

Five Dials



NUMBER 16

Things We Found In The Snow

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... plus (more) art from Julie Doucet and a painting by Peter McDonald



CONTRIBUTORS

ANTON CHEKHOV was born in 1860 in Taganrog, Russia, where his father ran a grocery store. In 1884 he qualified as a physician at Moscow University and practised as a doctor throughout most of his literary career: 'Medicine is my lawful wife,' he once said, 'and literature is my mistress.' His extra-marital literary works include some of the greatest short stories ever written, as well as four now-classic plays.

JULIE DOUCET lives in Montreal. Since becoming a member of the printing collective studio Atelier Graff in 1999 she has devoted herself to making prints, writing and creating artist's books.

PETER MCDONALD was born in Tokyo in 1973 and now lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions include shows at Gallery Side 2, Tokyo and Kate MacGarry, London.

FRANCESCO PACIFICO, who lives in Rome, is the author of the novel *Storia della mia purezza*, which is currently being translated for publication in English by Hamish Hamilton and FSG.

HEATHCOTE WILLIAMS is the author of, amongst others, *Autogeddon* and *Whale Nation*. A new collection of his short poems, *Punk Honey*, will be performed by Roy Hutchins in 2011 – premiering at the Brighton Festival, then at the Edinburgh Fringe and at selected venues in the Autumn. Phone 07966 285792 for details or contact producer Lisa Wolfe at wolfework1@aol.com

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Special thanks to: JULIETTE MITCHELL, ANNA KELLY,
JOSEPHINE GREYWOODE, SANTA, and ALEXIS KIRSCHBAUM

Designed by DEAN ALLEN

On Chaos and Christmas Poetry

From where I am sitting right now in north London I can see snow out the window, but it's not the menacing type. The fox tracks across the garden have melted into divots and whole patches of grass are beginning to show over by the wall. It's difficult to look upon this weak display and imagine chaos. Still, you may be reading this new issue of *Five Dials* on a handheld device as you wait in one of those queues at the Eurostar terminal that stretch from King's Cross across the city and over the river to Waterloo. Or you may have just woken up with a ruined lower back thanks to the row of chairs beneath you at Heathrow. You may be stuck in a place that is even worse, though it would be hard to beat hellish Heathrow. Given the circumstances, we hope this short Christmas card of an issue will lift your spirits, or at least keep you from fistfighting with the other passengers.

Inside you'll find some photographs of Montreal, where we launched our last issue in front of a raucous room of Quebec's finest, who were joined by some wonderful *Five Dials* subscribers who spent eleven hours on a train from New York just to witness the proceedings. The city of Montreal ensures ingenious machines clear snow from the pavements. London prefers chaos. What else did we learn from Montreal? Wind chill is real. Leonard Cohen has been known to buy his bagels on St Viateur and his cheese out in Jean-Talon. Also, the province has a thriving literary culture and it's not a bad place to be an illustrator. The only proof I've gathered to support this last point is the existence of the Drawn and Quarterly shop and the fact one of our favorite contributors, Julie Doucet, lives in the city and occasionally draws cars in her neighbourhood covered in snow – real snow. (Please see the front cover). So thank you again, Montreal.

In this issue you'll also find an example of the sort of traditional British Christmas poem, written by our old friend Heathcote Williams, which we hope will someday be published in all the papers. Feel free to read it now or save it for first thing in the morning on January 1st when it will take its place as the royal event of the year, outshining

by far the imminent nuptials of Will and Kate.

We've also included some Chekhov and a dispatch from one of our favorite Italian writers, Francesco Pacifico, who descended on London just as students took to the streets in protest. Sometimes it takes an Italian to describe chaos in a fresh way. He witnessed the madness just before the snow started to fall.

Happy holidays from all of us at *Five Dials*. Celebrate something and celebrate it in the best possible way. We'll reconvene in January on the subcontinent.

