok heard her and covered their ears; that it was a sound no human could ever make. There is even a rumor that when Apala was taken, a single bolt of lightning struck down from the peak shrouded in mist.

What is true, however, is that when Apala was taken her sari was twisted and tangled around her waist and head, blocking her vision. She kicked and thrashed her legs in an attempt to free herself from the hold the big man had on her. But he held on tight.

Apala could hear the sound of men grunting, woman yelling, and the sound of shoes on dirt road. Overlapping, she heard her mother crying, "Let her go! Let her go! She is my daughter!"

"Mama!" Apala called out. There was no answer. The only response came in the form of grunts, screams, and scuffling until finally there was nothing except heavy breathing. And then there was quiet. The silence left a rusted bell hung in Apala's heart. It rang in her ears. Indescribable. Similar to the sound bees make when buzzing under the sea. And she knew it was over.

Under the billowing clouds, the ghosts of Sikkim made their way back down the winding road and headed toward the northern trail that faced the great peak. They cast their eyes down, making sure not to look at the beautiful girl that lay bent over the big man's shoulder.

Tired from thrashing, Apala lay still and let warm tears stream down her face and along the ridge of her nose. She could see nothing except the color deep of sapphire that covered her eyes. Her beautiful head bounced with each step her captor took.



And Apala was never seen again. There are rumors that the people of Sikkim sacrificed her to Kangchenjunga, and that her blood stains the jagged rocks where she was slain. Others claim that Apala escaped and that she leaves remnants of spring wherever she goes, even in the dead of winter. That's the story Antima spent the rest of her life believing. But there is no doubt that when Apala was taken, the flowering trees trembled and swayed over a sea of ghosts, deafened by a mother calling for her daughter, as her husband lay in a dreamless sleep. That part is absolutely certain.

## **‘Nikolai Fedorov and the Dawn of the Posthuman’**

**Nader Elhefnawy**



Posthumanism, the idea that human beings will in the future acquire such command over nature that they can alter the most fundamental conditions of human existence (birth, death, the limits of space, time and economics as we know them, etc.) is generally regarded as a twentieth-century phenomenon. However, while most closely identified with figures like Marvin Minsky, Hans Moravec, Ray Kurzweil and FM-2030 in our time, and earlier thinkers like J.D. Bernal and J.B.S. Haldane occasionally mentioned, something of this idea may in fact be as old as civilization. It is probably significant that the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the first great work of literature in history, centers on its hero's pursuit of immortality. Alchemy, with its homunculi and transmutation of elements, its toying with the line between life and death (not least of all in its own pursuit of immortality), can certainly be seen as a forerunner as well, and one not unconnected to modern science—no less a figure than Isaac Newton having himself been an alchemist. Antecedents are also evident in the earliest stirrings of the Scientific Revolution of the early seventeenth century, in the calls of Francis Bacon and René Descartes for human beings to master the forces of nature and effect all things possible—with a glimpse of the results in Bacon's *New Atlantis*. The inhabi-

tants of Bacon's utopia of Bensalem have, among other technologies, life extension, robots, and the ability to control earthquakes and storms.

Nonetheless, a great deal of this can be considered a prehistory of the concept. The quest for personal transcendence, the speculations of philosophers like Bacon (notoriously conservative in their reading of the societal implications of these staggering technologies) are quite different matters from a wholesale transformation of the species into something no longer bound by age-old constraints. Nikolai Fedorov (1828-1903), a Russian librarian and teacher, may have been the first to produce that, not only the fullest and most coherent vision of human transcendence through science up to his time, but one that many argue is unmatched even in ours.

Known to us today principally through the posthumous collection, *Philosophy of the Common Task*, Fedorov's work may never have appeared in its entirety in English, but a substantial portion of it was published in 1990 in *What Was Man Created For?* (New York: Hyperion, 1990), translated and edited by Elizabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto. (All quotations of Fedorov's writing in this article come from that edition.) With Fedorov's unprecedented consideration not only of possibilities and means but also ends, the pre-



history of the posthuman idea arguably came to an end, and its history properly begun.

### **The Origins of The Common Task**

At first glance, nineteenth century Russia may seem an inauspicious place for the emergence of such thinking. However, on closer examination, it is not so surprising after all. Thinkers in nineteenth century Russia were preoccupied with the meaning and direction of history, and especially with the question of human freedom, interests shaped in particular by both Russian Orthodox Christianity, and the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. (Hegel's central idea—that world history was made by the universe's progressive realization of its inherent rationality, its movement toward a higher unity manifested in a community of free, self-conscious human beings who recognize each other as such—is a starting point for many Russian thinkers of this period, Fedorov included.) A common product of this combination of ideas was the pursuit of "the Kingdom of God not in the world beyond, but here and now" (132), and a belief that prayer was no substitute for actual human effort. It would come about not only for, but through, man, their Christianity one of action.

It was the way in which he expected humans to achieve this that really separated Fedorov from the others. His model for what human society should be was the Christian Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, individuality retained within an indissoluble union (65-66) existing in a "boundless love ... that excludes death" (143), the latter a critical point. The absence of kinship and brotherhood, the prevalence of separation between human beings everywhere—between town and country, learned from uneducated, between individuals, classes, nations, generations and even between thought and action—was in his view inseparable from the problem of death. Death, the great divider, was the "true evil" (109), and rather than a fundamental aspect of the "human condition," or part of a necessary duality along with life, he saw it is a "state conditioned by causes; it is not a quality which determines *what a human being is and must be*" (99). The cause was specifically "our being at the mercy of the blind force of nature, acting without and within us and not subject to our control" (90).

