

Nicolas Lepore

GenEd 1001: Stories from the End of the World

Prof. Giovanni Bazzana

Laura Thompson

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The Surface

Part I: The Morning

A droplet fell on his forehead, and Kol sprang out of bed in a panic. He looked up, noticing a new crack in the glass. He made a note to tell his mother.

Kol turned off his alarm before he could be bothered by it; he knew he wouldn't fall back asleep now. It was Monday, and this past weekend he had gone speargun fishing with his friends in the ravines up north. He slipped into his wetsuit, grabbed his backpack, and made his way down the stairs. His mother was waiting for him in the kitchen, with a fresh plate of turtle eggs on the countertop — over-hard, with a side of toasted kelp. She watched the news on the TV across the living room.

“Good morning, Ma,” Kol said. “I just noticed a new crack in the glass. The water woke me up.”

“Forget about that, I'll take care of it in a little while.” she replied, never looking away from the TV. “Take a look at the news, honey.”

Kol moved the plate to the table, sitting next to his mother. He took a bite of kelp and glanced up at the news.

“...our guest today is President Dr. Nekark, acclaimed scientist at the Marine Nuclear Energy Institute of Sub Francisco, as we all know. He has come to tell us about his latest research, news that is sure to revolutionize the United Shores of America. Please Jack, take it away.”

“Thanks Bill. It’s great to be here in the studio once again. Hello all citizens tuning in at home...”

Part II: The Impact

Since the Great Exodus, Dr. Nekark has been the voice of leadership in the country, as science now reigned supreme. When the Earth was knocked off of its orbit 17 years ago by a meteor landing in the heart of Russia, Nekark knew what would follow. The Earth thankfully realigned into a new orbit, but this one was much closer to the Sun. The event would later be referred to as “The Impact”.

Soon, the Earth’s surface became too hot to sustain life, and to make matters worse, both the North and South polar ice caps started melting rapidly. In the span of three weeks, most of the major coastal cities in the world were underwater. The land-locked cities were abandoned because of the intense heat. All told, the catastrophe cost approximately 6 billion lives.

It was a miracle that Nekark saved so many. A day after The Impact, Nekark, then an astrophysics PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, approached the United States government with the “Great Exodus”, urging the American people to begin production on a city off the coast of San Francisco, below the ocean’s surface. He stressed that it had to be underwater, for soon even the Earth’s underground shelters and caves would start to bake. He said that it was “time for humanity to return to its primordial womb, the ocean.” At first people laughed at the idea, calling him the “King of Atlantis”. But when the air temperature started to sustain 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and millions of midwestern Americans flocked to the coasts, the corporations and government knew they had no other choice.

They started production on New York Bay, Miami, San Francisco, and other cities. Every working man and woman dedicated themselves to the cause, no matter their means or occupations, for their futures and the future of their children depended on it. Glass domes,

opaque in some parts and transparent in others, were dropped underwater and fitted to be family homes, with different rooms and floors. Factories were built underwater, supplies were moved to the factories, and cities started to take shape as surfacescrapers were erected on the ocean floor. Innovation in scuba and submarine technology allowed for people to work and “drive” underwater, to speed up production.

By the time the Earth sustained 160 degrees Fahrenheit air temperature, the United States had almost completely moved underwater, along with other countries lucky enough to have a coastline. The new nation formed from the American underwater cities was named the United Shores of America.

Nekark was unanimously elected to be its first President, for his valiant effort in proposing, designing, and constructing the miracle cities. Instead of governing from his own mega-dome, Nekark opted to stay at the Marine Nuclear Energy Institute, to further his research and to continue innovating for the people of the United Shores.

Powering these cities was a matter of life or death. If the power went out, the underwater structures could not filter sea water to be drinkable, nor could it circulate oxygen and filter out carbon dioxide. At first, scientists tried hydropower, using the currents to generate hydroelectricity by spinning underwater turbines. They also tried coal power plants, but most coal was found in surface mines, which were inaccessible now due to the heat. Neither were enough, and Nekark knew it. So, he proposed nuclear energy to supplement hydropower. Underwater currents were well suited to cool the nuclear power plants. Even in the rare case of a nuclear meltdown, the power plant would be somewhat contained by the surrounding water — similarly, combustion and nuclear explosives were far less of a threat to underwater cities and countries. Uranium appeared more in underwater mines than above the surface. Nuclear waste

was dumped on land; radioactive barrels were shot out of a cannon as far from the shore as possible.

