

## WHERE ROCKETS BURN THROUGH

*Edited by* Russell Jones

Russell Jones is an Edinburgh-based writer, editor and researcher. His collection of science fiction poems, *The Last Refuge*, was published in 2009 by Forest Press. He moderates the poetry department of [writersdock.org](http://writersdock.org), writes articles on children's literature for [therustykey.com](http://therustykey.com) and travel articles for [exploration-online.com](http://exploration-online.com). He is guest editor for *The Interdisciplinary Science Review* and is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing and tutoring in Scottish Literature at Edinburgh University. He has researched and published on Edwin Morgan's science fiction poetry.



# Where Rockets Burn Through

Contemporary Science Fiction Poems  
from the UK

*Edited by* Russell Jones

Penned in the Margins  
LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS  
22 Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB, United Kingdom  
[www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk](http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk)

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First published 2012

Printed and bound in the UK by the MPG Books Group, King's Lynn

ISBN  
978-1-908058-05-8

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# PREFACE

by Alasdair Gray

FICTION ENTERTAINS by making parts of the life we know well wonderfully interesting, for describing wonderfully strange lives as if they were possible. Science fiction is in the second category, but differs from other fantasies by taking for granted the scientifically accepted. All fiction plays on our sense of right and wrong. Most science fiction describes the wrong, which is why Kingsley Amis called his book about it *New Maps of Hell*. In 1932 Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* described a civilisation where people are mass-produced on assembly lines as Henry Ford was making cars. Their embryos are warped to ensure they grow into adults happy with the work they will be given, with no need to choose it. This world is shown through the eyes of a savage who rejects it, and readers will mostly identify with him. George Orwell's *1984* shows how a limited nuclear war has led to sadistic dictatorships with total control of those who are not dictators. What would Orwell think if he knew that a London house has a plaque on the wall saying when he lived there, adjacent to a surveillance camera recording people passing in the street outside? But if you accept my definition of science fiction then two of the world's greatest poems are examples of it.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is based on a model of the physical universe developed by pagan Greeks and accepted for over sixteen centuries by all educated folk with scientific attitudes, whether pagans, Jews, Christians, Muslims or atheists. (There have always been atheists, though they usually found it safer not to talk about it.) Dante describes the world as a great globe at the centre of the universe, with the moon, sun and five nearest planets revolving around it, this whole system being contained by a revolving

sphere of all the stars, which conveyed life to everything within it and movement to everything except the earth. To this structure he added what many today think fictions. Dante's world contains Hell, a huge cone-shaped amphitheatrical pit made by God to hold Satan when He flung him out of Heaven, and all his followers then or since. Dante describes the sphere of stars as both the height of Heaven and of God the first mover of things, while Satan cannot move at all, being buried at the centre of the earth with only his heads (he has three faces) above the lake of ice at the bottom of Hell. After travelling down to that point and entering through a kind of tunnel along Satan's giant side, Dante is surprised to find himself climbing upward – he has passed the world's centre of gravity.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* describes a universe in some ways more primitive than Dante's and in others more modern, because he was an English Protestant who had visited Galileo in Italy, so made room in his poem for the solar system revealed through modern telescopes. Unlike Dante's God and Satan, Milton's both talk and move, especially Satan. On his journey from Hell to the Earthly Paradise he flies first to the sun and, standing there, finds it hard at first to see our world, it appears so distant and tiny.

No poems in this book attempt the epic forms I have mentioned. They are all lyrics – verses short enough to be sung if they were set to music. They show possible (though not always probable) parts of our most recent scientific view of things: a universe of infinite galaxies receding from each other after an inexplicable explosion which generated all of space, time and energy. Our world and our lives are forms of these, and (allow me to say "Thank God", Mr Dawkins) therefore allow us freedom of choice. For two centuries, between the publication of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* and Einstein's relativity hypothesis, the most scientifically convincing model of the universe was made of tiny, indestructible atoms obeying mechanical

laws. This meant that the arrangement of atoms composing us in the present was absolutely caused by their arrangement in the past, so nothing we thought could influence the future. Many who would have once have believed in Calvinist predetermination thought it tough-minded realism to accept this mechanical version of it, and regard their own consciousness as an effect, not cause, of what they did, though consciousness was the only effect they knew in the universe that had no consequences. The discovery of sub-atomic particles at first called electrical impulses, and that we can examine nothing closely without altering it, has not restored mankind to the centre of the universe, but makes every mind central as far as it can see.