The question of the relationship between human beings and nature is therefore at the center of his work. For Fedorov, humans are the "part of nature ... which has attained consciousness" (107). (Extending the metaphor, the universe's electromagnetic fields were an underdeveloped nervous system, awaiting a more mature organization by that consciousness manifest in human beings (100).) The non-human world "has no will, and for beings endowed with feeling and

capable of action and not mere contemplation, the world is not solely a representation, but a project of liberation from bondage" (113).

Accordingly, rather than accepting and submitting to the rest of nature as it is, venerating and deifying it (as in paganism or, implicitly, Social Darwinism)—or alternatively, "the pillage and plunder of nature ... through its exploitation and utilization" in the manner of capitalism (79)—the ethical response is to "be its regulator, its manager." In place of the earlier blindness human beings would subject it to conscious purpose in the "common task" of resurrection, transforming it from a death-giving force into a life-giving force.

Overcoming death was the only doctrine "which demands not separation but reunification ... the doctrine of kinship" (43) among not living human beings, but their predecessors, "the fathers." A fully developed sense of kinship meant defeating death on their behalf as well, shifting from the "mythical patrification" of ancestor worship to "actual resuscitation" (43), which he termed "the supreme good, the supreme task" (80). "Out of the child's love, the son's and particularly the daughter's love, arises universal love" (119), Fedorov argued, resurrecting the dead nothing less than filial duty (99), or "sonship." (Notably, he repeatedly referred to Christ as the "Son of Man.")

By contrast, the economic and political ideologies, and ideological conflicts, that emerged out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment were in his view woefully inadequate. The "natural" struggle against death trumps the "social" struggle, success in the former resolving the problems of the latter, which were rooted in death. Social problems, for instance, were in his view a response to poverty, which would never be eliminated so long as death existed (83). Mastering nature would eliminate poverty and disease, and the proper unification of the world in the project would end war. "Regulation will solve the social problem, put an end to proletarianisation ... and do away with the miseries of our time" (156), he taught, everyone becoming a scientist of sorts laboring in the common task, a work by all and for all. Moreover, even were it possible for the rationalist Enlightenment utopia to be realized, it would suffer from the grave flaw that it was based on self-interest rather than love and kinship, that its focus was on maximizing material well-being rather than spiritual needs, and of course, that its inhabitants would all be mortal.

### **Solving The General Problem**

Appropriately, given Fedorov's view that "the age of disputation" (89) was at an end, and philosophy and science could no longer justify themselves on the grounds that knowledge was an end in itself, he went beyond the general princi-

ples of his idea, to an outline of how the common task of mastering and transforming nature, and turning humanity into "a union of immortal beings," might actually be realized. The first step toward the realization of this project was the cooperation of the world's nations in controlling the weather, both to prevent droughts and destructive storms, and to extract energy directly from atmospheric currents. He saw a practical beginning for it in experiments to induce rain with explosives in the 1890s then being conducted in the United States.

Nonetheless, truly complete control over the weather would require going beyond the Earth to organize the solar system as a "controlled economic entity" (102). (In fact, he proposed constructing a planetary sunshade through the use of magnetic fields to control the movement of meteoroids (95).) No less important, in space lay "the solution of the economic problem posed by Malthus and, more generally, of a moral human existence" (97).<sup>1</sup>

Taking a purely materialistic view of the mind-body problem, which he somewhat facetiously describes as consciousness relating to the body "like bile to the liver" (99), meant that if you "reassemble the machine ... consciousness will return to it" (99). Though he was careful not to exclude other hypotheses (192), he believed that the means of such "reassembly" would be the "gathering of the scattered dust and its reconstitution into bodies, using radiation or outlines left by the waves caused by the vibration of molecules" (142). Since those vibrations travel into space, the extension of human control into space was again critical to recovering all the scattered particles.

Furthermore, since the Earth could not accommodate all who had ever lived, room would be found for the resurrected in space, the "celestial worlds ... the future home of the ancestors" (96). Indeed at one point he went so far as to say that the "exploration of outer space is only the preparation for these future dwelling places" (96). In fact, the bodies of both living and resurrected human beings would be modified for the journey. Man, Fedorov wrote, will "recreate himself from primordial substances, atoms and molecules" so that he can "live in any environment, take on any form"—"heavenly space and heavenly bodies" (138) "attainable only to the resurrected and the resurrecting" (96).

Together weather control, the control of the Earth's movement in space, and the colonization of space "form one general problem ... the return to life of our ancestors" (98). This would culminate in the "knowledge and ever-expanding government of all the worlds ... and the ultimate spiritualization of the universe" (115) as worlds "deprived of reason" (215) were peopled by the

carriers of nature's consciousness, saving them "from downfall and destruction" (215) and restoring the world as it was before the Fall (128).