Kol's father and mother, Kane and Carol, were Midwestern school teachers before The Impact, so they contributed to the creation of Sub Francisco by working on the construction of new buildings and assembly of submarine-cars. Carol worked throughout her pregnancy. After Kol's birth, Kane went to work as a uranium miner, since there was always high demand for uranium. He was away for months at a time, and communication was limited. His mine was located next to a nuclear power plant and the Marine Nuclear Energy Institute. Carol resumed her teaching at the new local high school, Riptide High, where Kol was just beginning his junior year.

Part III: The News

“... all citizens tuning in at home, I wish you health and happiness. I, President Dr. Nekark, have some uplifting news.

“This past week, we witnessed our worst act of interoceanic terrorism in years — the city of Miamitis suffered a power outage of approximately 12 minutes, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties. As you all know, we have been competing for uranium with the China-Taiwan Ravine Union, as well as the United Kingdom of Coasts and Austro-Zealand Reeflands, for quite some time now. We cannot identify the aggressor, but we believe this act of war was motivated by our early seizure of the nearby Caribbean uranium mine, a vast system of caves amongst the former Caribbean Islands that powers all of Miamitis and most of New York Bay.

“I come to tell you that we mustn’t live in fear any longer. Today, we set in motion our top-secret operation to eradicate the threat of terrorism in our United Shores, and we will rid the whole wide water of those evil enough to steal our precious power. Today is a day of celebration, and will henceforth be called the Day of Victory, or V Day. We will have unlimited access to energy ad infinitum. Tomorrow, you will wake up to a brighter future. Thank you all for creating this great nation, and God bless the United Shores of America!”

The screen cut to commercial. Kol and Carol looked at each other. Kol saw that his mother felt relieved and elated, and she began to cry. Kol got up to hug her.

“You know that ever since your aunt and uncle died in Miamitis last week, all I could think about was your safety,” Carol managed, now almost sobbing. “I helped build this world, and as soon as I knew you would be a part of it, I worked hard to make it last forever.”

“I know, Ma, I know,” Kol said, consoling her. Though she hadn’t seen her sister since before The Impact, her death had left Carol quiet and reclusive. His mother was finally at ease, but Kol didn’t know how he felt about the announcement. He knew of all the good that Nekark had done before he was born, but he didn’t witness it firsthand — and recently it seemed like Nekark was more occupied with his research than with leading the nation...

She wiped her face, then checked her watch. “I will always remember today. I thank God every day for President Dr. Nekark.” She grabbed her bag filled with school books. “Well, it’s time for school!”

Kol and Carol stood in the airlock and bit down on their Breathers, made of two hyperconcentrated oxygen tanks and a mouthpiece. Kol hit the button and the room slowly filled with seawater. As the water gathered around his ankles, he noticed that it wasn’t too cold today, and he was glad of it, since he put on his thin wetsuit this morning. Kol swam around back to feed the turtles in the coop and the manatees in their pasture, while Carol swam over to the sub — not the kind of submarine from before The Impact, but made with glass windows, comfy seating, and painted bright red. They owned a Ford Barracuda, which they bought used from a neighbor a few years back. Kol climbed in after her. They allowed the pump to release all the water, and took off their Breathers. Kol was driving since he was practicing for his upcoming sub test.

They drove down the channel, indicated by rings of light. They passed by whale farms and turtle coops. Some whaleboys were herding the pods atop their dolphins. They waved. Kol waved back, and looked out across the great empty expanse of sea. Since moving underwater, the world had taken to cleaning pollution from their oceans. But really they were launching the garbage back onto land.

The sub made its way towards the city, and more domes became visible. Then factories and surfacescrapers finally came into view. Kol didn't like the city. He didn't like the crowds, and not being able to see the tops of the buildings made him uncomfortable in a way he couldn't explain. People were swimming all around, going about their workday as usual.

Kol made a right turn without signaling, but Carol didn't notice. She was too excited about the day to come, mulling over what discussion questions she would ask her students.

Part IV: The Call

On the ride home from school, Kol started to make his peace with the news. This was a good thing, he told himself. No more fear of drowning or suffocation from a power outage. For the past few years, he had been seeing a therapist about his fear of drowning. “These are totally normal fears to have as a member of this society,” the therapist reassured him. “Water is all around us, and it is deadly if we aren’t careful. But it is also our savior, our salvation. Without the water, we would all cease to exist. Learn to love the water. Cherish it, appreciate it.”

Carol’s phone started ringing, and Kol shook away the memory. “It’s your father! I wonder what he thinks of Nekark’s news!” She hit the accept button and brought it to her ear.

“Hi dear! How are you? We miss you very much... it’s been a few days!”

