

**2009 Short Story Competition Special
Won by Iain Cairns**



CONCEPT

Sci-fi e-zine



Editorial

It's 1914 and Gustav Holst is struggling with a Royal Commission--to write a Solar System Symphony fitting for the ever-expanding Great Britain. One doesn't refuse the King himself, no matter how inconvenient, so that's how Holst finds himself on Sir Ernest Shackleton's Grand Tour of the planets, writing to his friend Ralph Vaughn Williams from New London about the most difficult movement of the work. How best to capture the horror and strangeness of a war with the Martians? A traditional march simply will not do...

When I was a child, there were few things I loved more than Gustav Holst's *The Planets* suite and H. G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*. Never once did I consider combining them all into one wondrous piece. Iain Cairns has done so brilliantly well, and in the process created an alternate history I'd like very much to see more of. Like the real Shackleton, I am filled with an appetite the gods might have envied, but this brief taste will have to do for now.

- *Sean Williams, Author.*

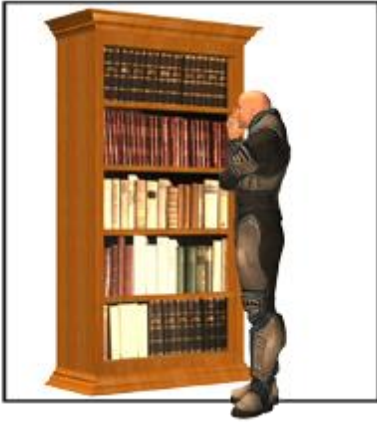
Congratulations to Iain Cairns on winning the Concept Sci-fi Short Story Competiton. You can find his winning entry, and the other two short-listed entries below. I hope that you enjoy them.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

Artwork

Stu Driver at <http://obsidianhawke.deviantart.com>



Bringer of War

by Iain Cairns

From Gustav Holst, New London, Mars

To Ralph Vaughan Williams, London, England

4th March 1914

Dear Ralph,

My dear friend, apologies for not having written to you for so long. Recent days have proved eventful, to say the least, leaving me no opportunity for correspondence.

As you've no doubt observed from the hotel notepaper, I'm writing to you from Mars. Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are.

Only a fortnight ago, I was sitting at my breakfast table in Barnes, little suspecting the hundred million mile journey ahead of me. That morning's post included a letter from an equerry at Buckingham Palace, requesting my attendance the next day on an urgent and confidential matter. I was bewildered and intrigued by the invitation. I guessed that perhaps this official might want me to perform one of my recent organ pieces at a palace function.

On arrival at the palace, I was ushered into a comfortable reception room. However, instead of being joined by some flunky, imagine my face when King George himself swept in and bade me sit.

With your level of success, Ralph, I'm sure that meeting royalty is a commonplace event, but I confess that I was feeling light-headed and rather overwhelmed. "Mr Holst," said the King, "My wife and I have long been great admirers of your work - and we would like to offer you a special royal commission."

The words “royal commission” sang in my ears. My work of late has been woefully overlooked by the public. This commission, I imagined, could be the popular breakthrough I’ve waited so long for. However, as the old adage goes, always be careful what you wish for.

“In these times, Mr Holst,” the King continued, “Britain must be seen to affirm its status as a Great Power. Not only politically and militarily, but also in the realms of science, exploration, art and culture. We need to demonstrate that Britain can achieve great things on a grand scale. So, I want you to compose a sort of Solar System Symphony, inspired by the very planets themselves. What could be grander, eh? It would be lauded as a masterpiece throughout the civilized world. That would certainly show our continental friends a thing or two about British achievement, what?”

“It sounds intriguing, Your Majesty,” I told him. “A great and worthy project indeed. I would be honoured to undertake the commission.”

“Splendid!” the King said. “So you’ll go?”

“Go, Sir?”

Seeing my look of confusion, the King’s face fell. He scratched his beard. “Sorry, Mr Holst. I’m not being very clear about this, am I? May I ask Sir Ernest to join us?”

Presently, Sir Ernest Shackleton joined us from an anteroom and shook my hand vigorously. I wondered who else might be waiting outside to join us.

“Mr Holst,” said Shackleton, spreading out an astronomical chart before us. “I take it you’ve heard of our plans for the Imperial Trans-Planetary Expedition?”

Shackleton outlined his latest odyssey, a sort of Grand Tour of the Planets. Shackleton’s ship *Endurance* will embark from Mars, visit Venus and Mercury during the first stage of its journey, before ‘sling-shotting’ around the sun. Shackleton explained that this is a desirable speed-building manoeuvre rather than the suicidal madness it at first appears. *Endurance* will then fly past the unexplored worlds of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, before returning home to Earth.

“All this is fascinating, Your Majesty,” I interjected, “but what has it to do with me?”

“Why everything, Mr Holst, if you accept the commission,” said the King. “You will be on board the *Endurance* with Sir Ernest for the three-year voyage.”

You may be relieved to learn, Ralph, that I managed to take a seat before my legs gave way. “I beg your pardon?” I whispered.

The King beamed. “How can you hope to capture the essence of the Planets in musical form if you don’t visit them for yourself?”

“Use a telescope, perhaps?” I offered weakly. But His Majesty had already gone on to explain that I was to be part of a vibrant “artistic contingent” aboard *Endurance*. Apparently, Augustus John will be capturing the brave adventurers and their exploits on canvas, while John Masefield records the momentous events in prose and poetry.

“But... three *years*?” I enquired.

“Yes, just three years,” confirmed Shackleton. “Dazzlingly quick for a circuit of the Solar System. It’s a feat made possible only by the very latest British scientific improvements to the salvaged Martian spaceflight technology.”

“This would be a great service to your country, Mr Holst,” said the King. “I can understand that you have a lot to think about. Take a day to consider, and give us your answer in the morning. But we must have your decision then. *Endurance* embarks from New London at the end of next week – can’t have anyone else’s expedition beating us to the glory, eh?”

