



Catherine
Dufour

**THREE
TALES
OF THE PAST
FUTURE**

Original title :
Trois contes du futur antérieur

© Catherine Dufour, 2020

© JEU DE PAUME, 2020
for the English version

Cover image :
Bohn advertising poster, circa 1940

Catherine Dufour

**THREE TALES
OF THE PAST FUTURE**

Translated from French (France)
by Bernard Wooding

JEU DE PAUME – le magazine

1900

Once upon a time there was a little boy called Émile, who found life terribly boring. Everything bored him, and he got bored wherever he went, with everyone. Pushing his hoop in the Tuileries with his friend Dédé was a drag; playing with his friend Lulu in the sand, near the large pond, made him yawn. He didn't even have the heart to run on the lawns in order to catch butterflies with his little green net.

One day, as he was walking by the Seine behind his parents, sighing heavily behind their backs, he spotted something shining brightly beneath an epimedium bush. Leaning down, he made out a large marble that had been abandoned in the mud and was sparkling in the sun.

- Oh! A taw.

Émile slid under the bush to pick up the taw. He rubbed it on his sleeve to clean it. Suddenly, as he did so, everything misted over. As if in a dream, he could see his father and his mother disappearing into a thick fog; he had the sensation of being caught in a strong wind. He didn't know it, but years were speeding past him, like golden arches.

Émile rubbed his eyes with his fists. It was no use: he was now alone on a neatly built embankment, and what looked like the Seine was flowing placidly just two metres below. He looked up: hundreds of airplanes were moving above him, as in some sort of beautiful ballet. Some of them had one, two or three wings, and they were all different colours. Some were minuscule, while others were as large as stagecoaches, and were transporting lots of people,

of which Émile could only see their hats poking out above the gondola. In the middle of all that, policemen with articulated wings, recognisable by their uniforms and their white batons, were directing traffic. And higher up, almost level with the pretty white clouds, were brightly coloured hot-air balloons. They were being powered by large propellers whose blades were glinting in the sunshine. Shouts, engine noises and laughter fell from the sky onto the astonished Émile's head.

Émile decided to leave the riverbank, and looked for a staircase: he couldn't see one. But the wall opened up to reveal a row of lifts. As he cautiously approached them, an attendant beamed at him, opened the door to one of the cabins for him and said in a loud voice:

- Mind your step!

Émile cautiously entered the lift, which was lined with mirrors and red velvet. The attendant closed the gate and pushed the lever down: less than a minute later, the gate opened again to reveal a huge boulevard.

'Everyone get off!' shouted the attendant. Émile jumped, stepped out of the lift, and nearly fell over: the pavement had just disappeared under his feet.

Astounded, Émile saw that the landscape was slowly scrolling past before his eyes. He recognised the Pont Royal as it was passing and looked down at his shoes: he was on a vast moving walkway, whose wooden slats were sliding silently along the road. Disconcerted, Émile carefully went over to the side and plucked up the courage to jump . . .

1960

... onto the road made of white plastic. Émilie sighed with relief: the moving walkway had almost been making her feel sick. She looked around: hurried-looking people were going past her without looking at her. They were wearing strange, shiny jumpsuits and had helmets on that gave off flashes, and on their shoulders they had what appeared to be gas masks. But the most bizarre thing was that as they were walking they were looking at television screens no larger than bricks, whose light turned their faces green. It occurred to Émilie that they must fall over quite often and that it must be an amusing sight, but alas nothing of the kind happened. Looking over the heads of the passers-by, Émilie recognised the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, which marked the end of the Tuileries Garden. But it was surrounded by a cloud of half-bubbles made from grey concrete that she had never seen before.

- What's that? she exclaimed.

An elderly man who was walking slowly, hands clasped around his portable television, assumed the question was directed at him. Looking up, he stopped to answer:

- That? But where have you been, young lady? Those are the anti-atomic shelters that have just been inaugurated. Didn't you read *How to survive a nuclear attack* at school?

Émilie, who had been wary of elderly men ever since her mother had told her to be, thanked him with a nod and trotted off. She headed in the direction of the shelters, because she was curious. For the first time in her life, she no

longer felt boredom weighing on her. She also tried not to wonder about the strangeness of her situation. All around her little transparent plastic cars glided across the sparkling ground. Above her, round flying saucers gracefully crossed paths, moving from one huge tower to another. Paris had really changed! Suspended trains as streamlined as cigars moved at incredible speed along tracks above the Seine. Looking up, Émilie glimpsed a sort of metallic sparkle in the very blue sky: these were surely satellites orbiting the planet (she had learnt that at school). There seemed to be as many of them as swarms of midges in summer.

