

THE FUTURE FIRE

SPECULATIVE CYBERPUNK DARK

Issue 2008.11

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Cover Art: (c) 2008 Chris Cartwright

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The Future Fire: Issue 2008.11

No Piece can properly be called good, and well written, which is void of any Tendency to benefit the Reader, either by improving his Virtue or his Knowledge.

-- Benjamin Franklin

Fiction

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The release of this issue, our eleventh, marks a step forward and up for *The Future Fire*. As of this issue we are paying more for fiction (\$20 per story), and we shall pay our cover artist the same fee (though the heroes who illustrate the inside of the magazine still do so out of love, altruism, and generosity). As of this issue we also welcome three new associate editors: thanks to David, John, and Lois for helping out with reading and decision-making (and if we may take a moment here to also thank our several unnamed--because anonymous--referees who apply taste and distinction to the ever-growing submission pile).

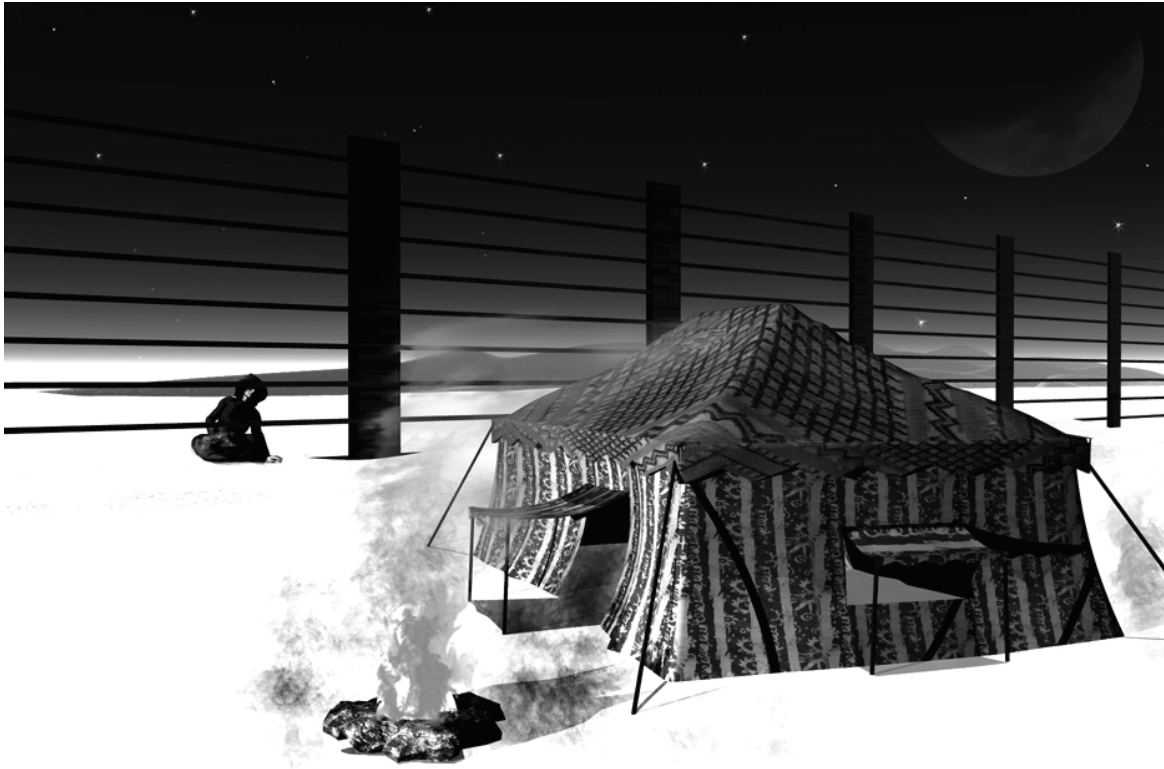
You will already have noticed the redesigned website: please let us know what you think. We think it better reflects the dark and techno content that we are trying to achieve with this magazine. But we'd love feedback: it's you, the reader, that we're serving.

This issue sees some great new stories. Kassandra Kelly takes us on a desert trek through twisted time and sordid social manipulation. William J. Piovano gives us the first part of a serialized story which is a dark take on Plato's myth of the cave with shades of *Brave New World*. David Towsey investigates the dark side of our psyches as we get pushed into living closer and closer together. Lots of great artwork from our talented illustrators, and a couple of braces of book reviews. Enjoy.

April 2008

‘Lucky .003’ Kassandra Kelly

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After the cat died, time began to creep up on me.

One day I set out to water the tomato plants, and the next thing I knew I'd spent most of the day going through old clothes, shaking out wrinkles and remembering when I last wore this dress, that blouse.

In the trunk I also found a notebook. I don't know how it got there, maybe scooped up in my last frenzy of packing. We are taught never to write anything down, not even directions or lists. I've obeyed this rule so well that I had to teach myself to hold a pen.

You see, that was one way the cat helped. I wouldn't have lasted a month out here without her, in the beginning.

I've been thinking about human companionship since she died. Like writing, we were discouraged from making memories with another person, even other time keepers. Jaguar and I violated that rule, but everyone agreed we were more

valuable together than apart. And now of course, friendship is not possible. People live here in the desert, more than Howard said there would be, but too few for anything like friendship.

The local people, the Safa, bring my water pods every week. They sit at the edge of my wire perimeter in their blue robes, watching me. We are curiosities to one another. I've never learned more than a few of their words, and they know nothing of me. They bring water because Howard paid them. Continues to pay them, I should say, which means that not too much has changed in the world since I left. When the Safa stop bringing water, that's how I will know.

The cat was called Isadora and she gave me the safety of the eternal present. Unlike cats, people slide between past, present and future restlessly, sometimes visiting all three in a single sentence. Maybe Is had her own tiny cat memories of other places, less dry and hot places, but all I saw of her was cat in the present tense. Is.

Now that I'm forcing myself to write, memories come to the surface. Today I recalled how the helicopter pilot insisted I take the cat when I didn't want her. He tossed the cat carrier out the door as he was lifting up, leaving me and the cat in the middle of nowhere, with our cases and boxes already sinking into the desert. If I focused on even the smallest detail of that memory, like the frantic scent of cat urine or the sandy grit inside my clothes, I could—as you know perfectly well—slide into that moment completely.

The cat died in a corner of my tent a couple of days ago. I found her the next morning stiff and covered with flies. I have to be careful the sound of insects doesn't become a trigger for time travel. I swept her into a hole in the sand and pulled a sheet of corrugated metal roofing over the top, heavy enough to keep the scavengers from digging her up.

I have no idea where the metal came from. Things rise out of the sand around here as often as they subside into it. I swear the metal roofing wasn't there a week ago, but then I also swear my grill was next to the fire pit yesterday. Or what passes for yesterday around here. I've found Coke bottles and orthodontic retainers, batteries, lighters, tires, and once, memorably, ten yards of white muslin. It was just a scrap of cloth flapping in the wind but when I pulled it, yards and yards of it unwound from the sand, no end in sight. Maybe it was a mummy wrapping, the old bones spinning under my feet as I pulled the cloth. I think there is a whole city under there. Sometimes I fall asleep imagining I'm on an ocean of sand.

Howard Reinman was the one who found this place and made the arrangements. All I wanted was some place distant, isolated. I never thought I'd be out here for years. I told him, *no supplies*, but he arranged everything, including the water from the Safa. He probably thought of the cat. No doubt he still wants me alive, his secret weapon.

I thought it would be the other thing that got me. *Ponderiosis*. Drooliosis we called it when we were kids visiting the sick time keepers in their wheelchairs in the nursing home. I hated wiping drool off old fat chins, but I have some appreciation for it now. The first time keeper from my class developed stability problems at thirteen, and that's how I learned that while some of the people in the nursing home were old, most weren't.

Jaguar developed it at thirty-eight, late for someone who'd been so profligate with his abil-

ity. He liked to say he'd rather time travel for a pack of cigarettes and a fuck than for any paying gig. The last time I saw him, a child with latex gloves was changing his waste bag.

True, I could have the disease now and not know it. I've always had drifty moments and I seem to have them more often now. By day, I feel completely fine. It's only at night that things begin to slip. I am 48.

The sheet metal is gone today. I walked out to where I thought it was and kicked around in the sand, but the dunes have grown over the place. I hope the cat's body is down deep and not about to float to the surface some day when I'm not ready for it.

I beat the sand off my tent and straightened the posts that hold up my perimeter wire. Half the day's water goes to my plants and I make tea with the rest. Now I sit here, smoothing the pages of my journal and listening to the sound of my voice as I reread yesterday's entry aloud and consider what to write next. I wanted to write about my beginnings, my family of birth and how I was identified. But it gets complicated very quickly. My past has been rewired so many times that I can't even say reliably when my parents were killed. It was either at dinner when I was six or in a car accident when I was thirty-one.

The community was established to protect against biographical leaks. I've seen time keepers exploited for the flavor of a blueberry milkshake and turned into walking bombs. That's why we are identified young, taken to the school and have no further contact with our families. No memories but those the community can control, see? That's how it's supposed to work. But in the last years security was breached dozens of times. I don't know if the community even exists anymore. Nothing is secure and everyone talks under the right circumstances.

Nuance. That's one reason I've come to love the desert. It's all nuance out here.

Since I hadn't planned on having a cat, I hadn't planned for veterinary emergencies. I know how simple it would be, so simple, to slip back to the evening when Howard and I drew up equipment lists and add a few medical supplies. We were at his place on Lopez Island, we'd had Dungeness crab and a bottle of prosecco for dinner, and Howard leaned across the table and said—

"You can't stay here, Jenna. I can't protect you."

"It seems remote enough to me. Look out there."

Howard glances at the window and back to his wine glass. Though I've been here a dozen times, I can't tear myself away from the view. My shoes are off and my toes curl in the carpet which is thick enough to be lawn grass. Clouds roll in to finish the summer evening. Nothing in the water but a few sailboats tacking for home.