These poems assert our freedom to imagine excitingly different worlds, however agreeable or hellish. Edwin Morgan's were the first verses to show me that short science fiction poetry is possible. I will not prejudice readers by mentioning my preference for others in this book. I have a soft spot for those which take Lowland Scottish speech into distant futures, but hooray for all of them.



# INTRODUCTION

by Russell Jones

THIS BOOK begins with an epigraph by Edwin Morgan. He declared, ‘the last refuge of the sublime is in the stars’ — and it is from this that I took the title for my own first collection, *The Last Refuge*. It is a small book of science fiction poems, a genre I’d not encountered much at the time I wrote it, other than in Morgan’s work, but I was intrigued by the sense of experiment. Science fiction poetry seemed something of a draw to people, particularly events organisers, who often came to describe me as a ‘science fiction poet’. Most people hadn’t heard of the genre, though over time others emerged from dark space, some having written reams of the stuff, others having ‘one or two that might be sci-fi, maybe.’ A year after I first spoke to Morgan about his science fiction poetry at his Glasgow nursing home, he died. It was a blow to Scotland, which had lost their treasured national poet, but also to a lot of people who knew and were inspired by him, many of them poets. His death was hard for me too, which felt silly given that I’d only met him once, but perhaps this sadness was because I felt I knew him through his work, that his poetry had informed my own. And so I decided to produce this book, not only *in memoriam* Edwin Morgan but to provide a space for readers and poets to look to the future, to reconsider those final frontiers as he had.

A potential difficulty with a themed anthology like this is distinguishing what *is* or *is not* science fiction. This is a contentious issue, even down to the very words ‘science fiction’. Some favour sci-fi, others SF or Speculative Fiction. I chose Science Fiction for its clarity to the wider public, mainly, and instructed the poets to ‘write something which speculates

about alternatives, with a scientific edge'. My interest was in variety, not just aliens and ray guns (though there are a few in here) but in reassessing the past, speculating about possible futures, current and imagined sciences and technologies, how we engage or might be affected by them. The poets rocketed through, taking their inspiration from books, television, cinema, music, life, the imagination, science and technology, experimenting in form, narration, tone and theme to produce – what I hope you agree is – challenging and rewarding poetry.

As Steve Sneyd points out in his mind-melting essay included in this book, there have been other science fiction anthologies published in the UK. We have a long cultural and literary history in the science fiction genre and this book hopes to bring that up to date by showcasing work by long-established and emerging poetic talents from across the isles. Gwyneth Jones wrote that the science fiction future is an 'extrapolation of the writer's present' and through bringing these voices together I want to create a collage, the impression of which might give us, and future generations, a sense of the implicit concerns of our age and nations. The poems in this book highlight our uncertainty about the future but also a persistent hope that we will be able to see beyond ourselves, to advance as a species through our understanding of each other and the universe(s) surrounding us.

*Where Rockets Burn Through* is an appropriate title, then, for such a collection: poems for now, poems that burn through our history and into the future.

## THANKS

My unfaltering thanks to every poet whose work features in this book, not only for their hard work and wonderful contributions but for their support, good cheer and passion. Particular thanks go to Ken MacLeod and Ron Butlin for their invaluable guidance. Thanks also to Robyn Marsack for advice which helped me to get this book started and finally into print; Alasdair Gray for writing the preface, an engaging insight into the science fictions that precede this collection and encouragement to those who endeavour to explore the genre further; Steve Sneyd for his vibrant introduction to the history and future of the science fiction poetry genre, as well as his expertise throughout this process; my publisher Tom Chivers for his patience, direction and the ability to see the potential of this book.

