

F O O L S



Look before you leap
Jonathan Hicks burns his bridges

Oh, those Russians...
Comrade Loftus joins the revolution

Magnific Opus
Jeff Gardiner abandons matrimony for the sake of art



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

Issue 47
May 2005

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Artwork and photo credits:

Front cover PGL/Allen/Stewart
Design Pod Productions

Editor

Simon Morden
13 Egremont Drive
Sheriff Hill
Gateshead
NE9 5SE

focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk

The opinions expressed are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the BSFA.

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Focus is published bi-annually by the British Science Fiction Association © 2005

Printed by PDC Copyprint, Middle Unit, 77-83 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4UH

Distributed by Bramley Mailing Services.



BSFA membership rates

Renewals and new members:
Estelle Roberts, 97 Sharp Street
Newland Avenue, Hull HU5 2AE
estelle@lythande.freemove.co.uk

The new rates are as follows:

UK standard £26

UK unwaged £18

Joint/family memberships are at standard rate plus £2

There will be no more discounts for paying by standing order.

Overseas rates:

Europe £31

Elsewhere surface £31

Elsewhere airmail £37

USA enquiries: Cy Chauvin, 14248
Wilfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213 USA

Other BSFA publications:

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Tom Hunter, 46 Saltwell Street, London
E14 0DZ

matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

Vector: critical journal

Tony Cullen, 16 Weaver's Way,
Camden Town, London NW1 0XE
tony.cullen@dfce.gov.uk

BSFA Orbiters:

writers' postal workshops

Gillian Rooke, Southview, Pilgrim's
Lane, Chilham, Kent CT4 8AB

BSFA website

www.bsfa.co.uk

The British Science Fiction Association Ltd is a Company limited by guarantee, number 921599, and is a non-profit organisation run solely by unpaid volunteers.

Registered address 1 Long Row Close,
Everdon, Daventry, Northants. NN11 3BE

About the cover

130km off the Yorkshire coast lies Silverpit – the UK's first and to date, only impact structure. The Tertiary-aged central crater is 3km across, and buried under 1km of subsequent sediment.

With thanks to Phil Allen of PGL.

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

Please see the extended *Pedantry* for an explanation of the new editorial policy.

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 September 2005

pedantry

After last issue's *Pedantry* recommended the writing life, no matter the monetary reward, I suddenly and unexpectedly find myself a filthy pro.

It was strange how a project I'd had on the back-burner for a while fought its way to the front of the queue and demanded to be written – in this case, Iron Age science fiction – and bish bash bosh, sign on the dotted line. I'd never sold anything I hadn't finished before, let alone on the basis of the first few chapters of what turned out to be a 95,000 word novel.

I'm delighted to follow in the footsteps so ably trod by our own Ben Jeapes: *The Lost Art* should be published by David Fickling Books sometime in 2006

On to more serious matters now. A shorter version of this appeared in December's *Ansible*, but it seems only right and proper to give it a full airing:

"It's come to my attention that an article in the most recent issue of *Focus* (#46) on UK short stories markets contained several inaccuracies. Whilst there are lots of reasons for this bout of editorial slackness, there aren't really any good excuses – I accepted the article, I printed it, and I apologise unreservedly to all parties concerned for any inconvenience that will inevitably arise.

To whit – *Sheherezade* does not, and never has, accepted horror. Neither is it a fanzine. It does, however take sf. *Interzone* has a very minimal backlog of stories, and is actively looking for quality stories, especially hard sf. *TTA* is no longer accepting sf, as this causes problems with *Interzone*. *Spectrum* looks like a dead market. *Orbital* is on hiatus following the editor's recent heart attack (get well soon, Steve).

This isn't a hanging offence, but it's certainly a hang-head-in-shame offence. Grovel, grovel."

Thanks to all the understanding editors out there...

Gateshead
April 2005

pedantry EXTRA

No, you're not seeing double. Changes are afoot across the board in the BSFA's publications, and *Focus* is changing too.

As from next issue, *Focus* will not be publishing unsolicited fiction. At the recent BSFA committee meeting, lots of hard decisions needed to be made, not least of which was how to offer the best possible deal for members.

BSFA Chair Elizabeth Billinger puts it thus:

"We talked at some length about the mission of *Focus*, and it was the overwhelming feeling of the meeting that it's a fundamental part of the BSFA's activities, not least because so many of the enquiries from potential members are from those who want to be published authors. Further to this, however, we all felt strongly that the magazine should be there to help aspiring authors, not by publishing their work but by publishing articles about the processes and techniques of writing.

"We felt that there are other, paying outlets for short fiction and that the BSFA wants to support writers at a different stage in the process, such that *Focus* would only publish fiction as part of an exercise in discussing the techniques/ mechanics of writing."

For old and new members alike, this will be a bit of a radical departure. I've now been *Focus* editor for five years – from the first issue which contained nothing but articles and letters and one poem, to now which is mostly fiction. *Focus* has always taken fiction from the very start, but for the time being, no more.

You'll have noticed I haven't mentioned poetry. While the market for short genre fiction is wide, that for genre poetry is not. Consequently, it stays as part of *Focus*' remit to inspire and encourage.

Some will lament the loss of another market for short fiction: but there are, as the pages of *raian.com* attest, lots of other magazines to submit to. As ever, good luck and best wishes.

However, the gains will be considerable. There are precious few places which regularly consider the mechanics of genre writing in all its forms, for all media. Hopefully, *Focus* is going to become a valuable resource for all those involved in the creation of that which we love the best: telling stories.

J U M P E R



Jonathan Hicks

Carver has decided to jump and end it all.

He takes another look around his apartment. He can see where some of the cleaning hasn't gone according to plan (he wasn't much of a housemaid) but right now he couldn't care less. He shrugs on his brown knee-length coat and walks to the door.

"Out for a while," he says to the voice-ac security system. He presses the door stud and it slides open with a sound like a bee hum. The apartment registers his absence and the lights dim and the infra-red switches on.

He steps into the chute and says, "Ground." The disc drops slowly and then gathers speed as it falls the eighty-eight floors to street level. He steps out into the marble and glass lobby. The officer on duty flicks the brim of his cap. "Morning, Carver, want your mail? I was about to pipe it to you."

"No thanks, Jim, I'm heading out. Send it up anyway, will you?"

"No problem. Have a better one."

Carver waves half-heartedly and steps through the glass and steel doors into the street. The main thoroughfare is busy and it roars noisily overhead, the eight-lane street passing through a huge hole in the centre of his tenement and then on to the interprovincial terminus. Smaller ground vehicles buzz up and down the street he walks onto. Electric engines make the air feel sharp.

The streets are busy this time in the sun-warmed simulmorning and Carver wonders whether he'll get a transit. The buildings rise above him like threatening giants, the tops of some disappearing into the mist. Birds flicker from one building to the other regularly. Holograms, of course, as real birds are not allowed in the sterile City. The real ones are confined to the reservations. The City Councillors just think that the citizens will like the illusion, as if their concrete and steel world is part of nature.

The facades of street-level shops and convenience stores are blurring into life. Holograms advertise services, simple neon glares for attention. Billboards seem to turn into a bright fog then form into advertisements. City regulations determine that there can be no audio advertisements until midday, and then only for three hours. The colours and lights beg for loud sounds and blaring music, but all that can be heard is the movement of the crowds and the humming of the cars.

The traffic is thick this morning. It flows freely and is evenly spaced. He sees a couple of chancers start across the busy road, stopping and starting as the vehicles fly past on their solid rubber wheels, the occupants looking up from screens or morning vis-papers to glare disapprovingly. Horns blare. A peacekeeper watches lazily from his hovering patrol vehicle but when he sees there is no real danger he lets it pass.

By the time the traffic has thinned sufficiently for Carver to cross he has reached a pedestrian crossing and he steps on the conveyor. It carries him across the road to the other side and he walks back the way he came for a few moments and enters 'Weasels', the twenty-four Hour Bar.

The door slides open and he is immediately assaulted by the smell of stale beer, smoke, marijuana and spices. He screws up his nose at the odour and approaches the long ornately carved bar.

"Weasel!"

The long-haired man turns and sees Carver, his rough beard and bloodshot eyes betraying a night of vice. "Carver! What the hell you doin' in here, man? Finally given into temptation?" Weasel, an old school friend, had been running the bar for a good decade but had never managed to convince Carver to sample the seedier side of City life.

