JIFFY

Nothing will come of nothing.

BY GEORGE ZEBROWSKI AND
CHARLES PELLEGRINO

“The box flickers from absolute zero to normal, back and forth,” Cora said.

“It’s only the instruments,” her thesis adviser said, and laughed. “We’d all be dead if they were measuring anything outside themselves.”

“Not if it’s far enough below the jiffy point,” she said.

“Is this April first?” he asked, chuckling, well aware that they were looking far below the travel time of light across the diameter of a proton, below one billion-trillionth of a second, below an instant called a jiffy. His neck tingled as he gazed into the black box.

“The meter flickers at the lowest limit of detection,” Cora said as Professor Draud glimpsed the jitter. It had to be one of those irreproducible results, seen by one observer and not another, probably not there at all. Near the theoried bottom of time-framing, with a jiffy measuring the travel time of light across a proton, and if one imagined the proton as the diameter of Earth, one would notice a passage of time smaller than light’s sprint across the eye of a flea on a jiffy-sized Earth.

“There!” Cora shouted. “Duration is up.”

“If it’s really there,” he said, as if that would stop the absurdity.

Now you see it, now you don’t, went on for an hour. Their necks tingled in unison and Cora imagined that all the errant twinges she had ever felt in her body had registered cosmic rays, neutrinos, irrational stray thoughts from previous boyfriends, tachyons allegedly travelling back in time, or even her cat’s psychotic proings. But this ambiguous nonsense about absolute zero spilling out of a black box from the realm of manifold space-time was a perversity worthy of money-hungry sci-fi writers.

“Can our equipment be measuring this?” he asked.

“Well, it’s doing it,” she replied, enhancing the resolution.

Unlike most of his colleagues, Professor Draud encouraged students to lead him, if and when they could.

The view through the black box was impossible. “Two flea eyes at least, and growing,” he muttered, no longer in denial.

“Still not large enough or fast enough to be noticed by the rest of the Universe,” Cora added.

“But if it keeps expanding?”

“If it’s everywhere at once, then there are three possible outcomes — all different levels of bad.”

“And least bad?” he asked.

“Another cosmic crunch, and maybe another inflationary universe afterwards.”

Was that really it? The true default condition outside the multiverse? Untypically, Draud seized on the idea of an exterior infinity. Jean-Paul Sartre’s nothingness was leaking into being. Outside the multiverses that bubbled into existence, the norm was absolute zero, which the bubbles resisted.

Cora interrupted his wild thoughts. “When I began this, I was a little afraid, certain that I would get no interesting results.”

He cringed inwardly at the strangeness on the bench before them. “Three flea-eye diameters now,” he said.

They set up a fresh box with two monitors, like gamblers hoping that a new deck of cards would defeat the cheater in the game. But it all came back with the same vision of the entire brane of existence coming to a particle stop, all the granularity of the periodic table suddenly stilled, leaving a timeless existent. They stared as if blinded, expecting it all to wink out in a grotesque spasm of decay.

“Can it be happening everywhere throughout the Universe?” Draud asked, eager to deny that much. Nothing in physics

had ever been local. Even in the quantum realm of imagined fleas on a proton as large as Earth, the laws of physics were not suggestions, but obligatory.

“From the very first jiffy of the entire visible Universe, it’s all been running down from energy into matter, and towards the zero point...”

Draud said, remembering an errant wish to have fathered a child.

“Six flea eyes!” he announced, suddenly seeing himself as a fearful inflation in an infinite series of cosmic doomsdays and rebirths. If the anomaly lurched beyond a thousand flea-leaps, quarks and gluons would phase into instantaneous non-existence, with every living creature throughout all the galaxies suddenly gone, all choice lost in a death unlike any that had ever been and could only be imagined, yet as simple as an on/off switch. No rending and tearing of flesh, but the truest of evils, nothingness itself, to which all lesser evils were beholden, to be feared but never experienced.

Student Draud had sometimes longed for a path along which science never became his life. What joyful memories would comfort him now?

“It’s still increasing!” he shouted. How many times had his life gone wrong, how often right?

Did having progeny have anything to do with fathering universes? Were there intelligences who could do that?

As Cora stared at him, the black behind his eyes fragmented her loveliness into chaos, mocking the logic that insisted on the impossibility, of non-existence, the much denied zero-point field...

They teetered between everything and nothing, an ancient undefeated void at their throats, and he felt the onset of the distinguished moment, so much greater than the usual dying, unequalled except by the lost strangeness of birth. ■

George Zebrowski is the Campbell Award winning novelist of *Brute Orbits* and the classic *Macrolife*. All his fiction is available from Gollancz’s *SF Gateway* (www.sfgateway.com) and *Open Road* (www.openroadmedia.com). **Charles Pellegrino**’s many books of history and archaeology include *Her Name Titanic* and *To Hell and Back: The Last Train From Hiroshima*. His science-fiction novels include *Dust* and *The Killing Star* (with George Zebrowski).

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