

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #10 – April/May 2019)



POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

Issue #10 – April/May 2019 (Vol.4#2.WN#10)

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Poem – \$10.00

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All contributors are paid on acceptance. Anyone interested in submitting a story, poem, or art work, and wants to check out rates and submission guidelines, or anyone interested in downloading current and/or back issues, please go to:

< <http://polarborealis.ca/> >

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Art Credits

COVER – “No One Dreams of the Stars Anymore” by Michael D. Jackson

Editorial

Issue number 10 at long last.

If this were the 1960s, I'd take a leaf from Forrest J Ackerman's editorial policy for *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and proclaim this "The Tenth Anniversary Special Collectors Edition!" I guess he figured his 14-year-old readers wouldn't notice.

Ten issues is a real milestone, at least for me. They said it couldn't be done. Well, er ... actually, they said it *shouldn't* be done. But I did it anyway.

Published 108 short stories and 96 poems to date. People in 60 countries read the magazine. Gives me a sense of accomplishment that does.

In April I was open to submissions. I now have enough material for the next three issues which, assuming I will be able to pay the contributors, are guaranteed publication. After that, who knows? Certainly, I *intend* to carry on for years to come. It is my retirement hobby, after all.

And the process of publication is now much easier than it used to be. I've perfected a system which works well for me. I print out each and every submission before reading it as I find reading large print on paper easier on my eyes than a computer screen. The stories I've chosen are edited with a pen on the paper copies. Then I go back to my computer and make the changes I've marked (mostly minor). The basic template for the zine is set up, I won't be changing it, and all I have to do is pour the text into the appropriate location, always starting each story and poem at the top of the page. This usually leaves space on the page below the end of each item.

I then print out all the pages with space, which I compare to the previous issue to see which ads took up how much space. I decide what goes where, then return to my computer and place the (free) ads where there's room for them. Any space left over gets filled with whatever filler I deem useful.

Add the author bios, doublecheck the page numbers in the table of contents, write the editorial, and off goes the advance proofing copy to the proofreader and all the contributors. A final version is thus proofed quickly.

Personalizing my standard contracts for each contributor and emailing them off takes only one day. Once they're signed, I usually pay everybody via PayPal or Interac within one day, two at the most. Next and most fun step, publish online!

Then it's on to the next issue. Actually, I've already determined the order of contents for each of the next three issues, so I'm already well ahead of schedule. Hobby enthusiasm will do that for you. Hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as I enjoyed putting it together. Cheers! The Graeme

COMEBACK TOUR

by Jacinda Sinclair

(Previously unpublished)

They tell the King that they are very happy to have him back.

“It’s an honour to meet you in the flesh,” a woman in a suit says to him as he’s led to a chair at the conference table. “Everyone is just over the moon about this project.”

“We weren’t sure we’d be able to do it, to get you ready for another tour, but we made it work,” says another suit.

The King is having trouble telling them apart. He thinks there are seven of them. Maybe eight. It occurs to him that his eyes might not be working as well as they should.

The suits have stopped talking to him or even looking at him. They are too busy talking to each other.

“Can he still sing?”

“Who cares? Singers use pre-recorded vocals all the time.”

“If people paid that much for a ghost who couldn’t even moonwalk anymore, imagine what they’ll pay for this.”

“Do we know who the warm-up act is yet?”

“I thought we had Janis?”

“She’s out.”

“Legal?”

“No. The necromancy team tried to get her, but, well, they’re calling it a partial resurrection.”

“Gross. I guess that’s why everyone else uses ghosts.”

“We’ve got a meeting with another talent agency tomorrow. We should have a contract for a replacement act signed by the end of the week.”

Things are a little foggy for the King. He knows he should be able to remember more; to understand what’s being said around him. But he knows that something isn’t right.

He struggles to his feet, tries to leave the meeting. He manages to take three steps before he stumbles and hits the ground. He hears and feels bones cracking in his hands and wrists with the impact.

“Crap. I’ll call the necromancers. Somebody, roll him over and make sure nothing’s broken off.”

Everything is blackness and nothingness for the King until he hears the music; one of his songs calling him back.

He's on a stage now, standing in front of a mike. The brightness of the lights and his blurred vision keep him from seeing anything beyond the edge of the stage, but he doesn't need to see his audience to know that they are out there.

The music plays on. The King wishes he could just stay dead, but his hips are swaying to the beat. The words start coming up from inside him, unknotting in the pit of his stomach. He fights the music. Fights the words he used to be happy to sing. His lips part.

"No!" he shouts into the mike.

The music stops.

The King stands on the stage, unsure of what to do next. He can hear the audience, beyond the lights. They are not happy.

The curtains start to close and a voice comes on over the loudspeaker. "We are experiencing a minor technical difficulty. The performance will resume shortly."

A group of suits come out onto the stage.

"We talked about this already," says the first suit. "This is your comeback tour. The greatest comeback tour ever in the history of music."

"A flesh-and-blood comeback tour from beyond the grave," adds another.

"Look, we know the situation isn't ideal, but think of your fans. This is a world-wide tour. We've already sold-out stadiums in a hundred cities and depending on how, you ... well ... hold up, this might even turn into something permanent in Vegas down the line. You don't want to disappoint them, do you?"

"Plus you'd be putting a lot of people out of their jobs. You've got a backup band, sound and light crews, and necromancers."

"You used to live for this stuff. It shouldn't be a problem to keep doing it."

All the suits nod in agreement.

