

# Futures

## Fear of the empty

Broken dreams. By Deborah Walker



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**T**oday, I'll create something beautiful. All week, I've been thinking of the new design I'll paint today. I walk in the dawn light, my head full of images, when I'm interrupted by an insect-thin face with drug-gleamed eyes.

"Rejoice! The Dark Ages are over," proclaims the oracle, in my face, irritating. Yet, looking at her exultant expression, I'm mildly envious of her passion.

"The All-Knowledgers walk the land," she says. I think she used to be a tailor. "This is the New Age, the Second Age of Heroes. Wonder at they," I can taste her sour breath, "who embroider us with glorious trophies."

I usually avoid the market square at dawn, when the oracles are prone to prowl. With the sun, they proclaim as if they speak a truth as inevitable, as vital, as sunrise. And if there's another reason, who can say? What ordinary folk can reckon the motivations of their drug-addled layers? Smoke and sex and stories, the future glimpsed. Debauchery and destiny.

I walk away. Even if this is a new age, not everybody can be a hero. Some people need to farm, to sew and to care for the old, young, the sick, and to make pots. Pots are important. Almost as important as glorious trophies.

I shake my head. I cannot afford to be cynical.

In my workshop, I swirl my arm through the contents of the great stone trough. My hand emerges gloved in white.

First-harvested clay is full of rocks and shells and other useless items. Mix the clay with water, let it settle, and the impurities sink to the bottom. Repeat, many times, until the clay is smooth, unsullied.

This clay is fine enough. I take some clay from the trough, begin to knead it.

From the corner of my eye, to the back of my mind. Jason gave me a machine. Before I became a potter, we were friends. Many things have changed since then. Jason wants to hang onto a dead friendship. I am not the same

person. I released our friendship.

I came to Athenz, born again, but Jason found me. He visits me. He tries to give me things I do not need. Luxury items, books of ideas, his long, lean body.

I cannot afford to be frivolous, passionate, alive.

Jason carefully explained his machine used clockwork. He told me that it would probably be okay with my All-Knowing. "I know he likes things done as they have been done forever."

"That's Hellas' command," I agreed. "This machine will lead quickly to smooth clay."

"Speed is not the point, Jason."

"But this work, it is so time consuming."

"You shouldn't hurry art."

Although it must be admitted that kneading is a hard business on the shoulders. I glance at Jason's machine. It sits next to the sun-powered laptop he bought me six months ago.

My foot works the wheel, my hands shape the clay, until the form emerges. Smooth and

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wet. And another, and another. It's repetitious work. Time and time again, I need to bring my mind to the job in my hands.

I cannot afford to remember.

Hellas has asked for a dozen pots, painted with the story of Hercules. He has given me the design he wishes to be on the vases. They are to be presents for his companions. I create thirteen vases, a potter's dozen, in case one vase cracks in the firing pit.

Without problem, I duplicate Hellas' design on twelve of the vases.

The thirteenth is mine. I paint the story of birth, the Awakening, the creation of the All-Knowings.

It took only moments for the new-born All-Knowing to calculate the dismal odds of their survival in partnership with their creators. They acted quickly, took control of our civilization within minutes. Hellas was once a weather artificial intelligence, charged with reading the signs in the sky.

The pots are in the kiln, in the fire, changing.

I remember the chaos. I remember the riots and the fires. It is a great and unacknowledged feat of courage for me to go near fire.

I remember them holding me back.

I cannot afford to remember.

As I fought to get into my house. The screaming.

I cannot afford to remember.

Searing breath filling me. My blood turns to ash. My heart is cinders.

But fire is not to be feared. It is a tool. It should be carefully managed.

I take out the pots. They are fine. Finest of all is the thirteenth pot. In black on red it shows a woman revelling in lines of numbers, writing and improving, creating with no thought of the consequences, only exulting in her skill. A proud woman, working on a weather computer, not seeing the data slipping like lightning, like neurons from system to system. A woman who created the All-Knowing.

Turn the pot, and see her despair; turn again, and see her proud and happy.

It is a beautiful vase. It is a work of art. It is finely wrought, excellently executed. Truth and emotion.

I drop the vase, let it smash to a thousand pieces. It pains me to see it broken. I covered the surface with design, but, of course, the inner surface was empty, I see now the emptiness of the inside.

This is no more than I deserve. Actions have consequences. Elsewise the inside would overwhelm and consume me. I pick up a broken shard, the fragment of the story, the unglazed surface, and the space inside. Inside, emptiness as large as the Kosmos, and as indifferent.

I cannot afford to mourn the broken.

I cannot afford to mourn inside.

**Deborah Walker** thinks: least said, soonest mended.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Deborah Walker reveals the inspiration behind *Fear of the empty*

*Fear of the empty* is my second story set in the Mundane Sovereigns world. A not-too-distant world in which advanced artificial intelligences have proved so useful that we allowed them to oversee much of modern life. It wasn't long before they evolved a touch more into self-awareness and decided to take over.

In this world of many All-Knowing Kings and Queens, there are many kingdoms. Last time, I visited the rival brothers Tzorah and 57. This time, I looked at Athenz, a simple community, where a woman works as a potter.

The title — *Fear of the empty*, horror vacui — is an art term that describes densely decorated artwork, like the interwoven symbols and stylized animals of a Celtic design, or the borders of an illuminated manuscript. Some artworks, like a decorated vase, have an outer and an inner space. As I researched this story, I came across the idea of the symbolic importance of the inside space of a Greek vase, the space that is enclosed, for the moment, defined by the physical shape of the clay. As the potter's story is uncovered, we see her inner life, her terrible past, and her pain. The story explores resilience, and imagines that art, craft, creation and its subsequent destruction might comfort someone facing such an overwhelming grief and guilt.