—CRAIG TAYLOR



PETER MCDONALD, *Over There*, 2010, acrylic gouache on paper, 29 × 21 cm
courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

London Fantascienza

Francesco Pacifico reports from the bunker as the bonfires burn in Parliament Square

I come from Rome, a city with no future and a huge amount of past, and whenever I visit London I can't dismiss the way the city feels like science fiction. It must be that British people not only have an actual past (an empire, like we do) but also an actual future. There's CCTV everywhere. There's the O2 Arena, and the Crossrail site at Tottenham Court Road, a crater dug on the London's busiest corner to meet the eternal need for more public transportation. There are cool TV screens on the tube escalators. (My notion of the future is kind of childish, I must admit).

In London there is a mix of stale-carpeted Victoriana and evil visionary corporate awesomeness. The B&Bs are beyond ancient. Elderly structures in front of Liverpool Street sit next to the Gherkin, which to me looks more like an egg skyscraper looming over the grey City, a part of London that still can't shake its nineteenth century roots. The landscape produces, at least in me, a sense of momentum, of increased speed towards the unknown – a feeling I never experience in Rome even though we're headed towards disaster faster than you lot.

It makes me think of proper British science fiction with its political overtones. Works like *1984*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *V for Vendetta* all outline a risky triangle between a conformist silent majority, a media-fueled dictatorship, and a sliver of the population seeking change, whether it's anarchic or intimate, pure, public, lucid or manic. All somehow feel destined to fail.

It's a more compelling science fiction than the one developed in the US, as it is tamer in its settings, and therefore more scary. (Just think of J.G. Ballard's supermarkets.)

I've always felt that this spirit was born from that of the Empire, from facing new continents and at the same time tackling the unavoidable changes in domestic culture. Queen Victoria's eternal fear of the future, a feeling both cozy and unheimlich, is the real voice of

all British science fiction.

I was in London in the second week of December, meeting my English publishers, on the day Parliament voted on the bill to triple university taxes. In the meantime, Julian Assange was jailed nearby in Wandsworth prison. Assange is obviously the main character from Alan Moore's book *V for Vendetta*. What he does has more to do with intimate art and a need to change people's perception than with politics. I get excited, or confused, or excitedly confused when I think that one guy challenged the received notion of diplomacy simply by making public what everyone knows: that it's all based on secrecy. (The Assange/Mark Zuckerberg showdown for *Time's* Person of the Year makes it clear: both candidates changed the world by exposing the obvious.)

So, just as my heart was longing for Victorian *fantascienza* in London, suddenly there was a whole list of factors that confirmed the very personal and previously undisclosed truth I've intuitively known for years – London = Science Fiction.

First: I walked into the office of a publishing company in London. It's a panopticon-inspired, open-plan space with low ceilings and the colour scheme of a wealthy private hospital, where the white and light blue create a feeling of safety while the absence of walls ensure there are no secrets.

Second: I know writing about how interesting Twitter is might sound lame to civilized North European ears. But I am an Italian living in the past and was unaware until informed by my editor that the only real reporting from the current riots was not being written for paper nor broadcast but tweeted by a woman named Laurie Penny, as #Pennyred.

Days later, while helping me writing this *Fantascienza* thing for an Italian newspaper, my editor described Penny's work: 'Just google 'Penny Red Twitter' and scroll down to the week before last – the second day of major demos – the week

before last Wednesday,' he wrote. 'I simply reversed the order so they read chronologically and thought they read brilliantly – doing something only Twitter can do: real time journalism from the heart of an event with no space for the rambling you might get in a live radio report – and without the mediation of hindsight which you find in reportage from after the event. Her followers reached 6000 plus by end of day because her Twitter feed was just about the only way of following events if you weren't there. The BBC etc were left standing.'

So I did as I was told, and I went back to the Pennyred tweets from the day I had lunch with my editor, and he was right, it's interesting, informative, avant-garde and sweet, and it's not exactly like Normal Writing (he also told me tweeting is not normal writing, so a person shouldn't tweet the same way he writes. People in media often do that. It's not interesting).

So here's #Pennyred:

'My phone is about to lose charge. Just FYI. | Something Huge is burning in the middle of the square. | Looks like enormous smoke bomb. Billowing black and sickly red. | This is apocalyptic. London's burning. | Waiting for the vote to come in, about 200 students just formed a conga line. Aw! | They're playing the Smiths' 'This Charming Man'. | I think I hurt my back in that crush. Can't walk totally right. | Vote in. Passed. Shout: 'let's go fucking mental!' It's going to kick off | Climbed traffic lights. Cops and kids battling going on beneath me | They're crushing us on Whitehall. A woman behind me is screaming. | Back at @ucloccupation. Covered in bruises, sitting down to write'.