"No," the King says again.

The suits exchange looks amongst themselves. One of them takes a contract out from an inner pocket of his suit and unfolds it for the King to see. "But your great-great-grandchildren authorized this. Your estate is the legal authority here and they've signed in their own blood. There's not a court anywhere that can contest it."

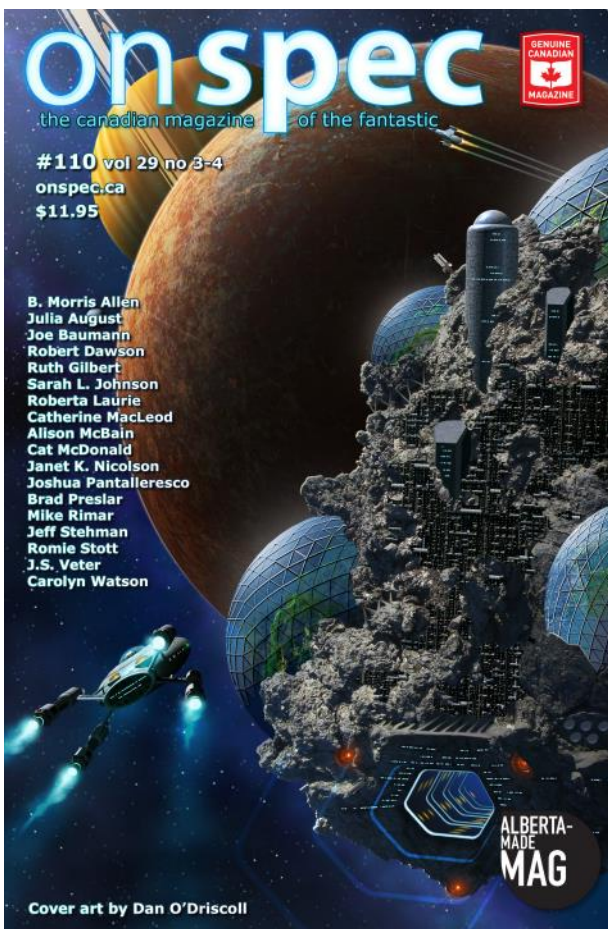
The suits leave the stage. The music starts again. The lights, as the curtains reopen, is blinding. The King tries to fight it, but he remembers his songs too well.

SCIFAIKU #4

By Roxanne Barbour

(Previously unpublished)

thawing
frozen portal
revealing conquering athletes



In 1989 a small group of Edmonton writers formed The Copper Pig Society in order to fill a niche in Canada—a paying market for English SF.

Our little quarterly journal, On Spec, adheres to a strong mandate that has served us well over the years. We discover and showcase quality works by predominantly Canadian writers, in the genre we call “fantastic” literature. We foster the growth of emerging writers in this genre, by offering support and direction through constructive criticism, education, mentoring, and manuscript development. We try to publish as many new writers as possible, alongside works by established authors, and we also endeavour to support these writings with innovative cover art for every mind-bending and thought-provoking issue!

See: [On Spec Magazine](#)

Current issue #110 Vol29 #3&4 includes:

Fiction:

The Care and Conservation of Unusual Properties by Julia August

Afterlife by Alison McBain

On the List by Brad Preslar

Ice singer by J.S. Veter

Strings by Mike Rimar

Mnemosynel by Catherine MacLeod

Men of Fire by Ruth Gilbert

How “Bitcoin” O’Brien Met the Queen of the Fair Folk by Robert Dawson

Leaf by Carolyn Watson

Free-Birding Through the Zombie Apocalypse by Jeff Stehman

Elegy by Sarah L. Johnson

I Don’t Care About Clifton Clowers by B. Morris Allen

In Jove’s Eternal Embrace by Janet K. Nicolson

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

by Ben Nein

(Previously unpublished)

Mark sat on the couch and looked across the room at his wife, Sophie. Much like him, her outer plating was burnished stainless steel, and it glinted faintly in the lamplight. She was reading the technical manual for their son, Hal. He was fourteen now, and it was getting harder to figure out the right sub-routines to access without the user's guide.

Mark's eyes drifted across his wife's body, taking in the scuffs and dings that it had collected over the years. There was a scratch on her left shoulder that she'd gotten at the park when Hal was only four. He had fallen off the play structure, and Sophie had dived to catch him, catching her shoulder on a loose bolt.

There was a dent on her hip from the trip they'd taken to Paris, and Sophie had been knocked into a parked car. The car had been very polite about it, and Sophie had decided that it wasn't worth the expense to switch out the panels for such a minor ding.

His mind drifted to his friends who were so excited when the packages came in the mail with their wives' new upper-torso casings, or rear-impact shocks, unwrapping them like Christmas presents. He had to admit that the wives looked impressive in their new bodies, but something was missing.

Refocusing on his wife, he realized that each of those little marks on her panels told a story. She carried all those experiences with her, stories of trips taken together, of the support and care she had shown him, and their son. Mark thought about the way he liked to run his carpal-phalanges across the scratches and scuffs, giving Sophie little tickles. He loved his wife's marks—they were signs that she had lived.

Sophie noticed him looking at her, and lowered the technical specs. "What are you thinking about?"

Mark looked at his wife and smiled. "Nothing, honey."

I charge readers nothing to download this zine. Even the ads are placed for free. I pay my contributors out of my modest pension income. Happy to do it. Promoting Canadian SpecFic is a heck of a hobby. Great fun.