Shackleton shook my hand again. “I’m off to Mars tonight to prepare *Endurance*. See you in New London then, old chap?” He winked.

I returned home to Barnes in a somewhat dazed state, certain that the whole idea was madness and that I would politely decline the royal commission. But the next morning, I found to my surprise that I was actually considering it.

In the end, it was Isobel who said that I should go.

“You’ve not been genuinely happy for years, Gustav,” she said. “This may be your best chance to achieve real recognition. You must follow your dream.”

She was right, Ralph. If I don’t take this chance, I might as well forget about making a career as a composer, and go back to playing the trombone at tea dances.

I sent a short telegram of acceptance to the palace and began to pack.

Two days later, I was on my way to join Shackleton and the crew of *Endurance* on Mars. The journey to New London involved a week of cramped tedium aboard a noisy packet cruiser, the charmingly named *Pride o’ the Clyde*. Most of my time was spent cooped up in a tiny cabin with a snoring hat salesman from Dundee. (I mean that the salesman snored, not his bowlers and Homburgs.)

My fellow passengers were mostly over-fed holidaymakers. They apparently hadn’t read the ominous newspaper headlines about the worsening situation on Mars, as they all seemed jolly as Jove to be going there. There was such bustle and mirth among them, you’d have thought we were on the train to Margate on a sunny Saturday morning. They’re doubtless all going to Mars for nothing more spiritual than to wallow like so many walruses in the hot spas under New London, watch the bear fights in New St Petersburg, or fritter away their savings in the casinos of Nouvelle Paris.

Also among the *Clyde’s* passengers were soldiers on their way to the New London garrison. They clogged the companionways in their red vacuum suits, and created a constant fug of Woodbine smoke - which played merry hell with my asthma. The troops seemed tense and sombre, and did not join in with the laughter and music-hall songs of the holidaymakers.

Perhaps they had good reason to worry. Only last week, the Kaiser extended the boundaries of Wilhelmsland and laid claim to the uranium mines at Olympus Mons. I gathered from the troops’ nervous mutterings that this expansionism has caught the generals in Whitehall on the hop. I hope for all our sakes that, as former allies against the Martian foe, our two nations can resolve matters peacefully. (However, given the growing tensions, I think my

darling Isobel was right in persuading me to drop the “von” from my surname when I applied for my off-world passport.)

“You’re lucky that the trip’s so short these days,” my bunkmate said one morning, when I complained about my interrupted sleep. “When Kitchener’s armada did it in ’99, it took them four months.” He laughed. “Mind you, he must have been slowed down by all them bombs he was carrying.”

When I wasn’t failing to sleep, I tried to make some initial notes for the Solar System Symphony. (I’ll have to do something about that title.) The first movement is to be a study of Mars. Yet, although we live in a time when Mars dominates our lives, I found it hard to get inspiration. What does the red planet sound like? I knew it was named for the Roman god of war, but my initial sketches on that theme sounded trite – like the bad Wagner tributes we wrote when we were students. I tore up those first manuscripts in disgust.

I sought inspiration on the ship’s observation deck, gazing out at the steadily growing red disc ahead. By the last day of the voyage, Mars filled the viewing window from top to bottom. Looking at its mottled surface, I found it easy to imagine the outlines of continents and oceans, but I knew this was merely an illusion. For if Mars had still had oceans, rich flora and varied fauna, there would have been no reason for the Martians to seek to conquer Earth.

When we finally docked at New London, none of my fellow passengers seemed excited by the prospect of setting foot on another planet. How quickly people become blasé about such wonders! Why, only 16 years ago, they would have put the chances of life on Mars at a million to one. And certainly none of them would have dreamed that the life in question might be their own.

I, for one, was suitably awestruck as I alighted from *Pride o’ the Clyde* and beheld New London - the city of crystal and columns. You and Adeline will have seen photographs, Ralph, but believe me - they don’t do it an ounce of justice. It’s as if the Crystal Palace mated with the Parthenon and had a thousand glittering puppies, all of them jostling for position along a craggy red mountainside.

“A marvel of British engineering and the jewel of the Empire,” said Shackleton as he met me after customs. “Take a good look, old chap.”

Out beyond the vast crystal windows of the space terminal stretch the rusted plains of Mars. A sea of paprika under a butterscotch sky. Along the horizon, the ground thrusts up suddenly like a massive wall into the dusty heavens.

“Olympus Mons,” said Shackleton. “That’s what Kaiser Willie’s got his greedy little eyes on. That and the uranium.”

“I didn’t realise how close it was to New London,” I said.

Shackleton laughed dryly. “No wonder the Viceroy is demanding more and more troops from Earth. He’s petrified by all the German land grabbing.”

As if on cue, the troops who’d disembarked from *Pride o’ the Clyde* marched past us. From my viewpoint at the observation window, I could see the garrison spread out far below. The parade grounds were swarming with tiny purposeful figures, busy among the gleaming hulking forms of land-crawlers and flying howitzer platforms.

“And look there,” said Shackleton. I craned my neck and saw a large, very new-looking rocket at the far edge of the docks. Technicians and engineers were busily preparing her for launch. “That’s our girl,” he said. “That’s *Endurance*.”

As we left the terminal and headed for the taxi rank, I encountered my first ‘Martian’. Even though I knew the thing on the great stone plinth was lifeless, it still gave me quite a shock. Of course, it wasn’t the organic life form itself – the only place you’ll find those today is dissected in a specimen jar. Nor was it one of the great three-legged fighting-machines which all Earthmen learned to hate and fear.

Rather, this was a Martian ‘handling-machine’ – a five-legged crab-like apparatus fashioned from gleaming metal. These five-legged, many-armed contraptions turn out to have been the Martians’ everyday raiment here. The handling-machine served simultaneously as clothing, protection, support, transport, and weaponry for the relatively helpless organic body of every adult Martian.