If you're generally in favour of this kind of effort, it really sounds like 'Stop Me if You Think You've Heard This One Before'. If not, you might slightly hate the undertone of 'Did you see the stylish kids in the riot?' (though I for one don't hear it).

So the future is New Wave, as always.

While I was collecting tweets from the day I had lunch with my editor, Pennyred was tweeting: 'Officer number 183582 says 'we are obstructing your right to peaceful protest, yes. This is to prevent a breach of the peace'.'

It sounds like traditional British courtesy with added doublethink. The

policeman is polite, but he doesn't have a name, just a number. It's a good sci-fi moment but an even better one comes when my editor and I have lunch in an underground private members' club that looks like a bunker while the riots rage on the streets above. It's a club for freelancers who need an office and a printer in a quiet environment, and it's decorated with furniture and grey hues and lighting as precise and confident as one of Ian McEwan's better paragraphs. Since there's no natural light filtering inside, my edi-

tor says, you can work hard and forget what time it is. Which means that you can still meet your deadline even while London's burning. So, had I been writing this thing about #Pennyred in the bunker club while people were being kettled near the Strand and Assange was in jail in Wandsworth, this would have been the closest my life has ever come so far to resembling sci-fi.

But it didn't quite happen, so the closest thing to sci-fi in my life is still watching NBA basketball on my iPhone. Lame.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention one more thing about the silent majority. They were the ones reading the news about the big Camilla and Charles Rolls Royce scare and contemplating the amazing picture of the two of them trapped in the expensive car. The silent majority felt sorry for them. The royals were supposed to enjoy a nice night out at the theatre and instead they ended up in that Steve Carell + Tina Fey movie. This is also very lame, but sweet, too, in a way. But mostly lame. ◇

POEM

A Traditional Christmas

by *Heathcote Williams*

For Christmas, the Queen
Requests new nipple tassels
Then, on Boxing Day,

She sets herself up
With a portable podium
On Brighton Pier

And begins swivelling
Her sparkling accessories
To a thinning crowd.

It's a tradition
Stemming from the recession.
There's no TV crew.

She plays childhood songs
On a wind-up gramophone
Then smiles at those left.

There are only two:
A bag lady, and someone
From an actors' home

Who wants to show her
His press cuttings, then hand her
A dusty meringue.

"Miss it all dear, do you?
Christmas at Balmoral – with
Those kilts and sporrans?"

"No, I've had all that,"
Says the Queen, who's now giggling.
"The penny dropped.

"Thanks to Christ's message
'Give away all that thou hast',
I can smile real smiles!"

Still spinning her tassels
And without a care in the world
She grabs passers-by,

"Christmas is magic
So, borrow my bank account
For as long as you like.

"It still has trillions
Last time I looked. Jesus saves,
So please help yourselves.

"This Christmas, banknotes
Have poor people's faces on –
Hope you've all noticed?

"Every one was mine
But now the poor have first dibs.
Christmas, eh? What larks!"

Then, in frayed slippers,
She walks towards the care home
For her Christmas lunch

And the people's ghost
Of Christmas past disappears
Into the mists of time.

At Christmas Time

Anton Chekhov

I
'What shall I write?' said Yegor, and he dipped his pen in the ink.

Vasilisa had not seen her daughter for four years. Her daughter Yefimya had gone after her wedding to Petersburg, had sent them two letters, and since then seemed to vanish out of their lives; there had been no sight nor sound of her. And whether the old woman were milking her cow at dawn, or heating her stove, or dozing at night, she was always thinking of one and the same thing – what was happening to Yefimya, whether she were alive out yonder. She ought to have sent a letter, but the old father could not write, and there was no one to write.

