



Open your mind

Gary Budgen offers us some serious pharmaceuticals

Lucky Jim's is open for business

Explore the seedier side of used space-ship parts with Jonathan Hicks

Something wicked...

A toothy tale from Richard Strachan



The B.S.F.A.'s magazine for writers

Issue 46 November 2004

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About the cover

On a clear October morning, I went down to the banks of the Tyne to snap the latest creation from master architect Norman Foster. Described in *The Sunday Times* as huge, gleaming and bulbous, The Sage looks like a Vorlon ship just landing.
www.thesagegateshead.org

Submission guidelines

Non-fiction

Articles on all aspects of writing, publishing, editing, drawing, printing even, are always welcome. Length should be no more than 5000 words. Letters regarding *Focus* are also gratefully received. Please mark 'for publication'. I reserve the right to edit/shorten them.

Fiction and poetry

Focus needs high-quality fiction and poetry of 5000 words or less. I will also consider stand-alone comic strips up to 4 pages. Science fiction, fantasy, and psychological horror all taken. There's no payment, but you'll see your work grace the pages of this magazine.

Art

Black and white/greyscale only! *Focus* is always on the look-out for covers, illustrations and fillers. Recent advances in digital printing mean that I can now do hi-res photos.

Non-BSFA contributors get a complimentary copy of *Focus*.

How and where to submit

Postal and email editorial addresses in the first column!

By post:

Text: double-spaced, single-sided A4, or on disk. I can convert most formats, but always include a .txt file in case.

Art: one illustration per page. Don't send originals – only photocopies. If you want to send a disk, you can. Again, I can read most formats

If you want your work back, enclose an SAE with sufficient postage. If you don't, mark the work as disposable, and either enclose an SAE or a valid email address for a reply. I like covering letters.

By email:

Text: as part of the body text, please. No attachments.

Art: not by email! Put it on the web and send me the URL!

Queries regarding the suitability of submissions should also be directed to the editorial address. Please wait at least a month before querying submissions – I do have an increasingly busy life!

NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:
1st April 2005

Pedantry

Following on from the last Pedantry, some folk have asked 'How did it go?' Well, Spaceship Morden had a hard landing Beagle 2 stylee. No filthy pro-dom just yet, but hope springs eternal.

Having said that, and having appeared on a panel over the summer at the Greenbelt Arts Festival for 'Struggling writers', the whys of writing have loomed large in my mind.

I've been published for around 6-7 years now, a pile of anthologies, a few magazines, an indie press novel, two short story collections. They've all been well received, and I've built up a rep in the horror/fantasy community – but it's not exactly success, is it?

So why do I do it? Why does anyone do it? Almost all the writers I know (and I know a lot) have full-time day jobs or have gone part-time with a working spouse. It's certainly not the money, and my tax return is pitifully easy to fill in.

Is it the girls? Despite my tongue-in-cheek assertion that we're just doing it to impress the ladies, what could be less attractive than a man who shuts himself in his study for three hours a night and emerges only to nip to the lavvy? Beating the groupies off with a stick is a problem I've yet to encounter. Besides, I have a feeling the stick will be wielded with more force by my lovely wife.

It's not for the status, either: I've more kudos for being a Teaching Assistant, and even then my children's friends all run up to me when I'm on yard duty, point, giggle, and run away.

It comes down to this: I write because I want to tell stories. Forget for a moment that the audience is small, the pay non-existent, the respect zero. I write because I know stories have a life of their own, that I can transcribe them to paper, that I can make them live outside of me.

What other motivation could there be? Fame and fortune are beyond my current reach, and may well remain there until my dying day. But between now and then, I'll still carry on, writing stories, telling tales, building worlds (and destroying them again), making stuff up that could never have happened, never will happen.

It is a joy to do so, and I recommend the writing life to all.



Simon Morden
Gateshead, October 2004

Streetlight Guile Maureen Braithwaite

Spreading diffused light,
they mingle with the mist
in a whorl of tainted white.

Innocent enough
but then so is the laugh
which betrays vampires' delight

Their unblinking eyes
look down on highways
joined in phosphorant light

Hiding their guile
under protector guise,
easing our fears in the night.

Monsters from War of the Worlds,
they dim as dawn spawns,
glows fade into obscurity like
Hal's micro-chipped death throes.

You wonder why I
wake up screaming,
I saw them mass and move,
but I was only dreaming.

This time.

They never sleep,
always watching me,
watching you,
surrounded by their halos
of halogenic blue.



Maureen Braithwaite lives in Stockport and is a secretary. She enjoys reading weird, supernatural and science fiction. In her poems she tries to peel away the veneer of the ordinary to reveal the extraordinary that lives behind and alongside our routine lives – that of alternative worlds, lives, beings and legends.

Across the Universe

Gary Budgen

Carter spent his days reclaiming rubbish, wearing a bright yellow badge that said, "Hi my name is _____ and I'm helping to save the planet". He never did fill in the blank. His job was to stand at the mouth of the extractor and ensure that none of the bags of filth or tin cans caused a blockage. All the stuff torn out of the old landfill was sent down the line to where an expert system sorted it.

When you first started everyone said, "Amazing what they used to throw away," but then you soon grew too bored to talk. Today he'd been on shift with Annie Ann, who'd once been a nurse but was now a synesthesia addict who didn't talk much but not because she was bored; quite the opposite. She'd watch the extractor suck from the trash face and nod as the colours of faded old labels sang to her like a choir of joyful children or the texture of the crushed cans evoked melting chocolate on her tongue.

After work he took the tube back home and bought the evening paper. He let the green lozenge dissolve into his palm leaving only a stain. There were the usual economic forecasts, showbiz and then pictures of a battle with helicopters firing into some slum housing. As he returned his attention to where he was going this scene became a montage as he made his way towards the alley that led to home. For a moment he had to do a double take—the leaves of the alley were covered in helicopters soaked and turning to mulch.

He switched the paper off, stopped and closed his eyes for a second; maybe you should only read these things when you're sat down.

Ahead, in the alley he saw a couple of teenagers loitering, and on the floor slumped against the railings there was something black that looked like the old plastic rubbish sacks he was forever seeing pulled from the ground.

One of the teenagers kicked the bag and the bag moved, becoming a man. Carter was closer now and heard the groan; then another as the teenager kicked the man as he cowered against the railings. Carter froze and watched. He hadn't been seen yet and could turn around and escape from the situation.

One of the kids went on with the kicking whilst the other just watched, leant forward slightly and focused on the violence. Carter realised that they were voyboys and ran ahead shouting. They turned towards him and he saw that the one that had been doing the watching had a bio-cam implanted at the side of his eye and had been recording. Children of some rich bureaucrat most likely. For a moment they didn't move, then they turned and ran. Carter wasn't particularly intimidating but he evened up the odds and that had been enough.

The voyboys' victim was more bemused than hurt. There wasn't a mark on his face, and just the dust from soiled feet on his black suit. He stood up as Carter approached, brushing himself down. He was young, with curled blond hair and his clothes didn't fit him; not that they were cut wrong or out of size, rather it was as though the colour and demeanour of them meant that he looked somehow in disguise.

Then he spoke, "Do I burn you?"

"Sorry. Look I just wanted to know if they hurt you."

"Like Moses on Sinai, you are burnt, you are overcome?"

"If you're all right I'll be on my way."

As Carter walked off he felt the man's fingers touch him, without pressure, stopping him in his tracks. "Thank you."

"Yeah well," said Carter, "that sort make me sick."

"I am glad I didn't burn you." Then, after a moment, "I must offer you transcendence. That is how I can thank you."

The man was searching his jacket pocket for something as Carter forced out a snort, "There's plenty that need a bit of transcendence more than me, mate." And finally walked away.

"I'm Roderick," said the man.

"Goodbye, Roderick."

The alley came out onto a main road and Carter

was amongst jammed ground-cars and people starting to trot as it began to rain. Outside the Nova Inn an old soldier stinking of booze and oblivious to the weather was singing as he slumped against the wall beside a notice telling how his eyes had been ruined by battlefield lasers and that he was saving up for new ones

Carter's flat was on the fourth and top floor of a twentieth century low-rise and the lift was, as usual, broken. He stopped on the third floor lobby to get his breath and heard sobbing, knowing immediately that it was Trxie Good and that she had had another one of her incidents.