There was noise from the phone, but Kol couldn’t hear what his father said.

“Okay, sure thing!” Carol hit the speaker-phone button.

“Kol, Carol, can you hear me? Are you alone?” His voice was barely audible. He seemed to be feigning calmness, but the shaking in his breath told Kol there was something wrong. It seemed like he was in a rush.

“Yeah, I can hear you, Pa. We are alone, in the sub.”

“Good. Now listen.” This was not the ordinary Kane. Usually he wanted to hear them speak, or he’d poke fun at one of them, and wait for the reaction from the other.

He continued. “I’m sure you’ve heard of Nekark’s announcement by now...”

“Isn’t it wonderful!” Carol interrupted, moved by her giddiness.

“Carol. Listen.” he snapped. “I was in the mines today, and I surfaced in an untouched cave leading to a vent from the Marine Nuclear Energy Institute. I knew it was above my level of

clearance to be there, but there was a clean vein of uranium right next to it, so I tried to extract it quickly. Voices came from the vent, and I realized I was listening to a meeting between Nekark and his cohort of scientists. I knew it was his voice from all the news announcements.”

“That’s incredible honey! You were within earshot of the most powerful man in the United Shores, maybe the world! I wish I had your luck.” Carol stared up at the ocean’s surface in amazement.

“No Carol, stop it for one minute. This is important. Nekark mentioned something about a weapon called ‘The Lava,’ and how they planned to use it to eradicate the uranium competition from China-Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and Austro-Zealand. Although I only taught chemistry, my understanding is that The Lava is an underwater nuclear weapon that expels a kind of gel that prohibits the water from evaporating, then heats up to extreme temperatures. It makes all the water in a certain radius so hot that it can melt glass, steel, anything really. This new technology could really do a lotta damage to a lotta people.

“Then, one scientist from the cohort spoke up, a woman from what I gathered, and seemed very agitated. She said something about how it’s not his choice who lives and who dies, and how the weapon isn’t even tested yet. Nekark then said that he saved this nation from total annihilation, so it *is* his choice who lives and who dies, since *he* gave everyone life. Then he said, ‘Besides, do you really think one of those other nations could manage to disrupt the power grid of Miamitis? I needed an excuse to use The Lava on our adversaries.’”

Kol looked at Carol. She was frozen. Her delight had vanished. There was silence for a moment.

“Are you still there?” Kane said.

“Yeah we’re still here, Pa,” Kol said, still looking at his mother.

“After Nekark said this, there was a woman’s scream and a single gunshot. I ditched the ore, dove back underwater, and swam out of that shaft as fast as I could. Calling y’all is the first thing I did since getting back to my quarters. I think they’ll kill me if they find out I was listening.” His voice was below a whisper at this point.

“Kane,” Carol started slowly, “you need to come home right now. Quit if you have to.”

“But what if they follow me to our home and...”

“Kane. Now it’s your turn to listen to me.”

“Okay, Care. I’ll take the next sub-bus outta here. See you in a few days.” Kol and Carol could hear Kane fumble with the phone to hang up, but after a moment, came back on the line.

“I love you both.”

The rest of the sub ride was silent.

Part V: The Lava

While Kol was upstairs doing homework, Carol didn't know what to do with herself. She should have been grading her students' papers, but she couldn't focus. She tidied up the house for her husband's arrival in a few days. She felt like she needed to lay down. On the couch, she turned on the news channel from that morning, and looked out of the transparent glass at the sea bottom. The outdoors was much brighter than usual for this time of day. She also felt hot, even though the glass homes were always kept at the correct temperature.

"...continuing our celebration of V Day, we bring you the boy band sweeping the nation, the Lobsters! ..."

Carol didn't know what to think. Was Nekark responsible for her sister's death? Did he actually kill that woman who spoke up at his meeting? Was he really our savior, or was he just power-hungry?

"Ladies and gentlemen, this just in: we have the honor of hearing from our great leader for the second time today! Here is, President Dr." The news anchor trailed off and the screen abruptly cut to Nekark at the Marine Nuclear Energy Institute.

"...so sorry. I'm so very sorry," cried Nekark, frantic. There were tears in his eyes.

"Kol, Nekark is on the news again!" called Carol. She immediately sat up.

"...it was all going according to plan, but the gel wouldn't release..." Nekark was hysterical at this point. "I don't want to die."

Kol was downstairs now. They had never seen Nekark cry. They watched.