"Just swinging by, heading for the landing pits. Need a favour."

"Man, the hell with you and your social visits. Come in here wanting my stuff. Man."

Carver smiles, trying to not look too dismissive of Weasel's smoking habits. "I need a bottle of Red Clacker. Have you got some you can spring me?"

"Red Clacker?" Comprehension dawns. "Is Lydia back today? You got it bad."

"Yes or no? Come on, mate, I'm in a rush."

"Yeah, man. Take it, settle up another time." Weasel reaches under the counter, produces a hand-span-high bottle of red liquid with a simple rotating label.

"How much?" Carver knows Weasel will only forget in his mind-altered haze.

"Twenty. No, fifteen, since you had the grace to ask me and not that store up the road. Man, I hate that wine bar stuff."

Carver hands over the cash in three small pentagonal coins and scoops up the bottle. "Excellent, thanks, Weasel."

"No problem, anytime. Don't be a stranger, man."

Carver waves at him and heads for the door. The low light in the bar causes him to unsteady a stool and he catches it deftly. He turns with an embarrassed smile as Weasel says, "Oh, man," but the comment is meant for a large balding gentleman holding out his bong for a refill. Carver exits and wipes his running eyes, the atmosphere of the bar causing moisture to rise.

Carver looks at his timepiece. He's going to be late. He scours the road for an empty transit as he walks in the general direction of the landing pits.

Laughter distracts him and he sees some people pointing upwards. He follows their gesticulations and sees several birds flickering in and out of existence, the holographic projector obviously malfunctioning. He smiles and shakes his head at the spectacle, and as his eyes lower back to street level he sees a transit almost right in front of him with two people climbing inside. He inwardly curses his bad luck and shakes his head.

A horn blast makes him jump and he looks across the street, expecting to see more people running across the busy road. The first vehicle he sees contains Kin, his best friend and workmate. The purple and white car slides sideways into a small gap between two larger vehicles. The canopy pops open.

Kin waves, his oriental features creased into a smile and his jet black hair shining with oils. "Hey, Carver! What you doing wandering the City at this time in the simulmorning?"

"Trying to get a transit."

"Where to?"

"The landing pits."

Kin whistles through his teeth. "Well, get in, pal, I was just taking my new Model-P out for a spin. Like it?"

Carver opens the small door and climbs in, the canopy sliding back overhead. "Very nice."

"So, why the trip to the pits? I thought you weren't working this weekend."

"Lydia's back in about," quick check of the timepiece, "an hour and I want to meet her."

"She's back today? How long she been away?"

"Nearly two months, supply trip from Pluto. Can't wait to see her."

"Why do you smell like tobacco and hemp?" Kin suddenly asks.

Carver sniffs his sleeve. "I nipped into Weasel's for a bottle of Red Clacker. Damn, that place reeks."

"You? Went into Weasel's? Never." Kin smiles deviously.

Carver laughs aloud. "Look, I can get a transit to the pits, there's no need for you to take me."

"No worries, my man. Let's skip this traffic, shall we?" With a show of pressing several switches, with a couple of glances in Carver's direction to be sure that he was paying attention to the extras he had opted for on the Model-P, Kin lifts the vehicle into the air. A red light flickers and then turns green with a 'ping'. Kin lets go of the wheel and allows the autopilot to drive. "Landing pits," he says as the green light blinks three times, each time with a soft 'beep'. He leans back as the controls move up and out of the way.

The street drops away. Carver watches as the vehicles and people turn into dots and oblongs of colour and then looks around as the buildings became less threatening. The Model-P enters the long lines of fast moving aerial traffic.

The pressure was off and Carver allowed himself to relax.

"So, meeting Lydia, eh? What makes you think she hasn't scored with a handsome shuttle captain whilst she's been away?"

An old joke. "I'm hoping she's coming back with good news."

"What? You haven't asked her to marry you, have you?" Kin seemed genuinely shocked.

"Nope. Look, I wasn't going to mention

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anything until Firstday, but we're trying to get back to Earth."

"No way!" Kin sat up. "Really?"

"Really. I'm hoping she's bought back passes and permits from Pluto Station. We got word that a liner might be heading back to Earth from there. We're getting the next shuttle back to Pluto Station and then heading back."

"You've thought this through, yeah?" Kin asked suddenly. "It's not a spur-of-the-moment thing, is it? I mean, what will the boss say?"

"I've already cleared it with him. I'll be summarily dismissed and my contract terminated, of course, but I think it'll be worth it. I've got enough saved, and Lydia has loads of hazard pay coming her way."

"God, you have thought this through. But Earth is a Reservation Zone now, you'll have to rough it. Could you manage?"

"Earth Central says that we'll have to pay out a substantial sum for residence and permits, but we've already decided to join the EcoSystem Conglomerate. They pretty much set you up."

"And the liner tickets?"

"Sorted. Lydia pulled in a few favours, as long as the liner is still at Pluto Station."

There was a long silence. Kin gazed out of the canopy with a shake of his head and watched a long line of slow moving traffic a few meters below break up as vehicles joined other flows. A glare of red and green lights signalled a Peacekeeper patrol vehicle blurring past to an emergency. The buildings appeared as gravestones, now, uniform and endless into the misty distance.

"I don't believe it," Kin said at the end of a long sigh. "Unbelievable. You're really going to do it? If the liner is there, when are you going?"

"Next supply run, probably tomorrow simulnight."

"You've never been to Earth."

"I've discussed the mental issues with the tenement doctor. He gave me loads of advice and handouts. He's dealt with jumpers before."

"If it happens," Kin said with a chopping motion of his hand, "then we all go to Bozo's and get trashed tonight."

Carver smiled. "Deal. Lydia will love that."

The landing pits were jammed with traffic at this time in the simulmorning. It took several minutes to disengage from the traffic lines and find a suitable place to park, but after a quick illegal manoeuvre (flying over the rows of parked traffic and landing in a free space)

Carver scrambled from the vehicle and checked his timepiece. Eight minutes to spare.

"Thanks, I owe you."

"I'll go wait in the bar, buzz me if you and Lydia want a lift back."

"You're a saviour," Carver clapped Kin on the shoulder. "See you in a little while."

Carver felt a little guilty at imparting the news of his jump to Kin in such a way. They had been friends for the five years he had been in the City and they had shared much but he resigned himself to the fact that even he wasn't sure that he was definitely leaving. He didn't want to put any pressure on Kin, on any of his friends.

The slidewalk took Carver into the main terminal and he was surprised at how busy it was. The last supply shuttles were coming back from Pluto Station and he watched as families were reunited. The great overhead holograms glimmered in the bright light of the white and grey lobby and he tracked the list to Shuttle Seven, the *Hunter/Gatherer*. On Time. He headed to the Pit Seven entrance.

A small bridge connected the terminal to the landing pit and Carver looked down through the catch-nets at the City far below. The buildings tracked into the distance either way uniformly, the faint simulmorning mist dispersing with increasing traffic. The holographs and neon of street advertisements gave the City a sense of disorder even though the buildings were all exactly the same. He could make out small black squares of vehicles moving along the packed streets and flying vehicles buzzed about the towering tenements like insects. Looking directly down from this height, the buildings seemed to compress as they receded into the distance like a habitated accordian.

The light of the main airlock of Pit Seven turned green and the heavy door rolled upwards. Carver peered into the bay.

The shuttle *Hunter/Gatherer* was docked in the cylindrical landing pit, huge tubes and gantries hooked to her as if the ship were attached to a huge life-support machine. Her thick landing struts were still spewing carbonated gases, a testament to her recent arrival. Technicians swarmed about her, huge automated lifters emptied her cargo bay.

The crew of the ship was walking out of the bay. Some dropped their bags and enveloped waiting loved ones with huge hugs, lifted children into their arms. Laughter punctuated the drone of the landing pit.

Lydia walked out, then, next to her commander. They were laughing at some joke but she quickly dropped the visage of humour

and searched the crowd. Her rolled-up sleeves showed off her muscled arms but the rest of her green uniform ruined what Carver knew was a fit physique. He felt a little scrawny in her arms. She had trained long and hard for the Core, and now, if everything was going according to plan, she was going to quit it. Her long thick auburn hair bounced as she walked.