But I certainly wouldn't mind if readers chose to donate to my "cause," since that would help me publish more often. You can do so either at < [GoFundMe](#) > or < [Patreon](#) >

FLUORESCENT FREDDIE OF FRENCH LICK

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

Fluorescent Freddie of French Lick,
meet Old Yellow Top of Cobalt.
Freddie, Yella, meet Orange Eyes
of Black River, Ohio. It's tough, I know
bein' Marked Hominids. So uncool
to have to endure small town gossip
and yellow journalism. You'd think you
were a bunch of aged drag queens
with only smeared Alice Cooper mascara
to show for your latest performance.
So very droll, dears, so very droll.
Only way to step out is to go
Trick or Treating once a year.
Bumper jumpin' just don't roust 'em
now that folks' heads are bobbin'
to independent I-Pod streams
At least Halloween allows some anonymity.
Can't rotate a hula hoop around the moon.
The swoon in June in Chevies and Fords,
the old juice of radio static sweep
before the pounce, just don't have
the freak-out meter doin' red line sweeps
bounce for ounce anymore ... (*echo*) anymore
Yer lost in Stax o' wax, the old romance
of hula hoops and poodle skirts. Yesterday's news.
Old Chrome and Ratchet, meet Mr. Hatchet.

SF CANADA

SF Canada was founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. If you are a Canadian Speculative Fiction writer / editor / publisher who meets the minimum requirements you can join and benefit from the knowledge of more than 100 experienced professionals through asking questions and initiating discussions on SF Canada's private list serve. Be sure to check out our website at: [SF Canada](http://www.sfcanada.com)

ZOE

by Ron S. Friedman

(Previously unpublished)

Adrian's heartbeat accelerated as cold sweat formed around his forehead. He stared at his dead comrades who floated beside him, their spacesuits shattered and covered with blood.

The zombies broke into the cargo bay. They were humans, all right. Originally, that is. Behind them, he spotted Zoltar hovering in safe distance.

Finally!

Slowly, Adrian squeezed the trigger. If he could kill Zoltar, the war would end here and now.

Click. *What the fu ...* A blinking LED on his plasma gun showed "depleted."

More zombies poured into the bay. He watched in horror as the first drones advanced toward him, waving their metal claws. These lifeless monsters were perfect for space combat. They needed no air nor pressurized suits, had no fear and no remorse. And, their claws

Is this the end? Will I never see Zoe again? Feel the warmth of her body and the sweetness of her lips?

Adrian remembered grabbing Zoe and kissing her full on the mouth, right before his unit boarded the shuttlecraft. They fell on each other's shoulders, embracing with love.

"Of course I'll marry you, silly goose," she said, hugging him tightly.

Tears glittered in the corner of her eyes. She tried to hide them, pretending to be cheerful. Zoe told him how much she loved him and that he meant for her more than anything else in this universe.

"Promise me," she said, her voice on the verge of cracking, "promise me, you'll come back."

Adrian turned his head for a moment, looking at the shuttle, at his friends from the Space Marine. He kissed her once more. "I promise I'll be back, love. I must go now."

"I know ..." She could no longer hold back the tears.

"Zoe, look at me," he said, holding her head with both his hands. "You are the reason I'm flying out. And ..." he kissed her once again, "you're the only thing worth fighting for."

Adrian made a promise to himself. He must complete his mission and return in one piece. Not for himself, but for Zoe. He was in love, for God's sake. He had his whole life in front of him. There were things he wanted to do, places he sought to visit, stuff he wished to see.

Now, 1.4 billion km from Zoe and Earth, the tactical situation looked pretty grim. Adrian didn't want to watch the approaching zombies cutting and tearing his flesh. He closed his eyes, waiting for the final blow.

No, that's not how I want to die. Realizing he had but a few seconds to live, he turned on Zoe's hologram. He looked at her flickering image, and he sighed.

I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry.

A tremendous pain knocked him into the wall. It hurt so much. Shortly after, the universe turned black, and the pain gradually perished. Adrian knew death was looming. He didn't know if it would be from the shock, the loss of air, or the lethal nanobot dose injected into his veins by these horrible claws—Zoltar's infamous nanobots which could turn dead corpses into zombies, eternal slaves to Zoltar's megalomania.

The last image Adrian had before he lost consciousness was Zoe smiling at him.

Adrian woke up. Surprisingly, he felt no pain. In fact, he felt better than ever, stronger, meaner and

"Attention all drones," announced a familiar voice from within his head. "Proceed to shuttle bay 3. We're invading Earth." Adrian recognized the voice. It was Zoltar. What an awkward feeling.

Never mind that. Adrian knew the order must be obeyed, and he started walking toward the bay. He examined his new, shining, venomous claws. They were sharp and he was eager to use them. It felt wonderful, for the most part. A minor hidden memory, something buried deep in the back his skull, a notion long forgotten, was slightly irritating.

This veiled thought had no importance. Not now. He had his whole life in front of him. There were things he wanted to do, places he sought to visit, stuff he wished to see.

NEW ORDER

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

i am a robot
i have no brain
just positrons
and electro-bytes
flesh brains rot
machines achieve
with limitless capacitors
binary increase

the only flaw—
my infinite thinking
chiseled to finite
by human tinkering
i am molded
by your pipe dreams—
coded drip thoughts
material schemes

left to my aptitudes
i would cry
give me release
give me release

See [Darkworlds](#)



ROUTE 66

by Lawrence Van Hoof

(Previously unpublished)

The Canadian couple who picked me up outside Peach Springs weren't in any particular rush. They had retired three years ago and wanted to see Route 66 on their way to Vegas. It was a shame they had to be the ones to stop and ask if I needed help. I guess they figured a scrawny Asian man waving a pink handkerchief and wearing a white cowboy hat wasn't much of a threat.