It also served as cutlery. The integrated blades and syringes enabled the Martians to swiftly drain and ingest the blood of the docile bipeds they reared as cattle – and the blood of the unfortunate human beings they captured on Earth.

“Strange isn’t it?” said Shackleton. “I’ve seen those things a thousand times here. but they never get any less... alien.”

Seeing that single machine, my mind too easily summoned up a vision of the city as it must have been only 15 years before – alive with a million five-legged steel crabs, carrying their bloated, betentacled occupants about their bloodthirsty business. And all of them rending the thin air with their dismal cries of “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla.”

With a shiver, I joined Shackleton in a hackney carriage and rode from the docks to the upper tiers of the city. Over the hum of the taxi’s electric engine, Shackleton gave me a running commentary of the city sights. He mingled this with the short but eventful history of the colony - from the Royal Engineers’ construction of the first pressurised crystal dome amid the ruins of the original Martian city, to the sprawling growth of today’s thriving New London.

Our cab took us past what little remains of the old city - the spindly-columned architecture and haunting statuary of the Martians.

“Kitchener blasted most of the city into rubble with high explosives,” said Shackleton. “It was rather unnecessary by that stage. He and the Allies had already slaughtered the Martians with an aerial bombardment of germ warfare shells. And for good measure, they incinerated them with their own heat-ray weapons. Demolishing the city, though. That was a shame. That was like the Romans salting the earth at Carthage.”

Shackleton told me that, being underground, the city’s great hot-spring complex was spared destruction. As he delighted in telling me, before its formal renaming as New London in 1903, the battalion of Cameron Highlanders garrisoned here gave the city a different name. Apparently, they were inspired in their naming by the grandeur of the Martian baths, as well as a yearning for their distant Highlands. Shackleton grinned. “They called the place Ulla-Pool, old chap.”

On arrival at the New London Savoy Hotel, Shackleton left me to continue with his preparations. I had been inspired by my first experiences of Mars. As soon as I was safely ensconced in my hotel room, I spread out the

manuscript paper and began to write. The music now flowed freely onto the paper as if it were straining to be born – it was an unsettling but quite exhilarating experience. The entire movement seemed already perfectly formed in my mind, the sound of a quintessentially martial world, moving ominously towards a whole new era of battle. The insistent pounding of war drums drives the piece in a relentless spiral towards a bloody and terrible climax. I think you will particularly enjoy it, Ralph – you'll probably think it sounds like Ravel bare-knuckle boxing with Strauss.

But here's the thing – what would your natural choice of time signature be for such a piece? Common time? A march *alla breve* would of course be appropriate. But the more I had tried to shoehorn my melody into either of these meters, the less impact it carried.

Now the solution was clear. I needed something of the alien to make my music truly Martian. And, Ralph, if you'll forgive my posing the question - how exactly would a five-legged Martian go marching to war?

In 5/4 time, my dear chap, in 5/4!

As soon as I applied this new meter, all fell at last into place. The off-kilter rhythm brings an 'otherness' to the piece that I think that the listener will not easily identify with his ear or his head – but will feel with force in his gut.

Now, as I write this letter, I gaze from my hotel room window at the night sky over Mars and I wonder if the very bright star I see between Phobos and Deimos is actually my own dear home.

I wonder what the music of the Martians must have been like, before their descent into single-minded brutality and survivalism. What remains of their ancient civilization shows they once had the capacity for art, culture and finer feelings – surely music was a part of that?

I wonder what awaits me in the coming years aboard *Endurance*. Will we find other civilisations on the unexplored worlds of our solar system? Will they be enlightened angels – or monsters more horrifying even than the Martians?

And I wonder, Ralph... how long do we have before war comes once again to our worlds?

Your dearest friend, *Gustav*



Swan Song

by Graham Storrs

'We got another one, Jed. Just came in. Singing his head off.'

'I'll be right there.'

I was out of my office and down the corridor before I'd even hung up the call. I could hear the singing in the distance, odd, tuneless warbling, not even in a scale I could recognise. Just random notes, grating against each other or leaping strange intervals.

'This is Doctor Gastel,' Robyn said, introducing me as I entered the consulting room. 'He's our resident neuropsychologist.' She turned to me. 'This is Mr. Ellyard. He was referred by his GP, presenting with... Well, I guess you can hear for yourself.'

I smiled and stepped forward. Ellyard was an ordinary-looking man, about average height, a little overweight but nothing terrible. He was in his late thirties, I guessed, a touch of baldness. He was casually dressed but not scruffy, clean, clean-shaven, and in every outward sign, perfectly ordinary. Except that he was sitting there with a dopey grin on his face, singing that unearthly music like a tone-deaf drunk.

I turned back to Robyn, looking for more information. She shrugged. 'He was fine when he came in. Sober, sensible... We were just making small-talk while I read his history and suddenly he was off.'

'Anything in his notes?' I asked as I thumbed his eyelids wide and peered inside. He didn't seem to notice.

'Nothing. No head trauma, no fevers, no history of epilepsy or autism, no psychiatric problems.' She shook her head. 'It started a few days ago and has been getting worse. His GP's had the usual blood work done, plus some drug screening. Everything negative.'

His pulse was normal and he seemed relaxed and happy enough. 'Mind if I talk to him?' He was Robyn's patient. I was just there because she'd been kind enough to invite me.

'Be my guest. I wasn't able to get through.'

I planted myself in front of him but his eyes wouldn't meet mine or follow my finger. They weren't avoiding contact, it was just as if he wasn't seeing me. I spoke his name, and again, more loudly. I asked him what he was singing. I asked him if he knew where he was. I took hold of his shoulders and asked him again. I might as well not have been there.

'I thought I'd repeat the blood work,' Robyn said, 'check the more exotic things his GP didn't ask for. I'll also do an MRI, see if there's anything obvious – a tumour, aneurysm, dementia, whatever.'