"Is that you Trxie?" he called up.

There was a muffled sound and more sobs in reply. Carter began the final flight of stairs and saw her sat on the top step. Her strawberry blonde hair was askew across her face, falling over her eyes to just above her mouth where her hands were not stopping the blood soaking through from a cut lip. She wore a PVC mini skirt that had ridden up around her waist and the artificial skin on her leg looked contaminated and had flared into a long jaundiced wrinkle. As she saw him she managed to strain what sounded like "Rsssd" between her beaten lips and bloody fingers.

"Punter?" asked Carter

Trxie nodded, then pressed hard on her lip whilst she said, "He's still there."

Carter looked at her pleading eyes knowing that she wanted him to sort the situation out.

"He's not hard or nothing," she said, and then, holding her mouth tight shut again, looked up at him and tried to bat her eyelids from beneath her hair.

"Please," pleaded Carter as he made his way towards her flat; there was no need for any of that.

The middle-aged punter stank of gin. He was pulling out a drawer. Already the contents of the others had been tipped onto the carpet in his scramble for valuables. Threadbare clothes were lumped in piles and now kicked as he rushed to a shelf and with a swipe knocked off an ornamental snowstorm, papers and cardboard folders.

"Where's the cash?" he mumbled to himself.

"She's got nothing," said Carter.

At the sound of the voice the punter turned, breathing hard, his bloated stomach shuddering. "Who the hell are you?"

"Just clear off."

"Or what?" But already the punter was moving, past Carter and towards the door.

As the punter moved into the hall Carter inspected the room. It was a mess, but hardly that

different from the state Trxie usually kept it in.

Carter picked up the snowstorm and put it back on the shelf. Then saw a folder that had spilled photos. He squatted down to have a look; there was a company motif in italic saying "Poignant Moments". The top photo on the pile showed a vintage ground-car, could've even have been a petrol burner, with a man standing next to it laying his hand on the bonnet with the possessive caress of a lover. He wore a trilby sat back at a jaunty angle and had some kind of rash along one side of his face.

The membrane around the edges of the photo had frayed, and some of the emox had seeped from the surface of the photo and dned into icing around the edge: Carter couldn't avoid touching this. At once he was seared with the nausea of fear. Even as he dropped the photo he felt the emotion embedded in it wash over him, then ebb away leaving a tingle of shame and humiliation.

He realised he had just experienced what Trxie had felt when she looked at the photo, drawn out from her touch through each viewing, and incised in the image forever. Carter looked down on the floor where the photo now lay and saw the man on the car looking up at him smiling, his eyes bright beneath his hat.

Back upstairs he put seal-it on Trxie's lip and it seemed to just about hold in such an awkward position, leaking out the odd bead of blood. Then





he poured a drop of whisky into their tea from a bottle he'd been saving for a special occasion that never came.

Suddenly Trixie brightened up. "Bastard didn't get these," she said pulling something from her bra. She broke the seal on a small paper pack with a Hindi label, and tipped out two leeches that squirmed and felt their way in her palm. Quickly, before they could enter her flesh, she ripped open the pack and spread the paper into a sheet onto which she tipped the leeches.

"Want one?" she said, eyeing him coyly, trying to smile without opening up the cut on her lip again.

Carter saw the leeches squirming. They were genetically modified and popular in the first wave of bio-consumables. They were not interfaces, but standalones.

"No thanks," he said, "I try to keep clear of religion."

"You shouldn't," she said, "It's better than opium."

"What?"

"My dad used to say something like that."

"What happened to your dad?"

"The Polity took him."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Carter muttered.

"Well you don't know what you're missing," Trixie said and picked both of the leeches up and let them loose on her arm.

Soon she was beyond conversation. The leeches initiated a series of suggestions and the brain supplied the missing information from the

memories and desires. So each user had a unique and personal experience that enhanced the quick spiritual high. But Carter thought there was too much religion these days, with everyone getting out of their minds rather than face up to things.

It could send you over the edge, like the man in the alley.

Half an hour later, over a second cup of whisky tea Trixie was telling him had she'd found kether, a place beyond reality, which to Carter sounded like the point of drunkenness where you forget your way home. She was happy and rejuvenated, her lip had dried, and she could face going out to work again.

"Back to Banford Street," she said, beginning to swing her hips as she went out the door.

The next evening Trixie was in a mess again. She was outside his flat holding a tea towel to her leg. The artificial skin had split on the job and she wanted to use his seal-it. She could cope with the pain, she said, but it didn't look too becoming.

Once again she sat on the armchair, this time with her legs stretched out before her for attention.

"You'll need cleaning up," said Carter.

"There's no water."

Carter felt like swearing but knew that would only upset her, making her feel like a burden.

"I'll go to the standpipe," he said fetching a bucket. It was on the other side of the estate and there was already a queue. When he got back an hour later the door to his flat was open and he could hear voices.

It was the man in black from the alley, Roderick, sitting on the settee opposite Trixie.

"This one's cute, Carter, he a friend of yours?"

"No. I dunno. Look," Carter turned on Roderick, "how did you get here?"

"Followed you last time."

"Why?"

"For future reference." He held out both his hands in benediction, "Transcendence is at hand."

Carter shook his head and wondered when his flat had become a home for waifs and strays. "You can stay for a cup of tea, but that's it."

"Transcendence," said Roderick and held between his fingers a transparent sealed packet that contained a green lozenge, slightly larger than a normal interface and marked with some letters that Carter couldn't make out.

"What is it?" asked Trixie.

Carter groaned. If these two wanted to indulge in some kind of religious soiree then they could

take it elsewhere.

"Transcendence," Roderick said again and stood now, holding out the interface in front of Carter. "You were the Good Samaritan and so deserve this."

"I'm not interested."

"He don't go in for it," Trixie chirped in, "he neglects his spiritual side."

"This is the way, the truth and the light. If you accept this you will see creation."

"Where'd you get it?" asked Trixie peering up to get a better look, "my dealer hasn't got those."

"There is only one," said Roderick.

"You hear that Carter? There is only one of them, you've got to use it."

Carter pushed past Roderick and headed for the kitchen carrying the bucket of water, "Like I said you can stay for a cup of tea."

Trixie stood now, wincing with the pain in her leg. Roderick still held out his spurned gift, the serene features of his face sagging with a crestfallen slump.

"I'll take it," said Trixie and swiped the package from Roderick's hand so that it was tucked away inside her bra and she was back in the armchair before he realised it was gone. "I'll save it for after work," she said, "that's when I'll need it."

When Carter came in Trixie was alone, inspecting her prize. "He gave it to you?"

"Yeah," said Trixie, "I guess he figured I could do with a little lift." She looked at him for a moment "You don't want it do you? I'm mean he did offer it to you."

"No. But look, Trixie, you don't know what it is."

"Leave it out. It's just an interface. What could it do? Anyway, he had the face of an angel."

"Yeah, but still?"

"Look Carter," she snapped, "after I've been at it all night I can always do with a buzz. Ok?"

They left it at that, sipping their tea staring at the spare cup on the table that hadn't been touched.

It was four in the morning when Trixie knocked on his door. "I need a place Carter. I don't want to be alone."

There was something wrong with her face. Her eyes weren't focusing properly; the balls flitted about and then rose slowly to the top like dead fish in an aquarium.

"What's the matter, Trixie?"

Arms stretched out before her she stumbled through the living room, bashed past the coffee table and managed to find her way into the bedroom. Already she was sprawled on Carter's

bed.

Then she was talking, her tone clear, her voice not directed at him, "English and Therapy. Basic passes. I want to be a beautician."

"What?" He came forward and lent over her, she was shuddering slightly but her face looked into a place he couldn't see.

"Oh Carter. Sorry." She looked around her head focused on him even while her eyes bobbed about. "I was talking to Mr Wales, the careers teacher. He's going to do me a favour." She giggled with an abrupt eruption that died on her lips.

"What are you talking about?" But then he saw it, the fading lime stain on her palm, the vestige of a recent connection. "You used that interface? Trixie, can you hear me?"

"Transcendence. Of course I can hear you Carter. Don't leave me with Mr Wales, he's dying to get his hands on me. Stay with me?"