"But I know you're right, Howard."

"It kills me to say it, Jenna."

"But you'll say it again."

He stands up abruptly and walks to the bar. I know the stance; Howard's not a time keeper. He doesn't get our humor. How long have we been lovers? Howard would probably say six months, since the Atlanta job. But with all the iterations I've experienced or caused, the last six months has telescoped into what feels like ten or twenty years. I'm exhausted and not even sure if I'll be awake until sunset, let alone companionable while Howard drinks enough scotch to make his point.

"I wish it wasn't this way, Jenna. Drink?"

He hands me a glass of scotch and I sip. It tastes like rubbing alcohol. A time keeper would use this taste to anchor a slippage. Think of this nasty stuff sometime in the future and be here. This is the kind of memory Howard's enemies would pay elephant dollars to use.

"Don't wish that, Howard."

He doesn't reply. We're in an iteration where the London subway bombings have just occurred, and I spent part of the day watching CNN. I ache to call Jaguar and can't, so I sublimated by cleaning Howard's spotless black bathroom. There's no Jaguar to call, no phone that could reach him.

Howard was on the phone with his British associates this morning and spent a lot of time in his office with the door shut. Only the fact that I'd been with him for three days before the bombing keeps him from suspecting I have anything to do with it. That's how little he knows about time travel.

Howard takes his seat at the table, puts his elbow on the placemat and leans his head into his hand. He looks older than his years, though I'm never sure how old he's supposed to be. Multiple iterations usually have no physical consequences on non-time keepers. It could be Atlanta that's aged him, or maybe it's me. Knowing the unsteady sands on which we base our reality tends to make you lose sleep.

"How often do you do it, Jenna?" he asks sud-

denly. "Have you done it since we've been on Lopez?"

My turn to get up and go to the window. "I can't talk about it." The clouds are a bruised purple in the sky as if we are one moment away from night. The wind bends the fir trees on the bluff. Beautiful and unsettled.

He sighs. Ice clinks against glass. "I know I shouldn't ask."

"But you always do."

The window overlooks the hardscrabble bluff stone yard, not even a garden. In a fit of new home ownership zeal, Howard arranged the stones and planted small, rock-growing succulents, but since he visits this place so rarely, the thin soil has gone back to raising conifers with bent, wind buffeted branches. In all the times I've been here, in the real continuum or the bastardized generations of same, it has never looked more bereft and singular, more blue with darkness, more permanent unto itself.

"Come sit down," says Howard. "Have another drink."

I think ahead to the bed we'll share. It's a luxury to think forward, but the anticipated feelings of love and companionship, of possible sex, don't comfort. It is something, another thing, to get through.

"You're right. I need to go," I say. "You have to arrange it. Don't tell me where, just make it happen."

He ducks his head, looks away. "I have some ideas."

I stand stone cold and singular, watching him rub moisture out of his eyes. I know I should reach out and cup his cheek. I understand the value of the gesture and that things might change if I do it. I've never done it before.

So I reach out.

Sand ticks against the walls of the tent. I am clutching my journal as I come back into the present. Getting worse. It's one thing to relive a memory and entirely another to change it. This is why we don't write. We fortify ourselves in the narrow gauge of the present.

I push back from the spool table, a thing that had rolled out of the desert after a sandstorm, still feeling the glassy cherry wood of Howard's table under my hands.

It wasn't the slippage I'd seen with the sick ones. I wasn't free-falling through history. But I looked around the tent anyway, examining my things. Something might be different and it could

be very small.

A cat meowed and Isadora jumped onto the spool table, purring. She had a bald spot on her face and a pink seam running from her ear to the corner of her mouth. I took a step backwards and stumbled against a chair while she stared at me with pale green eyes.

I barely slept that night. At first light the blue robed figures of the Safa were at the edge of the wire, squatting in the sand. I saw a new water pod. Nothing was out of place but I didn't move. The cat drifted back to the tent after the Safa left, mewing for food.

The scar gave her a gobsmacked grin. I tried not to look. She rubbed it against the chair leg and an open case of American cat food. When I got up to feed her I chose a can at the back of the box to avoid touching what she'd touched. I would find more cases scabbed with sand behind the tent. New information pressed against old memories, embroidering in some place, overlaying in others. Now the helicopter pilot hands me Isadora's carrier. Now I push antibiotics down her throat.

Before the new memories become fixed, I have to make note of the changes. How far did it go, how deep? I couldn't shake my new feelings about the cat. Her coat was glossier and fuller than before, her belly sagged and tufts of long hair grew from it. This morning she'd been with the Safa while they watched me, winding between them and rubbing against them. I could smell their dry perfume on her coat. Isadora had never done that before. She always hid with me in the tent.

I can't bring myself to touch her.

This ghost cat lounged in the sand in front of the tent, tail twitching. She jumped on the water pod and stared at me. In the afternoon, she disappeared until almost dark and came back smelling of the Safa again.

The cat is new.

That night I slept outside behind the tent, next to the wire. The Lopez memory now had a crisp, newly-minted quality, what time keepers called a sexy memory. You didn't need to anchor to a taste or scent, just step in anywhere, the water's fine. I had shown myself to be alive and still more or less in control of my mind. Though not my emotions. Reaching out to Howard was idiocy. I'd seen my whole family killed, and many others after that, without giving in to emotional tinkering. But I'd done it this time, why? Because I was lonely?

My last memory of family is saying goodbye in the community's public parking lot when I was seven. Or it could have been the pipe bomb that came through the dining room window to land in a bowl of buttered peas when I was six. The earlier memory came later, if you know what I mean, a biographical attack that was attempted after I became a time keeper.

I don't know which memory is real. Either my parents said good bye in the parking lot and went on to live regular, natural lives in Arizona, owners of a car that would flatten some twenty-five years later into a freeway abutment, or they vanished in a white flash as the window shattered. Both could be true. Both may even be false.

That's how it is, changing so much you can never keep up.

Just before dark yesterday, I looked up to see a blue robe sitting at the perimeter wire. I was eating dal rolled in flat bread and sitting at the spool table. He could have been there a long time without me noticing, but the cat was just now sauntering over to him. It's like they rise out of the sand, these people.

I waited for the cat to make contact, realizing that in this version, that's how we did it, the cat and me. After the blue robe petted the cat and she insinuated herself around him, purring madly, I walked out of the tent.

The desert was already blue with night, the color swimming out of the sand like fog. In a moment the Safa would be invisible.

"Ho'aa," I said.

"Ho'aal, Jenna."

There was little I could see of him, not even his eyes. In the pressboard layers of new memories I found this man's name, Qhah. I knew he would not push back his hood until sitting inside my wire, and the first thing he would do once inside is tease a fire out of some dry dung he carried under his robes. It would burn blue and hot. I also knew we would speak in Safa, the quiet susurrations that sound like sand moving in the wind.

"Where've you been?"

"I've been in the mountains three days east of here. I would have come sooner." He dropped lumps of dung into the ashes and lit them with a battered Bic lighter, one of the more common relics delivered from the desert. "My brother has a radio."

"I didn't know you had a brother. Or a radio."

Qhah shrugged, universal Safa gesture for so

many things unknown.

Some things I do know about him. In the blue flame, the wide plains of his face are visible, blunt stone overlaid with a tracery of wrinkles. He smells of dust. Paler skin is concealed within the folds of his clothing. I have never asked if he is western, though a shared heritage might make us easy in one another's company. He asks nothing about me.

"There is another war, Jenna." He uses the word for great burning in the sky which is Safa for both war and cataclysm. "Perhaps time is different? Changed?"

"Who made the war, Qhah?"

"It doesn't matter who makes the war when it's so close. We saw bombing from the mountains. On the horizon, little fireflies."

We sleep together in the dark corner of the tent, the cat jumping in and out. When I wake up it is to see him smoking a cigarette in the dark, and then I can't get back to sleep again. I carry a blanket behind the tent and sit in the sand.

In the morning I make him take the cat.

The impulse for kindness has no good outcome. I relentlessly shut down memories of the cat, of Qhah. Just days ago I didn't know about him and now his absence is consuming.

I sit on the deep sand, waiting to see what will surface next. Two days ago I didn't know any Safa, and now the entire language is open to me. Already I am forgetting what it was like before, when the cat was dead. It doesn't fade like a memory; I simply stop having faith that it was ever real.

I am less alone. Sometimes I see camp fires in the distance. Once I heard truck engines. I try to sort out which transactions of the desert are harmless and which are not. I sleep by day.

The most common question people used to ask me was why time keepers' memories weren't changed when the timeline changed. I reply that of course our memories are changed just like anyone's, rewritten along with the physical fabric of the world. Except in the two instances they aren't. One instance is if you enabled the change, and the other is if you are one of the (un)lucky .003% of us who is unaffected by time alteration at all. I'm not sure about this statistic; being born with time travel ability is rare enough, hen's teeth, you might say. Some community actuarial probably derived the data from what remains of the sick ones. The .003 must be the sickest ones of all.

The way they teach children to time travel is

with taste. My teacher took us to a field on a spring afternoon, gave us all lime Popsicles in paper wrappers. I peeled mine and licked the green syrup from the paper and sucked the Popsicle until the juice was gone. Then we played a game for an hour. After that the teacher told us to think about the Popsicle. For Jaguar that was all it took. He went back in time, ate his Popsicle, knocked mine into the grass and ran off. What he achieved in one moment of heat shimmer slammed two memories together in my mind. I was the lucky .003. Not even Jaguar was that lucky.

"We should have a place," he said to me once, twenty years later. By then we'd done the jobs we were raised to do, the dirty and the clean. In fact, we'd just finished a complicated job worth several million that had required a thirteen year old version of myself to carry a gun into a school while a thirteen year old Jaguar did the same in another school two hundred miles away. Even though it was very real, it still had the fantastic thirteen year old flavor of a thing you did just because you could. Supposed to change a law. I'm not sure it stayed changed. I tend to lose track of the moral center of these jobs, especially since in my case three people got killed. Afterwards Jaguar suggested we agree on a place in the past to meet up when the slippage started. "Or whatever," he said, raising his eyebrows.