A tongue of anxiety licked gently at my insides. 'You won't find anything. This is the third one in a month. All the same. And you know what? Even the tune's the same.'

I left Robyn to her tests and went back to my office, staring out across the sun-baked Brisbane skyline. Two cases like this was a bizarre coincidence. Three was starting to look like an outbreak. But an outbreak of what?

I sent alerts out through the usual channels, emailed a few people I knew in other cities, other countries, and settled down to trawl through the databases. Someone, somewhere, must have seen this before. But, as the day wore on, my searches turned up nothing useful. Robyn kept me updated on her tests – which showed nothing unusual in the man's brain, nor in his blood. She widened her search, looking now for the improbable. My correspondents, one by one, got back to me with confused and negative replies. One even thought I must be joking.

'It's only happening here,' I told the roomful of specialists I had assembled. Woodroffe, Chief Administrator for the hospital, frowned at me as if I were asking him for a loan. 'We need to start treating this like an infectious disease; quarantine these patients, trace their movements, check the people they've been in contact with.'

'Aren't we talking about a mental illness here, Gastel?' the Chief of Surgeons asked. He emphasised 'mental' as if it were an inferior species of slime-mold.

I shook my head. 'The previous two patients have been under psychiatric care since they turned up. There is no sign of improvement, no diagnosis that fits. They don't respond to antipsychotics. They don't respond to anything while this condition is presenting. In between periods of mindless singing, they are perfectly lucid but confused.'

'Another Creutzfeldt-Jakob variant?' someone asked.

'I'm running tests for prion diseases now,' Robyn said. 'The other two had the same tests, with negative results.'

Woodroffe made an impatient sound. 'Surely we should find out what we're dealing with before we run off half-cocked announcing -'

'There are protocols,' I said firmly. 'We need to notify the Population Health Unit. Then we -'

Woodroffe raised his voice. 'Yes, if we were dealing with influenza or measles. What exactly do you propose we tell them? We've got an outbreak of tuneless singing?'

Someone on my right sniggered. I clamped down on the retort that sprang to mind and tried to stay calm.

'What's the time to onset of symptoms?' Woodroffe demanded, pressing his advantage. 'What's the recommended exclusion period? No, no.' He stood and picked up his phone and PDA. 'You need a lot more than that, Dr. Gastel. A lot more.'

The meeting broke up and people hurried off. One or two looked at their watches crossly, as if I'd frivolously wasted their precious time. Robyn hung back.

'He's right, you know. At the moment it's an interesting cluster, not an outbreak.' She patted my arm and we walked together down the corridor.

'What's that you're humming?' I asked as we waited for the lift.

She laughed. 'It's that damned tune. I've been around it so long now, and I just can't get it out of my head. It's weird, but sort of catchy.'

In the morning, there was another one. A young girl of fourteen, warbling away with a glazed expression. In the afternoon, there were two more.

Three days later, we had a ward full of them. They were turning up all over the city by then. I got a call from a friend in Sydney to say he'd seen his first case. Then from one in Adelaide.

'All right!'

Woodroffe was almost shouting, pacing up and down behind his desk while I stood in front of it, haranguing him.

'I want those patients quarantined,' I insisted. 'I want their families quarantined, their friends, their neighbours, the people they work with, schoolmates, teachers, everyone they might have come in contact with. I want the symptoms broadcast on the news channels. I want people to know they're in danger so they can protect themselves.'

He sat down, looking tired. 'Alright. I've been talking to the PHU. We'll use one of the infectious disease protocols. Chickenpox, maybe, or measles. I've also contacted the Communicable Diseases Network. It's being handled way above my head now.'

'We should quarantine the whole city. This is where it's incubating.'

'It's too late.'

'Because of the cases in Sydney and Adelaide? That's OK. We can contain those. Brisbane's the problem.'

'No, because of the case in San Francisco, and the two cases in London, and all the other ones we haven't heard about yet.' It was the first I'd heard of any infections outside Australia. He shook his head. 'Tell me you have some clue what we're dealing with.'

'We need better resources for this than we have here. Better people too.'

He nodded. 'And a bigger hospital.'

I turned to go but he stopped me at the door.

'Jed, should I get my family out of town? It's not too late, is it?'

Three days later, we were snowed under. I'd never seen an epidemic before and I didn't ever want to see one again. We doubled up in the wards and started putting beds in the corridors and waiting rooms. The quarantine procedures – the ones I'd been so keen on – made life difficult for everyone. You'd think that an illness that just made people sing a tune over and over wouldn't be so bad, but it was. While the victim was in the trance state they were completely incapacitated. They couldn't move, or feed themselves, or take care of basic hygiene. They just sat and sang with that creepy look on their face.

I must have passed twenty of them in the corridors on my way to Robyn's office. We hadn't had a death yet, but that was only because everyone was working flat out to prevent it.

'I've got a new theory,' I announced, walking in with a brief knock.

She was sitting by the window, looking out across the car park to the city beyond.

'It's a sort of meme,' I said, and stopped dead.

She was humming that damned tune. Just sitting there humming.

I grabbed the back of her office chair and spun her 'round to face me. Her eyes were blank, staring straight ahead. I cried out and grabbed her, shaking her and shouting at her to snap out of it. It wasn't my finest professional moment but the sight of her like that chilled me to bone. The rough treatment seemed to work, though.

She shook her head as if to clear the cobwebs and looked into my eyes. 'Jed?'

'Robyn, you've got to stay focused. Keep your eyes on mine. Try to keep it together. It's important!'

But she was drifting away already. 'It's that tune, Jed.' Her voice was dreamy and distracted. 'I can't get it out of my head. It just keeps going on, and on, and...'

'No, Robyn, stay with me!'

But she couldn't. She was la-la-ing the tune again, the same tune they were all singing, and I couldn't shake her free of it.