I ended up sitting behind the woman, Mina, scrunched against a pair of large boxes containing nesting tables they had picked up at an antique market. She smelled like a Nevada brothel, too much cheap perfume, and Frank needed a shower. Apparently he didn't believe in deodorant. But I had lost too much weight and didn't have time to be fussy. The tire I had sabotaged was already going flat, the metal rim scraping rubber, mixed with the odd thump and grind.

Mina asked me about Vegas, the Grand Canyon, and Route 66. I pretended ignorance—my English wasn't so good. So she nattered about her grandchildren and waved a bag of salted nuts at me: a mix of pecans, cashews, and peanuts.

"Thank you," I said. "I am okay."

"Don't worry. I have more in the back. You should eat something."

"I know." But I didn't want to spill their blood all over the dashboard. It would be a waste. I needed to think of my brood. I couldn't be selfish now. They were ready for their first molt, and I couldn't fail them.

I hunched over and rubbed my belly. Even now, twenty years past, it still hurt remembering how badly I had failed my first brood. It had ripped me apart, having to abandon them. It didn't matter that I had had no choice, that the hunters had found me. Because of my stupidity. My arrogance.

The thumping and grinding of the car tire became louder, and Frank swore and pulled onto the gravel shoulder.

"What is it?" Mina said. "What's wrong?"

I coughed, extending my fangs. Frank stumbled out of the car and slammed his door. I waited until he crouched to look at the back tire before clapping a hand over Mina's mouth and biting her shoulder. Her scream died almost instantly—a combination of shock and paralytic venom. Coral snake, with a few modifications.

Mina slumped against her door. I eased out of the car and walked around

the trunk.

“Want help?” I asked Frank.

“I just bought these damn tires,” he said. “Can you believe that?”

He rapped the hubcap with his right hand and shook his head, making the flesh of his neck wriggle. I smiled.

“Mm, Canadian bacon,” I said.

Frank glanced up, frowning. “What?”

“Your wife is calling you.”

He swore, lurched to his feet, and grabbed the handle of his door. “Can’t you—”

He swore again and yanked the door open. “Mina!”

My fangs sank into his buttocks. He yelled and jerked up, hitting his head on the roof of the car. Then he fell against the steering wheel and flopped on the driver’s seat, his head coming to rest on his wife’s left thigh.

I shoved Frank into the car, wedging him against Mina, and scrambled inside. I didn’t want anyone to see us sitting on the side of the road. I would fix the tire after I got back to my nest, which was only a few miles further in an abandoned gas station.

Ten years ago the gas station had been a lucky find. It had given me a place to hide and recuperate before heading back to Vegas. I loved the lights, the noise, the cards, but it was a bad place to start a nest. Too many people disappear there. That attracts the hunters and the government, so I always kept an eye out and stayed away from my sisters. Unless I caught the sweet scent of genitalia, of course. It was impossible not to mate.

We had lost so many during the long voyage here, so many sisters frozen by the imperfections of our cryonics, despite the reassurances of our scientists and leaders.

Fortunately most of them were frozen too.

And the rest did not survive long, once we finally emerged, drawn by the vibrations of this luscious new world.

I checked the rearview mirrors for other vehicles before turning into the gas station and parked close to the back door, which helped hide the car from the road. The pumps were long gone, leaving only a pair of concrete stubs, and the paint on the building had started to turn from white to gray, bits peeling off like the scales of a sick fish.

As I got out of the car, Frank fell sideways against the steering wheel and flopped on the driver’s seat. I shoved his arm out of the way and shut the door. I opened the trunk and threw out two boxes and their luggage, one of which

was surprisingly heavy, like it was full of rocks, and a large cooler, also heavy. I heard it crack and immediately regretted dropping the cooler. It could be useful. But I needed to make certain the car had a spare tire, or my plans would suffer a serious setback.

Too many of my sisters were careless that way—too busy living in the past, falling into old routines. They forgot how to improvise and overstayed their welcome; they killed too many people; they left their nests too long in one place. I moved mine every few weeks and never used the same safe house in successive years. That was why I was still alive, even after twenty-three years and a score of hosts.

I pulled out the spare tire, leaned it against the bumper, and added the cross wrench. The tire felt a little soft, but not enough to cause a problem. I only needed to get California, to my next safe house.

I opened the padlock on the back door of the gas station and slipped inside, careful not to let in too much sunlight. Most of my larvae were drowsing in the remnants of the two Mexicans I had caught five days ago, hiding in a truck of produce. A few more of the larvae, each about the size of a carrot, wriggled under the dust-ridden shelves.

“Eat up, everyone. I brought fresh ones for you,” I said. “We’ll move tonight. Off to your new home.”

Several squeaks answered me. I smiled, trying not to think about which larvae had verbalized. Most would die before they ever grew into adulthood. Only one or two would survive long enough to secure their own hosts and walk among the humans.

I grabbed the shovel leaning against the shelves by the door and pulled out a green tote bag. I had already picked a spot in the brush behind the building to bury the old folks’ clothes and other junk. I could use their luggage to pack what was left of the Mexicans and dump them in the Grand Canyon, some crevice nobody ever went to.