She began to shake so he lay down next to her and held her, felt her sweat and heard her gibber to people that weren't here. When at last she fell asleep he wandered into the kitchen put on the kettle and hoped she would be better by the morning, knowing that he didn't have the money to call out a doctor. As the dawn rose she began to scream, not loudly but in high pitched sighs of pain that he knew he wouldn't be able to stand for long.

He decided to call Annie Ann, the ex-nurse that he worked with; he would ask her to come and look at Trixie, offer her money since she always needed extra to support her habit.

Annie Ann shook her head and flicked her long grey hair in synesthetic disdain as she came into the flat.

"This room tastes awful. Like stale peppermints and fag ash."

"Just take a look at her, will you?" Carter pointed to the bedroom.

Trixie was still on the bed. Annie Ann felt her pulse and looked into her eyes. Then began to shake her gently in an effort to wake her. "What was the interface?" she asked Carter.

"I don't know. It had some letters on it. I didn't really look at it."

"Trixie, Trixie," Annie Ann was cooing, "I'm going to help you."

"Please," said Trixie without opening her eyes, "I don't want to be nice to Phil."

"It's all right you're here," said Carter.

"It's mummy's new friend," said Trixie, "he took me for a ride in his old ground-car. It smells. Petrol. He says it's petrol. He's got a horrid rash on his face and he's wearing too much aftershave and that stupid hat".

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He stepped forward, "It's me, Trixie - Carter. You're in my flat, remember?"

She opened her eyes at that; they wandered, trying to focus. "I should be out on Banford Street now. I should be working." There was incredulity to her tone, as though the words spoke through her and she barely understood them.

"It's all right, Trixie, you need to rest."

"No, you don't understand, Carter. It's this evening and I'm on Banford Street. A punter in a yellow jacket is coming with me. We'll be back in my flat soon. But I'm here too. A moment ago I was twelve and Phil..." She broke off and turned her head away, "What? Yeah. I can do that, but it'll cost you extra."

"Trixie?"

"Sorry Carter, I was just talking to the punter."

Annie Ann looked at him, "Try to keep her attention, bring her back."

He leant over, "Focus on me Trixie, focus on Carter."

"I know you're there Carter but this is the past. Just like Phil. The punter is taking off his jacket and unbuckling his belt. At least he's not too fat. I hate the fat ones."

Annie Ann touched his arm lightly. "You really need to find out what virtuality that interface was hooked up to."

"Trixie," he shouted, "Trixie listen to me. We want to help you. What did it say on the interface, the one Roderick gave you?"

She didn't respond to him and he thought she hadn't heard. Then she said, "What, Carter? It's difficult to concentrate on you. Didn't I tell you that this morning? Oh yeah, I'm telling you now. I don't get it Carter; it's all too confusing. The punter is gone and I'm heading back to the street. Phil is pulling up the car in an empty lane."

Carter put his hands on her shoulders and gripped them "What was the interface connected to? Trixie?"

"You wouldn't believe me Carter. It's like I'm expanding. I can see my whole life."

Carter let go. Trixie seemed incapable of telling him anything; she was too far-gone into whatever world the little green lozenge had drawn her into.

Then she said quite clearly, as though she had known all the time what it was that he wanted to hear, "It was to a place called Cern, Carter. That's what it said on it, Cern with a C."

"Shit," said Annie Anne.

"What? You know what it is?"

"It's some kind of temple in Europe. I dunno, I heard they're into some heavy duty theology there."

"What are we going to do?"

They both looked down at Trixie: she was still now, eyes closed with the lids flickering, her

expression unreadable.

"Well," said Annie Ann at last, "I'm going to get my arse into work and you better find out what you can. I'll try and cover for you."

"I owe you," he said over his shoulder as she left.

"I know."

But he wasn't listening now, just looking at Trixie and wondering what his next step should be.

Roderick could be anywhere so Carter decided he'd better follow the lead he had. In a newsagent he bought a interface to a European guidebook and walked to the church grounds. Sitting on a bench he let the interface be absorbed by his skin and, over the background of the church with its surrounding trees, began to search for something called Cern.

He was soon at the official site of Cern, an unexplained name of an underground religious centre in Switzerland. Carter found himself floating over a town and being shown how a circular tunnel, twenty-seven kilometres in diameter, was hidden underneath it. He couldn't change the view and a commentary began to tell him that his search for gnosis would begin here. An agent appeared: a young woman with unblemished skin, wearing a long smock.

"My name is Marianne," she said with a slight French accent, "I will be your guide on this tour."

"What is Cern?" Carter interjected.

"I would like to tell you about the Temple of the New Transcendence and how we are using Cern in our quest for ultimate knowledge. You too can know the reality of God. By participating in some of the most sophisticated experiments..."

"Skip!" shouted Carter.

Marianne frowned, displaying only the slightest ripple on her forehead, sighed, and Carter found himself underground. This is Cern, he knew. He floated behind Marianne along tunnels that contained what looked like pipes, monorail tracks or gigantic antique lathes, the terms "accelerator" and "collider", that filled Marianne's narration meant nothing to him. "Each channel is calibrated in a dynamic fashion..." she was saying now.

"What is this place?"

"I am trying to explain. Fundamentally it has allowed us to explore the basic structures of the universe. Ahead is where our most ambitious project is unfolding even as we speak."

"This," she said, "is the Brane Chamber. I'll let our founder and the leader of the Temple of the New Transcendence, explain it to you."

Marianne faded away and Carter found himself

in front of what looked like a giant circular airlock door, studded with pipes and lubes, with instruments serviced by a series of gantries and stairs. There was nowhere further to go, and he waited, looking beyond the virtual world to his surroundings in the church yard where a wind was picking up and the trees were beginning to sway.

"Since the dawn of time humanity has wondered about the nature of creation..." said the voice of the man who had stood in Carter's living room, the man he had rescued from a beating in the alley - Roderick stood there and began to explain how he had created a universe.

"As it expands the brane creates its own space, that in no way impinges onto the territory of our own universe. Within the facility the brane remains within its original size as contained within the chamber you see here."

"What have you done to Trixie?" Carter said uselessly: he knew it was only an agent version of Roderick whose task it was to give this little speech, to show off his great achievement

"Rate of expansion is difficult to translate into equivalents since the brane has its own structure of time as well as of space. Early measurements have indicated that the after an initial period of massive inflation the new universe has began a period of steady expansion."

Carter withdrew from Cem and, patching in to a general news server he found an archive story about the founder of the Temple of the New Transcendence, Roderick Maggum, about his recent disappearance and alleged mental breakdown.

Trixie was sucking her thumb and gurgling, lying on the bed and rolling up her legs and kicking. When Carter came in she called his name, and as he sat she managed to find his hand with hers.

"I'm a baby, Carter. I'm dying of cancer. I can see your face and you are sitting next to the bed. I can feel your hand and smell my mother's perfume, she is reaching to lift me up and snuggle me next to her. I am hobbling into the market to meet an old punter of mine who promised to get me some cheap morphine, I'm only sixty-five and being eaten away. Everything, everywhere is at once. What's happening to me?"

"I'm trying to understand, Trixie." But he wasn't really, he was just holding her hand and as the day wore on he still gnpped her, not wanting to let her go.

"I can feel it now, back beyond both the start and end of my life, being sucked down into nothing and being filled with the void. Just try and keep part of me here, Carter."

And then she was quiet and he tried to kid himself that it was because she had found some peace in sleep. She was still alive, he could feel her warmth, but he couldn't bear to talk to her

anymore.

Inside the Nova Inn he ordered a beer and then a whisky. It had just opened and there were very few customers as yet. The old soldier he had seen outside in the rain had found a seat and was quietly nursing a drink. Carter knew the barman by sight, he looked like an ageing wrestler and his nose had been eaten away by some sort of infection. "Hey," he called over to him, "you ever get a guy in here, young, wears a black suit, goes by the name of Roderick?"

Even as the barman was shaking his head Carter heard the old soldier behind him stumble up in blind enthusiasm. "I know him, I know him. Get us a drink pal and I'll tell you all about it."

The hostel was five storeys of long halls filled with beds. Roderick was sat on his, fully dressed and next to a packed suitcase. When Carter approached he put down the Bible he was reading and stood up and offered his hand.