### Reception and Legacy

Such ideas, profoundly radical today but not totally outside a twenty-first century frame of reference, could only have been all the more shocking in his day given its comparative unfamiliarity, and that may suggest that his vision was relegated to the margins. However, this was not the case. In the assessment of philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev, there may have been no thinker more characteristically Russian than Fedorov. In his 1915 essay 'The Religion of Resuscitative Resurrection: *The Philosophy of the Common Task of N. Fedorov*' (which can be found online at [http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1915\\_186.html](http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1915_186.html)) Berdyayev wrote that Fedorov embodied

*the Russian searching for a common task, the task of salvation. The Russian soul cannot joyfully create culture; it is anxious for the world and for all mankind, it thirsts to save all ... the thirst for the salvation of mankind and the Kingdom of God here, on earth—all this was expressed by Fedorov with an extraordinary intensity, without any sense of strain or quibbling.*

Consequently, while he had only a small following in his lifetime, they were members of an extremely elite circle, "the greatest of Russian people" as Berdyayev puts it—including the writers Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, two of the greatest figures in Russian literature; and the philosopher Vladimir Solovyev, perhaps the pivotal figure in Russian philosophy in the late nineteenth century. (Solovyev would say in one of his letters that he accepted Fedorov's project "unconditionally and without argument" and call Fedorov his "teacher and spiritual father" (230), though differences would later crop up between them.)

They also included Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, widely hailed as the father of space flight, who became personally acquainted with Fedorov at the age of sixteen. While the impact of Fedorov on Tsiolkovsky's thoughts on space flight is somewhat controversial, as Professor George Young, author of *Nikolai F. Fedorov: An Introduction*, told me "most commentators in Russia have agreed that ... Fedorov had much to do with Tsiolkovsky's development in that direction."

Not surprisingly, many of Fedorov's ideas would later become mainstream. In the case of Tsiolkovsky, it is arguable that they were promulgated, in a somewhat more developed form, by better-known followers; posthumously, however, Fedorov's ideas directly won a wide following in Russia. "Fedorovians" were a force in that coun-

try during the early twentieth century, prior to Stalin's repression of intellectual life, and it is arguable that they contributed in this way to the ferment that gave the world Sputnik not long after Stalin's death. The idea that human beings would need to look to space for additional resources and room to expand, at least in the long run, has since gained wide credence—even if it is less fashionable than it was thirty years ago—and may yet have a future.

In other cases there is no clear connection, but striking parallels. Before geopolitician Halford MacKinder popularized the idea, Fedorov noted that the advent of the railroad would bring continental states into their own, ending the "Columbian" era in which maritime states predominated (68-69)—for better or worse, one of the most influential ideas in international relations in the twentieth century, and still with us in the twenty-first.

While slower to catch on, the idea that human beings should manage their environment rather than exploit and exhaust it has since become the conventional wisdom, as is the idea that global cooperation will be required for the management of the planet's climate. While this has not yet gone so far as rainmaking, many countries do practice cloud-seeding on a more local scale, China being the largest practitioner. Moreover, Fedorov's call to abandon fossil fuels (in his day, principally coal mining) in favor of solar and wind energy production is increasingly the conventional wisdom, and there is currently serious discussion of directly tapping the jet stream. Fedorov's reading of the implications of a materialistic view of the mind-body problem is likewise espoused by many contemporary thinkers on life extension, like Ray Kurzweil, and his thoughts on body modification anticipated today's widespread discussions of genetic engineering, and the enhancement of the body through implants and prosthetics. His call to turn a universe entropically moving toward chaos into a cosmos (192) finds its echo in the work of futurists like Michael Zey, who cites Fedorov and his successors in his book *The Future Factor: The Five Forces Transforming Our Lives and Shaping Human Destiny*.

Of course, all of this raises the question of why Fedorov is not better known than he is, one of those thinkers everyone has heard of but "no one" actually reads—why indeed it is so difficult to find his writings at all. Part of it was his idiosyncratic career path. He published very little in his lifetime, and that anonymously, in provincial journals. (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Solovyev were, like Tsiolkovsky, personal acquaintances.) This was partly because he recognized how radical his ideas would appear, and partly because he was an astute enough student of science to know how

much more work he needed to do in order to properly ground his claims. *The Philosophy of the Common Task* was not a unified treatise but a collection of mostly unpublished material that was edited posthumously, ranging from fully developed essays and articles to notes and jottings—very much a work in progress.

Additionally, despite his radically technological vision, his ideas were frequently anti-modern. Contemporary scholars probably overstate their case when they argue that these would have prevented him from reaching a wider audience, since many very well-known Russian thinkers (like Dostoyevsky) expressed similar opinions, but they would have limited his appeal to progressives. His religiosity and disinterest in the social questions of his time (at least as they were usually construed) aside, he was hostile to urban, commercial, industrial life, which he denounced as a "cult of woman," an expression of misspent sexual energies. (Fedorov was hostile to sex even as a means of reproduction, frequently connecting it with death—the succession of generations destroying while creating, the new absorbing and eliminating the old, procreation an antithesis to resurrection.)

Many of his historical views, moreover, such as his attitudes toward the Germans or Turks and his monarchism, are reflective of nineteenth century Slavophile thinking, problematic for many in his own time and place, and only steadily more so, particularly for Western readers. Additionally, many of these views are not neatly separable from his larger speculations about history's trajectory (a line of philosophical inquiry that has also been less and less fashionable among Western philosophers). However, to linger on them would be to miss the point. Even where Fedorov is disagreeable, or offensive by contemporary standards, he anticipated too much and influenced too much to be taken lightly, a great deal of what he wrote about actually having come to pass.