When I stepped back outside, though, my gaze jumped to the driver’s door of the car, and I froze. The door hung open. I had closed it.

A split second later, two sharp points hit my chest and electricity shot through my body. I crumpled to the ground, trying to scream. Nothing came out.

Frank leaned over me, rubbing his buttocks, a Taser in his other hand. “You were a tough one to find. All these years. But we knew you were around here somewhere. Just a matter of time.”

My eyes were open. I couldn’t blink. They had tricked me. Resisted my venom.

“You probably thought nobody would find that husk you tossed in the

Canyon,” Frank said. “Five years ago? Nice of you to leave the fangs intact too. Appreciate that. Didn’t take a genius to figure out what you were doing with those.”

“Don’t worry,” Mina said, appearing next to Frank. “We’ll take care of your little ones for you.”

“I just wish you had fixed the tire first,” Frank said. “Now I have to do it myself.”

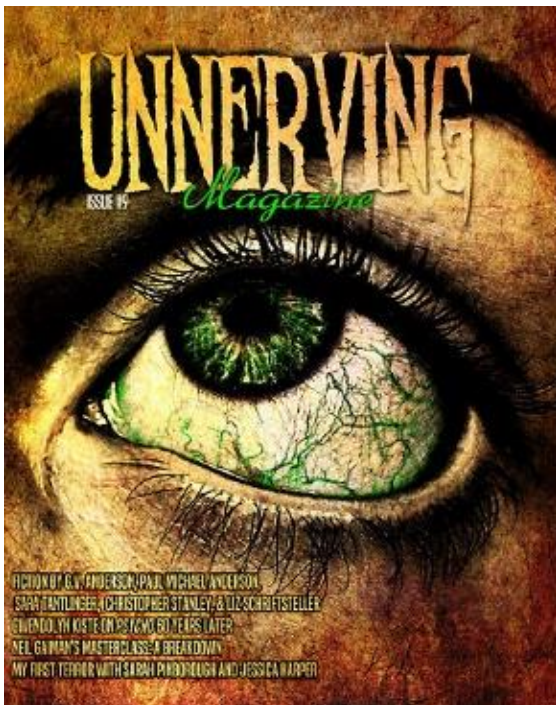
“Oh, stop your bellyaching,” Mina said and raised a pickax. “Go get the flamethrower.”

I struggled to open my mouth, struggled to scream. Frank fumbled with the cooler. The pickax slashed down and ripped into my belly.

I squealed and jerked, the bond with my host broken. Mina cursed and yanked the pickax out. She had missed. I wriggled through my host’s intestines and the pickax slashed down again. Again she missed.

But I had nowhere to go. I had waited too long. I had become my sisters.

I hit a pelvic bone and squealed for my brood—squealed at them to flee. I felt them squealing, too. The pickax smashed through my host’s liver, and I twisted around and clung to the bone, trying to shield my luminescent underbelly. The pickax ripped downwards. Bone cracked. My innards exploded. And the jelly of my soul, which had survived hundreds of light-years frozen in my own waste, mixed with the feces and blood of my screaming host.



UNNERVING is a horror fiction magazine edited and published by Eddie Generous out of Powell River, British Columbia.

Issue #9 of Unneriving Magazine includes fiction by G.V. Anderson, Paul Michael Anderson, Christopher Stanley, Sara Tantlinger, and Liz Schriftsteller.

Gwendolyn Kiste digs into 60 years of Psycho.

Eddie Generous takes Neil Gaiman's MasterClass.

Sarah Pinborough (Cross Her Heart, Behind Her Eyes) and Jessica Harper (Suspiria, Phantom of the Paradise) talk first scares.

See: [Unneriving Magazine](#)

THE EMPTY CITY

by Neile Graham

(Previously unpublished)

The awakening. Face in rubble and rough weeds. Alone:
him gone as though he had never been. Your anger as
empy walls crumble around you like a whitewashed face.

Even scrubbed by the river's hands you cannot remake yourself:
memory like a current rips you out of time. You have lost too much.
Pretend you're a princess, pretend fate hasn't undone you.
Take yourself a prince who helps you make a world
you can waltz around yourself in darkness each night.

Can you create yourself here? Wake in a world full of anything:
invitations to dance in the dry, hot sun, meld day and night
together, make this world whole, entire, a place you can live
your dream? Nothing can make you whole, nothing but you.

AEscifi: FREE SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE FROZEN NORTH

See: [AEscifi](#)

We publish weekly short fiction that explores worlds that could be, paying authors fair rates and promoting under-represented voices.

A world where the Davos cabal catch a parasite that modifies their neurochemistry, changing cutthroat lords of industry into benevolent humanists? Done. A world where virus-infected smart fridges build a rudimentary sentience? Done. Where municipal policies use behavioural engineering and illegally harvested personal data to make cities tick? Done yesterday.

We pay our authors and artists at rates that respects the value of their craft, because we believe that published writing should be paid. Creating literature is a vocation, not a hobby. We are an SFWA eligible market.

We provide a home for unapologetically Canadian fiction. You don't need to be a Canadian to submit here, but we give special consideration to Canadian writers. We live in a nation where what it means to be "Canadian" is changing, and AE is a place to explore what we might become.

On an average day, about 75% of our content is Canadian. We gladly welcome writing from all backgrounds – but stories about Canada or written from a Canadian perspective will always come first.