My eternal gratitude also goes to The Edwin Morgan Trust (SCIO), and his publishers Mariscat and Carcanet, who kindly allowed me to reprint Eddie's poems and to include his book/poem titles as chapter headings. Also, thanks to the staff in the Department of Special Collections in Glasgow University Library. I would particularly like to thank James McGonigal, Hamish Whyte and Michael Schmidt for their generosity and consideration.

A personal thank you goes to Joanna McLaughlin, whose support and good humour helped make the last two years of editing a lot easier. Finally, my thoughts and gratitude turn to Edwin Morgan, without whom the concept of this book would never have struck me. Without you all this book would not have been possible: thank you.

– RJ



# WHERE ROCKETS BURN THROUGH

*the last refuge of the sublime is in the stars*

Edwin Morgan



# WORMHOLEING INTO ELSEWHERE

An essay by Steve Sneyd

EDWIN MORGAN once said ‘The poet, I think, is entitled to set up his camp on other worlds than this.’ Define ‘worlds’ as not just the What Ifs of our solar and extrasolar planets, but let it embrace other strands of reality, other futures, other selves, and Morgan’s words illuminate science fiction poetry’s vast array of possibilities. Moreover, the imaginative spectrum offered by the poetry of the trans-real embraces the sciences, with metaphoric wonders on startling frontiers already reached, extrapolating into the even more astonishing not-yet science of future discoveries.

So much science today, particularly at its more speculative edges, provides treasure ships for the poet to loot, whether overtly or implicitly; a poem doesn’t have to be bowed under specialist terminology or feature equations to meaningfully reflect on the altering impacts science has wrought on individual, societal and cultural forms and responses.

In the counterintuitive quantum world, the Large Hadron Collider unleashes enigmatic sub-atomic particles, individual and wilful as alchemical essences when Morgan voiced them. How much speculative cosmology offers poets – from the near-mystical puzzles of dark matter and dark energy to the alternative universes? Implicit in String Theory’s hypotheses are enfolded further dimensions. What voices might they utter? Or all-swallowing black holes, their white hole ‘twins’, or postulated wormhole transit to the ultra-unknowable? Or take gene manipulation, already giving trans-species characteristics to existing life forms, ready to create even more extraordinary new ones. Those metamorphoses Ovid chronicled loom towards reality. What’s more, with cloning of animals achieved, and of

humans (possible if still illegal), next may come the revival of long extinct life forms from recovered DNA.

The evolution of human interaction, with digital reshaping, instant mega-information overload and globalised manipulation of social communication, plus the fast-approaching need to interact with increasingly communicative robot and android labour, demand that science fiction poets respond. How could emotion, comprehension and identity be changed by future designer drugs, or by transformations, perhaps by cyborgisation to part-human part-machine hybrids, involved in the creation of the post-human; how could these challenge the poet's creative empathy.

Such cutting-edge areas of actual or thought experiment offer the genre poet access to the sense of wonder that is still central to science fiction as it was to the very earliest poets considering the world with awe; access to that cosmic fear expressed by Nietzsche as staring into the void that stared back at him, which lies at the core of Lovecraft's poetry and prose.

The poet is called on to bring insight to change's totality, summarised by Allen Ginsberg as 'we are all living in science fiction now', whether that poetic shaping be positive or negative, utopian or dystopian, or coolly, detachedly, observational, even metaphorically abstract or fragmentarily experimental.

But why is the poet's voice so necessary? In part because poetry is still an inescapably expressive activity, from all recorded history and far back into oral cultures. As Jacob Bronowski says, 'Poetry is a species – specific to man as science is.' Nor is the activity a passive recorder. As the Science Fiction Foundation's inspirer, George Hay, put it in 1992: 'Technology gives us answers – but what we need is questions, and poetry gives them.'