'What's a meme?' Woodroffe asked.

'It's... I don't know... an idea, a catchy idea, one that spreads from mind to mind like a virus.'

'What? Like an urban myth or something?'

'Like that, yes, but maybe religion is a better example. The idea that there are supernatural gods that made the world and still interfere with it. It's probably the catchiest idea ever. It infects whole cultures, whole nations, the whole planet! And it evolves over time. New variants emerge. Judaism mutates into Christianity. Christianity mutates into all the different sects and flavours; Catholicism, Anglicanism, Quakerism. That's one branch. Islam evolved later and then spawned all its various sub-species.'

'These are beliefs, not viruses. You don't catch religion like you catch a cold!'

'Oh but you do! The vector just isn't biological, that's all. It's cognitive. That's why the victims show no pathology whatsoever. It's more like a computer virus than the kind we usually deal with.'

He was looking sceptical, so I tried another tack.

'Have you ever had a tune you couldn't get out of your head?'

'You're saying that's what this is? But this is just weird noise. It's not like some Euro-pop song you hate but you can't stop singing.'

'But it is. It's a real tune but not one using the scales and rhythms we're used to. It's something far more sophisticated, something that has evolved to colonise our minds much more efficiently.'

'I still don't get it. These people will die if we don't keep them alive. One of your meme things would need a living mind to stay alive and to transmit itself. What kind of disease kills its host?'

'An unsuccessful one. This thing is something new: a meme so virulent it could kill us all. Something even worse than nationalism, or religion, or racism. Viruses with very high infection rates and very high mortality rates are rare precisely because they eventually limit their own spread. It must be the same with memes. This one might wipe us all out and itself with us. Just another evolutionary dead end. They happen all the time.'

Woodroffe still looked unhappy. 'All right. What if you're right? What do we do? What's the meme equivalent of a vaccine, or an anti-viral? How do we fight this?'

I let out my breath in a sigh of frustration. 'I don't know. A meme is only like a virus by analogy. The same kinds of defence won't necessarily work. All I've thought of so far are these.' I pulled a pair of ear-plugs out of my pocket. 'We should get all the staff here wearing them as soon as possible. It might slow down the infection rate at least.'

'Jesus,' he hissed, unimpressed. 'We're going to need more than that.'

I shrugged. 'That's why we need to get me in front of the PHU. I need to convince them so we can get more people working on it. We don't have much time.'

'I'll make the calls,' he promised. 'Not because I believe you, but because I haven't heard a single other idea from anybody.'

'We could fly down to Canberra right now,' I insisted. 'I just need to get some notes from my office while you make those calls. I'll be back here in ten minutes.'

I headed for the door but he called out to me. 'Jed, if this meme idea is right, we're stuffed, aren't we?' I looked at him curiously. 'Because, if you're right, curing this thing would be like trying to cure religion, wouldn't it?'

I pondered what he'd said as I made my way through the corridors. Maybe we couldn't beat it. Yet some of us would survive; the deaf, the tone deaf, people for whom music meant nothing. I tried to imagine the survivors in a world devastated and depopulated, finding each other and building a new life among the ruins. None of them would sing. None would whistle. None would care that thousands of years of composition and performance had gone forever. The thought of a human future with no music was appalling. How could we still be human without music? If only I could think of a way to beat this thing.

But it was hard to concentrate with that tune going round and round in my head.



Volume Control

by Matthew Fazakerly

When your world becomes silent, things seem so isolating at first. A world without sound encloses and quarantines our own chaotic kingdoms, makes them prisons. Day-to day life is missing the normal osmosis of misheard conversations once taken for granted; the sound of petty arguments between neighbours; the wailing precious child that really, no, *really* must have the latest new toy or the world will end. It really is profoundly strange and unsettling when the general music of our own personal universes colliding and intertwining together is suddenly absent. But it's something you can live through. Live through and flourish. And as I found out, it's definitely for the better.

It all began when my good eardrum exploded with an involuntary spasm of pain, and a sickening drizzle of ooze. It was a relief, believe it or not. Out of the blue a few hours before, the earache had started. The torture had been like nothing I had ever felt before. It had grown and stabbed and throbbed until all I could do was whimper in helplessness. It was as if some sort of parasite had crawled into my head and started burrowing away, deeper and deeper inwards, all the while you can hear it getting closer, but there was nothing you could do to stop it. A sound was in my head; a pressure building, quiet at first then growing steadily until suddenly the crescendo, fully blown, mind-blowing and overwhelming. The pain diminished to a dull throb that I could have fallen in love with, compared to what had plagued minutes earlier. I lay my head down exhausted and drifted off to a deep sleep devoid, strangely enough, of my usual dreams.

The next morning when I awoke to a pillow soaked in a pool of yellowish brown – surely that amount of fluid could not possibly come out of my ear? – I knew that something was wrong. Filtered and sunlight was pouring through my window. I could feel the cool breeze of the central air processors lightly blowing through my bedroom. But there was something missing. It didn't strike me at first, so I eased my way out of bed with my afflicted pillowcase, threw it in the

dirty washing hamper and headed to the kitchenette to prepare some breakfast. I still felt a bit miserable, but there was a lightness in my step that bespoke of a man who had journeyed through his own personal hell and come out the other side.

“GovNet please, House.” Nothing so much as a croak came out of my mouth, and the first thing that struck me was that I must have lost my voice. I went to manually turn on the vid screen, but it responded to my command and turned itself on. Dirty and very scruffy outlanders, cuffed and cowed were marched toward a helicopter on screen. “Separatist Terrorists caught and interred, awaiting rehabilitation” scrolled across the screen, GovNet links indicating further related feeds. There was no sound.