Then she was on him. Her pack dropped, her long legs propelling her into his arms. He was almost bowled over by her, surprised at the ferocity of her embrace. She wrapped her arms tightly about him, squeezing hard. Carver half expected his lungs to fly out of his mouth.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, but no more words were coming as she pressed her lips over his in a rough kiss.

"I've missed you!"

"Good!" Carver said as he gathered his senses, trying his best to hold her as bone-crushingly tight as she had him. "Because." he produced the bottle of Red Clacker, "I've missed you as well."

Her eyes lit up. "Ooohh, that's sweet."

"Good trip?"

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Damn, no. We had to hold at Pluto Station because some chunderhead had mixed up the manifests. Then we missed our launch window and had to recompute our route. Oh, it was a mess. Anyway, we made up time with full burn. The *Hunter/Gatherer* is officially decommissioned, so she's going to be scrapped." Lydia's face seemed a little pained at this.

Carver grimaced. "Scrapped? So, does that mean...?"

Lydia's eyes rose from inspecting the label of the bottle of Red Clacker and she stared at Carver with sadness. After a few seconds she smiled and the eyes lit up again. "We got the tickets. We leave tomorrow midday, on the *Return to Sender*. As of now," she stood back and indicated herself, "I am the ex-navigator of the *Hunter/Gatherer*."

Carver's arms went into the air and he whooped. A mother glared at him with disapproval.

Bozo's was a well lit public den with plenty of space for large groups of people to sit around large oval tables on soft, downy sofas. The music was a mixture of classical and contemporary, a low drone in the background. Every now and then, some of the people sitting around Carver would sing to the wordless tune.

The glass dome that covered the bar

showed off one of the real parks that the City had to offer. Real birds perched on the thick alloy beams that supported the dome, peering in at the patrons as they socialised, drank and danced. Small waterbots continually crawled over the glass to quickly wash away their waste. Green trees towered over the dome as if protecting it from the great buildings surrounding it, the thick luscious grass surrounding it like a moat of green. Large stand-scooties ferried revellers across the park as all traffic was banned from places of natural growth.

Carver sat in his finest clothes, a jacket of dark red and black trousers. He had already opened the top of his shirt, the drink making his temperature rise. Lydia had dressed in her finest gown, a long dark purple shoulderless affair which flared out from her hips. She had tied her thick hair up into a high ponytail with several thick pins through it.

Kin was in his best suit, his wife Barbara had dressed in a ball gown. Sam and Phillipa had come in simple evening wear, and Weasel had taken the afternoon off from drink and drugs to smarten himself up for the evening.

Fado and his brother Lawrence had arrived late (as usual) and had dressed down. Jeanette arrived in her finest silk dancing dress with her new boyfriend Guillermo, dressed smartly and, as it was the first time he had met any of them, he was understandably quiet.

Hours passed. As midnight chimed, Lydia was leaning forward in her seat, racked with laughter, as Weasel finished a story about his bar.

"I'm not kiddin', man, he just walked out with his head held high. He was so sure it was a non-permit bar. You should have seen the look on his wife's face, I swear."

Kin wiped his eyes. "Oh, that's just."

Guillermo, more comfortable in the presence of new faces, his rich bass laughter rolling, leaned back and said, under cupped hands, "Just wait 'till I get you home!" The comment caused them all to laugh even louder.

They recovered from the hilarity slowly, with sips from fresh drinks the autoservitor had bought and the fanning of faces.

Suddenly, Kin said, "I wish you pair weren't jumping tomorrow." He looked up from his drink and at Carver and Lydia.

Lydia smiled sadly. "I know, Kin. I know this must have been a surprise to all of you."

"Surprise?" Jeanette said, her eyes glazing over. "Two of my best friends are leaving! For good!"

Fado scratched his beard and said,

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"Honestly, though, are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

"I'll tell you when I knew," Carver said. "I knew I wanted to go when we all went to that holographic show, remember? With the waterfalls and the jungles and stuff. It just looked amazing."

"Yeah, it looks amazing," Lawrence said, "but seeing it and living it are two different things."

Lydia sighed. "We've been planning it for six months. We've even got a place picked out on the EcoSystem Conglomerate Isles. The tenement doctors needed to be sure we were good to go, as ESCI is very particular on who they take. I think we are ready." She took Carver's hand and gazed into his eyes. "Aren't we?"

They all watched them closely but could see no apprehension or uncertainty. Then Kin lifted his glass after slipping his hand into Barbara's. "Here's to you pair, then. Good luck, and all that. Real sky and green. I'm almost envious."

They all raised their glasses as tears flowed along with the drink.

The grass was damp under Carver's bare feet.

"We'll be fined for walking on the grass, you know," Lydia chuckled.

"I don't care," Carver laughed and took her in his arms. Alone on the fields outside the dome of Bozo's, they looked up into the heights of the City, watched as small lights appeared in the sky. Music drifted from the dome, strings and piano.

"Nervous?" Lydia asked.

"Terrified. No regrets?"

"None. Although, it'll be hard to get used to living on a planet. With no-one for kilometres around."

"Less than three million on ESCI alone."

"Well, it is a Reservation Zone. Imagine, doing without all the automatons."

Carver laughed. "Not all, but we will have to get used to doing things ourselves."

"No aircars. And we'll have to take care of our own garbage. Ugh."

"No slidewalks. And real animals, every minute of every day. Notice how I said day, and not simuday."

The music increased in volume as the dome opened like a blooming flower to allow fresh air into the building. Carver could see his friends on the dancefloor spinning gracefully, Weasel watching them dance from his place at the bar.

Carver smiled. "I'm going to miss them."

"Me too."

There was a long pause as they held each other in the dark, watching the dome open slowly, silently. Beams of light escaped the building and penetrated the darkness above, tracking the sky like searchlights. The music slowly morphed into a waltz.

Carver took Lydia's hand and held it out, placing his other hand on her hip.

"Dance?"

Lydia smiled, her eyes swelling with tears.

They moved slowly, staring at each other, as the music flowed and ebbed, until it was a slow, moving piece to which they held each other close.

Their friends watched them sadly.

The *Return to Sender* was powering up.

Carver hadn't been on a starship for a long time and he breathed deeply as if it was his first aircar ride. He had assumed he would be wearing some kind of flight suit as he had when he had originally come to the City, but he sat in the acceleration chair in his slacks, quite comfortable. Lydia mentioned how strange it was to be on a ship and not in her flight suit. She also mentioned something about the skipper of the *Return to Sender* being a good captain, but Carver barely heard her. He was looking out of the window with mixed feelings.

He was leaving the City. He had never intended to; when he had signed the contract to come here, five years ago, he had honestly thought he would remain for the rest of his life. He had worked hard. He had made many friends. He had no other family to speak of. All he had was Lydia, who had been hard to woo but had finally admitted she was in love with him. She was a spacer, a Core member who tried not to get involved because of her long voyages out of the City. But he had won her, and for this he was glad.

He couldn't remember whose idea it was to go to Earth. He couldn't really remember why he had originally wanted to. The tenement doctor had called it the Calling, a need to return to the original home of the human race. Almost destroyed by environmental abuse, war and climate change, the planet had been saved by the conception of the City. Now they were abandoning their original dream and returning to the world that had spawned their race.

Was he afraid of what a future in the City would hold? Afraid of the same walls, the same buildings, the same daily routine? If they made a life for themselves on Earth, what would be the difference? Once they had settled into a

pattern it would surely be the day-in/day-out existence?

Why the Earth, and not the City?

It would be hard work, existing on the environmentally preserved planet, but Carver felt he needed that sense of belonging. The City provided everything, from transport to food to work to entertainment. Anything was possible. Everything was given.

But something worked for, sweated for, bled for. That was a thing truly worth having.

Like Lydia.

He took her hand as the ship lifted from its mooring and left the City. The last ship that would ever depart from the greatest thing man had ever built.

Carver had not seen the outside of the City since he had first come here. Over a hundred years to build, it was a huge ring construction, a five hundred kilometres diameter starship. The thick ring had the habitable parts of the City in the inside of the outer edge, the slow rotation generating gravity. On the inside of the ring were great reflective mirrors that absorbed and bounced the rays of the artificial sun at its centre, held in place by great unmeltable pylons as thick as the ring itself. The ship took off from one of the terminals situated between these great mirrors on the inside of the ring, rising from the landing pit slowly and then moving away quickly as the main engine burst into life. There was little weight on Carver as the acceleration grew but the couch he sat in compensated even for the little G-force there was. He watched the City tumble away, watched as it continued its five hundred year journey to the nearest habitable star.