"What have you done to her?" Carter asked, leaving the hand in space. "What does the interface do?"

"The interface. I shouldn't have given it to you. I wasn't myself but I'm in control now. I'll be happy to take it back from you. In fact it's best if I do."

"What is it?"

"It connects directly to the Brane Chamber. Since the brane remains the same size in our space, it is possible to observe it from outside, to connect directly with a point of view on an expanding universe. The idea was that as the brane universe evolves the user would perceive it and be fed information about the cosmological processes that are occurring. It was such a wonderful prospect - not a simulation but the real thing."

"And you thought that was a good idea? No wonder you went crazy."

"No, I never tried it. It was to be a privilege. I wanted it to go to someone who needed transcendence but now there's something wrong in the chamber. The interface shouldn't be used."

"What's wrong?"

"All universes are multi-dimensional. The brane was supposed to expand in four dimensions just as our universe does: three spatial and one temporal. Other dimensions would be folded up like they are for us. But the structure is deviating, the extra dimensions are unfolding with wild growths of space and time. I can't imagine what would happen to anyone using the interface..."

Carter didn't need to imagine. It was two minutes before the hostel security could get up from the reception on the ground floor. He kept punching and Roderick offered no resistance.

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Carter carried on until the security guard levelled his handgun at him and threw him out into the street yelling: "You're just lucky no one gives a shit."

All that night he sat in his armchair, whisky in his hand untouched. He must have finally drifted off only to be awakened by her voice calling softly and without urgency.

"There is understanding now. It is beyond both birth and death. Concentrating on the room I can be Trixie again, for a moment I'm sorry, it is so difficult.

"There is so much else to experience. Trixie became young and then Trixie became old but now there is little of her left. Time filled her and then she burst like a bubble and now the remnants are scattered across limitless space. I have watched the impurities of the original singularity expand and become child galaxies, gas coalescing into a billion stars. I have seen these suns blowing away the dust and sculpting nebula. Time doesn't just flow. Like space it has many

dimensions so that I can see slices that reach back beyond the beginning when there were only waves of potential, and further still to the end - when this universe will seed the next. I have become God."

He continued to feed and change her that winter until finally, in the spring, Annie Ann managed to contact an old colleague and find a place for Trixie in a hospice. The last he heard she was still alive, unable to move or speak, unresponsive to any outside stimuli. Omniscient.

Gary Budgen grew up and lives in London having made the rare migration across the river at some point. He teaches computing, but has at various times been, amongst other things, a switchboard operator and a print worker. He has had two other short stories published.

The Vampire

Richard Strachan

When you wake up you don't know where you are.

You're lying on the floor; it's night. You are in a wide, circular room with a high, domed ceiling. Above you, as you get to your feet, is a large observatory telescope angled out of the ceiling, up towards the stars. There is a cold breeze blowing through the open aperture.

You brush yourself down. You are dressed in a black suit, with a white shirt open at the collar. No tie. Your shirt is soaked in blood; there is a black scarf of it dned down your front. You take off the jacket, then the shirt, and see that you are wearing a black t-shirt underneath. You put the jacket back on and leave the shirt on the floor. Your neck hurts. You realise that you don't know who you are, and there's nothing in your pockets to tell you.

There was a woman; you can remember that much. She was tall and slim, with black hair, and

she wore black jeans and black boots. She wore a red leather jacket. No make-up, she didn't need it. Her face was pale, a sharp ivory white, and she had shining black eyes. You bought her a drink, then another drink, told her a name you can't now remember. She suggested the observatory, across the river and up the hill. It was the early evening; the sun had died in the sky and the streets you walked through were alive with people, bustling with summer life. You walked through cigarette smoke, the smell from the pubs and clubs, laughter and conversation. The town was called Malory - small, but vibrant, charismatic. You can't remember why you were here. You just remember the woman, and waking up.

You find the door and walk down the stairs, being careful not to make any noise. You reach the ground floor and the front door is wide open. You step outside onto the grass, onto the lawn at the front of the observatory. Turning round,

looking at the white pillars and cylindrical frame of the building, you think it looks like a mausoleum. You sit on a bench and look down on the town of Malory. All the streets are lit up, and the light reflects off the still water of the river. The town itself is quiet. An occasional car whispers past on the riverside streets, a sharp laugh barks out and breaks the silence somewhere among the houses below. It must be very late. Or, you think, as the first streaks of pink and gold creep out of the horizon, it must be very early.

You know you have to get back inside.

You have to get back inside before the sun comes up, she said. Her voice lingers in your memory; she spoke over your fallen body. When the sun comes up you have to hide.

Walking away from the observatory, heading away from the river and into the streets on the other side of the hill, you see a house with boarded-up windows and a peeling sign in the front garden that reads: FOR SALE.

At the back of the house you find a broken window, and you carefully remove the glass until you can squeeze through without getting cut. You know that you must be very careful not to leave any traces, and not to be heard. If anyone was to look at you too closely they would become afraid, and if they are afraid they will make more noise. You will be discovered, and it is too close to daylight to be discovered.

Inside the house there is a rank animal smell, but as far as you can see it is empty. Despite all the exertions of getting into the house you are not sweating. You find a room on the top floor with thick curtains, drenched in dust and spiderwebs, and you lie down on the floor, on your back.

When you fall asleep, it is not sleep, and when you dream they are not dreams. Who are you? You don't care.

When you wake up the sun has fallen behind the horizon and you are lying in the same position as when you went to sleep. There is a hunger inside you more profound than anything you can ever remember feeling. It suffuses every molecule of your being. At the same time though, you view it as an abstract. As something that merely needs to be filled.

There are two children playing in the street outside the front of the house when you walk round from the back garden. Instinctively you leave them, knowing that they will be missed sooner. They look at you, and you make the mistake of looking back. They stop playing and edge away from the road. You move on.

You walk back past the observatory, towards the river, and walk down the hill. There is a small park that borders the river on this side, and you walk up and down it twice without seeing anyone. You are about to leave when you see a young

man approaching. You walk towards him. It is far too dark for him to see your eyes properly. There is a gentle rushing sound as the river passes by, and as a summer's evening breeze plays through the branches of the trees.

"Excuse me," you say to the young man. He is about twenty; he has hair growing down to his chin and is wearing a black leather jacket. He looks up expectantly.

"Do you have a light?"

He takes his eyes off you and fumbles about his jacket pocket. Quicker than the eye can see you have snatched a handful of his hair and are pulling his head back. Your mouth clamps down on his throat, and your teeth are tearing at flesh and sinew. He tries to shout but you have clamped a hand over his mouth. You drag him into the bushes. Thick, black metallic blood is spurting over your lips, dripping down onto you chin. Some of it is soaking into his clothes. He screams as you bite deeper; the scream starts from his mouth, and then gurgles out of the gash in his neck, pitched lower, as you rip his throat out.

He dies. You can see perfectly in the dark, and watch the sheen on his eyes fade and grow dull. There is not much blood on you, but what there is, you use your hands to wipe off. You lick your fingers clean.

You drag the body out of the bushes and pitch it into the river. Walking on, you cross the bridge onto the other side of the river, where there are lights and people.

In your pockets you find money. The streets are busy. Eventually you go into a bar decorated in chrome and red leather. The lights are dim, and no one will be able to see your eyes properly unless they look closely. You order a bottle of beer and sit at the bar. Occasionally you raise the bottle to your lips, but you don't drink any.

It's not too busy yet. There are groups of people sitting at tables, girls wearing halter-neck tops so you can see their bare shoulders, men wearing brightly coloured shirts. Everyone is wearing a different shade of perfume or aftershave. Every grace note of every smell is a symphony to you; you can pick out every acrid chemical component of every scent in the room. You can tell which girls are menstruating. You can tell what people have been eating earlier from the smell of their sweat. You take no pleasure, no displeasure, from these facts. It just is. You just are.

The bar fills out, more people come in. A girl slides up to you and starts talking. She has dark blonde hair, white teeth slightly crooked at the front, dark blue eyes. She smiles at you, and begins telling a story. You barely listen. At the end of the story she starts laughing. You don't really understand what laughter is, and so you can't join in with her. Eventually she walks away.