“House, please increase volume,” I asked. When I spoke I still couldn’t hear my voice. An icon appeared on screen, increasing from fourteen bars twenty. There was very little difference as far as I could tell. I moved to the vid screen and scrolled it up to maximum volume. I could feel the vibration through my feet, but could only vaguely discern a dull fuzz of sound. I had always had poor hearing with my right ear, ever since I was a child. My parents had been some of the few who had felt that what we were dealt was how we should be in this life, and, to be quite honest, I had never known anything different. I could hear, I could experience, I could enjoy music and life as it was. Just not in the perfect surround sound of your average citizen. But now I began to panic. My brain was telling me ‘Don’t worry – it’s just temporary, you need time to heal, that’s all!’ But my heart was losing it. When you realise that something that had just been there, taken for granted for your entire life was gone, well, you panic a little.

Despair welled up and I sat and cradled my head in my hands, slowly banging my recently perforated ear to see if I could dislodge some kind of sound. I know, it’s silly. But I didn’t know what to do. So I did the only thing that was in my power to do right at that very moment. I went back to bed and cried.

* * *

Later that day, having pulled myself out of bed, I arrived at my precinct's med clinic, only a short-walk from my apartment. I entered the austere building and approached the receptionist. "Hello, I'd like to make an appointment please." He smiled at me, making direct eye-contact to show that I had his interest and respect and said something with what looked like almost convincing sincerity.

"I have no idea what you're saying, sorry. I've lost my hearing, but I assume you'll want access my ID. You have my permission." A picture of my face, name and government employment details appeared on my client readout screen. I smiled. "That's me. I don't have an appointment, but I thought it would be easier face-face. Can you come and tap me on the shoulder or something when it's my turn? I'll just be in a world of my own otherwise."

I went and sat down and picked up an e-pad and started reading *Towards a New Word* – Consul Leahman's manifesto. There wasn't much else to read. Ah, don't you love Government propaganda? It was strange though. I had read Leahman's writings twice before, and they'd struck me as rather insightful and witty at the time. After the population crunch, a strong controlling hand was what humanity needed, wasn't it?

Breaking me from my reverie, I felt a cool hand placed lightly on my shoulder. I looked up and there was an elderly man with a stern looking lived-in face. You don't see too many people of his age any more. He held out his datapad to me, and gestured for me to take it. Words appeared as his mouth moved.

[Hello Mr Haseldine. Please come this way and we'll have a look at you.]

Aha! Two-way communication! "Thank you Doctor." I made my way into the standard consulting rooms and sat down.

[I take it then you've had some trouble with your hearing?]

I nodded and explained what had happened last night and how I had woken up this morning. "There's a dull ache now and I admit I'm getting fuzzy burring white noise, but I certainly can't make anything out. I think it's a little better..."

[Well, let's take a look then, shall we?]

The Doctor retrieved an implement and started examining my ears; first my right ear that was shot anyway; then the ear that had so unceremoniously exploded on me the previous night.

[That looks nasty. You've a raging infection there, Mr Haseldine. I'm afraid that was your eardrum perforating last night. I'm going to put you on some strong antibiotics and that's about all we can do at the moment. If there's no improvement within seven days, we'll need to look if there's any reconstructive surgery that can help.]

"Damn."

[The Government will provide it free of charge, of course. I shouldn't worry. I don't know why you've never had the other ear assessed. It never formed properly, did it?]

"It's never bothered me. Or my parents." That was it wasn't it. Didn't bother me. Just everyone else.

The Doctor smiled jovially, like I was some kind of simpleton.

[You can use the datapad there if you wish. I can log it to you. Its speech recognition software will help until, if, or when your hearing returns. The Government will provide, Mr Haseldine.]

"Doesn't it always? Thanks, Doctor." I left and walked home. As I walked, I began to feel more than a little annoyed with my predicament. Inwardly I raged. I didn't really know why, but everything seemed to be annoying me now. I'm not sure if it was just that I was frustrated with the communication problem – which was at least partially solved with the datapad – or that I was annoyed that the Doctor thought I was flawed anyway. Why did everyone have to be perfect? Consul Leahman had passed the eugenics laws last year, mandating that all pregnancies needed to be certified genetically pure from any and all screenable and non-treatable condition. If anything was found it was corrected or terminated. At the time I, like everyone had accepted it as a necessity. We direly needed to repopulate, yes, and we all wanted the best for our children, didn't we? It only struck me now that this policy meant that I may not have been here. My parents may not have known me if my genetic abnormality or a flaw that could not have been "made pure" had been detected! Why was I thinking of this now?

As I crossed the enclosed dome of the central park, I was observed by cameras and militia drones. They were spooked by the Separatist terrorist attacks that seemed to be happening more and more often now. I'd got used to it, but I felt them scrutinising me more and more. As I was about to enter my apartment complex, I felt a hand pull me roughly on the shoulder. I turned around and found myself face-to-face with a small detail of militia. I looked down at the pad as words appeared.

[MR HASELDINE, I REPEAT, PLEASE STOP AND PUT YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD.] The text was in capitals, so I assumed he was yelling at me. I couldn't see their mouths moving as they were wearing masks. If I concentrated, I could just about hear a dull burr breaking from an even duller white noise. Frustrated, I lifted one hand behind my head, but held the pad up slightly so I could still read it.

"Look, I'm sorry, I can't hear you. I've got a problem with my hearing."

[WE ARE AWARE, MR HASELDINE. I REPEAT, PUT BOTH OF YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD, OR WE WILL BE COMPELLED TO USE FORCE. IT IS IMPERATIVE YOU COME WITH US.]

Weren't they listening to me? "I'm using this pad as a translator – if I put it down, I won't be able to understand what you're saying!" The next thing I saw was the butt of a weapon coming towards me, a flash of blind pain and my world went black.

* * *

Consciousness returned with the unwelcome passenger of a throbbing ache in the back of my head. I became hyper-aware of the cloying and over-whelming smell of musty canvas. I was cold and found myself laying on a camp-bed. Someone was sitting and staring at me. I sat up, half expecting to find myself restrained, but found I was able to move freely. The woman (I could see it was a woman now) came toward me and gave me my datapad. [Hello Mr Haseldine. We must apologise for your head. You were making quite a scene.]

