

The Book of Air

JOE TREASURE

I was about to write my promised piece on Anna Karenina, when my editor suggested that perhaps it would be a good idea to mention my new novel since it's coming out this month. This is the culmination of a couple of years' work. You'd think I wouldn't need to be reminded to make some noise about it. And yet I'm sure I'm not the only writer who prefers working to talking about work and who shrinks from anything that feels like self-promotion. Also that book is now done and I'm on to the next thing. Also Trump. By which I mean the world is in a dangerous condition and my book seems trivial in comparison.

But most things are trivial in comparison to something else. And the reading of fiction remains a source of profound emotional succour, allowing us both to escape from our immediate concerns and to place those concerns in a more timeless perspective. Where do I go in my spare time or while standing in a queue or sitting on a train? These days into the pages of Tolstoy – War and Peace, now that I've finished Anna Karenina. And I find the impulse to write stories has been sharpened, not diminished, by events in the world. Increasingly dystopian visions of a fragmented future are my main output

right now. Walls sprout up from my unconscious. And so I respond to events and escape from them at the same time. The Book of Air grew out of an idle

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speculation. What if there were an isolated rural community with only one novel? Since the inhabitants have no concept of fiction, they take it literally. But it's unique, so they study it closely, searching it for other levels of meaning. It becomes a

source of moral guidance. Its moments of heightened conflict are ceremonially re-enacted as rites of passage. They find metaphorically reflected in it the clash of elements in the world of nature. The whole drama of human existence is encapsulated in its narrative.

I decided the novel should be Jane Eyre, precisely because that book seems designed to deliver escapist pleasure more than the kind of high moral seriousness that we might look for in, say, George Eliot. And because Dickens is too rooted in the life of the city and its institutions and Austen's characters too restricted by social convention. And because I like it.

I pictured this community living in the future. Jane Eyre is part of their accidental inheritance, along with a house, some cottages and an area of farmland. And that set me thinking about their ancestors, a handful of survivors from some catastrophe of our own time gathering in this place as though returning reluctantly to a Garden of Eden. Who might they be and what serpents would they bring with them, what sources of human conflict to keep the human drama going? And how would they express the essential human urge to create meaning in the face of damage and disorder?

SPQH

SAHIR MUAYYID HUSSAIN

Celebration was in the air and the temperature was dipping fast. No-one seemed to care as children were out enjoying snowball fight and people flooded the streets in their thousands, buying food since the stores were going to be closed for a long time. In the corner of an empty field some even playing football and skiing in the ice rink. A group of children were building castles and making snowmen.

Some, however, decided to stay indoor, sleeping or watching television. Noor was playing videogames with his friends who were staying over. When it became too boring they would go outside and play hide and seek. It was while they were doing so something happened.

Noor, a friend, found a white stone the size of a tennis ball and put it under the mat, which Aryan eventually found but did not tell