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You are not sure what to do with your bottle of beer. You know it will look suspicious if you don't order another, but you don't want the barman to realise that you haven't touched the first one. You walk into the toilets and pour the beer down one of the urinals. No one sees you. When you come back, there is a young man sitting in your seat at the bar. You walk up to him and look him in the eyes, and then he leaves. You see him put on his jacket and leave the building. You order another beer. You could kill everyone in this place in a matter of seconds, but it is still important that you rouse no suspicions.

Another girl comes up and sits next to you. She has long red hair and is wearing a low cut green dress that exposes the deep cleft between her breasts.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she says. She talks loudly over the music.

"No."

"So . . . what's your name then? I'm Rebecca."

"I don't know."

"You don't know your own name?" She sounds sceptical, to say the least. "What, you've lost your memory or something?"

She starts laughing. You try to join in this time, but you don't really know what you're doing, or why.

"I come in here quite a lot," she says, "and I don't think I've seen you before."

"I haven't been here before, not that I can remember."

She starts laughing again, then stops and holds up her hand.

"Oh God!" she says. "I love this song! Don't you just love this song?"

She closes her eyes and very gently nods her head along to the music. You can tell it is a different song, but all the components sound much the same as the one that came before. You neither like nor dislike it. When it finishes, you can't remember how it went.

"You're a strange one, I have to say," the girl tells you. "I don't mind that though, don't get me wrong. A place like this, it could do with some strangeness."

She lights a cigarette and gazes off into the middle distance, into a space occupied at the moment by people standing and dancing and drinking.

"So," she says, "where are you from then? Are you from Malory?"

"The observatory," you say.

"You're from the observatory? Oh - kay?"

"Would you like to go there?"

"I hate that place! It looks like a fucking tomb, wouldn't you say? It's always frightened me."

"But from there you can see the stars. You can see the whole town spread out before you."

You look her in the eyes, and you almost see her mind change as she decides to go with you. The eyes - they work on the opposite sex. You understand that now. They attract them.

Thirty minutes later you are crouched over the girl's body on the floor of the observatory. Blood is spattered all over the floorboards. The girl's dress is hitched up over her thighs; she tried to struggle. There is a scrap of flesh between your teeth that you pick out with a fingernail.

You leave the building and cross the bridge back into town. You leave the body where it is.

You pick another bar and, using the money you took from the dead girl, buy a beer that you do not drink.

You sit at the bar and wait for someone else to approach you. You raise the bottle to your lips and then place it back down on the surface of the bar. You have infinite patience, you can wait forever. You cannot wait forever, because you are feeling hungry. You realise that you will always feel hungry, for eternity and a day, and that no matter how many people you drink you will never be able to fill that hunger. This is just knowledge, you feel nothing about it.

Did you feel things once? Would you have laughed once, and understood what made music worth listening to? There is a question hovering on the brink of some kind of consciousness, but when you see the woman sitting next to you, you forget what that question could possibly have been.

It is the woman who took you to the observatory. She is wearing the red leather jacket. She places her hand over yours and looks you in the eyes.

"There was a question you were going to ask me," she says. "I can sense it."

It comes back to you, forcefully. You can't understand why you had forgotten it?

"Who am I?"

She looks away. "I wanted to ask you the same thing," she says. "I don't know."

"How did I get like this?"

"I made you."

"How?"

"I killed you. I drank your blood and then I let you drink mine."

"Is that how you were made?"

"Yes."

"Who did it to you?"

"I don't know," she says. "I never found him again. I wanted you to find me. But you don't know either."

"Know what?"

She opens her mouth to speak, but no words come out. Her eyes glaze over. You take her hand

again.

"I don't know," she says. "I heard someone use the word 'soul' once, and I had no idea what it meant. Some nights I don't even know what 'I' means. Some nights it's just the hunger."

She disengages her hand. You would expect her expression to have changed, but she looks exactly the same. She leaves, walks away from the bar and out the front door.

You walk back to the observatory. The girl's body is still slightly warm. You bite at your wrist and hold the trickling blood above her mouth. She starts choking. As if in sleep, she takes hold of your arm and bites deep into your wrist, sucking the blood from your body. She drinks until you start to feel light-headed. You pull your wrist away. Her dress is drenched in her own blood, from earlier. She is lying back down now, her eyes closed, a pink warmth flushing through her skin, making her lips even redder than the blood had

done. There is a splash of blood on her chin, which you carefully wipe off.

"You have to get back inside before the sun comes up," you say. "When the sun comes up you have to hide."

You leave her sleeping, lying on the floor. You leave the observatory and walk back down towards the river. It is still quite early in the night. You cross the bridge and head back into town. You are hungry.

Richard Strachan was born in 1977, in Stirling, where he currently lives after spending the last 26 years in Trinidad, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dumfries and London. He was shortlisted for the 2003 London Writers' Prize, and is currently trying to place his first novel with a publisher



Jonathan Hicks

I'm not a huge fan of spacewalking. In fact, as far as my duties are concerned (and I have some pretty rough duties), spacewalking is probably the one I hate the most.

Of course, I take my time checking the suit. Checking and rechecking. Every seal, every connection, every pipe, yanked and checked and checked. And then checked. Yes, I really put the suits through their paces as far as pre-walk checks go. This particular suit was one of the new ones, which was a cause for concern. I'd used the other, older suits and they were fine. This one was brand new, straight out of Lucky Jim's EVA Emporium, so... what if there was some kind of defect? I guess some extra checking wouldn't have hurt...

"Jay, are you ready yet?" The impatient voice of the skipper, Douglas. He's a good man (if we can keep him of the sugar-based alcohol for more than five minutes) and he takes his job seriously. I could imagine him sitting in the command room tapping his fingers impatiently, waiting for me to finish getting ready.

"Just running some checks," I replied. He knew what that meant.

"Great. I'll just take a shower and cook some dinner and you'll be ready by supper, yeah?" Oh, the hilarity.

"It's not that I don't trust Lucky Jim," I said, "it's just that if the suit doesn't work I won't get the chance of seeing the look on his face when I ask for a refund." Click hiss. Lights flicker on inside the helmet. "Okay, I'm ready."

"I'm picking up your med signals, nice and clear." That's Geni's voice. Sexy girl, in a touch-my-backside-and-I'll-rip-your-arms-off kind of way. "Elevated respiration and heartbeat levels..." I can hear Bass, our dwarf mechanic, laughing in the background at that.

"Yeah, you think?" I said loudly. The pickup whines with the feedback. "Okay, I'm hitting the airlock."

The circular door cycles open and I step into the cramped airlock. It's padded all around (just in case, when the gravity plates go off, I decide to bounce about the room) and bright blue, with all the flashing lights and piping that always distracts me when I'm clumsily staggering about in a spacesuit. What if I elbowed the wrong button? Or ripped open the wrong pipes? I don't know what

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half the systems on this starship do, and I'm supposed to be the support personnel. Which, basically, means I get all the crappy jobs.

The inner door cycles shut. I feel the suit ripple as the pressure drops and the airlock becomes hard vacuum. Then the door control pad lights up green, which means I'm good to go. I press the wide pad and the outer door slides open.

Space. And lots of it.

At first I feel the bile rising in my throat and I hear the distant words of Geri in my headset: "Steady, Jay." My faceplate threatens to mist up as my breath becomes quick and erratic and I hit the autoregulators on my breathing apparatus. I hang there for a little while to get used to the sensation of continuous falling and then I grab hold of the handholds either side of the airlock outer door and pull myself out.

The stars are bright. The sun, far off in the distance, glimmers softly through the polarisation of my faceplate. Saturn hangs below me like a bright oil painting, hypnotic in its beauty. I take my eyes from the vista and concentrate on my target.

Roughly three hundred metres away, drifting dead in space, is an old ore hauler. Its an absolute wreck, totally ripped to pieces from what appears to be one of two things; either a space debris impact (which, to be honest, is a billions-to-one chance this deep in space) or an enemy ship strike (considering we're on the edge of Corporation space, that seems the most likely). The whole forward section appears to have been ripped away, long tendrils of torn metal and hull supports, twisted and jagged, jutting out in all directions. It looks like a debris strike, but... maybe I'm just trying to convince myself there isn't a Corporation ship in the shadow of one of Saturn's moons, waiting for a small group of salvagers like us to happen along the wreck. And then kill us and take our ship.