Still more of it might do so if some of the most eminent futurists of our time are right. Even if they do not, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Fedorov's speculations about those matters rendered the world a very great service. As Professor George Young put it in his 1979 book *Nikolai Fedorov: An Introduction*, Fedorov's answer to that question of just what human beings should do with their expanding technological power "may not be the best one that will ever be proposed, but so far it seems the most thorough and deepest attempt at one." Ours may be an age weary of visions and suspicious of grand narratives, and Fedorov's may be as suspect as any other, but that question grows only the more pressing.

## Book and Magazine Reviews

**John Twelve Hawks, *The Dark River* (Book Two of the Fourth Realm Trilogy). Doubleday, 2007. Pp. 384. ISBN 978-0385514293. \$24.95 / £14.99.**

Reviewed by Ixthus

*The Dark River* is the second book of The Fourth Realm trilogy by John Twelve Hawks. I came to this book having not read the previous title, or anything else by the author. Indeed, the stock system of a major bookseller registered having only one of their stores in the U.K. as holding anything by him.

I read a U.S. copy of the book and I must admit to having difficulty adjusting to the use of American spelling and the alternative American names for things (it took a few moments for me to realise that a French Press was not to be associated with a French Letter, but what I would refer to as a cafetière. Perhaps that's just the way my mind works.) The first book is entitled "The Traveler", and there seem to be a large number of these thorns to avoid, even though a significant portion of the story takes place in the U.K. That is a minor (and personal) point. Having since sourced a copy of the U.K. edition of *The Traveler*, I notice that the word "Traveler" has been changed to "Traveller," though I don't know if there are other changes.

Gabriel Corrigan is a "Traveler", one of a very select band of people who can separate their spiritual energy and wander amongst the realms other than our own. Doing so leaves their physical bodies in a state similar to a coma, and therefore vulnerable. Travelers across the ages have been hunted and slaughtered by the "Brethren." The Brethren are also known as the "Tabula" by their enemies because they believe that humanity and human consciousness is a tabula rasa, a clean slate to fill with intolerance and fear.

The current generation of Brethren are planning, and putting into practice, a "Virtual Panopticon". A Panopticon is a design for a prison building brought about by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century in which it is virtually impossible to be anywhere that retains any privacy: wherever you are it is possible to be viewed by other inmates and by prison guards. Bentham's idea was that, as well as it being easier to oversee the behaviours of the inmates, having no privacy meant that inmates were bound to be more docile, more manageable, and less likely to cause trouble. The Brethren believe that a modern society based around all-encompassing surveillance system—including security cameras, microphones, Global Positioning System (GPS) devices, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips, and so on—will lead to a populace that is docile and controlla-

ble, and where individuals and organisations opposed to them have no place to hide.

Michael, Gabriel's brother (and also a Traveler), has been captured by the Brethren, and now appears to be working with them. The Brethren see his skills as being useful for tracking down other Travelers, not least of which is Matthew Corrigan, Michael and Gabriel's father.

Alongside the Travelers fight the Harlequins, another secretive and select group of people. They eschew relationships in favour of the lone martial life; through the ages it has been their role to protect the Travelers from the Brethren, at whatever cost.

The story starts in a community called New Harmony, a small group of people set up by Matthew Corrigan and living in a remote location far from the Vast Machine, the network of surveillance devices and modern networks of control present in our everyday lives. Gabriel has gone into hiding in New York with Maya, a Harlequin, and a couple of other characters, Hollis Wilson and Vicki Fraser. Maya lets slip that she knows that Gabriel's father is still alive. The group are hunted down by the Brethren, and Gabriel sets out to track down his father.

The personalities are complex and well portrayed. The interactions between the characters of a story are always more interesting than the individuals themselves, and the author realises the motivations and tensions well. I really enjoyed some of the exchanges between Mother Blessing, who has been portrayed as a viciously ruthless Harlequin, and Hollis Wilson towards the end of the book.

There are quite a few places in the book where technologies that exist (and are in use now) are explained, and potential uses of many of these to erode our privacy and rights are covered. It is very refreshing to see these real-life systems and techniques described well for the layperson. Every description is real and concise, and not patronising to someone who understands them already. In many cases the privacy concerns do not need to be spelled out, but in others some of the concerns are brought to the reader's attention. It is in stark contrast to the ludicrous writing behind so many Hollywood films these days. This stuff is real and is all around us now.

The style of the writing reminds me somewhat of Greg Bear. Generally the prose is very efficient and economical, which is also refreshing, though in one or two places it goes almost too far: an extra sentence or two might make it feel like the author was not rushing to get to the next part. I found that there were some wonderfully perceptive vignettes scattered throughout the book. Not



really connected to the story directly, these definitely give the impression that the author cares about making his fantasy world and his characters believable.

The writing mixes very astute observations with a somewhat naive style in places. Some of this is deliberate, such as sections told from the perspective of the child Alice Chen who is forced to undergo a dreadful loss of innocence at the very beginning of the story. The naiveté is somewhat endearing, but can also be overwhelming in places. This seems to become less noticeable as the story unfolds, thankfully. It's also in stark contrast to the uncompromising ruthlessness elsewhere in the book.