I don't know if this qualifies as whatever.

Headlights in the night. They tracked a north-west-south line, passing within a mile of my camp. In my notebook, I've written Lopez Island, Washington. Akumal, Yucatan, adding more pages to the stack on the left side of the table. The aroma of red snapper on the grill floats through the curtain of memories and Howard says—

"--this is them? The consultants?" Howard Reinmann, the client, waived off a Mexican waiter. He was shaping up to be the kind of client we all hated. He wore a white man in the tropics suit and flashed a watch that was so expensive it didn't even have numbers on it. "They look like junkies." To us, "What are you, junkies?"

"Never hired a time keeper before?" asked Jaguar. "Lucky man."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reinmann." This was Caspar, a kind of broker. Jaguar was in a constant state of war with Caspar because he thought Caspar had hustled us out of some fees. Jaguar had never caught him at it, which meant that Caspar was somehow smarter than Jaguar. It worried me be-

cause by our very nature, we were smarter than everyone, if not at present, then certainly in the future. Time keeper joke.

Caspar introduced us, Howard blustered a little less and the waiter came back with beer. This was Akumal.

Howard wanted us to kill a man in Atlanta five years ago. Kill him, take his computer, wallet and cell phone. We'd done hundreds of jobs like this, and after watching Howard sweat and rant for fifteen minutes about how badly this guy needed killing, both Jaguar and I were yawning in our beers.

"You'll do it?" he asked, as if he hadn't already passed a briefcase to Caspar.

"Yeah, sure, what the fuck," said Jaguar. "Want to hit the beach, Jen?"

Akumal was on the Caribbean. Neither of us had snorkeled before and we drowsed around the reefs all afternoon, looking down into deep pockets of the world. Jaguar dove into the deepest rift again and again while I floated above. It was probably the first time he couldn't go somewhere by simply wishing it.

"Want this to be the place?" he asked as we dropped on our beach towels, exhausted.

We arrived at the restaurant late for dinner. Caspar and Howard were already drunk. Jaguar ordered the most expensive bottle of wine, slouched in his chair and yelled obscenities at the marimba band. Howard looked across the table at me and back at Jaguar, the blank expression of man confronting curiosities.

After dinner Howard took my arm. "What do you do?"

"Everything." I slipped out of his fingers.

There are, of course, timekeeper sex workers. Maybe that's what Howard thought I was when he knocked on my hotel room door later that night, waving a brick of Euros. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Whatever you want," he said. "I'll give you anything."

He was red-faced and rumpled, either from crying or throwing up. I held the door against him. "It doesn't work when you're drunk."

"Get lost, asshole." Jaguar stepped in from the balcony. The wind streamed through the room after him, lifting the gauze curtains to reveal the black desert of the sea beyond the margin of beach. Jaguar's shirt was open, showing the flat slats of his chest. No wonder people think we're junkies, looking at that. He clenched his fist.

Howard stepped backward and stumbled. I

smelled scotch and cigarettes and ancient, tender grief. He clawed at my shoulder to steady himself.

"Jaguar, no." I raised my hand. "Leave him alone."

Millions of possibilities are born from saying no just once to Jaguar. I see him as he was, bunching Howard's shirt and marching him out of the room. I see Jaguar as he is in this version, hurling a beer bottle at my head. I see him shoving Howard; I see him shoving past Howard and away. I see him the next morning passed out on the lawn, a dozen Mexican kids watching him drool.

I come back, years or minutes later, still in the desert. I watch both horizon and sky, rising only to stay within that hour's shadow. It won't be long now. The Safa haven't brought water in weeks. The water pod is almost empty and my ration drops to spoonfuls per day. The tomato plants calcify and their leaves blow away in the wind.

Lopez, garden of rocks and moss. Akumal, a billowing curtain against the night sky, Jaguar's smoke harsh voice. Here, the shushing winds and water plinking against my plastic bowl. It's amazing the little things you remember.

"Anything you want."

Blades settle out of the sky, blowing my perimeter wire over the dune sea, useless. As the helicopter settles, Howard steps out. He looks exactly the same, dressed for the desert in sand-colored boots. Never hire a time keeper before? Lucky man.

"Well, Jenna," he says. "Are you ready to come back?"

"Seems remote enough for me. Look out there."

A flash against the window, a dog digging in the shrubs?

Mommy says, *"I think you'll like your new school. Won't she, Daddy?"* The margarine sits on a plate, she dabs a pat on the peas and it smears like a weeping eye.

"No."

"But, sweetie—"

Glass pieces fly like daggers, two piercing Daddy's throat. Jaguar is a seven year old time keeper with a pipe bomb, staring through the broken window with his perfect blue eyes. He has a video game in his pocket for the ride home.

"Want this to be the place?" he asks.

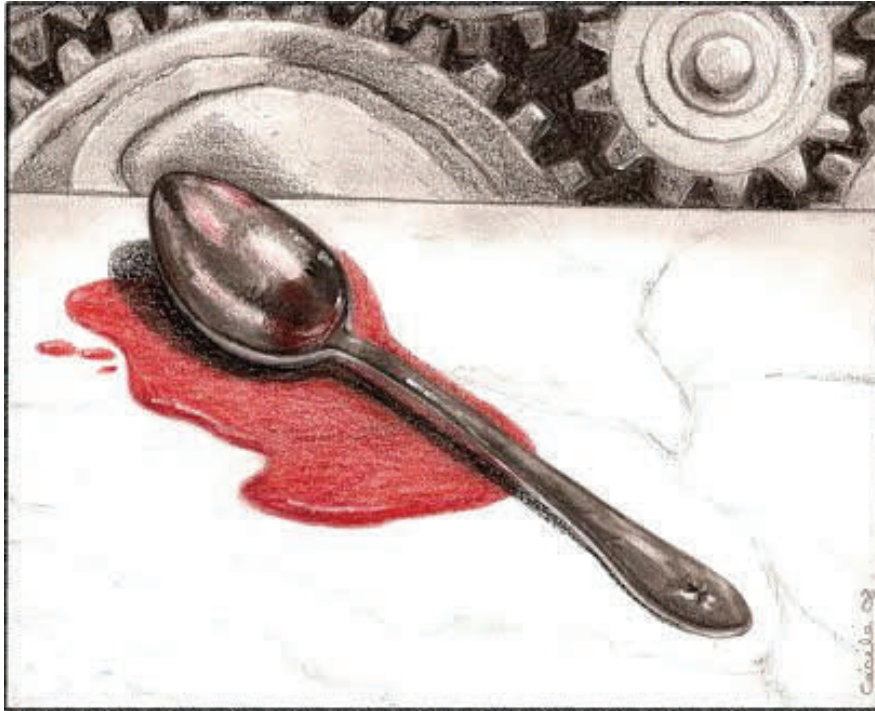
I close my eyes and fall.

Avatar on the Belts

1: Tartaros

William J. Piovano

Artwork (c) 2008 Cécile Matthey



Oil and blood. I have both on my hands. They say I should not get blood on the conveyor belt wheels—it crusts and has to be scrubbed off. They say I shouldn't get oil into the wombs. The women are replaceable, but like the wheels they are an asset.

I wipe my hands on my apron as best I can, leaving a smear of dark red over the previous crust. It's my fifteenth hour of work, two more to go. My legs ache, even though I'm sitting on a stool. A single grimy light bulb under a copper cone hangs perfectly still a few feet over my head. The conveyor belt rolls on before me, top side sliding left, carrying with it the impregnated women in their black metal chairs. Hundreds glide by, all the same blur of naked female, until the belt finally stops.

My next task sits before me, eyes rolled back and white with anesthesia. Her wrists and ankles are shackled to leave her in almost spread-eagled position, her legs slightly bent. It is the optimal position for giving birth. All these women are about to give birth.

I pay no heed to the swollen mammary glands, or to the dilated hole which oozes with clear

fluid. These women are cogs in the factory wheel, like the groaning pulleys and the steaming engines, and I should not look at them in such ways. I barely pay any heed to them anymore, until the crown of the baby's head juts out from between their legs, at which point I have to ease the newborn out. With the mother unconscious, even drugs cannot force the miracle of life all the way. A miracle, yes—someone wrote that, once. I can't see the miracle, though.

I see an unknowing mother. A bastard baby.

Left and right the identical process occurs for a million—ten million, a billion?—different and yet identical women, all splayed out with swollen bellies ready to be popped; like hens they are plundered, laying eggs of flesh and surrendering them on birth. The lighting is poor, and the conveyor belts disappear into the darkness. Nobody knows how far they stretch. Or how high. Above and below me, on the other side of grilled ceilings—or floors, depending on how you look at it—the vague shadows of other belts criss-cross to form a gradually fading canopy of assembly lines, their rolling wheels and pulleys droning a regular march which never misses a step.

It so happens that this day, with this particular woman, I do look up at my current woman, for no reason whatsoever but the random sweep of my gaze. With my hands outstretched, feeling blood and other liquids, I frown at her drunken visage. Her eyes are open, distant, too distant for sight. The lolled head stretches the skin of the cheek into a fishhook smile, as if she were thinking back to fond memories.

This could be my mother, I think. Why I'm thinking such a thing, I don't know, but it makes sense. The same black eyes—I noticed mine in water reflection once—and ink-black hair; her skin is tinted brown (rare in this world of tungsten filament spotlights), and the jaw closes a slender V into a pointed chin. We've been taught some genetics, mainly for explication of the Protein, and it's obvious to me how we could be linked. By genetic inheritance, I mean.