The generation starship fell away behind them. Generations of people would live and die before it reached its destination. The descendants of the first citizens would be the ones to set foot on their New World. The children of his friends.

"Goodbye," Lydia whispered.

Carver squeezed her hand.

The *Return to Sender* powered its way to Pluto Station and the Earth liner, the *Face of God*.

The favour Lydia had called in had got them a private berth on the passenger sphere of the *Face of God*. The ship was a collection of spheres attached to a long boom, in turn secured to a large engine cone. It was a full kilometre long, a third of the ship consisting of engines.

The berth had a window which looked down the length of the ship, the circular Pluto Station visible over the lifeless ball of ice that was Pluto in the distance. The steward had been most helpful.

"Now, the journey is almost a full two years, even at full burn, so I'll just need to go over the particulars of the SleeperTube with you. You can wear what you please, and if you place these small suction cups over your heart ... that's it, I'm getting a good signal. Our monitors can be sure everything is alright but you won't be disturbed until we reach Earth orbit. The SleeperTube is big enough for you both, of course, and when you get in we advise." The attendant droned on, a practised, repeated speech for new travellers. "Just let your body wake up naturally and don't try to force it. Here's a pamphlet detailing emergency procedures and what to do after you wake. There will be an attendant on hand should you need any help, before and after your sleep.

"Thank you for choosing the *Face of God*." Exit stage right.

Carver dropped the pamphlet onto the only table in the room after perusing it. "It says we should only ingest liquids for at least forty-eight hours after we wake up. Do you think that includes beers?"

Lydia chuckled as she took off her top. "I hope so. I could do with one now. Shall we take the sedatives?"

"I fancy just drifting off, you know? To be honest, I don't want to pass out straight away. The thought of sleeping with you for two years straight is a pretty good one."

Lydia pressed the stud which activated the SleeperTube and the glass canopy slid back. It resembled a normal double bed, although the heavy shielding surrounding it, the monitoring devices inside the cover that hooded the head of the bed and the glass canopy indicated otherwise. She looked at it with her hands on her hips.

"How do you want to do this? Pyjamas, or what?"

"The pamphlet says that the monitors are all biostat devices, no cameras, for privacy. I say we treat it like a normal night in bed."

"Right, so you fall to sleep straight away and steal the covers?"

"That's nice."

They stripped naked and climbed into the SleeperTube. As they settled, the glass canopy automatically slid into place, sealing them in. Carver eyed the emergency release handle but then turned away from it to face Lydia.

Lydia was already propped up facing him, her elbow in the soft cushion, her fist against

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her temple. Her hair flowed about her and she brushed it back.

"I guess, even if we changed our minds, it's too late. Do you think all this muscle will be gone by the time we wake up?" She flexed her arm.

"The pamphlet says less than five percent degradation, so I doubt it. I'm looking forward to having a flat belly." Carver lay on his back and smiled. "Do you ever wonder why we chose the Earth, and not the City?" he mused, half to himself.

Lydia reached out and brushed back hair from his face.

"Because Earth is real. It can be touched without the thought at the back of the mind that what is under the fingers has been manufactured. The Earth isn't a lie. It is what it is. A green haven of possibilities, of real water and real life. The City is a fair copy, but the Earth is truth."

"But we've never seen it. Earth."

"No," Lydia leaned over and kissed him softly. "But I think we've felt it."

They made love slowly, taking as much

pleasure in each other's bodies as they could, as if they were about to be parted from each other for the two years the journey to Earth would take. At their moments of pleasure they understood, and they wept at the thought of returning to a home they had never seen.

They lay silent in the bed, Carver's head on his lover's chest, her hair thick across the pillows, her arms about his body, his arms wrapped about her. After a short while her breath lowered and she hissed softly in her sleep.

She was warm and soft. He felt safe. Carver marvelled at the small smile of contentment on Lydia's face, and then slept.

Jonathan Hicks has been writing for his own pleasure for twelve years, including many short stories and three pulp adventure novels. By day he's a motor vehicle technical advisor, but by night he wanders in the vast realms of the imagination, and more often than not gets lost.

Writer's Block



Jeff Gardiner

To have married one exploding wife was unfortunate, but to have married two was just getting silly. I had started to take it personally.

The first had combusted spontaneously and photographs of her charred remains are available now in the public domain thanks to various bizarre websites and the inevitable article in 'The Fortean Times'. The photo is of a pile of ash on the burnt carpet of my front room, lying next to the remains of a shoe. I've lost count of the number of detectives, psychic investigators and journalists that interrogated me. I was variously accused of murder, arson, faking the whole spectacle and of being a self-publisher.

It had been a bad year. I was caught up in a media feeding frenzy during which I was offered unseemly amounts of money for my story, which, of course, I refused. I still remember Jean fondly as she was the first woman I ever loved and after all had promised to remain faithful to her 'for better, for worse'; and it couldn't get much worse than this.

I never expected to find a new lover and had committed myself to the rigours of bachelorhood, when Trudy crowbarred her way into my secluded existence. Stunned by her insistence and passion, she proposed to me and we quickly got married. It was about a year later when I turned on the news to hear that a

terrorist attack had gone wrong in London: a suicide bomber had only managed to kill herself. Yes, Trudy was in fact an international terrorist wanted for mass-murder, who had married me only for a green card and working visa. I was charged with conspiring to abet a known terrorist organisation and imprisoned for eight months.

So there you have it: two exploding wives and when I was finally released I went back home an ex-con and a bachelor. As my life became secluded, tedious and empty with the long hours of winter stretching ahead of me, I decided to fulfil an old ambition of mine that had been incubating in my mind as I lay in prison. As a middle-aged, single man with no dependants I became what I'd always wanted to be: a writer.

My first project was to work on my great novel. It was to be revolutionary: breaking all conventions and starting a whole new literary impulse to fulfil the dying promise of postmodernism. Being unconventional and wanting to be remembered as a maverick, I decided not to devise an outline of the story, but to let it evolve and develop with its own life and energy. I saw the plot as a spirit world where characters would be animated into existence taking on their own personalities. It would just be a matter of jotting down what happened as it flashed into my endlessly fertile imagination.

I purchased a laptop and as I explored its technological wonders I found it had free access to the internet and during the first month I spent about fourteen hours a day doing essential research, continually amazed by the variety of stuff available to anybody with the simple press of a few buttons. It was a treasure trove.

It was a drug! By the time I realised that I needed help with my obsession the spring was announcing itself: birds sang, bluebells brought colour to my unweeded garden and I knew something had to be done. I deleted the Internet server from my computer and disabled the phone connection in my study so that the modem became obsolete. That took away the temptation and gave me the chance to do what I really wanted to do: write.

I berated myself for wasting my talent. The sooner the world literally took me into their hands and held me gently as I made them laugh and weep, the sooner my true genius would be recognised. How I liked to imagine my readers as my multifarious lovers: they would caress me and allow me to enter them as we

shared private secrets and fantasies. There is something special about the relationship between writer and reader. Thus far I had only been at the receiving end, but now I could feel the power, which was surely mine, as my books would titillate, tease, astound and even manipulate, until I was their master and they worshipped the very pages wherein my thoughts, passions and id were to be laid out before them to inspect with their hungry, curious fingers and minds – my people reaching out for me to feed them until they were sated, nay gluttoned upon the nourishment of my words, my truth, my very self.

After three weeks I had thirty splendid pages that described the front of the house where my protagonist abided. I employed seventeen words to portray the various greens of the ivy that cascaded down the edifice and then explored the changing textures, smells and moods that occur through the various seasons.

Writing with a fever pitch, I continued to complete nearly ten pages a day, until I had over two hundred pages of fluent, poetic narrative and sparkling wordplay that fizzed with similes, personification, pathetic fallacy, alliteration, onomatopoeia, punning, classical allusion, kenning, tragic irony, portmanteau neologisms and, of course, zeugma.

The house stood as the central image and motif: a metaphor for life itself – dissipating and yet all-sustaining. I was certain this had never been done before. I read and reread my creation, the fruit of my own fecund loins. This was what made me realise with a haunting jolt that this was my true calling. I had the gift to write flawless work and at last my talent was to be shared with the world. Not one single word did I change or rewrite: here it was: perfection.