In the first half dozen chapters there are explanations of occurrences from the first book. These were succinct, like the rest of the writing, but they did stand out, especially after a brief section right at the beginning describing the characters and previous events. I couldn't help feeling that they would be sore for people already used to the characters and the first instalment of the story. Then again, I am glad that they were there to guide me.

I have one major gripe with one section of the story: The Free Running competition was not believable. It doesn't detract too much from the story, but I think the purpose it served could have been done better another way. Although Gabriel is supposed to be a Traveler and an outstanding character in terms of spiritual and physical abilities, it is difficult to imagine a novice to the art of Free Running giving a group of the best in the UK a run for their money (if you'll pardon the expression). People who practice Free Running or Parkour spend many, many hours performing the same feats over and over again until the movements become natural for their bodies to perform.

I would also make slight complaint with the portrayal of the "bad guys." The "good guys" are complex characters who each have their own motivations, who fight amongst themselves, and for the most part they are believable. The antagonists, while being utterly ruthless and despicable,

have this unfortunate air of "Bond-villain" about them. It's true that people like these are difficult to sympathise with, but in places it feels like these characters step slightly beyond the very nasty into the parody. I think this detracts from any intention the author may have in showing our privacy and our freedoms being eroded in the real world today. After all, the people who promote surveillance culture in our world have rational, considered reasons for wanting to do so. Not to say that these characters don't, it's just that I expected them to suddenly cackle and rub their hands together in glee rather than express these reasons. One character stands out from the rest of the antagonists, that of the mercenary Nathan Boone. Story-wise, he is most closely related to the protagonists, and he is an interesting, believable, and very nasty character.

I can't help feeling that any stand that the author was taking against the invasion of privacy was not strong enough. I do think that the author genuinely believes that our privacy and our freedoms are being eroded, and that this is a Bad Thing, but this aspect almost seems like an adjunct to the story, or possibly something to drive it along. The book does serve to educate the reader in terms of the technologies that are in use today, and I hope that the Author's Note is enough to persuade readers that this part of the story represents the real world, *as it is today*. However, I feel that the sorts of people who will be drawn to these books will be the sorts of people who are very aware of the ways in which our freedoms are under attack. Preaching to the converted? Perhaps.

It is clear from the structure of the book that this is the second part of a trilogy. Expect that you will be thrown into a world which has a significant back story already, and do not expect things to be tied up neatly at the end of this book.

I guess I had hoped for a piece of biting social commentary on a par with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Instead this is fast-paced, intelligent, and engaging fantasy.

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**Glen Duncan, *The Bloodstone Papers*. Scribner, 2006. Pp. 405. ISBN 0743252292. \$25.95 / £12.99.**

Reviewed by Lillith

*The Bloodstone Papers* is an enthralling novel about a young Anglo-Indian author who, in discovering the story of his father's life while working on his book, also discovers something of himself.

I must admit, being more apt to read fantasy and sci-fi rather than any other type of fiction, I was concerned whether I could give it a proper review, little own like it, yet the author, Glen Duncan, weaves the story in a way that had me turning page after page in spite of myself. He blends the past and present in each chapter so effortlessly that one scarcely notices—the flow of the story is like water, unlike some stories that attempt the

same and leave one confused.

This tale is rich with the culture of the father's British-occupied India as well as present-day London and the son's search for what he wants from life. I am not revealing much in the review because I want the readers to be as pleasantly surprised as I was—this is not a book I would pick up myself if I knew the plot, yet I am glad I chose this to review as I was enthralled, charmed even, by the story and its characters rich with life, love, anguish, and triumph.

I give *The Bloodstone Papers* a good ol' Southern "Hell yeah!"

As for the more proper vernacular, I recommend this book wholeheartedly and wouldn't be surprised if one day it turned into a screenplay.

**Shaun Jeffrey, *Voyeurs of Death*. Doorways Publications, 2007. Pp. 129. ISBN 9780615145679. \$14.95 / £11.50.**

Reviewed by The Exploding Boy

Shaun Jeffrey's first collection of short stories is a veritable feast of fiendishness. Having grown up in the vicinity of a graveyard, Jeffrey's imagination has clearly flourished in such macabre soil. Of the fifteen stories here, one will discover long forgotten gods haunting the Scottish wilderness, alien pregnancies in shadowed rooms and cocktail dresses with miraculous (and menacing) attributes.

There is more besides, as Jeffrey displays cunning and craftiness in all his works, approaching his themes with an original eye and a genuine knack for a thrilling twist. A great sketch also heads up each story, Zach McCain's pencil lending this collection a cool artistic touch.

Some of the settings for these narratives are as alarming as they are unsettling – a late night car park where 'doggers' gather, the premonition of an illicit affair, a wife swapping party – yet Jeffrey handles this inventive territory with panache, delivering swift and delightful kicks to the scare

centres of the brain.

Jeffrey's flair for believable characters works best when dealing with relationships and a fair portion of these stories track human beings in the throes of unfortunate couplings. From the misguided curiosity of 'The Watchers', to the male arrogance of 'Venetian Kiss', and the father/son estrangement of 'Peacock Lawn', Jeffrey opens a door onto private worlds, and it becomes chillingly clear that the 'voyeurs' of the title also include you, the reader.