That'd put a right downer on my day.

"Okay, Jay, head straight to the engine section. That appears to have suffered the least damage." The skipper again. Douglas clears his throat after he speaks and I hear a strange sipping sound. Probably drinking again. Great timing.

"Look, why doesn't Bass do this? I mean, he's the engineer, he knows what he's looking for." I already knew the answer but I figured a nice bit of moaning wouldn't go amiss, just to remind everyone how much I hated this part of my job.

"Once they make a spacesuit four feet high," Bass says over the communicator, "I'll be more than glad to go drifting in hard, deadly vacuum."

"Just call it 'space', will you, Bass, for Christ's sake?" I could feel my breath picking up again. Then I can hear Geri humming, trying to put the rhyming words 'space' and 'Bass' to a tune. Strange girl. "Do you want some music, Jay?" she asks.

"Yes, please. Something soft. Like... I don't now..."

"I can spool up some Albinoni."

"That Adagio G minor thing you were playing on Tuesday night?"

"That's it."

"Yes, please."

I've attached a lifewire from one of the reels on the outside of the ship to my belt and I'm ready to go. As I push myself off from the starship the low, emotion-driven pipe organ of the piece wells up from the suit communicator. As the strings begin I'm drifting freely, my arms and legs paddling with no effect on my trajectory, and I suddenly realise the music seems a bit too depressing to suit my mood. Still, it is a calm, moving piece and it takes my mind from throwing up in the spacesuit. Geri's collection of classical music, some of it over eight hundred years old, is one of the things I like about her. She has good taste.

I remove the mini-thruster from my belt and press the nozzle on the top, turning myself to get a look at the starship I call home behind me. The *Farsight Dreamer* is a strange ship, with absolutely no symmetry about her at all. A heavy forward command section, the engines either side of her hull at different angles and of different sizes, the upper hull covered in modified engine lumps and intakes. The rear engine section is a line of four huge cylinders taking up nearly a third of the ship's size. With the huge underbelly for cargo she looked like she was about to give birth.

I press the nozzle and turn back to face my target. The music in my helmet gives the scene a sombre atmosphere, like we're intruding on the great ship's death. The long thin boom from the engine section to the forward cargo spheres and the main decks is undamaged, as is the engine section itself, but the spheres are rent open and the command decks are nothing more than scrap metal. As I get closer I can only feel a small amount of pity for those who were on board when she was hit. Every spacer knows the risks of escaping atmo, especially those spacers who decide to drift this close to Corporation territory.

The Corporation is what the denizens of Saturn are called, not what they're actually part of. They're the remnants of the original miners and resource controllers who came to Saturn to rob her moons and rings of ore and elements. Then, when the Corporation who funded the expeditions had its fill, it collapsed in on itself thanks to boardroom greed and mismanagement. And the poor bastards who were left behind had to make a living in the asteroids and moons of this beautiful planet as best they could, with age-old atmosphere pumps for air and algae breeding farms for food. That was over two hundred years ago. The descendants have learned to detest anything that drifts too close from the Earth sector these days, and to take what they need.

This includes ships five times bigger than any of the vessels they have. Now that I can see the cargo spheres more clearly I can see they've been blown open at their weakest points, where the support struts are at their thinnest as they wrap around the module. Well, I've never heard of space debris being that accurate.

"Looks like the Corporation's been making some new acquisitions, I can see the cargo pods have been blown open," I report.

"That's great, Jay. How's the engine section looking?"

Didn't he even hear what I said? Has the skipper already downed the contents of his flask?

"Erm... looks good. No sign of power. I'm almost there."

When I connect with the dark hull of the ship I'm travelling a little faster than I anticipated and I crumple against the side of the vessel. I don't report it, of course, it's a new spacesuit. After a little time searching I find an external entrance and I get to work on the opening mechanism. It's a simple disclock, like an old-fashioned safe tumbler, and I can see that it hasn't been used in a while. If there's no power I'll have to open the door manually which takes a long time.

As I experiment with the disclock a few lights come on around it, which is encouraging. I have to trust that the destruction in the command centre has deactivated any security seals and I give it a twist. It continues to twist on its own and, ever so slowly, the airlock door begins to slide open.

"No problem with access," I say. "Be in a few minutes."

As the music reaches its dramatic peak I take the time to look at the ship in more detail. The hull is dark (old freighter camouflage to help avoid pirates) and almost featureless. There are several viewing ports along this line of the hull and I drag myself along the handholds that run the length of the ship to have a look in one. Its then I notice something peculiar.

"Skipper, I just noticed that the cargo spheres have been blown open from the inside," I say. It never occurred to me that the rents in the ship were curved outwards.

"And?"

"If the Corporation were attacking the ship for its cargo, they would have blown their way in from the outside." Bass's voice.

"Maybe they took the ship first," Geri offers.

"If they took the ship, why blow open the spheres at all?" Bass counters.

An uncomfortable silence.

I glance into the viewport I'm drifting next to.

Into frozen eyes.

I screamed and pulled myself back, almost losing grip and drifting away. My breath is a damn sight more rapid than it should be in a spacesuit. The great bowl helmet bangs against the hull of

the ship and the communicator crackles.

"Jay! Jay, are you okay?" Yeah, thanks, skipper, now you're concerned.

"Just..." I stare back at the *Farsight Dreamer*. "Looked in the ship. Body in the ship."

Silence.

"Can I come back?"

"Come on, Jay, you're doing fine. You won't have to stay long." For God's sake, skipper, what do you want from me?

"I told you we should have bought a suit with waste extraction," I say with a small chuckle. But I really didn't feel the humour of it. "Skipper, the interior must be vacuum. I would really, really like to come back now."

"Okay."

Thank God!

"Okay, just have a quick look inside. Just have a poke in their maintenance room, see if there's anything worth taking."

"Skipper... sorry, but I don't want to be drifting in a ship full of frozen bodies. Call me squeamish..."

"Jay, this is the best chance we've had in ages for a decent take. I don't want to spend the next three months looking for another one."

"Doug, I know that, but my job does not include floating through corpses on this or any other Sunday afternoon!"

"Jay-boy, remember who gave you this job! Now get in that ship and get me something I can sell!"

It took a few moments for my blood pressure to fall. I'm sure Geri was monitoring it back on the *Farsight Dreamer*. I tried to force from my mind the image of the frozen eyes. Then the image was clear in my mind again.

"Skipper. The body was a little girl."

More silence. I could hear Geri whispering oh, my God. Bass saying something like can't be expected to, or something. The skipper cleared his throat.

"Okay, Jay, come back."

Thank God. Again. I pressed the recall pad on my belt and the winch back on the *Farsight Dreamer* began to pull me back. I let my body relax and went along for the ride.

Now, I said I'd done some crappy jobs for the *Farsight Dreamer*, but don't think that this is a normal thing for me. I have never, ever seen the frozen body of a girl before. I've never seen the frozen body of anyone, ever. The closest thing I've come to frozen life was a shipment of freshly packed chicken we hauled a few months ago for the Europa Research Centre. Life on a salvage ship is usually pretty boring. I've never seen anything like this before.

Which is probably why the tears are welling up now. The shock had passed. The reality was

starting to set in. Looking back on it, I can't understand why it didn't register sooner, the fact I had looked into the dead eyes of a child. But then, it's not the thing you expect to see on an average working day.

I made it back to the *Farsight Dreamer*. I unhooked, climbed in, sealed the door, equalised pressure, opened the inner door, staggered out, fumbled with the helmet, got it off, looked straight at Geri and Bass and Douglas, who all looked at me with confused expressions.

And I burst into tears.

It's a natural reaction. I mean, crying like that. I've always prided myself on being a little hard-edged, you know, being a spacer, and all that. But I'm pretty sure no one with even half a soul could have looked at what I had looked at and not been affected. I mean, dying in space is a horrible thing. Maybe I would have reacted differently if the body had been adult. Either way, I cried for quite a while.

I fumbled out of the suit quickly, with Bass's help. I kicked it towards the locker but noone said anything about me booting a brand new spacesuit. The light grey walls of the cargo bay seemed a little bright after my half-hour behind the polarised faceplate and I squinted, forcing out more tears. It took a few minutes to calm down but finally I felt okay to get up and walk up the stairs and into the common room. I dropped into a mock-leather couch.