Then one night, I awoke – perhaps by divine intervention – when it occurred to me that something was missing from my manuscript. How could I have been so blind? I rushed naked to my study and clasp my magnum opus in trembling hands. I let my frantic, fumbling, fervent fingers flick furiously through the pages, whilst my facial orbs drank in the inky symbols that shimmered on the parchment. Then it hit me – my novel had no characters!

It was true that there were no discernible characters, only the house that had become an extended metonymy for the people who inhabited it. No actual plot existed; and yet the slow erosion and collapse of a building over seven hundred years was a fascinating story in itself, especially as an allegory for the human condition. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. Who says all novels must have characters and plots? Why should all

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fiction have to fit into the stifling limitations of dull, passé genres? Why should I have to stick to boring old conventions, just because the ruling academic classes tell us that this is the format of all fiction and that any deviation from the norm is unacceptable? This kind of hegemonic control made me seethe. My novel may not fit into the canon put together by these short-sighted snobs, but to be an originator you had to think outside the box and go against the flow.

I knew by instinct that the manuscript was a work of genius and I bundled it up into a parcel, the package throbbing in my excited, sweating palms as I sent it off to the world's biggest publishing company. Literary history was about to be made.

It came back two days later, clearly unread, with a terse, general rejection note. Ha! One day when I'm famous I'll make them pay dearly for this.

After that first rejection I just sent multiple submissions to every single publisher in the country: let them squabble over me – why should I have to hang around for them to get themselves sorted? For the next three weeks I got to know my postman well, except that he put in a complaint and refused to deliver any more parcels, forcing me to go down to the local depot and collect the last forty-three myself.

Tweaking. I finally and humbly accepted that that was what it needed: a little bit of editing here and there – although it was nigh on impossible to see how it could be improved. I sat down and planned my time carefully. I would work in sittings of four hours, with half hour breaks between. I allowed myself eleven hours sleep before rising at eight to eat breakfast before the first session.

By now it was summer and test match cricket was shown on television amidst the irresistible lure of soaps, quiz shows and films. By the end of August, even though I watched with the laptop on my lap, I realised I had not written a single word; but these things should not be rushed, and anyway I could justify watching films, as doing so was surely preparation for my work as a writer, as the ideas in my mind were slowly brewing and being unconsciously developed.

It was at this point when I faced a new setback.

Walking home from the shops one late summer's morning it began to rain. I let myself in and, a little soggy, allowed myself to dry and

sleep on the sofa – perchance to dream. I awoke about midnight in a fervour of inspiration. The ideas were flowing like a torrent and I rushed to grasp my laptop ere the blossoms of my mind should fall and atrophy. But the laptop was gone! Some jealous thief who resented my talent had stolen my masterpiece that was on its hard disc.

After a bout of panic and a painful asthma attack, I phoned the police and told them of my break-in. Angry when they only sent round a mere constable, I tried to convince him of the importance of my work. He asked how they had entered my abode and I scornfully told him that I should not be doing his job for him. The policeman examined all the windows and front door, before stepping out into my back garden where I had been sat that morning. There on the muddy lawn lay the laptop, still open, but now dirty and obviously unusable. I tried to convince him that some envious rival had destroyed my life's work, but he sneered and called me startling names, suggesting I had left it out in the rain whereupon it had exploded. Threatening to report him to his superiors, I explained that as an artist whose mind transcended the mundane, how was I supposed to remember such trivial, practical things?

The laptop was indeed beyond repair and I couldn't afford another one, so that afternoon I wrote to my insurers who eventually replied politely explaining that because it was my fault coupled with an act of God they could make no payments and that as my excess was greater than the loss anyway then it seemed a pointless claim to make. I took this blow on the chin and tried to accentuate the positive. Once I received my first advance and royalty cheque I would purchase the best computer money could buy.

I still had one manuscript left but for now I had no word processor and had kept no copies of the corroded files, so no amendments could be made. Anyway, what the hell do publishers know? They're just accountants with no artistic sensibilities. What I really needed was an agent who would recognise my raw talents for what they were, who could then guide and shape my writing for the benefit of future generations. I imagined myself giving lectures at festivals and agreeing to doctoral theses from zealous students desperate to analyse my oeuvre.

I won't bore you with an account of the response from every single one of these Neolithic philistines. It was clear to me that I was ahead of my time - misunderstood by these

vulgar savages who were dictated by mere 'lowest common denominator' commercialism. My work was not for popular mass consumption anyway – it was literary and artistic. Perhaps the originality of my work overwhelmed them.

Finally, there was one literary agent left who hadn't seen my work: an agency had just opened in London who was calling for new clients in the national press. The now slightly yellow, curling manuscript was duly despatched and I waited with tremulous excitement. I couldn't sleep or eat. I bit my nails to the quick and insisted on sleeping on the doormat, under the letterbox. After a month I became emaciated and feverish. Hair began to fall out in clumps and I slurred my words. Whenever the postman arrived I sat on my haunches and growled. I tried to keep a tally of the days that passed, scratching marks on the wallpaper; and on the one hundred and ninety ninth day, my self addressed parcel finally arrived. The postman was wary of me as I nipped at his ankles, but he threw down the brown package and ran for his life.

Lackaday! Woe is me! Rejection is the bitterest pill to swallow. I threw the manuscript on the floor with disgust and screamed a banshee howl of hatred and outrage. This was it! It was me against the world! But I had little strength left and certainly no more tears. Even my attempt at suicide lacked the necessary energy.

So I stared for days at my manuscript, getting cramp and tremors. Then in sheer desperation, I slowly and carefully rolled up the

discarded manuscript, lit the end and smoked it. With each inhalation I could feel the tension diminish and my mind clear; so lucid and full of shapes and colours. As I relaxed into a delirium, my eyes began to close and my mind's eye flickered like the beginning of a movie...

At last, I was inspired – I could see it all like a vision that had captured my soul. I had my own story to tell: about a man with two exploding wives. Of course! I had to grab a pen to write it all down immediately whilst it was fresh in the mind and the sensual energy of it still haunted my whole being – or at least after I'd watched that film that was about to start on telly...

Jeff Gardiner has had stories published in *The Elastic Book of Numbers* and *Fusing Horizons*. His first novel is with an agent and he is the author of *The Age of Chaos: the Multiverse of Michael Moorcock*. His articles have appeared in *Matrix*, *Vector*, *Prism*, *Wormwood* and *The Alien Online*.

Editor's note: yes, of course this is fiction. But I would like to point out that Mr. Gardiner speaks the truth on these matters. Time to dig out *Focus* #41 and an article therein *Manuscript Submission*...



THE CLOCKWORK ARMY

Peter C. Loftus

The high whine of the scanner told Josef it was time to get out of there. He moved sideways between the low piles of rubble, waiting for the warning to subside. Eventually the noise lessened and disappeared as he left the irradiated area. It was probably time for him to call it a day anyway, so he began to head downhill towards Ground Zero. He whistled as he walked, the sack on his shoulder jingling as he jumped debris and furrows in the earth. The

clouds were stippled above, light and darkness mixing in mackerel skies.

It took him about half an hour, forty minutes or so, to get back. Ground Zero wasn't the centre of the accident site, far from it, but when you saw the place the name made sense. One or two buildings had survived the blast; the low dome of the Swan Theatre ringed by four broken towers, the Civic Offices, the National

Proletkult Gallery, the Museum of Ethnology and two of the onion domes of the Vologda Cathedral, still tiled in red and gold. These traces were all that were left of Borograd, the city named for Boris Godunov.

The man was dressed from head to toe in the white robes of a dedicate. Around his waist was the *sholya*, the assassin cord, which had taken seven years to earn. His head was covered with a hood that draped over his shoulders and hung almost to his waist, and the hiss of his breath spurted from the mask that covered his mouth and nose. Black booted feet carried him easily across the flats as the sun sank behind.

Rikoshi ran through the night, for the time had not yet come for him to rest. He had spent his three *sufa* days regaining his strength aboard the launch from the mainland. Now he would run for twelve days, resting three hours in every twelve, keeping his back directly to the East, so that each morning he would greet the rising sun. The sombre peak of mount Volya loomed to his right, dominating the centre of Nova Zemlya even in the almost total darkness.