But now Christmas had come, and Vasilisa could not bear it any longer, and went to the tavern to Yegor, the brother of the innkeeper's wife, who had sat in the tavern doing nothing ever since he came back from the army; people said that he could write letters very well if he were properly paid. Vasilisa talked to the cook at the tavern, then to the mistress of the house, then to Yegor himself. They agreed upon fifteen kopecks.

And now – it happened on the second day of the holidays, in the tavern kitchen – Yegor was sitting at the table, holding the pen in his hand. Vasilisa was standing before him, pondering with an expression of anxiety and woe on her face. Pyotr, her husband, a very thin old man with a brownish bald patch, had come with her; he stood looking straight before him like a blind man. On the stove a piece of pork was being braised in a saucepan; it was spurting and hissing, and seemed to be actually saying: 'Flu-flu-flu.' It was stifling.

'What am I to write?' Yegor asked again.

'What?' asked Vasilisa, looking at him angrily and suspiciously. 'Don't worry me! You are not writing for nothing; no fear, you'll be paid for it. Come, write: 'To our dear son-in-law, Andrey Hrisanfitch, and to our only beloved daughter, Yefimya Petrovna, with our love we send

a low bow and our parental blessing abiding for ever.' '

'Written; fire away.'

'And we wish them a happy Christmas; we are alive and well, and I wish you the same, please the Lord . . . the Heavenly King.' '

Vasilisa pondered and exchanged glances with the old man.

'And I wish you the same, please the Lord the Heavenly King', she repeated, beginning to cry.

She could say nothing more. And yet before, when she lay awake thinking at night, it had seemed to her that she could not get all she had to say into a dozen letters. Since the time when her daughter had gone away with her husband much water had flowed into the sea, the old people had lived feeling bereaved, and sighed heavily at night as though they had buried their daughter. And how many events had occurred in the village since then, how many marriages and deaths! How long the winters had been! How long the nights!

'It's hot,' said Yegor, unbuttoning his waistcoat. 'It must be seventy degrees. What more?' he asked.

The old people were silent.

'What does your son-in-law do in Petersburg?' asked Yegor.

'He was a soldier, my good friend,' the old man answered in a weak voice. 'He left the service at the same time as you did. He was a soldier, and now, to be sure, he is at Petersburg at a hydropathic establishment. The doctor treats the sick with water. So he, to be sure, is house-porter at the doctor's.'

'Here it is written down,' said the old woman, taking a letter out of her pocket. 'We got it from Yefimya, goodness knows when. Maybe they are no longer in this world.'

Yegor thought a little and began writing rapidly:

'At the present time'-- he wrote -- 'since your destiny through your own doing allotted you to the Military Career, we

counsel you to look into the Code of Disciplinary Offences and Fundamental Laws of the War Office, and you will see in that law the Civilization of the Officials of the War Office.'

He wrote and kept reading aloud what was written, while Vasilisa considered what she ought to write: how great had been their want the year before, how their corn had not lasted even till Christmas, how they had to sell their cow. She ought to ask for money, ought to write that the old father was often ailing and would soon no doubt give up his soul to God . . . but how to express this in words? What must be said first and what afterwards?

'Take note,' Yegor went on writing, 'in volume five of the Army Regulations soldier is a common noun and a proper one, a soldier of the first rank is called a general, and of the last a private . . .'

The old man stirred his lips and said softly:

'It would be all right to have a look at the grandchildren.'

'What grandchildren?' asked the old woman, and she looked angrily at him; 'perhaps there are none.'

'Well, but perhaps there are. Who knows?'

'And thereby you can judge,' Yegor hurried on, 'what is the enemy without and what is the enemy within. The foremost of our enemies within is Bacchus.' The pen squeaked, executing upon the paper flourishes like fish-hooks. Yegor hastened and read over every line several times. He sat on a stool sprawling his broad feet under the table, well-fed, bursting with health, with a coarse animal face and a red bull neck. He was vulgarity itself: coarse, conceited, invincible, proud of having been born and bred in a pot-house; and Vasilisa quite understood the vulgarity, but could not express it in words, and could only look angrily and suspiciously at Yegor. Her head was beginning to ache, and her thoughts were in confusion from the sound of his voice and his unintelligible words, from the heat and the stuffiness, and she said nothing and thought nothing, but simply waited for him to finish scribbling. But the old man looked with full confidence. He believed in his old woman who had brought him there, and in Yegor; and when he had mentioned the hydropathic

establishment it could be seen that he believed in the establishment and the healing efficacy of water.