My mother is on one of these belts. I know that. Everyone's mother is. But nobody knows how many women there are, just like nobody knows how many men there are, or where this factory begins, and where it ends. Not even the Red Men, I think. I always tell myself that someone, somewhere, must know. It doesn't matter. They'd never tell me.

The baby slips wet and screaming into my prepared hands. I follow the procedure, the four-step procedure which has taken up eighteen hours of every day of my recollected life. Sterilize the baby. Close the woman up. Test the baby for the protein. Deliver accordingly.

With all trained workers, the job becomes second nature, like scratching your head. But this time I am too aware of the woman, and therefore of the baby. My hands move without orders, bathing the small speckled creature in the tank of green lukewarm water. I almost drop the slippery thing. For the first time in a long while, I'm fumbling. The green water purges the baby of mother's blood and engine oil. I don't know what that green water is, or what it does. Likewise with the Protein test gun. People don't ask questions in this place, because they know that, at best, they won't get an answer.

As the baby bathes I sever the umbilical chord and sew back the gaping wound. Some women don't survive the births. It always angers the Red Men when one dies, because the belt has to be paused. It is not our fault when it happens, though; we just do what we're told. I find it ironic how new life is the most common cause of death.

This woman here is alive. Does it even make a

difference, I wonder? Sometimes the babies themselves come out dead. Then I feel sadder, for the babies are denied any chance at all.

I take special care with the sewing, something I've never done before.

"Mother," I whisper to myself, peering at her inanimate pile of pale, flabby flesh. And if this was my mother, then this baby would be my... I glance back at the tank, the wriggling creature therein. My Sister.

The test gun is a small hand-held device with a triangular screen, fronted by a needle. I press it into the baby's side, hopeful, and wait the ten seconds needed for the scan. She screams in protest, tiny face corrugated, but her fatty limbs can only slosh the water around. The gun buzzes negative, its screen goes black. In thirty odd years—more or less, I've lost count—I've only discovered one child who was protein-positive. You see, that's what they want. The protein-positive children, those who are born with that unique Protein. They are the ones who get placed on the special belts, to be brought Outside.

As I sit there with this baby in my arms, glowing with the phosphorescent green, the belt wheels off again. No time to ask more questions. What if she was my mother? She's gone now, and even if she survives another pregnancy implant, I'll never see her again. That I know. The baby, however, is still here.

To my left and right, for hundreds of stools, my co-workers have already left their batches on the correct belts. Females on one, males on the other. There's the damaged specimens belt too, and the barren females. And, of course, the protein-positive. That belt is empty today, as always. Nobody even bothers to check it anymore. Three years ago a tank of the green fluid actually did slide by, and I remember everyone wheeling to stare at it in awe. Like a massive diamond being carried past the miners, towards the surface. A glimpse, a promise of what you might find.

My sister wails some more in my arms.

I swivel on my stool, pick her up and hold her out. The round beginnings of belts roll away into nothingness, each stretch of black cross-sectioned grooves promising a radically different destination. I hesitate. I can't help but think of my one-eyed Brother.

It started with my dream. I stood in the line, faced with the one bright prospect of my day: food. Only three men were left in front of me, three anonymous shaven heads. A hundred or so

behind me. Far to the left, the conveyor belts continued their spinning delivery, relentless. I had never seen them stop, ever. The Red Men probably wish we were like them, unfaltering machines. Someone told me—though at the time I didn't see how they could have ever discovered this—that there were always people working on the lines. When one group slept, the other worked. It made sense, for pregnant women can't wait. And men, like us, need more than just engine oil.

When my turn came at last, I held my bowl up in one hand, spoon clenched firmly in the other as if someone might steal it. Such fear was not entirely unfounded, for the floors were steel grates, and those gaps could swallow a dropped spoon faster than you could scramble for it. Most people did not have their spoons anymore, ate with their heads in their bowls, like beasts. I still had mine, and I guarded it with my life, feeling it to be the last thing that kept me human. Porridge splattered into the bowl, gushing out of the ladle brown and wet like diarrhea, but it smelled and tasted good and I was digging into it before the second scoop landed. It energized me like nothing else—except Aphrodite, but I had not met Her yet.

I didn't enjoy my porridge much that day, however. The man in the bunk below me had died, just a few hours before. A short man, with almost no hair (come to think of it, maybe that had been his disease). Either way, I woke to find two Red Men dragging his limp body away. It was not his death that bothered me, as much as what it reminded me of: another man had lived in that bunk below me, years before, and his death had truly troubled me.

I remember how his thick bushy eyebrows used to curve down when he spoke, his neck crane forward as if vicinity might drown the heresy of his words. He spoke to me only once, but every word is tattooed to my memory.

I woke, one time, to find his gnarled hairy fingers grasping at the edge of my cot, his face hovering before mine with a tinge of madness.

"There is something you must know, before I'm gone," he whispered. A barely audible whisper, but in the vast caverns of metal every human sound was a scream.

I didn't move, feeling his breath hot and humid, the eyes a battle of wisdom and insanity under wrinkles filled with dust. He spoke again, then, and did so for a very long time. He told me of things which should not have been spoken of. The Outside, and the people who held the Protein.

And he gave me the answer to a question which in these tombs of steel should have been the only question, and that which nobody had ever ventured to ask: why all this?

When he finished, his hands were white and shaking with the effort of his stance. "Do not forget," he told me, before sliding back under and onto his cot. I did not move during my three hours rest, frozen shocked, until I heard the Red Men come and take him away. His feet raked against the grate floor, but he was not dead yet.

It was the only time I ever saw the Red Men up close, their every part draped in crimson plastic, faces masked by square helmets of the same color. And in their hands, the metal sticks which in time I learned to fear and despise. That night, as I watched them take him away, my gaze had held curiosity, curiosity fuelled hot by information the Red Men did not know I had. Curiosity, and a little dread, for I knew this was a secret I wasn't supposed to know.

Despite my brooding mood, I licked my bowl clean and took great care to stash my spoon back inside my tunic. My body, reinvigorated by rest and fuelled by the meal, marched forth to another shift of work. My mind lingered, however, mulling over the wild-eyed man's account. Over the repetitive years, I had let myself forget his words, but they were now coming back to me. A steel pipe, the squirt of oil on the conveyor wheels; every detail—no matter how absurd—invoked something indirectly. It was unfortunate that this other man had to have been dragged off in a manner so reminiscent to the wild-eyed one. Had he, perhaps, come to know of the same secret?

Many hours and more anonymous births later, I lay in my cot like everyone else, staring at the curve of the mattress above me, running a finger over its fertile belly. I felt lonely with my knowledge, and lonely with myself. I considered the man's words, that which he had claimed was the truth, and found it hard to believe. There was no proof, easily a madman's fancy.

Sleep claimed me, and I drifted into one of those rare moments when you are aware of the dream. There was a circle of dim light, and around it only solid dark. Illuminated in the midst were a thousand shaved heads, shiny like mass-produced plastic. I think I was one, too, and when I looked down my hands were young and uncalloused. Unsettling, to say the least, but I was surprised to discover that my own will could bring me out of it all. I left, and let the normal dreams take over.

The following day, standing once again in line to receive my porridge reward and thought of my loneliness, it struck me: we were all so similar. We did differ somewhat, of course; tall or short, bony or muscular—not clones. But we were all men, equally clothed, with perfect shaved heads and no errors. Not a missing finger, leg, or arm. Natural clones, if you will. The deformed babies were placed on different belts, always had been—a handicap to a man was a handicap to the system—and those maimed during the shifts never returned to their posts, their stools filled by another shaven man in identical brown linens.

The wild-eyed man had been right about that, then; our masters wanted us to be as similar as possible. I attributed to such monotony, for some reason, the cause of my loneliness.

I decided to remedy.

When I returned to my post, shuffling mutely through the silent ranks of co-workers, I kept my hand under my tunic, holding the spoon which I usually left inside a hole in my mattress. Shifts were always a chore, but for the first time I eagerly awaited my first woman, my first task. I tapped my knee impatiently with the spoon as hundreds of specimens slid by, open and prone and ready to be plundered.

The belt stopped, leaving a dark-skinned woman to materialize before me. Her hair covered her face, the hanging jaw leaving a gap for some strands to stick inside her mouth. Her eyes were closed—a rarity. Maybe the woman was dead, and they had forgotten to remove her. Peering forward, I made to poke her exposed leg. A convulsion racked her, and I yelped and almost fell off my stool. I then noticed it was not her but the baby, struggling to ram its way out of the womb. Prodding into the slick tissue, I began easing its passage, meanwhile glancing over my shoulder to check if any of the Red Men's attention had been drawn by my unusual noise.

Everything but the births and the cots was unusual in this place, and therefore suspicious. Routine and similarity, I reminded myself, routine and similarity.

I held the baby in my hand and picked up the spoon. The Red Men are constantly watching. Everyone says so. But that day (and in many of those to come) I proved to myself that they were not all that attentive. They have many to supervise, after all, looking down from their hanging cages, pointing their hollow metal sticks in our direction. They must have taken my rash motion as an accidental slip of the baby. A blunder of

blood and oil. On the spoon, there was only oil.

I stabbed.

Babies scream, they always do, as loud as they can. When I put out my brother's left eye, he could wail with no greater agony. I'm sure he would have, if he could, perhaps even stabbed me back. Mine was not a brutal gesture, or heartless—on the contrary, it was an act of love, and I delivered it with a strange joy and stranger guilt. I set my Brother in the green water, purified him, hoping the liquid would clean the wound, and without ever glancing at the belt-for-imperfections, placed him on the healthy line.

The next few months I ate with my hands. The spoon, crusted with my Brother's blood, I carried with me at all times, but I never washed it. No longer did I leave it in the mattress. More afraid than ever of having it stolen, I held it under my tunic, and when asked of the secrecy of my right hand I made accusation to chest pains. Some—those who worked in my vicinity and 'knew' me, so to speak—shook their heads when I said so. Pains usually mean disease, and after disease there is only the Red Men and the dragging of feet on the grates.