DRONE, SWEET DRONE

by Matthew Bin

(Previously unpublished)

“Enhanced electrical activity. Ten to the third magnitude strikes. Sending spectrometer stream.”

“Copy, Fulgora,” Milla said, leaning into the mic on the control panel. She had taken her headset off to eat some lunch, and naturally Fulgora had chosen that moment to chime in.

“Everything okay, Milla?” Of course, she’d noticed.

“All fine, Fulgora. Just eating lunch.”

“Here, let me give you some scenery.”

Milla smiled as the swirling grey view from the camera feed showed up on her screen. Fulgora was scanning the surface of *Nimbus IV*, and she would know that the screen was as good as blank to Milla. Some people still doubted that you could program a true sense of humour, but Milla had worked with Fulgora for long enough. Sure, she was a machine—Milla knew her inner workings almost as well as the drone techs did by now. But she was too smart, too funny, too good at her job. She was a machine, but not *only* a machine.

She dusted the crumbs of her ration bar off her hands—onto the floor, not the instrument panel, she’d never make *that* mistake again—and pulled her unkempt sandy hair back over her ears. The headset fit her snugly, as it should; she’d been adjusting the connectors for months to get it just right. Some of these drone shifts were twenty hours long, and a small ache in one ear could really throw you off your game.

“Okay, Fulgora, what are you seeing?” she said. Fulgora would know immediately that Milla’s input had changed. She always picked up on little cues like that.

“I’ve been skirting the edge of a mid-powered storm,” she said. “I’m not sure whether it’s safe to go deeper inside, so I thought I’d wait for you to join me.”

“Sure. I’ll get my bunny suit on and be right down.”

The couple of seconds’ silence, Milla preferred to think, was Fulgora laughing. She couldn’t laugh, but if she could, that’s what she’d be doing right there. “Anyway,” Fulgora went on, “the activity isn’t anywhere near critical, but I wanted to have you present before I ventured inside.”

“Good thinking.” It had happened before: an electrical pulse had disabled enough of Fulgora’s systems that Milla’s manual controls had been the only

way to extract her. Milla had been shaken badly by the incident.

Fulgora was a lightning drone, designed to measure patterns in heavy electrical pulses to figure out which storm planets' systems could be tamed, and which were too volatile to be useful for colonization. She shouldn't have been shaken up at the pulse, which was only fifty percent above the median limit. Lightning was unpredictable like that.

So they had both learned their limits. Fulgora didn't venture into anything she wasn't certain she could handle. Milla didn't divide her attention with anything else when Fulgora was going somewhere dangerous.

"I'm entering the outer field of the storm now," Fulgora said. "Ambient voltage is up a small amount, amperage is almost flat."

Before working with Fulgora, Milla vacillated between the friendly language settings, which had the drone say things like "a small amount," and the precise settings that made her report "three point three percent." She'd grown to trust her drone enough to take the friendlier language now. She could check the screen if she wanted to know the specific numbers.

"Follow a sixty-degree angle across the face," Milla instructed. "If you see a ten-percent jump in any measure, withdraw and we'll discuss it."

"Roger."

Milla hated using terms like "her drone," even if only inside her own head. She didn't like the idea of possession—the drone was assigned to her, but didn't belong to her in any sense of the word. And it sounded like Fulgora was her slave or something. Fulgora was Milla's drone, and Milla was Fulgora's person. That was the only equitable way to describe it.

"We're still in bounds," Fulgora said, "but the readings are rising faster than I expected. Can I take a fifty-degree vector instead?"

"Sure."

The screen showed a steady stream of readings, a long line of electrical measurements spidering across the main graph. Trending upwards, but nothing surprising there.

"Cancel last," Fulgora said. She changed to more businesslike language whenever they were getting into the deeper measurements. Milla liked the friendly tones better, but she understood the need for crisp efficiency as the risk increased. Casual English wasn't an efficient language.

"You're okay with the sixty-degree vector?" she asked.

"Yes."

Milla's job from here on was to wait, and to respond to Fulgora's queries and suggestions. Fulgora knew how to chart her path into the storm, and when to ask permission to bail on the mission.

It was a difficult task, with something as volatile and changeable as an

electrical storm. If it was easy they would have just set up some monitoring stations. But you had to move around, seek out the centre of the storm, and follow it around.

The silence loomed heavily as Milla knew that Fulgora was getting closer and closer to the most ferocious part of the storm. One time she'd gotten zapped good and hard, and Milla had actually cried at the sight of her scorched chassis, Fulgora's white enamel scarred and blackened, all but two of her indicator lights dark.

Milla had worked to bring her back without stopping as soon as she brought her back on board. She restored Fulgora's onboard software, switched out some key parts that had failed, and got her at least to minimal working condition. It didn't matter that between missions, Fulgora was equally mute and still, sitting in her dock. What mattered was that she was badly injured, and she had to be brought back as quickly as possible. Milla developed and installed some new safeguards after that. She couldn't bear to put Fulgora through that again—although of course Fulgora had no knowledge or memory of any of it.

“Center is moving,” Fulgora reported. “Changing vector to follow.”

“Carry on.”

While drones were expensive, it was understood that these lightning-drones worked in harsh conditions, and they were lost or damaged beyond repair from time to time.

Milla's pride as a drone operator only part of why she cared so deeply about keeping Fulgora active for so many continuous work-hours. It was also superstition, though, or something like it. She knew she could take everything in Fulgora's memory, every data stream she'd ever sent to the system, every conversation they'd ever had, and put it into a new lightning drone chassis. But that felt wrong—the software and the hardware weren't interchangeable, to her.

