

In the air

Wishing

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Time turns round and another new year has just begun - unless you happen to belong to one of the cultures in which another new year has not just begun.

Suspending disbelief in the notion of time as a continuum, divided up merely for human convenience, we draw a line under the year that has just ended and make wishes and resolutions for the one to come – as if writing 2005 instead of 2004 can somehow make blank the page, invert the hourglass...

As if we can reinvent ourselves.

Each year, skeptics and believers alike pen thousands of words in this vein, but the conclusion always seems to be: we all know, rationally, that 1st January was merely Friday plus one day and that resolutions and wishes are a superstitious waste of time; but they do no harm and in any case no one intends giving up making either.

Beneath the frivolous disguise of resolutions and wishes, of course, lurks our old friend „free will versus determinism.“ You refuse the idea that things have to be „thus“, that an alternative life is not possible; that you cannot do things differently if you so choose.

It is our way of asserting ourselves in the face of so much powerlessness. We are no more capable than King Canute of holding back the waves – let alone tsunamis; but through wishes and resolutions we make the small choices that persuade us we are captain aboard our own ship.

But only if we choose carefully.

Take resolutions. They're fine if you can stick to them: how proud and strong (and fit) you feel if you really do get up an hour earlier each day and jog round the block, or are still not smoking six months later. But what, as Macbeth asks his wife: „if we should fail?“ Why, just the reverse: feelings of shame and weakness seep into you.

You have dealt a blow to your own self-esteem.

As for wishes... well, fellow aficionados of fairy tales and fantasy will know the terrible dangers that lurk in an unwise wish.

First, you should never forget that the power is in the words themselves – the word „spell“ after all originally meant simply „tale“ or „narration“. So you have to be careful to choose the right ones: „fate“ has a tendency to take your words literally and a careless adjective could turn your wish into a mocking source of sorrow.

Then you have to be sure that the means of making the wish come true



Photo: Internet

The Monkey's Paw

cannot take the form of some horrific event that will blight your life and that of your loved ones for ever.

Anyone who has read William Wy-mark Jacobs' short story „The Monkey's Paw“ will know what I mean.

In this gruesome piece of Victoriana an old couple and their son, Herbert, entertain an ex-army officer who shows them a mummified monkey's paw he has brought back from India.

The paw has had a spell put on it by an old fakir, „a very holy man“, who „wanted to show that Fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow“. Three men could have three wishes from the monkey's paw – and he reveals rather grimly that he has had three wishes and the paw's first owner as well – of which the third was for... death.

„Better let it burn“, says the soldier, throwing the paw into the fire. But the old man snatches it out of the flames.

What has to happen happens. He becomes the paw's third owner and is finally persuaded to make a wish. He holds up the paw in his right hand and wishes for the two hundred pounds that will clear the mortgage on their house. The paw writhes and leaps out of his hand to his shuddering cry of horror. As his wife and son retire for the night, he is left alone, gazing into the dying fire and seeing hideous simian faces...

The next day – Herbert has gone to work – the old couple receives the visit of a well-dressed gentleman who says he is from the son's firm. Herbert, he eventually brings out, has been badly hurt, caught up in the machinery, „but he is not in any pain“.

The mother is the first to take in the terrible meaning of that last statement. The firm, continues the gentleman, disclaims all liability but will be making a gratuity payment of two hundred pounds...

The old people bury their dead and return home. One night, some time

later, the desperate mother suddenly cries out: The monkey's paw! Why has she not thought of it before, they still have two wishes left! Against his better judgment, the father makes the second wish: „I wish my son alive again.“

The monkey's paw leaps to the ground and the two old people wait, in terror and longing. After a time, they hear a knock at the door, then another and another, louder and wilder. The mother struggles desperately to undo the chain and bolts. But her husband, realizing what they have done, is already on his knees groping around for the monkey's paw before the mutilated thing outside can get in. As his wife drags back the final bolt his hand closes round the paw and he desperately breathes out the third and final wish ... The frantic knocking ceases and there is a deathly silence.

This horrific tale is typical of Victorian angst at the decline of faith and the advance of technology. But it also illustrates the complexity of our relationship with fate, coincidence and free will: you cannot imagine the old people ever being persuaded that their wish had nothing to do with the death of their son.

Superstition has always been a powerful force in human life.

In ages past, lack of scientific knowledge and the resulting ignorance as to cause and effect allowed a sick person's recovery to be attributed to the pendulum they had dangled over them and not to the few days' rest and proper food they were given... (I say „in ages past“, but there are still plenty of pendulum-danglers among us.)

These days, our hearts and minds are flooded each day by a tsunami of words and images showing us catastrophes, major and minor, natural and man-made, about which we can do pitifully little – except, perhaps, make a donation.

Or a wish...