I had no pains, of course, only the cold reminder of my Brother pressed against my chest. I knew I would not be able to find him for at least ten years, if not more. I had been a small boy when the Red Men had first set me to work on the belts, but I can't remember exactly when. It is a vague memory, and all preceding it is utter darkness. More worryingly, I didn't know if they would let him live. He was maimed, devoid of an eye—obvious enough as a flaw. Somehow I trusted that others like me would be dealing with him, merciful people, and not the Red Men. We pale shaved ones do not care for the efficiency of the system, as long as we don't hinder it.

A long time passed after that, mainly uneventful.

The first year groaned by, marked by premature enthusiasm. Every day I sat in my stool and delivered. Mostly perfect babies, some male, some female; some imperfect; none protein-positive. I thought about the Outside, about the wild-eyed man's words and the truth of our world. If what he had said was true, then I needed my Brother.

My Brother.

For years he was the first thought in the morning and the last one before sleep. The promise of his discovery was all that kept me focused, moti-

vated... kept me sane. Was he alive? If so, where was he? How long until I should start searching? I didn't even know if they'd set him to work within miles of my position. What if they set him to work right above me, or below me, where I could never wander? Again, hope offered the most unlikely answer.

Another year, watching the days drip away slow and thick like molasses. The enthusiasm cooled, routine settled in more firmly. Womb's blood and engine oil filled my life again. This was followed by another year, and yet another. There came periods when I forgot completely. It took a long time, for there is nothing to distract the mind in this monochrome existence, but time is the most patient enemy. Repetitiveness dulled my brain down to the most basic animal functions. Slowly I came to understand why the older men spoke or reacted so seldom.

Paradoxically, it was habit which saved me, making me reach for my spoon, my bloodied spoon, and I would be reminded that there was a reason for enduring.

I contracted a fever at one point, but forced myself to the stool nevertheless, day after day. The sickness worsened, angered by my refusal to rest. Those who rested beyond their designated hours never returned. At my stool, I hallucinated, seeing the women talk to me, and the babies being born without eyes. During sleep I dreamt of the Red Men coming to drag me away, and the others in their cots watching my feet rattle on the grate floor. The remnants of such visions in my sweaty wake-ups were all that pushed me to my seat. Somehow, I survived it.

Hundreds of thousands of babies were delivered by my hands in those years. Only one mattered to me, growing old somewhere in the unknown darkness. The spoon had lost most of my Brother's blood by then, so I had wrapped it in some fabric torn from the cot mattress. I felt the steel shape through the rough texture, picturing the lifeblood. I held it close to my chest while sleeping, a mummified memory, and pictured what my one-eyed Brother would look like when I found him. That way, sometimes, I would dream of him instead.

Those were the good nights. Most nights were not.

Shivering in my cot from exhaustion or hunger or fear, I peered out into the immense darkness beyond the perimeter. A solid wall of black where the combined cones of lamplight could not reach. I knew there was something beyond there.

There had to be. Soon I would have to venture out and see for myself.

To keep myself resolute, sometimes, I would whisper to the spoon, reassuring it that I had not forgotten, and that my Brother's bloody sacrifice had not been wanton.

Sometimes I would read to it.

Ah, the books. The books were old, so very old, faded covers—if covers there were at all—clinging over jagged-edged pages, all falling out of their spines where the glue had gone as brown as the paper. They were delivered to us, and it was the same man who distributed them every time. One could hear his metal trolley, stacked high with volumes, rattling on the grate floor long before it emerged into the light.

I would wake in excitement every time I heard those wheels, at times with so much enthusiasm I ended up banging my head against the mattress above me. Climbing down, I rummaged through the collection with child's glee. Sadly we were allowed only one volume at a time, and I was one of the few who actually read the book he had chosen. Some held the tomes like talismans, to banish boredom perhaps, but never bothered to open the pages, embracing them instead like an offspring, or a balm against their cough. When my own reading was done, I would eye with bitter envy those square paper teddy-bears.

Whether the Supervisor handed books out as kindness, or to keep us under control, or even to send us a message, I never understood. I got many answers from my books, but none from the trolley-men. Over the years, many have pushed the book trolley, but none have ever returned a word in response to my questions. Where do these books come from? I would ask. Who gave them to us? All I got was blank stares. Two unblinking eyes under a shaved head. Until the day one of them coughed, or tried to, and the light of the bulb above me shone into his mouth to reveal a stump in place of a tongue, wickedly torn from its root. I never questioned them again.

The trolley-men came often enough—but for me not often enough. Being allowed only one volume at a time, I chose slowly and read slower. I'd read to the spoon, leaving it on the pillow, like a father easing his child into sleep with a bedtime story. It became the most cultured spoon ever smelted, lectured on the philosophy of Marxism, quantum mechanics, the miracle of Ford's industrialization, and ancient mythology. In truth, little of it held any real meaning to me. The complex terms, the idea of human discussion, sharing

of power and wealth, were all alien on my tongue. Why would anyone share their spoon, or want something in exchange for their work on the belts? Each word was a tag on an invisible object, with the tag itself written in some foreign language. Did anything in my world or my mind actually improved, by reading, one might wonder? I must admit, at times the act became no more than habit.

The history of the Gods, however, fascinated me particularly. After some old volumes on Egyptian polytheism, I had come across a large black book called *Theogony* by one named Hesiod. It was a long-winded chronicle of Gods, very different from the Egyptian ones. According to Hesiod everything started with nothingness, with the Chaos, and out of it came the elder Gods, the Protogenoi; Gaia the Earth, Tartaros the Abyss, Eros the Lust, Aither the Light and some others. And though much of it was incomprehensible, the idea of all-powerful creators frightened and excited me. I thought the creature responsible for this place, all its unending and non-stopping belts, must be one of those primordial beings, a Protogenos. Then I thought differently. For all the power our creator had, it could not directly control me, or the belts, or any aspect of reality. If it could, why would the wheels jam and need oiling, or the light bulbs burn and force pregnant women and potentially protein-positive babies to be discarded?

No, the Gods were something more.

Such mythology became part of my routine, as I learned of their lives, loves and hates. What fascinated me was how similar they were to us mortals, despite their greatness. Until one day I happened on a passage chronicling Zeus' ascension to the kingship of the heavens, done so by an alliance with his brothers Poseidon and Hades. I had no grand plots to engineer with my Brother, and he himself was unaware of my existence. Nevertheless, the tale forced me to shut my book abruptly and turn to the spoon. The time had passed.

"My brother," I said, "I think it is time we found you."

So did my search begin.

I could go nowhere during my shift, of course. The Red Men were always watching, always threatening with their hollow metal sticks. Everyone feared them; the fact that we did not know what those sticks actually did, made them all the more frightening. But during my hours of rest-

time and food, I was free to wander where I pleased. For decades I had milled around my work area by the belts, or lain in my cot to stare at the darkness which surrounded us, wondering what I would see if only there had been light, everywhere. And so that day, instead of blowing on strands from my mattress and wondering what I'd do if all the bulbs went out, I struck out into that unknown territory. For the first time in my life, I wandered.

The first few meters were the most frightening. I thought I was headed into pitch darkness, feeling my way with nothing but my fingers, eyes blind and nostrils filled with the stench of blood and engine oil. After pretending to rest on the floor, I rolled under the first belt and flattened to stillness. It had taken me a lifetime to make this first move, and while it did not take quite as long to make the second, I'm do not remember it being a quick decision. No Red Men appeared to drag me away, no hollow sticks pointed at me. I crawled forward a bit more, slipping around the legs of the belts, peering up at their undersides which at some point would swivel round to become the tops once again.

Creep. Crawl. Obstacles of steel holding up the occasional roof. Some belts moved, others didn't, and here and there I saw green water tanks moving overhead, the blurry shapes writhing within. I alternated dragging myself on the grates, fingers twined in the metal mesh, and lying on my back to take hold of conveyor belt legs. And as I made my way deeper into this new world, my eyes grew accustomed to a dimmer illumination which I had never noticed in my sector. A sort of ambient lighting originating from everywhere and nowhere. It was enough for me.

For the first time, I saw above and below. Identical, a criss-crossing of conveyor belts looping and hopping over each other, transporting the green water tanks and their passengers. Green and white shapes riding the scaled rubber backs of steel snakes. Above me I could distinguish the silhouettes of the metal webs, hear the hum of their engines and the shuffle of their rolling wheels. To see my own world from such perspective, understand my miniscule role in the vastness, was at once awe-inspiring and utterly terrifying. If anything, I garnered an even greater respect for the Gods. Fear clutched at my throat, and I forced myself to keep mental record of my path.

It might be fascinating to explore a new world; I remember some people saying so, in the books,

eager to dive into the uncharted lands. Looking back, I think their worlds held greater variety than mine. Walking a mile, in *their* world, brought you somewhere new, from one God to another. In my world, a mile left you with the same million empty eyes peering at you, one from each hole in the metal grates, and the breathing of our only God, a dead silent thing whose lifeblood was black and used to lubricate the belts. Five miles, ten miles; it made no difference. Nothing changed. I had no blank explorer's maps to chart, and wouldn't have needed them.

Until at last I saw new people.

It came to me slowly, the tungsten-filament bulbs shining strong even from a great distance, like lighthouses in the storms of Argos. It became my goal to drag my aching body in their direction. When I reached the last belts, those forming the perimeter, I squinted out and saw a sector similar to mine. More shaved heads and linen tunics, but new faces nevertheless. In a place where belts ran into infinity, such minor changes still painted a whole different landscape. I had discovered new land, and it brought a thrilling rush into my veins.

I still had a few hours left, I knew. My sense of time was well honed, having counted the minutes of my shifts for years, in wait for my rest time when I could read my books. I also knew that the Red Men did not monitor us as closely when the shift ended. Half-knew, half-hoped.