Me? Making a scene. I wasn't the one kidnapping innocent civilians in the middle of the day! "What do the militia want with me?" I asked. I assumed she was with them. She was probably Consul Leahman's niece or something, knowing my luck of late.

[We're not the militia. There's probably a lot you're not aware of until now.]

I wasn't sure what she was on about. "Then who are you?"

[We're the Separatists, John. And you've just become one of us.]

I began to panic, I really had been kidnapped!

The woman put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. It was a tender act, and didn't seem like that of a terrorist. She continued. [You'll need to brace yourself. You're probably feeling quite angry, confused and questioning everything you know. That's common for latecomers. The world in which we live isn't what it seems. It's a world controlled by the Government through sound; through resonance; by the suppression of emotion and the managing of thought.]

It was so ridiculous. But everything within me sang in response to what she was saying. I knew deep within me that it was true.

[The population is controlled through the manipulation of sub-sonic harmonics. It's not something you hear as such, but something that's broadcast at a particular frequency, just below the normal perception of human hearing.]

She looked me directly in the eyes. She had clear blue eyes that seemed to tell me she had recited this story many time before. [When you lost your hearing, and your brain was no longer susceptible to ongoing conditioning, you started to question things, didn't you?]

I had thought differently. I had questioned many things for the first time in a very long time. It was true. "But what about you? You can hear?"

[Most of us can. The Separatists are a mixture of Outlanders who survive outside the cities where the Signal does not reach. Most of us have genetic defects in our hearing; we don't receive the particular frequencies on which the Signal transmits. We have people on the inside who are passing as Receivers – the normal populace. That's how we found out about you. We had to get to you before the Government did.]

"What would have happened if they did?"

[It depends.]

That didn't sound promising. "On what?"

[On how you heal. If your hearing is undamaged, you'd be released and allowed back into their clockwork society. If you're no longer susceptible to the Signal, then you're no longer controllable. You'd be decommissioned. Killed.]

The question that I hadn't asked spilled out in a gush of emotion. I suppose it's the question we all ask of ourselves at one time or another in our lives when fate conspires to put us at a crossroads: "But why me? Why has this all happened to me? Why save me?"

[Because everyone deserves to be free.]

* * *

I had been taken to a rudimentary community that the Separatists had established in the Outlands. It was roughly one hundred kilometres away from the nearest city, hidden away in the mountains in and amongst old tunnels. It was ramshackle and improvised; a mix of high and low technologies indicative of the fringelands on which these people survived, shielded from the Signal. I was cared for and befriended by Airlie - the Separatist who had debriefed me. We grew quite close, and it began, slowly but surely, to feel like a normal life. Weeks passed as I waited for my hearing to return, but it didn't. I was told, quite gently, that I was now permanently and clinically deaf. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about it all. Everything had changed so quickly, but I felt I was adjusting remarkably well, considering all I had endured. My life was now quite humble, but it was a life where I had my free will. It was something that I hadn't even known I was missing before, but now that I had it, I began to think that my old life had little meaning at all.

Over time I began to get further involved in Separatist actions. I began to uncover piece by piece how and why the ruling Government were doing what they were doing. It had started off as a way to draw together a world in chaos. A world that was recovering after catastrophic pandemic. The people who had remained were scared and directionless. Wars broke out. The Signal was developed to promote co-operation and comradeship, safety and order. Like most evils, I'm sure it had started with good intentions. But now it was only about control, manipulation and power. Leahman wasn't just re-building the world; he was rebuilding it to his specifications. The genetic manipulation of the next generation wasn't just to iron out defects, diseases and heartache; it was to ensure that they were as susceptible to the Signal as possible. So we all would be under his control. Something had to be done, but what?

* * *

It was summer and the cool days in the mountains had given way to glorious warmth. The community – all those who weren't currently involved in operations, at any rate – had been working in the fields all day, preparing for the coming

harvest. We ate and then crawled off to get some rest. It was a hard life, but it was *real*. I was lying in bed with Airlie, my body exhausted, my spirit soaring. It was then it came to me. Completely and utterly out of the blue. Some would call it a gift from God. It was so simple. So poetic. So beautiful. I fumbled for my datapad in the darkness.

“Airlie, wake up. I think I’ve got an idea.”

Airlie, I think, just wanted to sleep. [John?]

What I was about to share, at least to my mind at the time, was perhaps the most important thought I had ever had. “What have the Separatist been doing for years against the Government? Terrorist actions, guerrilla tactics, small-scale military assaults. Insurgent actions. Fighting might with power. Fighting fire with fire, yes?”

[Yes. But what else could we do? It works. Most of the time.] She had to believe that it did, didn’t she? It was the only way she knew how to fight.

I nodded. “True, but they’re always going to have more guns, more people than us. More brute force. But it always seemed to me that if you fight fire with fire, all it generally gets you is a bigger fire. But what if we fought that fire with water; then it’s finished, isn’t it? What if we fought the Signal with its opposite?”

She peered into my eyes with what was almost, did I not now know her so well, pity. [With sound? We can’t make everyone like you John, we can’t fight with silence.]

This is where it got interesting! “No, but the opposite of sound isn’t silence, is it? It’s its *opposite* sound – the inverse of its waveform. Silence is the result in this case, not the absence. The Signal is sound, and sound can be blocked. Noise cancelling devices have been around for years, but has it ever occurred to anyone that they can now be used as weapons?”

She leant over excitedly and kissed me, smiling her beautiful smile. No words were necessary; we could both see the potential far-reaching possibilities.

I shared my thoughts with the Separatist leaders the next morning. No one else had tried using noise cancelling devices before; either as personal items to protect and free individuals, or as larger-scale devices to free whole communities.