The kettle issued a shrill scream as Josef plucked it from the stove and poured black tea. Still wearing his fingerless gloves, he began to shovel an onion omelette into his maw like a waste disposal with small wedges of flat, homemade bread. He looked to be in danger of eating his own fingers.

The last rays of the setting sun poked through the dirty windows of his attic. There was a sudden chiming, as of some vast clock, with bells of every size, tympanum, chimes and clockwork music. Nightingales carolled on oiled springs, wings flashing burnished light from the last of the day's sun.

Josef slurped his tea as the room sang back into silence.

Heavy doors swung inwards to reveal a cathedral of clockwork monstrosities. Files of garish tin gnomes wound their way around pillars of fused glass and metal. Baleful red eyes watched as real hammers struck plastic anvils. Gigawolves clad in grey ran scared from neon bolts of lightning that flickered white and blue. On the left, rows of peasant women with robot faces and radio-dial eyes waved and threw down handfuls of seed. A carriage of gunmetal swans chased a path above, beaks and black talons gleaming dully. Six torpedo-

casing nuns whirled below on a carousel, cackling and buzzing.

Grunting, Josef strapped himself into the harness and began to pull himself up. Everything needed to be oiled daily.

There were two on the left, and at least two, maybe three, on the right. They'd been keeping pace with Rikoshi for nearly an hour now, although he could feel their patience wearing thin as the moon rose.

Rikoshi hadn't seen them clearly yet, just glimpses through the mist. They moved like shadows, keeping pace with him, even though he could see no evidence of any type of gait, no shambling shoulders, no flicking tails.

The pack was ravenous. It had been days since they'd last scavenged anything, and this new prey was slow to tire. It wasn't often that something this big had the lack of brains to venture out alone. There was a dry gully ahead, perfect for an ambush. Sensing each other's hunger they closed in.

The alpha male was in first; speeding flat and low over the ridge, ready to strike. Before he could take in the absence of prey, something wrenched at his neck with incredible force, flipping him sideways. There was a great jarring along his spine followed by a loud snap.

Rikoshi dropped the dead creature and turned as another of the beasts hit him full force in the chest. He rolled with the momentum of the beast, landing with his knee between its shoulder blades. There was that moment of shock that comes before pain as two bony spurs shot from beneath the creature's mane and sliced through the flesh of his leg. Rikoshi almost fainted as a massive bolt of electricity surged through his body. Then there was a loud report and a pattering of glass as from a shattered windscreen. *It's the accident all over again*, thought Rikoshi, and this time, he did faint.

Rikoshi awoke in the hospital. It was dark this time, but he could feel the nurses bathing his face just like before.

This nurse was singing though, in a language Rikoshi didn't understand, and she stank of vodka and ammonia. The single light silhouetted her head, so he couldn't see her features, but she didn't look too pretty.

Some time later Rikoshi regained

consciousness. He was strapped to a gurney in a dimly lit room with walls and ceiling of flaking green metal. Whoever had stuck knitting needles through his head had left them there and his mouth was a cactus spike crying for water. Smells of coppery blood, homemade vodka and something shameful cocooned him.

"Seems like you're new around here." Josef's smeared face leant in to his vision, upside-down.

"That obvious is it?"

"Well, most others would know that getting too close to a gigawolf will get you stung. Did get you two broken ribs and a broken ankle though."

"Did you scare them off with some type of electrical pulse?" Rikoshi tried to swing himself upright, but his brain swam and yawed.

"No, that shock you felt came from them. It's in the tail, you know."

When Rikoshi felt a little better, Josef brought him into the kitchen and fed him a soup of wild grain and pulpy tubers.

"What day is it?" Rikoshi had dropped the spoon and was staring sickly at Josef.

"Tuesday. I found you on Saturday, and you slept for three days. Why? What's that got to do with the soup? Soup is poison on Tuesday, is it?"

Rikoshi began to eat again, shoulders slumped with relief.

"Well? What day can't you eat soup?"

"I'm a dedicate of the Mother. I rest three hours in twelve, three days in twelve. I eat no meat, no fish, no foul. My life..."

"Yes," Josef poured hot tea. "I've heard of you guys. You run all the time. Does the Mother chase her followers?"

"We follow the dawn that one day we may reach the primal core and witness eternity. And if you find it funny, you might be fortunate enough to meet my sholya." Rikoshi lifted a loop of his assassin cord so that Josef could see it. Josef raised an eyebrow and went back to stoking the fire.

"Eager to get on your way, priest?"

Rikoshi was slipping. He hadn't heard the man coming up the metal stair. He turned his back to the grey-paned window.

"I'm allowed time to recover." The sun was sinking fast at his back; an orange thumbprint casting long shadows over the scrapheap

streets.

"So why not relax while you have the chance?"

"It is not for a dedicate of the Mother to relax. I have taken my vows. I will run again as soon as my leg is strong enough to bear my weight."

"And where will you run to?"

"West." Rikoshi was clenching and unclenching his hands as they spoke.

"And what will you do when you reach the west coast? There's nothing there, you know, not even a village or a ferry."

"If I can't find a way, then I will stop there, and pray for guidance. The Mother will create a way."

"Sure she will. You can stay there 'til you drop, and then the Mother can ferry your soul to the other side."

"Do not make light of my beliefs, old man. A scavenging old crow is not in a position to make fun of my order."

"Actually, I'm an artist," said Josef, his voice heavy as if his calling were not something he celebrated. "I was once Dean of the Academy of Fine Arts in Chernyev."

"So why are you here?"

"I had..." and here Josef smiled ruefully, "a disagreement with some of the faculty."

"It must have been quite a disagreement."

For a moment, Rikoshi thought the old man wasn't going to answer.

"The secret police were involved too. They had me charged with sedition. I was to be 're-educated' in Strelinka, but a colleague tipped me off and I escaped. So what are you running from?"

"You haven't earned that story, old man. Find a rock and ask it what its doing."

Rikoshi watched through slitted eyes as the man shrugged, turned, and disappeared back down the stairs.

It was a week before Rikoshi could walk, and even then, he needed the crutch that Josef had made for him. Gradually, they became easier and easier companions. Josef decided that he'd get nowhere pushing Rikoshi's buttons, and Rikoshi accepted the fact that it might be a little bit difficult for the old man to understand his *sufa*.

Bit by bit, they began to fall into a routine. Josef was out most of the day scavenging, and spent the nights bashing and hammering in the central atrium. Rikoshi had to be content with

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prayer and meditation as he waited for his leg to heal, and Josef wasn't in a hurry to see the dedicate go after he tasted a bean stew that Rikoshi cooked one day.

"I didn't know you people could cook so well," remarked Josef, smacking his lips as he ate.

"I wasn't born to my order, Josef." Rikoshi laughed, a bitter, shallow sound. "I was a man before I became a dedicate."

"Yes, I bet." Josef looked up from his plate. He hadn't been able to draw Rikoshi out about his past life. "But what kind of man? Did you have a family?"

For the slightest instant, Rikoshi looked stung, and Josef knew he'd scored.

"Yes. But only the Mother hears about my family. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

Josef pursed his lips.

"Well, whatever it is, I hope the Mother can help you with it."

Rikoshi reached for his crutch. As he did so his lips moved, but Josef didn't catch the comment. It obviously wasn't meant for his ears.

The metal doors swung inwards on well-oiled hinges. The three visitors gasped at the spectacle before them. Extending down both sides of the hall, walls of rattling automata span and clanked, playing out their programmed roles in a vast matrix of moving parts that was almost too much for the eye to comprehend. Serried files toiled in chains beneath nightmare representations in Kulturkorps livery. But this was far from the communist art of the capital. Josef's work was a rallying cry for the downtrodden masses, a vast tableau of the suffering and misery of the proletariat. Rikoshi followed the group, transfixed by the complexity and beauty of Josef's machine.

"It's amazing, Professor!" said the fat one, spinning to shake Josef's hand. "I've never seen anything like it!"

The others, a tall thin man in an expensive suit, and a dark-haired lady pressed around Josef too, enthusing and patting him on the back. Rikoshi couldn't help but smile, forgetting himself in the moment.

"What's it called?" asked the lady. The wings on her archaic spectacles matched the angle of her cheekbones exactly.