Once again, it took no short span of time to build enough courage. For my Brother, I thought, to find him! I rolled out and stood, faking nonchalance. Nothing happened, nobody stared. Some distance off, a line had formed for porridge collection. I strolled my way down, past the porridge queue, all the while keeping an eye open for a one-eyed man. A cyclops, certainly unmistakable. I found nothing. Pressed with time, I retreated.

Creep. Crawl. The fear of not finding my way back. I had been gifted with a wondrous sense of orientation, but the path had been long and highly similar at every turn. The panic gripped me, at one point, when I reached a point of no remembrance. I was saved by the Red Men, ironically, for peeking up over the belt I saw one of their high-hanging cages far to my left. I knew I was close to my sector, and the cages only hung above and around the populated areas. A few more ago-

nizing minutes and I was back, almost running back to my cot to plunge into the deepest relief.

The next few days I dared not strike out again. I had been lucky, that time. What if I did get lost? Would I starve, or be hunted down? Or worse? My fear kept me pinned, and not even the spoon could fight such a rational worry. Fate, however, had different plans in mind.

I was reading more on the almighty Gods, imagining their Mount Olympus as vast as (for surely nothing could be vaster than) this place. Not as dark. The Gods dwelt in a place with much light; I knew it somehow. And as I pondered such thoughts, I came upon the tale Theseus and the Minotaur. I drew instant parallel between the walls of Daedalus' labyrinth and the cobwebs of conveyor belts texturing the floor in every direction. Most intriguing was Theseus' use of a ball of thread to find his way back out of the maze after having slain the beast. The woman Ariadne had given him the idea, and I found that book in my hands to be my own Ariadne.

At last I'd have some use for all the threads of the mattress.

The final string was thin, but I trusted it would hold. I had it wrapped around my spoon, for easy unwinding. Armed with a concealed ball of thread, I made my second foray into the lonely lands of darkness and humming belts. With the string to mark my path, I trusted myself to quicker movement, and soon discovered a new sector a similar distance as the last one.

Every other day I would move out, unwinding to my destination, and then carefully rewinding with the thin white thread to lead me. On the days of rest I would take a short time to reinforce the string, and elongate it for deeper exploration.

Different areas had different rest periods, I realized, and as a result I was forced to limit myself to certain zones, or peek into people's cots. Entering a working sector was not an option. When the shift was on, everyone had to be working, and a stray man would surely attract the Red Men's attention. The last thing I wanted was attention, my feet dragging on the grate floor.

And so every other day I'd search, search for my Brother the Cyclops. Weeks and months wore this routine into my bones and my body, slowly but surely, began to feel the toll.

Until one day I saw Her.

TO BE CONTINUED...

**‘Share Your Space Today’
David Towsey**

Artwork (c) 2008 Steve Cartwright



The carriage creaks as we swing through another tunnel; the neon blue lighting flickering in time with my eyelids. Jesse doesn't notice. He's still talking, gesturing to emphasise something I should probably be listening to. Nodding, I lean my head against the window, trying not to look out onto the city. There's nothing else to see, which makes things difficult; like in the office, when you look up and see the foam tiled ceiling stretching across the world in neat geometric lines. I've spent too long following those lines.

The residual sun won't struggle over the horizon for another three hours, and change the black buildings to a streaky grey. By then I'll be trying to sleep.

"... and he'll be working from five, so you better have the cables." Jesse says, staring through me. He looks hollow, especially in this electrified light, his face like three pixels on an

over-zoomed photo. He constantly runs his hand over his shaved head. "So when Simmons gets here we'll be ready to show him what we've got. I mean it: he needs to see everything."

Should be listening.

"Show him everything?" I say, without lifting my head from the window. "We haven't started recording yet. What's to show?"

If I could just slip between the panes, not be in here or out there. Find my own place to live. It's another idea that might flower in someone else's hands, so I toss it out onto a bed of street weeds. A group of kids are playing with their imagination on a street corner; one might pick it up, realise some profound truth, and move out of the city. There's enough decay here for anything to grow.

"Rick, wake up!" Jesse punctuates with his fist, an exclamation mark of force on the line-end that is my shoulder. "I mean show him the cam-

era and stuff. He's very discreet; needs to be in his business. I've already told him to forget what this is about."

"And will he?" I reply, but I'm distracted. There's a woman on the seat opposite, half covered by Jesse's accusing chin. I can barely make her out, her black hair and formless face. I wonder if my eyes need treatment again.

"Of course. He's done worse than this before. No questions asked."

Leaving Jesse and the woman behind, I return to the window: a blind of urban sprawl pulled down. So many people here, moving along on a single track subsistence. A web of infinite coincidences and choices we used to associate with divinity. Now people have a name – Aether—for the social lubrication that enables us to co-exist; that stops most men from lashing out at their neighbour as we all struggle to put out our rubbish.

Swipe the card, punch the number, check if anyone's in the flat. The lights come on, chasing away the dark. No one is here, there never is when I get back. But someone has been; slept and lived in my space whilst I'm out. I know this, because now everyone knows this. Knowing doesn't stop the edges of my teeth grinding, or the hair on my arms and neck standing on guard as I come home.

"Where do we want the first one? Maybe the shower? She could be spicy, think about that." Jesse was grinning, grasping his head and looking about the place as if 'she' could still be here. Just like I was.

"She could be a he. Try and think about that."

"Lounge it is."

We spend the next few hours placing the cameras, talking crap and eating worse. I'm too tired to kick him out, and time spent with Jesse is time when I can let go. Not think.

"Can't believe someone else would actually want to live in this dump."

"They probably want to live here just as much as I do," I say, clearing the table of anything not burnt on.

"Fair. My flat is no better. Dunno who lives there too. Was thinking if this doesn't screw with us too much I might try it at mine, after you're done."

"Does it bug you too?" I try to keep my tone casual. It's becoming more and more forced. Soon, people will notice.

"What? Someone living in my place? Nah, not

really."

Someone living in my place. Merging with me: sharing my mail screen; touching my light switch; pissing in my toilet. How could it not get to you? How could your skin not crawl every time it touches what should be yours and yours alone? The kitchen is cleaner than I left it; hiding the last meal cooked there. The scum around the shower: I try and identify it as a product of my own body. How could it not get to you?

Jesse leaves. He has nowhere to go, but he never likes to stay in one place for too long. That's him, and that's the people Jesse lives with, talks to, and leeches off.

It feels late, except it's early. These kind of words have lost their meaning when people started working in shifts around the clock, but I still cling to them as I lie staring up at the ceiling. She could be beautiful, or so could he. What difference it would make, I have no idea. We occupy the same space but not the same time. I could always move if I hated them. But it might start again, the itching need to know.

Things are kept in the same place, slotting together in my life and theirs in a sickening efficiency: a universal material jigsaw. It all makes sense; there would be no reason to do otherwise.

Aether made sure of it.

We are all linked by a shared consciousness. It allows us to work and play amongst each other, regardless of our circumstances or surroundings. Before moving to the city, we had no need to realise this, but now we can only survive by embracing it. Share your space today, so we can have a more expansive tomorrow. Aether.

I remember reading it for the first time, the words grainy and digital.

'Can't live in half the world these days, so there's double in ours,' said an old man stood next to me. His tone was bitter, but I was too young to understand why. Now I'm too old to care. Other people said things, then moved back down the street and disappeared.

The cities were the warm, rotten, centre of existence people crowded around in their hundreds of millions. In such numbers they had to adapt, as humans always have, and felt secure in calling the changes Aether. A mass consciousness that dances step by step through the motions of accommodating more than one life or family per room. It had been there before, whenever a group of people were thrown together by a situation; the fusion of atomic personalities that formed a new whole. We see the fledgling Aether in the people

who survived the old wars and natural disasters. We have them to thank.

Today it organises everyone: me, her/him, everyone. I say 'it', but I really mean we. If I choose to get up right now, put on some clothes, or not, and walk out into the day and maybe go to work or maybe not, Aether would compensate. My co-habiter would decide to take the afternoon off to sleep, or they would win a competition, or get knocked down by a train, or doze in a gutter, or visit their family, or end it, or any of the myriad of possibilities.

I won't, so they won't, but that's probably Aether just making our lives easier.

"Um, J-Jesse, is this the right place?" Simmons asks. He looks nothing like I'd imagined. He is fat, with long dark hair tied back and a beard that looks like a handful of pencil lines.

"Yes, and could you stop with the stupid questions?" Jesse says, his hand etching italics of written stresses against his head.

"You know I- I- I don't have to be here. I've got other things to do."

The entrance display does neither of them any favours; distorting the reality into cartoon bulges and shapes stencilled imperfectly in black and white. No one looks quite right on a screen. It's not the true image, but a distancing representation – one that can change in the journey from source to viewer.

"Yeah, I know, and we both appreciate it. We'll just get the monitors set like you want them, and we're done. You can go back to whatever it was that put you in a shitty mood this morning."

"That would be, that would be you," Simmons replies.

Jesse either ignores that, or more likely, doesn't hear it. His attention has turned to the door. I hit the button.

"Hey, come on in," I say, in an attempt to sound accommodating. Neither Jesse or Simmons are the type of people to use or acknowledge pleasantries. To them conventions and conversations are alien, to be mistrusted and avoided.

"I figure, I, um, I figure, if it wasn't something we should be doing then Aether, Aether would kick in, and find us something else to do," Simmons says abruptly.

"Yeah, yeah, that's right." Jesse starts pacing around the room. "If it was bad to find out, then Aether would just do something, and we'd never know. Like, maybe kill us, or get me a job, that

kind of thing." Either of those possibilities was extreme. "Or... maybe it will work retroactively and we'll just forget, replace the files with porn or an action movie or something."

"Does Aether even work that way?" I ask.

"Who knows? Who fucking knows what it can do?"

It can't do that. It works in our subconscious, like when I'm trying to get to sleep. It's not malevolent or benevolent. It, through the people by which it is generated, has no conception of right or wrong. The way I see it, having any form of motivation is a singular human mindset, and the mass of Aether is above that. Or perhaps below it.