Having finished the letter, Yegor got up and read the whole of it through from the beginning. The old man did not understand, but he nodded his head trustfully.

‘That’s all right; it is smooth . . .’ he said. ‘God give you health. That’s all right . . .’

They laid on the table three five-kopeck pieces and went out of the tavern; the old man looked immovably straight before him as though he were blind, and perfect trustfulness was written on his face; but as Vasilisa came out of the tavern she waved angrily at the dog, and said angrily:

‘Ugh, the plague.’

The old woman did not sleep all night; she was disturbed by thoughts, and at daybreak she got up, said her prayers, and went to the station to send off the letter.

It was between eight and nine miles to the station.

II

Dr. B.O. Mozelweiser’s hydropathic establishment worked on New Year’s Day exactly as on ordinary days; the only difference was that the porter, Andrey Hrisanfitch, had on a uniform with new braiding, his boots had an extra polish, and he greeted every visitor with ‘A Happy New Year to you!’

It was the morning; Andrey Hrisanfitch was standing at the door, reading the newspaper. Just at ten o’clock there arrived a general, one of the habitual visitors, and directly after him the postman; Andrey Hrisanfitch helped the general off with his great-coat, and said:

‘A Happy New Year to your Excellency!’

‘Thank you, my good fellow; the same to you.’

And at the top of the stairs the general asked, nodding towards the door (he asked the same question every day and always forgot the answer):

‘And what is there in that room?’

‘The massage room, your Excellency.’

When the general’s steps had died away Andrey Hrisanfitch looked at the post that had come, and found one addressed to himself. He tore it open, read several lines, then, looking at the newspaper, he walked without haste to his own room, which was downstairs close by at the end of the passage. His wife Yefimya was sitting on the bed, feeding her baby; another child, the eldest, was standing by, laying its curly head on her knee; a third was asleep on the bed.

Going into the room, Andrey gave his wife the letter and said:

‘From the country, I suppose.’

Then he walked out again without taking his eyes from the paper. He could hear Yefimya with a shaking voice reading the first lines. She read them and could read no more; these lines were enough for her. She burst into tears, and hugging her eldest child, kissing him, she began saying – and it was hard to say whether she were laughing or crying:

‘It’s from granny, from grandfather,’ she said. ‘From the country . . . The Heavenly Mother, Saints and Martyrs! The snow lies heaped up under the roofs now . . . the trees are as white as white. The boys slide on little sledges . . . and dear old bald grandfather is on the stove . . . and there is

a little yellow dog . . . My own darlings!’

Andrey Hrisanfitch, hearing this, recalled that his wife had on three or four occasions given him letters and asked him to send them to the country, but some important business had always prevented him; he had not sent them, and the letters somehow got lost.

‘And little hares run about in the fields,’ Yefimya went on chanting, kissing her boy and shedding tears. ‘Grandfather is kind and gentle; granny is good, too – kind-hearted. They are warm-hearted in the country, they are God-fearing . . . and there is a little church in the village; the peasants sing in the choir. Queen of Heaven, Holy Mother and Defender, take us away from here!’

Andrey Hrisanfitch returned to his room to smoke a little till there was another ring at the door, and Yefimya ceased speaking, subsided, and wiped her eyes, though her lips were still quivering. She was very much frightened of him – oh, how frightened of him! She trembled and was reduced to terror by the sound of his steps, by the look in his eyes, and dared not utter a word in his presence.

Andrey Hrisanfitch lighted a cigarette, but at that very moment there was a ring from upstairs. He put out his cigarette, and, assuming a very grave face, hastened to his front door.

The general was coming downstairs, fresh and rosy from his bath.

‘And what is there in that room?’ he asked, pointing to a door.

Andrey Hrisanfitch put his hands down swiftly to the seams of his trousers, and pronounced loudly:

‘Charcot douche, your Excellency!’ ◊

In Montreal

Photos by ANNIKA WADDELL and SIMON PROSSER



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