"I don't have a name yet," said Josef waving forwards at the blank portion in the centre of the far wall. It was framed by two giant Valkyries on quicksilver mounts, each bearing a twenty-foot

lance. "I don't think it will reveal that to me until its completed."

The fat one, a Professor Turgenyev winced operatically at this and began dry-soaping his hands. "That's what we came to see you about, Josef. The Kulturkorps are coming."

Josef took the news soberly, nodding softly, but Rikoshi could see a tightening around the old mans lips. "When?"

"We received word this morning. They'll come here tomorrow, probably at dawn," said the thin one, Doktor Nicholaievich. "Contrary to what you may believe, it is not possible for one of your stature to simply disappear. You can come back with us after Magda records your work. If you have anything to pack, I'd suggest you get it now. We don't want to be here longer than possible." As he said this, the tall man's hand went absently to the radiation meter strapped to his belt.

The woman took out an analogue recorder and set about filming the sculpture. Rikoshi leaned against his crutch, already knowing what Josef's answer would be.

"I'm not going."

Rikoshi smiled. The old man had not disappointed him.

"You don't have a choice, Josef." Turgenyev pursed his lips in commiseration.

"I do, and I'm not running again. Magda, set that recorder up over here." Josef pointed to a low stepladder on the right. Magda looked at Turgenyev, then made her way over to the table. Josef took the camera off her and attached it to the top of the ladder.

"Now, Magda, set it to 220 degree scan with alternating zoom... that's right." Josef ran a cable across the floor, plugging it into the back of the camera. "Alright... now, I'm going to pipe this directly to the network in the Academy..." Josef stopped suddenly in his tracks. He turned to the visitors as if seeing them for the first time. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to leave. If what you say is true, I've only got fifteen hours to complete my life's work."

Rikoshi watched as the trio picked their way back to their maglev. They were muttering and cursing about stubborn old fools, but he could see that they didn't believe their own words, and that they were humbled by their respect for Josef.

"You'd best be on your way," said Josef, not looking up from his work. He was welding metal strips onto a cylindrical frame.

"I'm not going," said Rikoshi. "I think the Mother forced me to stop here for a reason. I'm

going to stay and help you. Besides, there's a story I owe you."

He began his story as Josef worked. At first the words came out slowly, but then, like a spring torrent, they flowed from him. He told of Yuki, and how they had met. He told of the endless summers they had spent in Nigata-Shima. He told of their marriage and the birth of Yukako. Then, with tears in his eyes, he told of that night in late October when they'd been coming back from the north of the island. It had been raining heavily all day and the roads were slick and greasy. Yukako had woken up, grumpy, and he was pushing it a bit, speeding; trying to get them all home to bed. They hadn't stood a chance. The roadtrain had come round the corner far too wide. Its headlights had blinded Rikoshi as he tugged at the wheel, dragging them in a slide, onto the margin. As he spoke, he heard again the scream of collision detectors. He heard again the screams of his wife and child as the groundcar crashed into the barrier. He was breathless for a moment, back in the spinning vehicle, in that tense, eternal moment of silence before the car crunched back to earth. He felt the tiny cubes of shattered windscreen striking his skin then, the endless rain, falling on his upturned face.

When he finished, Josef turned to him with blurry eyes. He was holding out what he had been working on. Josef looked ten years older.

"What is it?" asked Rikoshi, taking the object from the older man.

"It's a leg brace. If you strap it around your knee, it should keep your weight off that ankle."

"Thanks," said Rikoshi, sitting to strap the brace on. It fitted perfectly.

The two men worked straight through the night, Rikoshi making tea and passing wrenches and parts to Josef. By the time morning came, Josef's work was still far from finished, but the two had at least worked out a strategy for their defence.

The Korps came for them with first light, two maglevs marked with the twin 'K' decal. As they came in to land, the wizened figure of the artist darted from the building and took off through the ruins.

"Let's pick him off from the air," suggested the pilot.

"You idiot, we want him alive, we don't need a martyr on our hands," snapped the sergeant. "Unit two, secure the primary on foot and await my command."

The second maglev settled on some open ground to the left. Four men sprinted out in light

combat gear and took off in the direction Josef had run.

Sergeant Ivanov gestured to Nilssen, Shevchenko and Budanov to fan out and approach the ruin that was Josef's house. Keeping low, two took up flanking positions. Shevchenko scouted forward.

"Left flank clear," came the voice of Nilssen.

"Shev, where are you?" called Ivanov. "Report, Shevchenko." Not a sound. Crouching, Ivanov signalled to his point man, Budanov to circle back to the right. Budanov nodded once, then cut back behind a mound of debris.

"Sergeant." It was Tarkovsky, leader of the second unit. "We've cornered the old-timer in a gully. Reece and Karkov are closing in now."

"Unit 2, we request silence, we've got a slight situation here, over." Ivanov waved to Nilssen to proceed towards the building. He looked for his point man. Nowhere. Shit. "Budanov, what's your status?" No answer. Again. "Budanov, where the hell are you?"

Ivanov set off to the right. Either this old timer kept some tough company, or else he had more than a few tricks up his sleeve.

The sergeant was running low over open ground when Tarkovsky's voice came through. "We are under attack, repeat, we are under attack. Fall back. Ivanov, we need back up, there's some kind of mutant wolf taking us out." Ivanov flicked a switch on his wrist. "Send in the Nova Unit."

Rikoshi watched as the sergeant approached across the patch of open ground. The first two had been easy, too easy. Paid soldiers should have been much more difficult.

Ivanov was rounding the ruined corner of a wall when Rikoshi struck. He felt something drop around his neck. In a sudden, cold sweat, he knew he was in trouble. Dropping his sidearm, he drew his hunting knife and began slashing at his unseen assassin as his vision dimmed.

Rikoshi kissed the side of his right index finger and raised it to his temple in salute. There was blood running from a wound in his leg, but he paid it no attention. Time enough for that later.

Pulling the *sholya* off Ivanov's corpse, he ran back to the hall. Following the route that they'd planned earlier, Rikoshi sped to the wrecked tower to the right of Josef's hall, and up the remains of the exposed staircase. Swinging through a broken skylight, he landed on the upper balcony, just as Nilssen was scanning the now silent sculpture. The *sholya* went

neatly over Nilssen's neck as Rikoshi's weight pitched the soldier forward. Within seconds, he too was dead. Too easy.

Rikoshi was strapping a tourniquet to his leg when the Nova Unit arrived. There was a sound from outside as if a car had been ripped in half, then the doors were torn off their hinges and the Nova stood, blocking the light.

The Nova was four metres tall and three wide, a squared off humanoid shape with an insect's head. Rikoshi stood frozen for an instant as the head swivelled and the inhuman eyes snared him. Demonic wings retracted as the Nova took a step forward. *How do you stop that with a length of cord?* thought Rikoshi.

"DO NOT MOVE OR YOU WILL BE TERMINATED!" With those words, the Nova sprang towards Rikoshi.

Josef ran and ran until he felt as if his lungs were on fire. Back in the gully, he could still hear the soldier's screams as the gigawolves ripped them apart. He had owed them a meal ever since he'd saved Rikoshi.

It took him almost five minutes to get back to his place. As he neared, he saw the body of one of the marines on the ground. Averting his face, he tugged the man's weapon out of his lifeless fingers. He took the sidearm too, tucking it into his belt. Then, he legged it to his hall, where he could hear the mother of all rows going on.

Rikoshi was knocked sprawling with the Nova's first lunge. His head cracked unmercifully against the concrete floor and he felt a sharp pain as something gave in his wrist. With a noise like a thousand warriors unsheathing their blades, the Nova sprouted four lethal knives from each fist and thumped at the stunned Rikoshi. Recovering just in time, Rikoshi rolled aside and dived behind the carousel of missile-casing nuns.

Josef brought the rifle up to his eye. The Nova was a massive target. He squeezed the trigger and a burst of light caught the machine on the side of the head, ricocheting off around the room. The Nova turned, completely unharmed. It locked him in its sights and sped towards him like a train. Josef turned, diving for cover. Then, the balcony beneath his feet gave way as the Nova rammed his fist into it. That was probably what saved his life, as he all but slid down the monstrous chest of the thing. Giddy with

adrenalin, he took off running for the centre of his sculpture, hoping to hide behind the Valkyrie's steeds.