In an assortment of grotesqueries that never disappoints, it is hard to choose a stand out story from *Voyeurs of Death*. My money is on the fantastical 'The Quilters of Thurmond', or perhaps the gruesome 'Clockwork', a tale that might owe its genesis to Lovecraft's *Reanimator* yarn, given a mechanical twist. Either way, none of the stories here dip below engaging and in many cases soar above the norm, proving themselves worthy bedfellows in the modern horror tradition.

*Voyeurs of Death* shows Shaun Jeffrey as an accomplished spookmeister, and, if you'll forgive the pun, a burst of fresh blood to the contemporary genre. Miss out at your peril.

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**Matt Richtel, *Hooked: A thriller about love and other addictions*. Warner Books, 2007. Pp. 292. ISBN 9780446580083. \$24.99 / £17.99.**

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

A journalist is sitting in a coffee house when a mysterious brunette leaves a note on the edge of his table. As he runs out after her, the café explodes. Nat opens the note and recognizes the writing to be from his girlfriend who's been dead for four years.

A great start to an energetic thriller.

Nathaniel (Nat) Idle is the narrator of this tale. He's a medical journalist who's still mourning for his girlfriend years after the tragic boat accident. Their love was powerful, almost an addiction.

Annie Kindle, Nat's deceased girlfriend, worked for her father, Glenn Kindle, director of Kindle Investments, until the tragic accident. She was funny, loved life and a very smart business woman.

Sergeant Danny Weller is a San Francisco cop. He doesn't like his lieutenant and works with Nat to solve the puzzle.

Lieutenant Aravelo is in charge of the investigation into the Sunshine Café bombing. His brother, Timothy Aravelo, was the cop convicted for beating up a Malaysian prostitute. It was one of Nat's articles that put T. Aravelo away.

Erin Coultran, a survivor of the blast, is the waitress at the café. She and Nat become friends and discover evidence of a conspiracy.

Friends or Foes? Nat is warned not to trust anyone. *Hooked* has a great build up in every

chapter and adds more questions to the 'who done it, and why.' Twist and turns leave the reader wanting more. *Hooked* is almost an addiction in itself. Flashbacks of Annie's and Nat's relationship give the reader a break from the pace. However, there are too many, leaving the reader hoping that the dead girlfriend is going to play a huge part in the plot. Keep reading. Yes, it is important. The flashbacks play a key part of the story.

Just like in *The Da Vinci Code*, our main character is thrown together with a woman as they both desperately search for the answers. But unlike Dan Brown's over-rated thriller, this has nothing to do with religion. *Hooked*, is novel about mystery, murder and mayhem caused by a hard-core digital revolution. Nothing is what it seems. No one is who they claim to be. Everything is a conspiracy.

Another explosion and the plot thickens. Mr Richtel enjoys blowing things up, but it is the cleanest way to get rid of evidence and those that are getting too close to the truth. Nat finds himself in more than one life-threatening situation. Yet there are those behind the scenes who are looking out for him.

Can the use of computers become addictive? Richtel wants you to believe this, and comes up with an original idea of what causes this addiction.

*Hooked* is an easy read. You won't find yourself skipping through pages of detail. This is straight storytelling at its best. Readers will jump

to their own conclusion about what's going on, but you'll be jumping too high! The twist at the end will leave you breathless. The conclusion is like being caught in one of Richtel's bomb blasts. It will leave you stunned and your mind reeling.

Can you digitalize love? Richtel seems to think so, and as Technology and Telecommunications

writer for the *New York Times*, maybe we're going to have to trust him. The closing epilogue will leave you with the questions:

- Do we have too much faith in Technology?
- Do we depend on the internet too much?
- Is it time to unhook?

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**Not One of Us issue #37. April 2007. Pp. 51 . \$4.50.**

Reviewed by Johann Carlisle

*Not One of Us* has been published for over twenty years now, with issue one appearing in October 1986, and in the intervening time it has consistently published high-quality, atmospheric horror on the theme of the alien, the misfit, and the unfortunate. This issue, which editor John Benson describes as the "comrades issue" is a typically entertaining and thought-provoking read, with five short stories and seven poems.

The opening story, 'No Good Deed', by regular contributor Patricia Russo, is classic *NOoU* fare: life on the streets; life is tough; friends stick together, especially when life is tough. Although in the case of Janey, Marc, and Fernando, life is more a story of apathy, of not having escaped from post-high school doldrums twenty years later, of never having found a job you didn't hate, a flat that was any good, enough money to get out of there, or the energy to do anything about it. Or any relationship as good as your two best friends from high school. Told with atmosphere, verve, perhaps a hint of judgemental tone, but no cheap pathos, the story follows our three protagonists dumpster-diving in the alleys behind restaurants on a Friday night, when the mild tale of alienated friends shifts gear with the introduction of something truly alien. From the shocking climax follows a last line that is simultaneously hopeful and chillingly sociopathic.