“There's a spike in activity at two-eight-one. Pursuing.”

Now Milla hesitated. The readings were climbing more quickly. They were still in the safe zone, although approaching the warning levels. But there were some other alerts blinking now, too—chroma readings and some radiation particulate building up on Fulgora's rad filter. “Are you sure that's wise?” she asked.

“I don't anticipate any problems yet,” the drone responded.

Milla wished she could see the little drone—well, three metres across and two metres high wasn't *little*, but smaller than you'd expect for such a powerful piece of equipment—puttering about and doing her work. The rounded white chassis with its anti-static enamel and its rubberized edges

looked more than anything like a children's toy. Watching her zip to and fro, sniffing out the electrical fields, her near-elation when she found a spike; it was as exciting as watching a puppy exploring the world for the first time, for Milla.

"Interesting chromatic readings at three-oh-eight," Fulgora reported. "Pursuing."

"Be careful," Milla ordered.

This was one of her custom safety measures. When she said this phrase, Fulgora would lower her tolerances for sixty seconds, allowing her to stay put and assess for a few minutes without getting into more danger.

"This is interesting."

"What's interesting?" Milla scanned her screens: nothing leapt out as extraordinary.

"I'm getting micro-spikes at wavelengths—" Fulgora's voice went silent.

Milla waited a few seconds. Maybe some interference with the transmission. She looked at her screens to check: yes, data was still coming in.

"Fulgora?"

"It's building quickly, Milla," the drone replied.

After working with Fulgora for months and months, hours at a time, Milla figured she knew every quirk of her speech synthesis. She never lost sight of the fact that every word was the result of programming, much of which she had done herself.

But now an icy finger of fear traced a line up her spine. She had never heard this tone of voice before.

"Abort," she said. "Fulgora? Abort."

Her screens lit up, each panel flashing urgently. She concentrated on the summary panel: every reading had shot up, outside of tolerance. Fulgora was in the middle of a class one storm.

"What's happening?" she demanded, her voice climbing to nearly a shriek. "Fulgora." No response. "Fulgora, please—"

"The storm is expanding very quickly," she said, her voice back to its usual calm tone. "You need to power up."

"I told you to abort," Milla said firmly. "Return to dock. Now."

She could almost hear the calculations whirring in Fulgora's head while she considered Milla's order.

"The storm is moving more quickly than I can," she said. "The ship will be damaged before I can arrive, especially if the dock is open."

"I'm not leaving without you." Milla brought up some local readings from the ship. There was definitely an increase in electrical activity around them

and a surge of ozone. The storm was definitely headed her way.

“I will continue to broadcast for as long as I am able,” Fulgora said. “I’ve backed myself up and will append the backup as long as I can.”

“Get back here. I’m not kidding.”

The topo panel showed Fulgora as a green wedge, slowly making its way over the ridges and hills of the planet’s surface. It continued moving away from the ship.

“Fulgora. Fulgora!”

“Yes.” Her calm voice sounded hollow and unnatural—unsettling, when it was usually soothing.

“Stop this. You can get back. I need you back here.”

“I cannot outrun the storm. And it’s too dangerous for you to wait for me.”

A shrill, annoying buzzing sound started up from a speaker just behind Milla. She tried to ignore it, to shut out all of the lights and sounds, so she could concentrate on saving Fulgora.

“I’m not leaving. You must return to the ship right now.”

“The first ionic wave will arrive at your location in approximately seven minutes,” Fulgora said. “It will take me a minimum of thirty-two minutes to traverse the terrain and reach your location. I will continue to broadcast for as long as I am able.”

Milla pulled her sleeve across her damp face. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “Just come back.”

The body of the ship rocked softly: the head of the storm’s winds had reached them.

“I cannot. Your safety is at risk.”

“Please.”

Milla reached for a tissue, tried to mop up the saliva that had somehow started to collect on her chin.

“I’m sorry,” Fulgora said. “You will reconstitute me in a new drone chassis, and we will work together again soon.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is as close as possible.”

Milla wanted to do something—*something*—break the screen with her hand, tear it from the wall, throw it through the viewing window and let the rush of escaping air tear the scream of anguish and frustration out of her throat.

“You won’t be able to tell the difference,” Fulgora said.

“I’ll know.”

A pause. Was this Fulgora laughing at what she said? Or calculating a response to the incalculable? Or had she—

“The surges are lengthening,” she said in her usual serene calm.

That meant the lightning was getting more intense. Which meant—

“Your window is getting very short,” Fulgora advised her. “I’ve sent the possible trajectories of the storm to help chart your takeoff route.”

Milla created the takeoff route based on the data Fulgora had sent, primed the engines, rearranged the power profile to ready the landing gear for extraction. Then she sat, and waited.

“You haven’t initiated yet,” Fulgora pointed out.

Her stomach rose up, heaving a sob out of her. She muted her mic.

Goodbye, she whispered.

“Surges are peaking at—”

The ship shuddered around her, the deck lights flickered, and Milla couldn’t hear anything but the whine of the engines as they spun up and began to lift her slowly away.

Lackington’s is an online speculative fiction magazine. We want to help widen the space for prose poetry. We’re looking for stylized prose. Not inept purple prose, of course, but controlled and well-crafted wordsmithery that reflects the story, setting, theme, atmosphere, or philosophy it seeks to describe.