The first thing Rikoshi noticed was that somehow, his *sholya* had been impaled on one of the automaton's talons. After that, he heard Yukako's voice. It was as if time slowed. From somewhere above came a beam of light, then, it was as if the whole building were falling down around them, and he saw Yukako's face, and she said, quite simply, "Live."

Then, then world sped up again. Josef shot past, and the Nova leapt after grating "...WILL BE TERMINATED."

Josef dived for the legs of a horse. The Nova lunged. Tearing a power cable from its housing Rikoshi pulled with all his might. There was a sudden strain that dislocated his shoulder as the cable caught the foot of the Nova, then a tremendous crash as the machine toppled forward onto the twenty-foot lance of a Valkyrie. The smell of ozone filled the air as power surged through the cable and it snapped forward, flinging Rikoshi head first into a pillar.

"....TER...MINATED."

"....TER...MINATED."

Rikoshi sat up suddenly, the pain nearly splitting his skull. Josef sat back on his haunches, lowering a cloth that he had been using to clean Rikoshi's face. "It's still alive!" He struggled to get a look at the Nova.

The Nova was now a part of Josef's sculpture. The nuns span, the women threw out handfuls of seed and the Nova waggled one arm weakly. One of its eyes flickered a dull red every now and again.

"....TER...MINATED," it bleated.

Rikoshi was awe struck. "Is it safe?" he asked.

"Yeah. You completely shorted it out. Nearly shorted yourself out, too."

"How come I didn't?" asked Rikoshi.

"The brace on your leg must have earthed you. You owe me one."

They turned to look at the Nova. Two metres of lance were protruding from its back.

"It's perfect," said Rikoshi, "What are you going to call it?"

Josef smiled. " 'Victory', of course."

It took Igor Blavatsky nearly an hour to crawl back to Josef's hall. Back in the gully, the gigawolves were still fighting over the bones of his comrades. As he approached the hall, he

saw one of the maglevs rise unsteadily and shoot off into the west. He tried shouting and waving, but they didn't see him.

When he entered the hall, he was greeted by the strangest thing, a clockwork army spinning like a giant's playthings, filmed by a battered analogue recorder from a chair in the centre of the room.

Peter Loftus lives with the beautiful Hilbo on the coast to the north of Dublin. He is the headmaster of a school for young learners of English. He spends every spare moment writing, or thinking about writing, or sleeping. This is his second appearance in Focus.

Alexander and the Orphics

Cardinal Cox

From the hill,
He could see across the Gangees
The priest brings a bowl
To scry beyond another border
Once the prince who tamed
The horse of history
The general who cut
The knot of fate
In the Egyptian desert
They promised him eternity
In search of other worlds to conquer
The priest offers the afterworld

The sarcophagus is empty
He tastes the salt of tears
Now on the wind, he passes Babylon
Satraps turn in their beds
He is the knife of the falling star
Slaves drained slow
Stone vault, cold echo

Cardinal Cox was Poet Laureate of Peterborough and Poet in Residence at *They Came and Shaved Us* in 2003. As well as a poetry trail for his city's museums, his cycles of verse include *PNUK* (uk.geocities.com/p_rance/pnuk.htm) and a collection inspired by the Mabinogion (online from his local Druid Grove).

Is still perhaps the prelude

Steve Sneyd

in ruins all alone all others
back on ship to first-sort finds
drink celebrate couple now
tomorrow we go Home

a last time idly i reconjure
holoselves who built it left
same faces same ones separate
show first then entwine two

a gloat of ghosts first smile
sweet benevolent wise recite
as music as prayer as chant
story of universe from birth

to culmination in this starline
Allcreation World then in twin
scene must've been as proud as
sure image they sought to also

leave for any here come to find
faces feral slaver snarl tear of
helpless children of their race
heart brain twin and shape genitals

all till all gone the end THE END
a flashback Wordsworth to Stonehenge
saw same splitbrain in ghost Druids
flowertongue bards sicklehand killers

ah but where where the girl back
beggarpoor her soldierman dead fellow
wanderer of emptiness out of war in
Amerikay came to distract doombdoubt

show him we do we can we must go on
whatever happen or how bloodamp
all worlds we find and switched those
holos off and went to see if any

thighs on ship still left
not yet completely occupied and thought
the ruins falling monoliths behind
horizon as my jetbackpack leapt me on

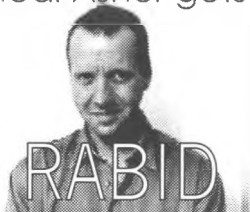
is not our problem we only
explorer experts sent to put a set
of facts into the pool of such Home
let OUR wisemen sort for meaning

just do not in the finish turn
around and tell us what the kind
of End you have in mind for us
recarolling again Goodbyetown's

two-head's killcure Art call it song

Steve Sneyd's 12p hiaku collection *Three Star Chamber* is a Krax publication (63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR).

Neal Asher gets

**SUPER TROOPER**

I've just re-read Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* – a book I originally read when a teenager. What little I remembered of reading the book then, had since been swamped by the lurid images from Paul Verhoeven's silly but enjoyable film. I probably would not have read it again but for two circumstances: firstly my mother happened to bring home a copy from the charity shop in which she works, and secondly, the strident claims that Heinlein is fascist/night-wing/libertarian from members of the British SF establishment, piqued my interest, for it is often the books recommended by the same critics and self-styled academics that bore me into a coma.

My second reading of this book gave me what I'll describe as the Dad's Army effect. When I watched that series as a child, I laughed along with the slapstick and enjoyed it on that level. Watching it later as an adult, I began to appreciate the adult humour. *Starship Troopers* can appeal to the SF-with-boy's-toys oriented adolescent just as much as to an adult with the same orientation. But reading ideas of how human rights and privileges should be earned and should be equally balanced by responsibilities, I began to see why Heinlein is disliked by so many, then I hit chapter eight.

There are those who consider his work ironic – satire – when he is describing his future society, but that's wishful thinking on the part of people who cannot accept that someone who produces such lucid enjoyable work does not buy into their political beliefs. His satire is in fact directed against the society of his time, and of our time, of which he is unstinting in his scorn. Not accepting the cop-out that he didn't really mean it, it would seem then that Heinlein advocates corporal and capital punishment "...they (wrongly) assumed Man has a moral instinct..." his narrator tells us, this, after detailing how the delinquents of the twentieth century were never really deterred from going

on to become full-time criminals. How they never, in the puppy-training analogy he uses, had their noses rubbed in it.

He comments on a death sentence carried out on someone who kidnapped and murdered a little girl: *Well, if there was no way to keep it from happening once, there was only one sure way to keep it from happening twice. Which we used.* The old liberal platitude has it that the death penalty is no deterrent to murder, which is like saying that hitting a paving slab at 125 miles an hour is no deterrent to jumping off the Eiffel Tower. Well, you'll only do it once. Of course such arguments are too simplistic for the politically correct and 'socially aware', but he has a pop at them as well on the subject of corporal punishment: "...the time-tested method of instilling social virtue and respect for law in the minds of the young did not appeal to a pre-scientific pseudo-professional class who called themselves 'social workers' or sometimes 'child psychologists'. It was too simple for them, apparently, since anyone could do it using the patience and firmness needed in training a puppy. I have sometimes wondered if they cherished a vested interest in disorder..."

Such simplicity is not relished by those who studied psychology, sociology et al at the universities where they also received their political indoctrination. (It's sad that so many enter the SF world via the same route and consider themselves radical, when really they're only joining the establishment.) Such people have not so much a vested interest in disorder, but in over-complication, because that way they can wrest control from poor normal plebs. "You must not smack your child, bring him to the child psychologist and if that doesn't work, we'll dose him up with Ritalin, then during his ensuing life this severely screwed-up human being can keep any number of counsellors, psychologists, social workers & sociologists in employment."

Reading about Heinlein's work I discover that he did not write 'literature' and that his later works were weighed down with didactic right-wing/libertarian tracts. Of course, had those tracts been left-wing/liberal, he would have been on a higher pedestal than the one he presently occupies – his work branded as serious literature containing much important social commentary. You gotta laugh.

Starship Troopers was first published forty-six years ago. In the political zeitgeist of today's Britain, Heinlein is not accepted as a visionary: that will come after the lunatics presently in control of our society have finished shovelling their excrement at the fan, in the time when we have to clean up the mess.

Neal Asher's *Brass Man* is out... so be warned.