A poem, 'Cydonia River' by Danny Adams, fills the next three pages of this issue. Told in six stanzas, each a chapter told from the point of view of a different member of the struggling Mars colony. The poem combines prosaic, real-life vignettes with a growing sense of heartbreak and desperation. There is no conclusion, but that is the case with most tragedies; we just have to live with what has happened.

'Ebb' by Amanda Downum is a dark, curious story of Celia, a young psychic with a special affinity for the sea and the tides, and a sinister family history that she is trying to escape from, and especially trying to keep her unborn daughter from. A tall, shaven-headed biker looms into her life, but is he working for her family or trying to save her from it? Although we never hear ex-

actly what the danger is, we never doubt that it is there, and the lack of immediate menace makes the possibility that Celia will succumb to her mother's devices. A very effective story that keeps the reader guessing and, after it is done, dreaming.

'A Chrome Attic' by Elizabeth Barrette is a short, quirky poem full of the imagery of a mechanised chameleon, a being that is different but imitative. I am not sure if I think this piece is about a computer, an alien, or just a person lost in someone else's eyes, but it's a poem, so I guess it doesn't matter what it's about.

Brian Worley's 'Smother' is a gruesome little story, told in a second-person, about a nondescript man, unhappy with his life—perhaps in mid-life crisis—who begins a brutal work-out regime and boxing training. The story is more *Hell-raiser* than *Fight Club* as the second-person protagonist soon sheds his skin, with grim physical and psychological consequences. As a study in violence, desperation, and self-hatred this story is more disturbing than most.

The longest story in this issue, Chris Bell's 'The Locum, Yellow Rose', is also perhaps the strangest, although there is no lack of empathy and recognisable motivation in the characters. Perhaps the most interesting character, however, is not the somewhat directionless narrator, nor his angry, dissatisfied ex-girlfriend, but the mechanical Betty Boop-like doll (the Locum Yellow Rose of the title), which pulled the trigger on the failing relationship, and who speaks your innermost thought via a roll of ticker-tape. Needless to say there are secrets yet to be revealed, emotions to be learned, and tragedies yet to be lived before this story is told. Despite the genre, a deeply human story.

Three poems fill the next two pages before the final story in this issue. Jennifer Crow's 'Grave statue of an unknown baboon-headed god, c. 300 B.C.' is a mild, thoughtful piece narrated by a minor deity, that could well have been inspired by an archaeological find. 'Sticks' by Karen R. Porter is an evocative little piece about an old man (or a rodent?) and his relationship with the row of upright sticks surrounding his home. 'Your First Time' is Samantha Henderon's creepy take on the myth of a monster coming to London—a vam-

pire, or Jack the Ripper, or something worse than either?

The final story, then, is Joshua Reynolds' 'Just an Old-fashioned Love Song', a grim tale of crime and love and parasitic aliens in the Deep South, narrated in mid-twentieth century slang like a twisted Bonnie and Clyde meet Hellboy. The good guys are more sadistic than the bad guys, the heroes are the most villainous of all, and love

conquers eternal. "Or at least for another day."

Another regular NOoA contributor—impressive poet Sonya Taaffe—provides the end-piece for this issue, a two-page collection of verses, 'Kameraden Obscure: A Retrospective', that spans across years, art forms, and terrors.

Subscribe to *Not One of Us* today; it's always worth the trouble.

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**Apex issue 9. Summer 2007. Pp. 128. \$6.00.**

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

This is a fairly new magazine with this being issue 9 and now editor Jason Sizemore thinks he is finally able to define the "type" of fiction they have been publishing: "the application of technology to create horrific or terrifying visions...the unknown creating havoc... [and] ...the expansion of the human element, be it powers of the mind or of the body". (p.2)

The only previous issue of *Apex* I have read is number 6 (summer 2006) which was filled with high quality pieces. Among those that linger in my mind are the haunting search for a lost lover 'Cerbo en Vitra ujo' by Mary Robinette Kowal, and a well researched and referenced essay 'Some Notes Towards a Working Definition of Steampunk' by Lavie Tidhar. Most memorable for me was the exquisitely crafted and aptly titled 'Queen of Stars' by Bryn Sparks with vivid description, developed plot and characters, all in a classic tradition where the good guys are beautiful and the villains nightmarishly repulsive, and completed with an excellently described metamorphosis which allows the hero(ine) to reap revenge with a little help from the gods.

This issue number 9 is a high quality publication with some excellently written stories, interviews, and essays, as well as good artwork. The adverts, of which there are many, also seem to have been chosen for their appropriate and provocative design.

The first story, and one of the strongest in this issue, draws the reader in and holds them tightly throughout its 12 pages. 'The Sum of His Parts' by Kevin J. Anderson, stitches together in taut and well-paced prose neat background stories of the donors to Victor Frankenstein's infamous project. We are introduced to the individuals and how they came to be sucked into Victor's web of intrigue, deception, and single-mindedness. Anderson develops the characters superbly with subtlety and economy of words.

Katherine Sparrow's 'The End of Crazy' catches the fine distinction between crazy (as in insane) and extremely gifted, drawing perhaps on experience gained in her day job (see the short bio) but certainly using words that should ring

true for her readers. Two young people on the edge are struggling for freedom but each are on either side of that line (both sanity and freedom) and one of them is not as alone as they might think.