Just as she was reaching one of the anti-atomic shelters, Émilie saw, stuck to the trunk of a tree made of rubber, a large poster featuring a woman who was as old as her grandmother, and who looked almost as strict. The portrait was crowned with a bright red slogan that Émilie was easily able to read (she was precocious): 'Nathalie, the power of age!' Lower down, written in even bigger letters: 'Vote Nathalie!' Émilie sniggered. She laughed even louder when she discovered, a bit further on, on a stone bush, a poster showing a female boxing champion: 'Laurence, champion of France'. Then she noticed a kiosk that seemed to be selling sweets. But when she went up to it, an electric sales assistant stretched out a long articulated arm and said in a metallic voice:

- Buy my pills! Vitamins! Mineral salts! Proteins and lipids!

Emilie frowned: where were the boiled sweets in shells, liquorice spirals, machines full of pink and yellow marshmallow, and copper pots with boiling praline? The pills proffered by the robot-saleswoman looked like medicines. As the seller extended her long arm towards her, Émilie quickly turned around and bumped into . . .

2020

... her father, who picked her up, laughing:

- Where were you, you silly thing? You really had me worried! For a moment, I thought the crocodiles had carried you off!

Emmy clutched her father's neck with inexpressible relief. No more boredom! She had been so frightened that she didn't feel it anymore. At all.

- Sit right down in the boat. Your mother is waiting for us at the Jeu de Paume port.

Emmy curled up on the seat, while her father positioned himself at the bow, from where he deftly sculled amid the carpet of green water primrose with little yellow flowers covering the murky waters of the Tuileries lake. Emmy lent over the side.

- Oh! Look, dad! The insect gathering pollen in this flower is a bee, isn't it?

- Unfortunately, it isn't, darling. I think it's an Asian hornet. As you know, the bees are all gone.

- Oh, said Emmy with disappointment.

- Make sure you stay in the middle of the bench. You know the Egyptian geese like to come up to boats to pull children into the water and drown them.

Emmy moved closer to the side, sighing. She was not frightened of Egyptian

geese: after all, they were just big aggressive geese with nasty red feet. And she knew how to swim. Everyone in Paris knew how to swim now that three quarters of the city was under water. But still, if her father insisted . . . He hadn't reprimanded his daughter for running off in the way she did, but Emmy instinctively knew that it had been a close thing. She looked up: in the distance, the Big Stone at Les Invalides was just poking up through the shiny surface of the lake. Despite the heat haze, Emmy could even make out the rusty silhouette of the Eiffel Tower. The Jeu de Paume port must have been close, somewhere behind the vaporous plumes of glyceria.

It was not really a port, but rather a raft chained to the remains of the old Napoleonic building. The boat came alongside gently and Emmy jumped onto the planks and ran into the arms of her mother, who scolded her.

- Do you realise what a scare you gave us? With all of these groups of starving swans! And the hordes of yellow dogs! And the rats lying in wait!
- But mum, the yellow dogs only come out at sunset.
- Don't ever do that again.

Emmy looked at her shoes, without saying anything. They were waterproof, non-slip shoes, cut out of old tyres. Her parents had explained to her what a tyre was. They had told her about cars, the roads as smooth as granddad's skull, their speed, the petrol stations, oil, pollution, greenhouse gases. None of it made sense to Emmy: the cars she had known were rusty wrecks strewn about streets that were used as urban planters, the road surface was cracked like her grandmother's face, and there was nothing faster in the world than her grandmother's bicycle – apart, of course, from the flying taxis that belonged to the people who were known as the 'last polluters'. She sometimes saw

them going past, but less and less often, high up in the sky above Paris, mostly in the south and the west.

Her mother was still shouting, so Emmy decided to cry. And while she was crying, she felt the boredom that had formed around her heart in a hard, cold crust melt like butter in the sun. As she cried, she thrust her fists into her pockets; she felt something smooth and hard in her fingers. She took out of her pocket a strange dirty marble which she hadn't remembered putting there. The marble, washed by her tears, started to shine more and more, shining like a lightbulb, then like a small moon and, finally, like a sun. Dazzled, Emmy closed her eyes and had the impression that she was in the grip of a wind. She did not know it, but it was as if years were passing her at high speed, like golden arches . . .

1900

. . . Émile shook himself like a wet dog.

- Come on, Émile. Hurry up please!

Émile's father, half-turned in his direction, gestured to him. Near Émile, behind an epimedium bush, the Seine flowed lazily. Émile let go of the taw and, without looking at where it was rolling, ran to catch up with his parents while wiping his eyes.

This novel by Catherine Dufour
was commissioned by the Jeu de Paume
in connection with "Futurs d'avant",
an online project with artworks
by Letícia Ramos and Marguerite Humeau –
<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org/>

FUTURS D'AVANT.



<
jeu
de
paume
espace
virtuel
/>

LETICIA RAMOS

MARGUERITE HUMEAU

Curators: Livia Benedetti and Marcela Vieira (aarea)

JEU DE PAUME / ESPACE VIRTUEL

<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org>

October 2020 - February 2021