"What did you see?" Douglas asked, taking a seat opposite me. He wiped a hand over his shiny bald head.

"The cargo spheres had been ruptured from the inside. Each one at the weakest point. The command decks were ripped to bits, probably mass driver fire. The engine section was intact but..." Pause. "Vacuum. I guess there's a lot of stuff in there, but..." I shrugged.

"We should report this," Geri said, tying back her long black hair.

"Are you having a joke?" Douglas frowned. We all looked at him with concern. Surely he wasn't about to say what I think he was about to say. "An old Manta-Class hauler, engines intact? We can't leave it for the next salvage team to strip her."

"Skipper, there are bodies in that ship," Bass rumbled. He was a dwarf but he had a voice that could shake mountains. His hair was short, greasy from the amount of time he spent in the tight engine compartments. "We need to inform Central."

"After we take some prize salvage," Douglas pointed a meaningful finger at his engineer. "I'll go myself if I have to."

"You bloody well would as well, wouldn't you?" I said sharply. "Skipper, I saw... look, the ship is big, for all we know there are families drifting

about in that thing. More kids."

"Look, the Dreamer is in financial trouble, you all know it. I'm already three months behind on contract payments. Another two months and we're shipless. I... we need this hit."

"I'm not going back over there," I say.

"I don't expect you to," Douglas said, almost derisively.

Geri made a sideways chopping motion with her hand. "Count me out."

"Great," Douglas said as he stood up. "I get this ship, get you all on my payroll and now you're willing to let it all go, just like that. After all I've done for you lot." Oh, great, another you'd all be unemployed back on Keepsake Station if it wasn't for me speech. "Fine. I'll get suited up and do it myself, but no bonuses."

"That's not fair!" said Bass. "I can't suit up and help!"

"Then help with the loading. You pair," finger at me and Geri, "get up to command and monitor."

He stormed off to the cargo bay. Bass, shrugging helplessly, followed him.

And that's how Douglas Warner, skipper of the *Farsight Dreamer*, died. He went into the ship, had a nose around. He never talked of what he saw in there. Never mentioned the fact that there were dozens of dead families in the ship; adults, teenagers, children, babies. We saw it all on the news. 'Roamer Ship Hit By Corporation. Sport Next.'

We got a great haul from the wreck, got great prices on Keepsake Station for it, no questions asked. I think that Jim knew where we got it from, but he never mentioned it. Lucky Jim's Used Ship Parts made some horribly good profit.

Four weeks later, Douglas killed himself. Apparently, the air in the *Farsight Dreamer* was a bit stale and he decided he'd go outside for a walk in his t-shirt and underwear. Thing is, we were halfway through a two-month journey to Mars at the time.

Two days before the 'tragic accident', he'd signed over ownership of the *Farsight Dreamer* to me. A note he'd left had a line in it for my attention.

It said, 'I'm glad I never made Jay go back'. Life's weird, isn't it?

Jonathan Hicks has been writing for his own pleasure for twelve years, and has written over a hundred short stories of varying genres and quality and three pulp adventure novels, just to see if he could do it. He's only recently considered trying to get published – and this is first time he's appeared in print.

UK Short Story markets

Rosie Oliver

Where does a gal (or guy for that matter) submit their short stories to in the UK, especially if they are hard science fiction? That stalwart *Interzone* was out of action for most of the early part of this year, and no doubt, will have a nice backlog of excellent stories to choose from. But it means it will be more difficult than ever to get a story accepted there.

There are of course the old favourites of *The Third Alternative* and *Scheherazade*. When I looked into them many moons ago, I was put off by their bias towards the gothic and horror. (Yep, I'm squeamish and a born coward.) There are several such other longer standing fanzines that include horror amongst their science fiction and fantasy as well as a new magazine *Postscripts*. By including that dreaded genre, they come under the title: 'not for me, guv!'

Of the longer standing magazines, that leaves *Spectrum* and *Jupiter*. *Spectrum* after a couple of years of regular publication, has become a random feast in that the editor publishes it as and when. A great shame as it was really producing such wonderful stories and articles. *Jupiter* has been going for over a year now, publishing on a quarterly basis. Its stories have interesting ideas and some of them even show a sense of humour!

A new magazine, *Orbital* is hoping to launch later the year, publishing on a monthly basis. More information can be found on www.orbitalmagazine.co.uk. I cannot tell you more as I refuse to connect up to the internet: but that's another story.

If a gal can't get into *Interzone*, *Spectrum*, *Jupiter* or even *Orbital*, where else can she get published? She could go abroad and *Light's List* is an excellent source of zine information for English-speaking countries. The only other option is to look at the general market and hope they will take your science fiction.

What about magazines for budding writers?

If you are unpublished and a subscriber, *The New Writer* will accept stories of 1500 word for their 'first time' slot. The editor likes science fiction. Yes, I did write, 'likes science fiction'. However, like any other professional, Suzanne Ruthven will not compromise on quality.

Otherwise, the three main writers' magazines will only accept stories through competitions. *The New Writer* has one major competition a year for short stories up to 4000 words for a non-subscriber fee of £4 per entry and novellas for up to 20000 words for a fee of £10 per entry. The closing date in the last few years has been 31st October. It occasionally asks subscribers to

submit short stories on a given theme, but as they covered science fiction not all that long ago, they are unlikely to redo it in the near future.

Writers' Forum only accepts stories between 1500 and 3000 words through monthly competitions. You pay an entry fee of £10 if you are non-subscriber (otherwise £6). If you don't get accepted, you will get a four page marking sheet indicating the weaknesses of your story. According to their representative at this year's Annual Writers' Conference, they have published the occasional science fiction story, the main reason for rejection being the lack of characterisation. So come on, get rid of those cookie-cutter people. Change them in hero(ine)s with little mannerisms portraying their strengths and having slight faults that are useful to the plot.

That leaves *Writers' News*. Whilst it is good on keeping you up to date on the market opportunities, it is to my mind the least supportive of the main three writers' magazines for publishing science fiction. It has run the very occasional competition for science fiction requiring stories of either 1400 to 1600 words or 1600 to 1800 words for a minimum entry fee of £2.50. They regularly run competitions based on a given picture, opening line or last line and there may be an opportunity there. However, pictures of old clock towers and summer houses don't inspire me to put fingers to keyboard.

Some contact addresses are listed below. Please remember to include a stamped addressed envelope for all enquiries.

As for me? I'm off to write a 5000 word story about Uranus for a national competition I haven't mentioned. Well, a gal has to keep some secrets!

Interzone: Andy Cox, TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB

Spectrum: Paul Frazer, Spectrum SF 53 Waverly Park, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow G66 2BL

Jupiter: Ian Redman, 23 College Green, Yeovil, Somerset BA21 4JR

Orbital: Orbital Magazine, 1 Firhill Mews, Pitmoor Road, Sheffield S3 9AU

Light's List: John Light, The Light House, 37 The Meadows, Berwick upon Tweed, Northumberland TD15 1NY

The New Writer: Suzanne Ruthven, PO Box 60, Cranbrook, Kent TN17 2ZR

Writers' Forum: Writers' International Story Competition, PO Box 3229, Bournemouth, Dorset BH1 1ZS

Writers' News: Writers' News Ltd, 1st Floor Victoria House, 143-145 The Headrow, Leeds, W. Yorks LS1 5RL

A Cosmic Triptych

Rick Hudson

Aldebaran
Cold with anger
Red with age
Fading bull's eye
Leers towards
The young and giddy Pleiades

Brown dwarfs
Clunk about
Misfired stars
So many dull failures

Dark matter
Mundane and drab
Aborted stars
And heavy emptiness
Not the sinister shadow
Promised by TV

Rick Hudson is a writer and poet whose work embraces many genres. As well as being a professional writer and poet he is a lecturer in Literature and Media at Southampton Institute – specialising in horror, sf and fantasy.