Science fiction poetry stands on the shoulders of giants, a point illuminated by Sir Arthur C. Clarke's view that to most, 'any sufficiently advanced

technology is indistinguishable from magic.’ From the earliest surviving literature, like the Sumerian epic poem *Gilgamesh*, poets interpreted a universe whose forces seemed unpredictable and uncontrollable except by magic. To live in such a world, they drew again and again on concepts we today regard as science fictional. To take a handful of instances — artificial beings appear in *The Iliad*, servitors that Hephaestus has made of gold, while the Daedalus myth has him make a mechanical man, Talus, a name revived in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* for his punishment-administering metal justiciar. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer deployed what to us are clearly space satellites, as well as matter transmission reminiscent of *Star Trek*. William Blake employs the familiar science fiction concept of time running in reverse in ‘The Mental Traveller’. Shelley followed him in deploying this concept, along with equally science fictional moon terraforming in *Prometheus Unbound*. Indeed, that poem draws heavily on the science of its time, including theories of Shelley’s scientific mentor, Erasmus (Charles Darwin’s grandfather), whose own epic poems of knowledge contain proto-science fiction predictions of black holes and flying machines, later appearing in Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’, raining down poisonous gas from above.

That inheritance from an earlier tradition of poetry was made explicit in a comment by critic Tom Henigan in 1987: ‘our new mythology is science fiction and speculative poetry.’ As earlier poets used figures of fantasy and myth to explore reality indirectly, the science fiction poet, an outsider seeing more of the game, can reflect on our present, using a What If standpoint in Elsewhere and Futurewhen.

While other contemporary poetry is almost entirely lyric, science fiction poetry does not fear narrative, even sometimes to book-length instances. Genre novels, too, frequently include their authors’ or other’s poetry, so to illuminate characters or societies, or even to progress the plot. Such embedded poems later served Hawkwind and others as space-rock

lyrics.

British science fiction poetry has a tendency to the darkly dystopian. For instance, although the first landmark anthologies of science fiction poetry published in the UK – Edward Lucie-Smith’s  *Holding Your Eight Hands*  and the mass market paperback  *Frontier of Going*  edited by John Fairfax – appeared in the year the space race culminated in the Moon landing, both almost entirely avoid High Frontierish yea-saying.

That only up to 1969 was a Moon landing poem necessarily science fiction also exemplifies boundary definition dilemmas. Often, deciding whether a particular poem is science fiction, realist, fantasy, horror or other genre, or overlaps, demands context. Is a poem wherein climate change, environmental degradation, or explosive urbanisation, cause our world to resemble inhospitable far planets, science fiction, realist or both? When pollution breeds monsters, is it a horror poem?

Such challenges to tidy boundaries arise again with much of the poetry used by Michael Moorcock as editor of highly influential science fiction magazine  *New Worlds*  in the 1960s. His choices often frequented the psychological realm dubbed ‘inner space’. George MacBeth’s classic ‘The Silver Needle’ used myth-tinged science fiction imagery to convey drug addiction as interior conflict; others versified medical reports of mental illness. There and since, science fiction poetry reflects the contingent relations of inner and outer – ‘consensus’ – reality, P.K. Dick’s  *idios*  and  *koinos kosmos* . Using alienation-capable in-head environments such writing needs no other worlds round other stars to find, meet and express the Other’s otherness. From within can be conveyed loves, hates, as different as those which will doubtless imbue our android creations, initial portals to reflect on couplings and grievings of future consciousnesses.

Isolation, as Marx-predicted, atomises consumers. Online contact

purports to overcome this through virtual community while equally separating us further from 'real' interaction. There is a similar confusion in the paranoia of feeling ever-surveilled, yet choosing to use privacy-busting social media. Also crossover is the painful relief of finding the conspiracists proved right, if not about alien kidnap experiments, then at least about manipulation by a 1% of secret masters. Ones who prove, like an unmasked Wizard of Oz, unable to retain control of unleashed financial forces. An even more frightening possibility to the poet is not the presence of those watchers from here or from Out There, but their absence. Rather than as microbe-like swarms of only statistically interesting experimental subjects, maybe we in our cosmic backwater stare at a god-shaped hole of metaphysical meaninglessness. For the poet, even that challenge, of fearful nothing, can be a gateway to memorable beauty.