'The Gunslinger of Chelem' stalks dreamland where dreams become reality in Lavie Tidhar's offering until he meets the 'Man With No Name' who has seen all the movies and knows how to ride off into the sunset, even a surreal one.

The short and simple 'Locked In' touches a raw nerve when Mary Robinette Kowal reminds us of our vulnerability and the potential for blind faith when it comes to our understanding of the nature of science.

Druggies have their uses when a 'Projector' gets out of line in Daniel LeMoal's tale of the same name. The boss calls in the debts for a job that only they are equipped to do. With an unexpected twist at the end that makes us re-evaluate our preconceptions.

An excellent short tale by William F. Nolan titled 'At the 24-Hour' told almost entirely in conversation between the protagonists at the all-American diner with a not-so-at-all-American stranger.

The love story of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', known from Ovid and popularised by Shakespeare, is re-worked in a new setting inspired in part, says the author Jeremy Adam Smith, by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. A love that transcends death mixed in with surreal cities inhabited by both the living and the dead overseen by the 'brotherhood' provide the backdrop for this tale of love and loss. This tale is well-written and taut with Classical themes throughout but fans of Ovid (and indeed Shakespeare) might be disappointed with the distance between the clear allusion suggested in the title and the plot.

'Sufficiently Advanced' is the deserving winner of the 2006 *Apex* Halloween Short Fiction Contest. Ben Vincent draws the reader out using a not uncommon topos of the spaceman and the aboriginals but with delicate treatment of this theme. Disembarking from the *Odyssey* after crashing alone in a strange land, like Odysseus, Henry hopes his greeters are not going to eat him and they do indeed turn out to be curious and



welcoming, until...

'Don't Show your Teeth' by Rob D. Smith is a little predictable but nevertheless well-written bringing new meaning to the expression 'green teeth' and develops well in the short space it's given.

The longest in this collection and perhaps the most disturbing with its dark theme is Geoffrey Girard's 'Cain XP11: the Voice of Thy Brother's Blood'. Cloning and genetics is much-covered in the media and here combined with the battle over 'nature and nurture' we have a most provoking tale with a splattering of blood and gore thrown in to shock and horrify as the sole government investigating agent closes in. This is a four-part story with part two in the next issue of Apex.

To complete this issue there's an interesting dark poem 'Poppet's Left Impression' by Brandy Schwan, a couple of interviews, two good essays and a short flash titled 'Sonorous' by Paul Abamondi where the gleaming object found in the woods is best left alone.

As well as offering the opening tale the prolific writer is the subject of the first interview—"What

Wouldn't Kevin J. Anderson Do?", followed by a second more conventional Q&A featuring Liz Williams.

'Unspeakable Horrors: The Legacy of Darkness in the Visual Arts of Western Culture' by Deb Taber explores the attraction of the morbid tracing its roots to Ancient Greek art and pottery, through the Christian era and the birth of 'Best-Selling Horror' with woodcuttings of Prince Vlad Dracula and his forest of impaled bodies. The horror genre is older than we realise, Taylor argues as she moves to the modern and links this with our inner needs which draw us "into the unknown that we dread to explore, yet crave" (p.117).

Alethea Kontis eloquently describes her encounters with school English teachers and the curriculum in a year by year struggle to truly express herself in her writing. 'Kill Me Then': a struggle to reach fulfilment outside of the 'box'.

Overall this is an excellent and very professional publication with high editorial standards. It was a pleasure to read and I look forward to the next issue.

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## Black Swan Competition

In association with Black Swan we are offering an exciting creative writing competition. Write a short story based on the evocative and bizarre surroundings of Black Swan, and the best entry submitted by the closing date will win the **first prize of (USD) \$500**, and be published in *The Future Fire* and in *Second Life* by Black Swan.

See below for entry terms and conditions.

1. Enter Second Life and visit the following SLURL: [http://slurl.com/secondlife/Black Swan/245/120/39](http://slurl.com/secondlife/Black%20Swan/245/120/39)
2. Have a good look around: this land parcel is full of sculpture, structures, events, and strange inhabitants. Breathe in the atmosphere. Be inspired. Come back as often as you like.
3. Write a short story of up to 2 000 words based in some way on what you have seen.
4. The story must be submitted to *The Future Fire* fiction editor by midnight (GMT) on December 10th, 2007. Submit stories by email as a .doc or .rtf attachment. Please use the subject line "TFF Black Swan Competition" to help our editors distinguish these from the regular submission stream.
5. The story may be in any genre on any topic, but there must be some discernible link to The Black Swan artwork. Bear in mind also that *The Future Fire* tends to prefer speculative and dark stories with a social conscience that confound the reader's expectations. Quality will be the deciding factor in all judgements regarding this competition.
6. All stories will be read by a panel of editors and guest judges, and a verdict will be reached in time to publish the winning story in the December 2007 issue of *The Future Fire*.
7. Black Swan may choose to adopt features from the winning story for future enhancements to the Second Life exhibit. The winning story will be licensed in such a way (to be negotiated) that neither the author nor Black Swan shall have exclusive rights over these ideas or be able to limit the other's use of them. All other rights will of course revert to the author upon publication and copyright of the story remains with them at all times.
8. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

Good luck!



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Articles and reviews: [nonfiction@futurefire.net](mailto:nonfiction@futurefire.net)  
See submission guidelines at  
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