For those we owe everything, nothing is too much

Steve Sneyd

the time of year again is
nomansland a season we have learnt well upon

this land whose months spell out in turn
all bad emotions now is the time all chasms

open like bowels and airs turn all
from sicklysweet to acidsour just

enough to burn words away from
our songs mountains a week ago

were in nine rainbow coats of
sniffglue snow now shed to spread

curves sensuous maddeners with birth
of longing then having gotten

us off guard out of the dark falsewelcome
pores rise up pure fumes that hate us

almost as much as now ten decades
localtime trapped upon this colony

anus of the universe we hate ourselves
such mugs for coming told we were on

our way to make a brave new cycle
proper future eden for mankind

turned from idiots of the mind only into
wrecks throughout we only who survive

on all fours mostly or all threes or twos where
limbs are lost or curled back into lumps

like warts only fingemail clippings
of the great hand of the great expedition

gigantic we were and equal to our task they said
as saints and angels to conquer heaven

ah but their voices cry out still from
rare overripe organic tapes Home still

drops down on us occasionally which in this
climate change into parasites eating

ears and eyes even as we scan for content
"you did your Duty and you did

it well" only sometimes tearing ratvine
from each other it takes three to pull

clear the suckers in our weakened
end-of-line condition we wonder if in fact

our work a joke taking this place
before the aliens could like Home says yes but

perhaps really the aliens spent
a fortune mocking up this dump

to lure the best and bravest of our species
out here to sink up to the crotch the brain's

crotch even yes and doubtless
Home went along with it knowing full well what

better way to rid
the old homestead of our dangerous

glorious restlessness: for the general good
we agree of course or would if we'd been asked

Focus regular Steve Sneyd recently compiled (*Data Dump #71*) a list of SF and proto-SF poetry: the earliest work is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tentatively dated at 2000BC, and takes in Aristophanes, Dante, Spenser, Alexander Pope, Erasmus Darwin, Blake, Shelley, Byron, Poe, Tennyson, Whitman, Browning, Lovecraft, Pohl, Aldiss, and Heaney. In another list of long-running SF poetry markets, Focus didn't even make the top ten!

Why There Can Be No Life On Mars

Alessio Zanelli

She said she'd never comply
with his request; she'd rather run
the New York marathon
or, on her own, climb K2.
She restated she'd never, ever
do that, anyway;
then added that she maybe would,
if little green men
should actually land, and make her.

He took exception to her resolve;
indeed, he flew off the handle
and began to curse her,
shouting as if he were possessed.
She swore at him with equal vehemence,
even while she completed her toilette.

They went on like that
throughout the damned night,
watching *The Thing From Another World*
for the hundredth time,
sprawled out apart on the couch,
sipping beer and crunching popcorn
without restraint,
exchanging scowls from time to time.

That's why brewers, maize growers
and TV makers will never go broke,
safe as attorneys and morticians.

This also explains why there can be no life
on Mars.

NASA'd better take it into account
and revise its space program.
UFO fans ought to understand, ought to put
an end
to the laughable pretence we're not alone.
So, gulp down beer and popcorn at your
ease
while watching the twentieth repeat of *Star Trek*,
and don't forget to cast the evil eye at your
spouse.

Above all, keep on making
indecent requests of each other.
I have just purchased professional-quality
ear plugs.

Lost Oneness

Alessio Zanelli

*Our country is the world—our countrymen
are all mankind.*

William Lloyd Garrison

From antipodean worlds, from disjointed
milieux,
from reciprocal enclaves—one mankind
proceeds, multiplies, expires.

One but riven, severed into vestigial
splinters
sickly dragging along, in their finity's
affinity.

Myriads of trails—originated from distant
cradles
but forever impressed on the only surface—
converge
to the only precipice, on the verge of the
only deep.

The common stare—nonplussed—
contemplates
the sweep below, inundating the horizon
as far as the eye can reach.

And from the sinking light a domineering
recall arises,
then turns to regret, in the end to ache for
the wasted time.

Along with shades, the early inducement
returns
ever stronger each night—the idea of diving
into that sea.

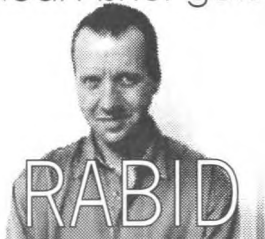
Closing the eyes, waiting a long while
then traversing the expanse on the instant,
twigging at last what teems in the mind
of the neighbor opposite the world.

Becoming one again.

First published in *The New Cauldron* (UK).

Alessio Zanelli is an Italian poet who has adopted English as his artistic language, widely published in magazines, including *Pulsar*, *The Journal*, *California Quarterly*, *Italian Americana* and *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and the author of 2 collections, *Loose Sheets* (Upfront Publishing, 2002) and *Small Press Verse & Poetic conjectures* (Xlibris, 2003). He lives and works as a private financial advisor in his hometown, Cremona, northern Italy.

Neal Asher gets



NOT IMMORTAL

We live in a society obsessed with the idea of youth, and frightened of the plain facts of aging and death. To avoid facing up to them people will lie, behave as if those facts don't exist, refuse to wear hearing aids or glasses, dress young, have Botox injected and wrinkles cut away. But worse than all this are those who offer up the obviously untruthful promise of eternal youth.

One look at the advertising thrown in our faces every day will illustrate this. An evening of TV adverts will give you such gems as a model who has only just managed to clear up her acne in time to sing the praises of a hypo-allergenic-polyfiller-in-wrinkle-cream. Another cream will reduce the seven signs of aging, so we can all be glad that such a simple product will protect us against incontinence, arthritis, dementia, heart failure, blindness, hearing loss and a tendency to harp on about the good old days. You can boogie down on the beach sipping a drink containing enough sugar to rot the tusks off an elephant, and somehow this will transform you into a white-toothed youth. There's the deodorant that keeps you perpetually available to your latest boyfriend, which is probably useful if you live the active skateboarding life promoted by your latest brand of tampon.

Magazines and catalogues are as bad if not worse. See the girdle clinging to the curves of that model who has just returned from shooting an advert about a shampoo that apparently gives you an orgasm. Observe young Adonis modelling the latest truss. And read all those articles promoting foods, New Age treatments, lifestyles and internal decor that'll keep you perpetually this side of the Styx and apparently on the underside of thirty.

The horror of all this is that it works – many people believe it. It is doubly unfortunate, therefore, that this lying 'in spirit and in fact' extends well beyond the mercenary and cut-throat

worlds of advertising and glossy magazines.

Consider government health warnings on cigarette packets. If you smoke you can get painful, humiliating, or disfiguring diseases that can be fatal. This is all very frightening until you ask, "How many of us don't?" We all die. Few of us are lucky enough to die in our sleep. Most of us die from some kind of lingering malady. If you drink, don't imbibe more than twenty-one units in a week. Heavy drinking can lead to liver failure and death (unless you're a famous footballer of course). Both of these aberrant behaviours can lead to all sorts of terrible illnesses ranging from impotence to heart failure. Again, such warnings ignore the fact that avoiding such habits does not result in endless perfect health. You are going to get sick/die anyway, and not at the age of ninety-two with your nurse bouncing up and down on your willy. But ignoring this fact is carried on through to our health service with horrible results.

This seeming inability to accept the inevitability of death (which admittedly has always been a human trait) has resulted in a health service that refuses to give us an easy way out and, with increasingly poisonous treatments, prolongs the horrible process. Get yourself a painful lingering terminal illness, and you can guarantee that the NHS will extend your suffering for as long as possible. Your only way out would be to suck on the exhaust of your car but, unable to drive that since you sold it years ago, or perhaps cut your wrists, if your hands didn't shake so much. But neither are really viable while you are trapped in a hospital bed. Your dignity is irrelevant, of course. How dare you, by your very presence, prove that none of us lives forever? How dare you be old or ill? How dare you die?

Coming soon... *The Voyage of the Sable Keel and Brass Man*.

Neal Asher space is at:

<http://freespace.virgin.net/n.asher/>

POSTSCRIPT

It does occur to me briefly that Pete Crowther's new magazine is also called *Postscripts*. I am fairly certain, however, that copyrighting portions of the English language is as unlikely as copyrighting the colour orange. Summonses to the usual address.

It's been a busy six months – with lots of submissions of high quality. Everyone in these pages deserves to be here, deserves to be read and appreciated, deserves feedback too. Letters to *Focus* are always appreciated. Mail to the authors and contributors can always be forwarded even if not for publication.