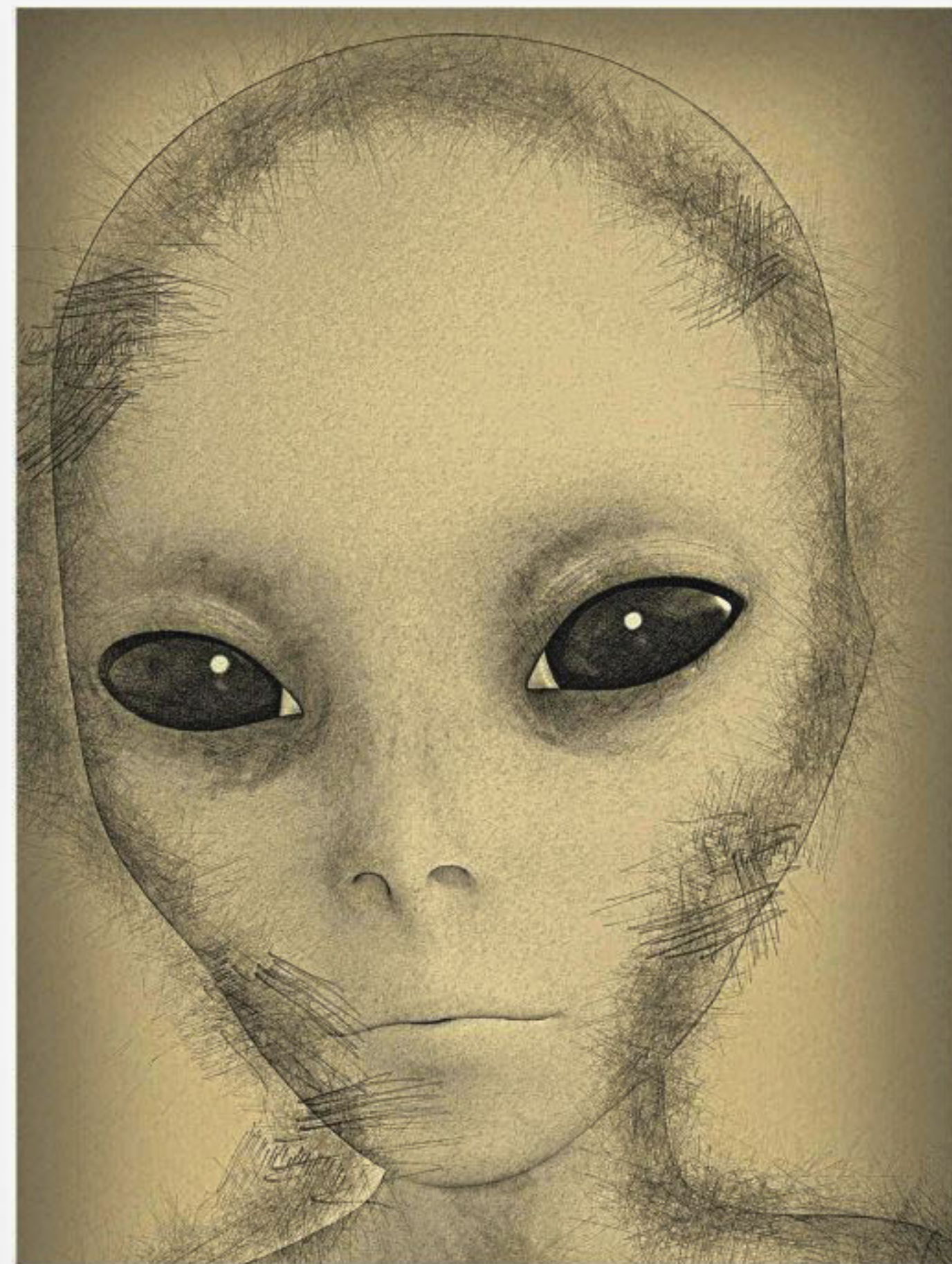
anyone. They went back as they "got bored rather quick" and started to play on their Xbox. Noor had let Aryan use the controller while he himself fixed the wire. And while doing so, he noticed a strange mark on his friend's neck. Instead of asking him, Noor peered hard only to think that it was merely a strand of hair and that his eyes were tricking him. On deeper inspection he realised that they were letters and they looked as though they had been burned into his skin. It read SPQH, followed by a symbol that resembled a trident with two lightning bolts going through each other horizontally.

Before Noor could ask what these marks were, he heard an explosion from outside. At first he thought it was a car crash and had rushed to the window and he could not believe what he saw. A red, burning disc seemed to have been floating in the air and

Noor panicked. Aryan hid under the bed. The object landed in the backyard and out came some people who looked like humanoids in red hair and had talons. Noor tried to run fast, but his feet betrayed him. When he was ultimately surrounded by them, he realised resistance was futile and that all his captors had SPQH and the symbol that he had seen on Aryan on their back.

Their leader told Noor that they were looking for a child who had escaped from the planet SPQH a few years ago and morphed into a human. Noor immediately knew that they were talking about Aryan and he exactly knew where he was. Shocked, Noor raised his finger to show the humanoids where Aryan was.

(SPQH is an edited excerpt of a long science fiction story. The writer studies in South Breeze School)



Nature

RUBAB ABDULLAH

Not by rules
Our feeling grows
One life is too short to define
How much I feel your senses

To see sleets on the window sill
I sob my heart out to be free
To watch the rainbow formed in the sky
Deep inside I am the same spellbound as you are.

Nature harbours recluses like us
I beseech you, "Lead me to your heart,
Let not our moments be troubled by fears."
We are on a spiritual journey like platonic lovers.
(Rubab Abdullah writes from Ohio, USA)



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