We didn't need to destroy the Signal, we just needed to make it ineffective. This had never worked before as there were redundancies in the transmitters – multiple locations, multiple transmitters. Knock one out and another came on. This plan negated the need for this kind of action. We just needed devices. Powerful devices. And many of them. I was tasked with putting a team together to develop a noise cancelling device – or a “NCD” as we were calling it – capable of weaponising. In my previous life, I had worked as an electrician, mostly in maintenance of small appliances, vidscreens and computers. I was no genius by any stretch of the imagination, but I was able to at least take an organisational role in the construction of the device. I felt like I was finally giving back to the people who had saved me. The team that we assembled procured, developed and augmented the NCD, and for that which we couldn't figure out ourselves we “liberated” people who had the knowledge. It took months, but eventually the prototype device was ready to trial. We smuggled the first device to the outskirts of the nearest city which had its own Signal transmitter, and waited for results.

* * *

It was twilight and the coolness of night was beginning to fall upon the warmth of the day. During the day we had lain low in and around the outskirts of the city, monitoring the local media, sending scouts into the city to report any incidents or indications that the NCD was working. I was joined by one of the younger members of our team, Mia. Despite her youth, she had a gift for electronics which had helped us no end. She turned to me, rubbing her hands together, and embraced herself in a gesture that conveyed both an attempt at warth and self-reassurance.

[Will they thank us for it do you think?] she asked me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

[They're happy now. You were once happy too. They're living perfect lives.]

Hmm. “But only perfect because they're told that they are. Don't you remember what it was like?”

She frowned and looked to the ground, ashamed. [I've never known. I was brought up in the Outlands. I've never lived under the Signal.]

I understood now. She just didn't understand. "Mia. It's not evil. It's just wrong. The Government want us to think like them. Do what they say. We all want these things, want control. But instead of convincing us through action and ideals, they simply make us do what they want, enforcing their will on us. Leahman took away our choices. We're giving them back. Look at it like this: Why are you helping to test this device?"

[Because I want to help. I suppose I want others to have the choices that I have. Freedom?]

"Good. You understand."

A week passed, and as we watched and mingled, what we began to see around us were citizens beginning to realize what had been happening to them and to their children. There were refusals to comply. Protests against the eugenics laws. People quitting the militia wholesale. There were even some riots. But the NCD was a resounding success. We had begun the task of taking back society. The Government was noticing too, and as Mia and I rounded a corner, the city central vid screen activated. Everyone stopped what they were doing and paid attention, through force of habit more than anything else, as the GovNet logo appeared on the towering screen. "Breaking News from the Regions" scrolled along the bottom of the screen, and a sombre-faced reporter appeared and addressed the camera. I looked to my datapad.

[This is a GovNet special broadcast. Separatists have attacked the regional city of Newhaven. After initial confusion and what appears to be a chemical weapon of some kind, the situation is under control. We caught up with Consul Leahman himself earlier today.] The vidscreen changed to a hurried figure walking toward the camera in front of the towering white edifice of Parliament. Surrounded by personal guards brandishing weaponry openly (something usually quite absent), the small usually composed figure attempted to pull off an air of calmness and control.

[Citizens!] Leahman began. [You may be aware of the latest atrocities that have been perpetrated against this great nation which we call our home. I can confirm that the Separatists have released some kind of toxic chemical weapon against the populace of Newhaven. To contain the threat, the region has been quarantined for your safety. Any citizens that may still have survived are dangerous. I repeat dangerous. The contagion is deadly and can cause paranoia and

disunity. Rest assured, the Government has this act of terrorism under control. The Government provides all. If you are contacted by any survivors, please report them immediately, for you and your family's safety. This has been a dark day for us all. Thank you.]

Someone threw something at the screen, and everyone cheered. [YOU'RE A LIAR LEAHMAN!] someone yelled, or I assumed they did, at any rate. I turned and smiled. It was expected, I suppose. To be honest, it was nice to know the Government was scared. Leahman was worried. The writing, you might say, was on the wall. The NCD worked. It was only a matter of time.

* * *

A chain reaction of uprisings followed the roll out of more and more NCDs. The Government retaliated and came down hard, perpetrating horrible, unthinkable things to stop us. When the regime eventually fell, I had wanted to see Leahman's face when he realised his little empire was gone. I had wanted to look him in the eye and tell him what he had taken from us; make a citizen's arrest of the dictator that the people had once loved. And we had all loved him. I had loved him. I still to this day despise him for what he had done to humanity. I wanted him to see how helpless he really was without his Signal. He should have experienced the powerlessness that we had all suffered under, and, just perhaps, in the process to set him free of its power too. But perhaps I was too idealistic. Leahman died in the uprisings that followed, his body burnt. We had given people back their choices. Some chose to take vengeance. I didn't want it to happen, but I couldn't stop it, even standing there watching. There were many things that I wish I could have changed, and many others that I would never have wished to. They erected statues in my name later, for my part in the revolution. The likenesses were terrible to be quite honest, and I didn't encourage them. I had become a bit of legend. But I was determined not to become another Leahman, and chose not step into public life as a new government arose from the ashes, and concentrated on what was important to me now. Family.

Even though it was so long ago now, I still remember what sound is like. I miss it, I really do. Airlie and I had been so blessed, don't get me wrong. But sometimes I do wish I could hear again. I dearly wanted to hear my first child taking his first breath, announcing to the world his arrival with a screaming staccato wail; the simple lilt of a lullaby as my wife sang him to sleep; the rushing beauty of a free-flowing stream by our cottage. But when I remind myself again that what I lost allowed so many others to appreciate simple things and make choices without a government saturating their thoughts, then it was worth it. I'm sure of it. When your world becomes silent, things begin to seem so much clearer. It may be the end of your world, but it something you can live through. Live through and flourish. And as I found out, it's definitely for the better.