They probably sleep like a baby in that bed. One of those crazy people who like solid beds, good for the back. And every night I'm pissing nails just to find out what they feel and see and taste in this place.

I poke my hand through the blind, sending a shaft of grey into the room which greets the glow of my monitor with open hostility. Dust jumps from my finger into the light; which body have these motes detached themselves from? I breathe in heavily, but can't taste anything that might be someone else. I notice a half bitten finger nail resting on the sill. Did I put it there? This nail is jagged, torn from an anxious finger. Did they stand here, like I am now, and wonder about me?

I'm looking, but not in here. Not this time. It's out there now. One shadow in the city. Impossible to touch.

I can feel the pull of my bed. For a moment I fight it, but it's a battle that I accept is useless. It feels hard beneath me.

Morning rolls around. I've spent another night wrestling with the bed sheet, trying to wring out answers. I'd accept them from anywhere now. I look across to the wardrobe, where I hide my disguises of a regular person with a job, with something worth dressing for.

There's one of Jesse's joints hanging precariously on the edge of my bedside table, deciding whether or not to jump; whether either me or the skin headed bag of nerves are worth living and then dying for. I dare it to take the leap. There would be a hypocrisy in trying to talk it down: I want to see what the plunge looks like before I take it myself.

I punch the code for my wardrobe setting, and my clothes rotate in from the storage unit. They've rubbed shoulders with my shadow's shirts and socks. I grab my synthetic suit, which

itches in all the inaccessible places, and head out the door.

"So you see, Rick, we can't have any more of this. We're a small company here, a family, so if you don't pull your weight, we all feel it." My boss: shirt and tie, strangling himself with his own importance. What a fucking joke. A family that had taken a week to notice one of its 'sons' hadn't turned up. I nod along anyway, making the expected placating noises, as if I'm calming a small child or animal. A small mole in a shirt and tie.

He turns to his screen, probably looking up my notes. His secretary floats in and out of the room. Her suit makes her body shapeless; androgyny in pin-stripe. I barely register her, instead rolling my neck back, and stare up at those ceiling lines again. Great polystyrene leyelines of bureaucracy. Blank white panels. My eyes reach the back of my head and keep going. I can gaze on myself here, an ugly mass of red pulsating...stuff. Jesus-fucking-Christ; I can barely describe my own thoughts these days. And I've resorted to swearing in them. I laugh out loud at this. My boss looks up.

I leave, not sure if I still have a job and even less sure if that's important. I'm on the wrong side of town to get home quickly. I feel an odd desire to be amongst people. I haven't slept in five days. Jesse lives three streets away. I begin to walk to his flat, assured by some indescribable feeling that he will be there. Of course he'll be there; he doesn't work or do anything remotely productive. I bark a laugh, causing the small shadows of people around me to jump. But that's just it. They all look the same on street level. All blackened and anonymous. But they don't live with me.

"You don't know my address!" I scream at one of the blank spaces. She looks frightened, and then slightly relieved as she realises I'm right.

I stride furiously through a park. Leaves have been thrown onto the path, browns and reds and some green. They stop me; a barrier of ordinary and natural occurrence, standing in between my manic energy and its destination. Anger floats away, as these leaves have floated from whatever had created them; flown the coop or left the homestead. They're making their own way, slowly to whatever end. One shadow; and I'll be able to stop the ramblings and walk slowly to an end.

"You look like crap." Jesse is smiling, taking

pleasure in the realisation that someone finally looks worse than he does. Both of us suit the run-down 'diner' which seems designed to house rats and dregs like us, with its wipe-clean furniture that's never seen a cloth, and its tired lighting. "Shouldn't you be at work anyway?"

"Haven't been in for a week." This raises an eyebrow.

"The great straight arrow comes,"—head rub for emphasis—"astray. Welcome to the world of the liberated non-contributor. What is it?"

I laugh, a sound which has lost all its previous associations, and feels as adrift as I do. "It could be anything, though I don't remember taking or even buying it. I'm—" pausing to pick up the multi-sauce shaker as if it would let me in on my own secret, "-seeing things. I think."

"Ok, fairly standard hallucinatory effects, you must have taken this substance when you felt as bad as you look. No wonder, bad experiences multiply themselves. The effect has some kind of name, I forget," Jesse says, affecting a look of authority.

"No, it's not like that. Every now and again I see some kind of shadow, just on the edge, and when I turn it's gone."

"Paranoia. Listen, look at me. Look right in my eyes. Here." Jesse opens his eyes wide, and proceeds to pronounce every word excruciatingly slowly. "No one is after you. You've done nothing wrong."

"Stop it. Seriously, I'm seeing this shadow. I haven't slept for a week just in case I get to see it again."

"Wait. Let's just re-cap. You haven't been going to work. You haven't slept. And now you're seeing someone's shadow. Well it's pretty obvious what's going on. This shadow have any shapely curves?"

"What?"

"Is it a wo-man?"

"I don't know. I can barely see it. It's like..." Jesse cuts me off with an upraised finger. He reaches into his bag, pulling out his CaL, and places it in his ear. A moment later the bust of Simmons appears on the table, a transparent green image that looks more three dimensional, although far lighter, than the real thing.

"What?" Simmons' attention was obviously elsewhere. The steady drum-like clicks of his input pad the only sound that carry through the link from his flat.

"Is it ready?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm, ah, just putting the f-

finishing touches on it now."

Jesse hangs up.

"I'll just need, need to hook this up to the viewer. It has got a T, T, T. It has a T23 port, right?" Simmons says, walking straight to the equipment.

"Of course: it's not pre-historic," Jesse replies.

"Good."

I let their banter disappear, just like everything else. I'd seen it earlier. I'd see it later. That was enough for now.

"Right, see, I've edited out all the junk, the junk with you in it, and the stuff where, err, no one's in the room. I think you'll be pleasantly, pleasantly surprised." Simmons nudges Jesse as he hits play.

The screen jumps to this room, just without the wastes of space.

"Ahhh man, I knew it, didn't I say? And a blonde too," Jesse says, grinning like a school-boy.

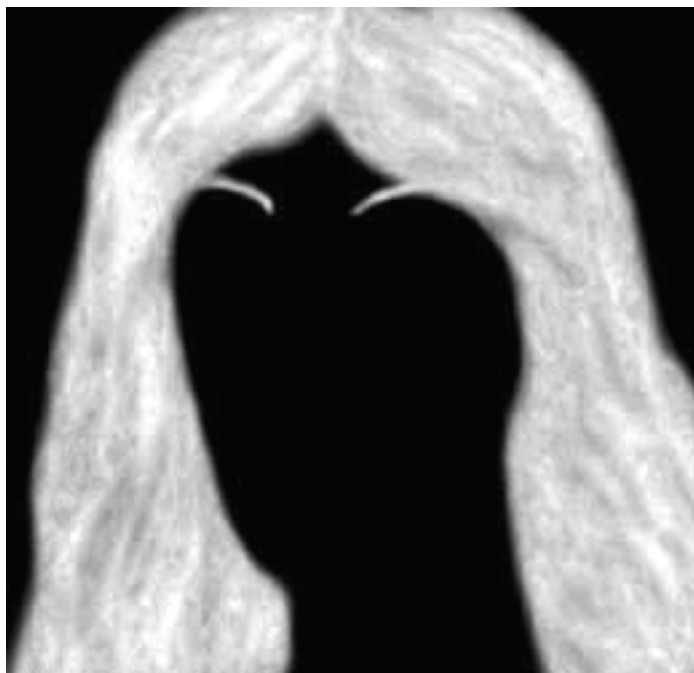
"Are you crazy? She's a bru, bru, brunette."

"What? You've been staring at a screen too long Simmons. What do you think, Rick? She a blonde or a brunette?"

I can't remember how cheated or angry feels, or how I am supposed to behave in this type of situation, or what is appropriate to say. I feel the pull of a contented acceptance, like the fleeting moments before sleep takes control. No point fighting it.

"I'd say she was darker than that."

I couldn't look at anything else. Her image on the screen. She moves about our flat, a black hole sucking in everything in an un-remarkable universe. Featureless, a permanent shadow, a gap. She's exactly how I imagined her. Beautiful.



Book Reviews

Jai Clare, *The Cusp of Something*. Elastic Press, 2007. Pp. 191. ISBN 9780955318139. £5.99.

Reviewed by Mario Guslandi

Elastic Press continues its commendable mission of providing a showcase for new writers by publishing *The Cusp of Something*, the debut collection of short stories by Jai Clare. Little is known of the author, except that some of her stories have previously appeared in literary magazines such as *The London Magazine* and *Nemonymous*. This book assembles twenty-five "tales" or, more precisely, explorations in the secrets of the human soul and in the sweet mysteries of sexuality.

Clare has a light touch, a sensitive mind and an elegant use of the language. Her pieces may disturb, disquiet, or simply convey a certain mood. Sadness and melancholy are the most common feelings to be experienced in her work.

You may have noticed that I am reluctant to use the word "stories"; this is because Clare seems either unwilling or unable to build a decent plot. She's a writer but not a storyteller, which to this reviewer is a major flaw, although others may not share my view. The lack of a proper story does not affect some tales, while making others flimsy and slightly boring.

Among the best pieces in this collection are 'Balloons' a delicately described love story taking place in the alienating environment of a big city; and the original 'Ramblista', where, in the magic atmosphere of an enchanting Barcelona, a man interviews

two ladies who disclose to him some unsuspected sides of life.

In the delicate 'Bone on bone' a love obsession dries out a musician of his musical talent, while in the brief but effective 'Eyes like water, like ice' the essence of sacrifice is represented with cruel realism. 'The ruins of Lutz' is an obscure and not quite so accomplished piece investigating the difficult relationship between brother and sister in search of the ruins of a lost city.