The post-colonial echoes traceable in that most anthologised of all science fiction poems, Morgan's 'First Men on Mercury', recur in future-likely persistence of the twin patterns of humanising, for control, the alien Other, and of dehumanising fellow humans into the Other. Science fiction poetry proleptically envisions future conflicts, wars waged perhaps by post-humans: Frankensteined selves, gene-tampered, enhanced, cloned, animal-human merged, maybe with ancestrally-dreamt physical wings growing at last, not for joyous flight but for battlefield duty. Will attack drones controlled from screens thousands of kilometers away, robot warriors, biofuel from enemy corpses, military zombies and vampires lead us to technofear rather than sexbot technolust? Whatever can slay or be slain in future-possibility, from ancient nightmare reptiles reborn, to uploaded virtuals battling for cyberspace, memories falsely real, can all be fodder for the science fiction poet.

From there follows the science fiction poetry trope of isolated post-

nukecaust or other apocalypse survivors, stranded in Earth's ruins or as Outer Space refugees, determinedly going on as in Morgan's notable poem 'In Sobieski's Shield'. In such poems the most frequent encounter is not with alien beings met in incomprehension, but with lifeforms discovered through the traces of their civilisation.

This duality in science fiction poetry's relation to its visions of the onrushing Future, near or far, and of the altiverses, alternative worlds perhaps only a nanoparticle-width wall away, is key to its range. To realise the Not-Is, the Not-yet, of those unstoppable Changefields which bind, compel, propel, it feeds on dystopian dubiety as on excited wonder. Wishing for or against such destinations, the science fiction poet must mind-wormhole through from the constantly transient, all but unseizable, pinpoint of Present Now, constantly excreting Past, ingesting Future, like a never sated blindworm, to grasp the poetic essence of its fearsome, hopeful, extraordinary, or perhaps even surprisingly ordinary difference.

A few words on form: science fiction poetry is predominantly free verse but fixed forms do occur, particularly short syllabics such as haiku form. More experimental forms, less frequent, include concrete, cut-up, multiple path, the definitionally slippery prose-poem, and visual-verbal hybrids like collaged and comic strip formats. Ultra compressive, paratactic, and jumpcut material can be found, too, perhaps influenced by L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. theories or methods proposed to communicate with Artificial Intelligence. Such are likely to grow; likewise computer-written poetry, hypertext, developing multimedia mashups including video and animation crossovers, and doubtless areas as yet unimagined for the science fiction poem. May its future know no limits!

I

## A HOME IN SPACE



## A Question

*Edwin Morgan*

They were so anxious, yet they had some spirit.  
Some of them shook their fists at us, though mostly  
they plodded, scurried, frowned about their business  
as we'd been told they would. What was most striking  
was that things did hold, the many intersections  
did somehow flow through one another, order  
without calm did seem to work, not always –  
we saw their blood, and bits – but surely something  
had ground together in great coherence –  
they could not see it, but we did, we could see it –  
over a few thousand years of using  
their planet, well, badly, up, no matter,  
we know and they know there are others waiting  
for spade and drill and geodesic dome. Well then,  
I cannot relegate, forget, make sense of,  
how one of them stood there intently watching –  
he was not young, not a fool – a piece of newspaper  
caught in traffic, blown then across wastelands,  
up among clouds where – and that's all – it vanished?

○

*Sarah Westcott*

what am I turning quietly and fast  
in the great I am, I am here  
I am bristling and crusted stripped and pocked  
I am teeming and meaning what am I meaning –  
where did I come from what cupped me a whole  
my core and my aura where rockets burn through  
my poles and my gibbons my beautiful girth  
I'm rolling round tundra and steppes and snow  
I'm playplace and gut, retina, sisal and gold –