"...everyone, look outside. The surface is coming closer. It's brighter out there. Do you feel hot? Why am I so hot..." For a second, Nekark composed himself. "The three nuclear

weapons that I dropped on our enemies have all malfunctioned. Their anti-vaporizing gel was somehow trapped inside each warhead, and now their extreme heat is evaporating the oceans' water. I'm so, so sorry. I thought this was the only way..."

Gunshots could be heard in the background. As Nekark turned right to look at the source of the noise behind him, a revolver appeared in the corner of the screen. A shot rang out, and Nekark crumpled to the floor. The channel cut back to the news desk, but no one was there.

Carol shut off the TV.

Part VI: The Surface

Later, Kol and Carol swam outside. The water was much warmer than it was that morning. Carol held a cross in her right hand, and a picture of Kane in her left. They watched as the surface slowly descended towards them. Nekark was right — the future was brighter, just not in the way he intended. Today would certainly be a day to remember.

Soon the surface made its way to the top of their home. Kol turned to his mother, then hugged her. She held the picture of Kane between them. The surface passed the second floor, then first floor, and finally reached the ocean floor.

For a brief moment, Kol took in the surface world. The sky, which he had never seen, was red. He could see for miles. Just along the horizon behind his home, ancient structures and a rusted red bridge emerged into the light, with water cascading down every facade. The old city was awakening from its watery slumber — unsupported by the wake, some leaned and finally toppled over.

It was beautiful.

Where he felt warm before, he now felt scorching, as his skin seared and cracked. They didn't scream, but instead gave out a lasting sigh. Kol looked at his mother one last time as they held hands.

“I love you, Ma.”

He could see that his mother was crying now, even though the tears evaporated as they left her eyes.

Comments

Much of *The Surface* pulled from the course material that I found most engaging and profound with respect to Christian apocalyptic motifs that we have studied throughout the semester. I would say that *The Surface* is most inspired by *Pumzi*. I asked myself, what would be the antithesis of living in a desert where water is the most precious resource, and I came up with a world underwater, where air and electricity were most valuable (and with that, uranium). I also toyed with, but ultimately left out, the idea of creating a suppressive government that secretly knew the Earth's land was habitable, because this felt too close to the warning of the information-suppressive surveillance state of *Pumzi* and the film *Snowpiercer*. I also felt it would have clouded the symbol of President Dr. Nekark as a tormented Antichrist, who is supposed to be universally loved. The characterization of Nekark (which is Kraken backwards, the devil of the deep, if you will) could have followed the role of the Antichrist exactly, but I decided to make him depart from the figure in a few ways. Nekark saves the people of the United Shores, and this paints him as a messianic figure, one who tirelessly worked to save mankind. But his motives are unclear; did he actually want to save the world and peacefully return to his research (similar to the legendary Cincinnatus of Rome), or to take control, perhaps in pursuit of creating a global government? His hunger for power does not stop once he's saved the U.S., since he seeks to eradicate the opposition with The Lava. We also see Nekark at his weakest when he is about to die, another departure from the Antichrist, showing that he was in reality a fragile man who hid behind the power of science to seize control. Nekark's character is also inspired by the *Apocryphon of John*, in which he is similar to Yaldabaoth, who creates the race of Archons who live in a lower world (underwater world) inferior to the one above. This world is made out of

darkness but harbors light stolen by Sophia, so it is neither light nor dark but instead dim, shown by the dimness of the underwater world, with Carol noting that it becomes filled with light as the surface descends and the above world melds with the below.

Other connections to the course material included The Impact, which is directly related to the First and Second Impact of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, but with a more radical consequence in the form of the Earth's realignment and the land becoming too hot (we actually see the water level rise in NGE after the First Impact). The 17 years between The Impact and the time of the story is reminiscent of the 7 years of Tribulation described in the Book of Revelation. This allows for the interpretation that The Impact was actually The Rapture, and the possibility that those who drowned or burned up were actually ascending to heaven, while those who saved themselves were "left behind". The Lava is most similar to the Oxygen Destroyer from *Godzilla*, an underwater warhead with unimaginable power. Another detail that I decided to leave up for interpretation was the significance of naming the father Kane, which is pronounced the same way as Cain, the biblical figure who murdered his brother Abel and had his descendants wiped from the Earth by God's flood. Covering the entire Earth in water would closely follow the story of Noah, so I decided to keep the land, albeit scorching hot. Our Kane's descendant and his wife are killed by the opposite of a flood — a great evaporation. This could be extrapolated as a commentary on how humans have evolved enough to survive God's wrath, since only Noah's Ark survived the first great flood, and the underwater cities serve as modern-day arks. But God's wrath evolves as well, hence the great evaporation, and it is inescapable.