Eros is often the subject of Clare's literary efforts. 'More Moments of Sheer Joy' is an accomplished example of subtle eroticism described from the feminine point of view through the words of a woman touring the world's islands to raise funds for charities. Two further, interesting trips into the world of female sexuality, either lesbian or hetero, are 'Man of Shape' and 'Vanitas' both imbued with a deep sense of bleakness and gloominess. The most consistent story, at least in terms of a semblance of a plot, remains 'The Lightest Blue', describing with a delicate touch the end of a love affair during a vacation in Greece.

Clare is a painter who avoids strong colours and prefers to employ soft pastels. This is her best quality but also her current limitation. She is an artist showing promise but should exercise her muscles in order to produce in the future more solid fiction, if possible endowed with fleshy characters and more substantial events.

Karina Kantas, *In Times of Violence*. (2d ed.) Lulu, 2007. Pp. 110. ISBN 9781411633711. €11.00.

Reviewed by Craig Bellamy

In Times of Violence is a hard-hitting urban thriller about gangs, teenage lust, and violence. Set in a tough urban landscape, the story revolves around a teenage girl, Jade, and her struggle to belong. Jade is from a broken family and moves to the big city to escape her drunken mother. On arrival she befriends the Tyrants, a local gang with the ultra-violent Clay as the leader. Jade will do anything to belong, including taking Clay as her lover with all the sexual obligations associated with this.

This novel, Kantas' first, displays a sophisticated empathy for a young audience. Initially, given the non-judgemental tone and sympathy with the characters, this reader assumed that the novel was written by an adolescent, but although the author has a distance in age from the intended audience, she does not suffer a distance in understanding. Although the characters are at times a tad thread-bare, the realistic setting of the story, and the sympathetic character of Jade, renders the story more complete.

The narration also at times lacks detail, depth and pace, racing from one unfulfilling scene to another. But the violent scenes are rendered vividly with heads cracking on concrete, knives, blood, and murder. Although violence, juxtaposed with love, revenge, and belonging, is the central theme of the story, the brutality is neither glorified nor overtly condemned by the narration. Instead, through the vivid depictions of violence, the reader is left with a feeling of the fruitlessness of violence and the social conditions that breed it.

Given the recent publicity about youth violence in Britain, *In Times of Violence* is a story that will resonate with English readers. A self-contained youth culture, devoid of positive role models, and with little or no social mobility, will find its own rules and own ways of belonging. Gangs and violence are a consequence of a fractured society with limited opportunities for those trapped in their grip. Violence only leads to more violence and to its ultimate conclusion: death.

In Times of Violence is an entertaining and fast-paced novel, well worth reading by younger audiences and perhaps even those a bit older!

***Zencore: Scriptus Innominatus. Nemonymous 7.* Megazanthus Press, 2007. Pp. 209. ISSN 1474-2020.**

Reviewed by The Exploding Boy

Zencore! is the latest anthology of Nemonymous Magic Fiction and Magical Realism from Megazanthus Press. The collection arrives in the same mysterious fashion as its predecessor, seventeen short stories by various authors, all listed on the back of the book, the stories inside unassigned to each writer until the following anthology.

This concept may, at first glance, seem a little strange, but in reading the collection, it somehow 'frees' the stories, allowing each piece to live and breathe as pure narrative, unattached to any particular author. It comes across as a fitting form for the simple art of *storytelling*.

Overall, the quality here is of first-class standard, with some fascinating ideas contained within its 200 odd pages. All the stories hold an elliptical and engaging air, never dipping below interesting. Nothing here is obvious and all the writers skilfully avoid cliché. From the charming snail-crunching vignette 'Torzion' to the scalpel-wielding 'Word Doctor', *Zencore!* does not disappoint, presenting us with a brilliant slice of independently published fiction.

And there are several gems besides. For my money, the standout stories here are all highly enjoyable and genuinely deserving of mention. The mysterious and quirky tale 'MMM-Delicious' is rather captivating, with a lovely thread of sinister humour throughout, never plumbing for the obvious and leaving the reader with a pleasant, if mystified aftertaste.

'The Awful Truth About the Circus' and 'Red Velvet Dust' are both excellent, well-written stories, nimbly capturing what magical realism is all about, turning the reader's eye inward to the human condition, describing hope and loss with delicate brush strokes. 'Mary's Gift, the Stars and Frank's Pisser' is a wonderfully original yarn, full of sadness and dreams, the story of tramps intertwined with fate and the cosmos, a juxtaposition that is both fascinating and grim.

Favourite story 'England and Nowhere' has a beautifully erotic slant, with excellent characterisation and a plot that keeps the reader guessing well after the end. This story, for me, was seriously moving and lifted the collection to new heights.

All these mentioned stories linger long after turning the page, though one gets the impression that readers will discover their own personal favourites within such a diverse and appealing collection.

Zencore! is well worth a look. This satisfied reviewer looks forward to the next anthology in the series with bated breath.

Israel Zangwill, *The Big Bow Mystery*. Dybbuk Press, 2007. Pp. 196. ISBN 9780976654636. £8.00 / \$13.00.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

Originally published in 1888, *The Big Bow Mystery* claims to be the first novel length locked door mystery. Based in Victorian times, Zangwill sets the setting for a bizarre whodunnit.

The writing is comical, but don't expect *The Big Bow Mystery* to be an easy read. The reader will find themselves glued to the words so as not to miss an important clue somewhere. And as always, the clues are right before your eyes.

The Big Bow Mystery was first published in installments for *The Star* newspaper, and had the public writing in with their conclusion to the mystery.

Once the wicked deed has been done, Zangwill goes on with a series of conversations and scenes between the main characters. Don't be fooled into thinking these conversations are unimportant: everyone is a suspect in a murder, which evidence proves could not have taken place. A suspect is arrested, a trial takes place and evidence points to the murderer. But it doesn't end there.

Readers who love Sherlock Homes and Agatha Christie mysteries will find *The Big Bow Mystery* just as engaging, and will concentrate on who done it, and more importantly, how it was done. As with all great mysteries, the evidence is there, the clues are simple enough, but don't expect the answer will jump off the page. Zangwill enjoys teasing the reader.

I thought for a while this story would turn out to be a mystery that would leave the reader hanging, allowing them to make up their own mind to what actually happened and who was guilty. Thankfully, Zangwill concludes the mystery with a motive, and murderer, that will leave a grin on the reader's face. A comical, engaging read.

At the end of the novel, Zangwill delights the reader with 'Cheating the Gallows', a short story about two men that lodge together and their love for one woman. Zangwill gives a surprising ending to this enjoyable short mystery tale.

New submission guidelines and paycales for fiction

If you are thinking of submitting a piece of writing for consideration by *The Future Fire*, please read some back issues and our online manifesto to get a feel for what we are looking for. When submitting, read the following guidelines carefully:

1. There is no absolute word-limit but pieces over 8 000 words will only be accepted if they are of outstanding value and quality. (Longer pieces may, at the editors' discretion, be serialised, but we must have the whole story before we make any decision.)
2. Please send your story to the fiction editor (fiction@futurefire.net) as an attachment. We prefer .DOC, .RTF, .ODT, or .TXT files (query first for any other format). Please use a common, easy-to-read font such as Times New Roman, Arial, or Courier, and use no other formatting than italics. For any more sophisticated media (e.g. graphical, animated, or hypertext fiction) please query first.
3. Use the email subject line: TFF submission: Surname, 'Title'.
4. Please only submit one story at a time, and do not send work that is under consideration elsewhere; let us know in plenty of time if you plan to withdraw and offer a story elsewhere. A story that is withdrawn once illustrations have been commissioned will deeply irritate us and we may hold a grudge.
5. A decision is usually made within four weeks but sometimes life gets in the way of efficiency, for which we apologise. Please help to keep us honest by reporting our response times to Duotrope's Digest.
6. *The Future Fire* is offering payment of \$20 for each original story accepted (to be paid via Paypal on appearance). We know that this is a nominal fee, but this is an entirely free and non-profit-making publication. The main reward is still seeing your work printed in the pages of this peer-reviewed publication.
7. We prefer to publish original material. We do not pay for reprints. Previously published stories are not verboten, but please let us know if a story has appeared elsewhere when you submit.
8. We shall ask authors of all stories accepted to agree to this electronic contract: "You [legal name] of [address] grant us, The Future Fire, the non-exclusive right to publish your work [title] by [name byline or pseudonym] on the pages of our website and in the free PDF issue. All other rights to this work belong to you. You guarantee that this work is your own and that you have the right to grant us the use of it and that the work contains nothing that breaks copyright or other laws. Any actions breaking such laws including but not limited to plagiarism intellectual property theft and defamation will be your sole responsibility. We will print a copyright notice in your name but we will not register the work with any copyright office on your behalf. You may modify or reprint the work anywhere in the world but we would ask as a courtesy that you wait three months after publication and credit us for first appearance."

(For the contract we shall need your legal name and mailing address, even if you wish your work to be published under a pseudonym. We will never share this information with anyone else.)

It is the intention of *The Future Fire* to keep a indefinite archive of stories published in HTML; if an author has a pressing (e.g. legal) need to have a story removed, however, we shall of course help them to comply. We may not be able to remove the story from the copy of the PDF issue that is deposited with national libraries, archived by the Internet Archive, and other places outside of our control (just as a paper periodical archived in a national library would remain available permanently).

Artwork

All illustrations for stories are commissioned. If you would be interested in joining the TFF artist team please email the fiction editor (subject line: TFF artist query) stating your interest and be prepared to show some examples of your work--an online portfolio or demonstration site would be ideal. Unfortunately we cannot currently afford to pay all artists, but one illustration per issue will be chosen to adorn the front cover of the PDF version of the magazine, and this artist will be paid a \$20 fee. We wish we could pay more.

These guidelines are correct at April 2008. Most up-to-date guidelines can always be found on the TFF website at <http://futurefire.net/about/contrib.html>



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