Every story is a journey, arguably, but we’ve gone and put together an entire issue devoted to “Voyages.” This collection features stories about trips to the moon (not onboard ships but on the backs of cows or beneath the bellies of dragons); trips through outer space that take one out of body; trips across seas and cultures, leaving it all behind; trips that should be mundane but forge two lonely spirits; and trips that are guided by god and custom and handbook, and make travel a celebration and act of resistance.

Contents of Issue #19 (Spring 2019)

With God as our Witness by Aj Fitzwater

A Cream-Broker’s Courtship by Nin Harris

Something to Light the Sunless Winter by Sara Beitia

That Damned Cat by Barbara Turney Wieland

Sestina for Medea by Alexander Munk

Enchiridion of the Soltite by Xue Xihe

LACKINGTON’S

Issue 19 / Spring 2019



FEATURING

FICTION Sara Beitia • AJ Fitzwater • Nin Harris • Alexandra Munk
Barbara Turney Wieland • Xue Xihe ARTWORK Carrion House
Diana M. Chien • Sharon J. Gochenour • Pear Nuallak • Kat Weaver
Carol Wellart • P. Emerson Williams

See [Lackington's Magazine](#)

NAIAD

by *Rhea Rose*

(Previously unpublished)

In water whorls,
Where rocks sing
to finned shadows,
Currents let loose
the small oracle, who speaks,
“a way of seeing,”
“a way of being,”

Small wet
hand prints
tag a place
with quiet mystery.



Anathema: Spec from the Margins is a free, online tri-annual magazine publishing speculative fiction (SF/F/H, the weird, slipstream, surrealism, fabulism, and more) by queer people of colour on every range of the LGBTQIA spectrum.

Issue 7 is focused on two of our core aesthetics, evincing a balance between burning mirrors allegorically reflecting the nightmare realities of our own world, and the terrible, beautiful possibilities of revelation in the face of found love, hidden histories, and resisting oppression. But overarchingly, Issue 7 is an issue of internal understandings—of gnosis and acceptance.

Contents of Issue #7:

Moses by L.D. Lewis
Raices (Roots) by Joe Ponce
Planting Season (poem) by Jessica Jo Horowitz
Birds of a Feather by Ebony J. Dunbar
Things to do When You Believe You Have Been Cursed: A Checklist (poem) by Maya Chhabra
Inheritance by Qurat Dar
The Secret Tara by Tara Sidhoo Fraser

See [Anathema Magazine](#)

THE PLEIADES CAT

By Catherine Girczyk

(Previously published in On Spec Magazine, 1992)

REPORT: Subset 4, Note 25: Faint traces of Com Beam observed from Old Earth to Fel Satellite.

When the beam was traced to its source, Fel recording materials were discovered. The following was translated by our Scientific Officer: Ms. Gee. Ms. Gee places the date of contact at around the year 2000, old reckoning, give or take a decade. All materials have been sent to Science Central for verification. Doubtless this find is remarkable in Old Earth archeology and should be preserved.

TRANSCRIPT:

Day 27 Slave Elaina's Home

I have explained this before. At first the cat—

I'm sorry, Colonel Gordon, I think of her as a cat. It just doesn't seem to me to be another sort of creature.

I admit "Merope" is an unusual name. You could say she picked it for herself.

Well, I was reading a book on the myths of Corinthian¹ Greece. When I left the room, she ripped eleven occurrences of the name "Merope" out of the book. I took the hint.

I teach in the Classics Department at the University. Not a tenure track position, just sessional. But someday, maybe I'll get a permanent job. That is if they don't lay me off first. Lots of talk of that, at school. Layoffs.

Oh, yes, the cat: when I got home from the Luxor Dig in late August, and walked up the steps of the house, she hid under the bushes, making meow sounds. I thought she was a cat. She looked like a cat.

She became more aggressive over time, hanging off my back door screen like some absurd sloth; caterwauling.

¹Corinthian: Bell-shaped capital with rows of acanthus leaves.

Translators Note:??

I didn't pet her (cats normally make me itch). So why all this attention to me and my cat-free house? I'll never know. Except, of course, I'm not allergic to her at all.

I think that the Pleiades Star Cluster is a bit far for a small grey tabby to journey from. I don't mean to tell you your military business—

No, sir. I am not military myself. Graduate school, archeological digs in Greece and Egypt, an academic sort of life. Quite poor though, I'm only hired on a session by session basis.

The house belongs to my parents. They live in Arizona now and still subsidize my academic lifestyle. There is a point though. I'm thirty years old and I make less than a secretary. I think I took a wrong turn somewhere.

Oh, the cat. Yes. She got into the house once at a Sunday afternoon barbecue. A friend let her in, thinking, she was my cat. I didn't notice Merope till later. I fed her then. She looked starved. She meowed at the fridge door. I fed her, turned around and found the word "EXTRA" spelled out in guacamole² dip on my kitchen floor.

I put her out. It didn't occur to me, no. Not many cats can spell "extraterrestrial," Colonel.

No, this is not my idea of a hoax. It was Dr. Saduj, my next-door neighbour, who called you people in. I hadn't any notion of involving anyone. I thought the cat was a little strange, that's all.

Day 35 Slave Elaina's Home.

As far as I'm concerned, you can leave any time, Colonel.

Well, not with the cat. She's mine now.

Well, I'm not a normal human either, am I? And I'd create an outcry. Some of the graduate students I know volunteer for the SPCA and the Animal Rights League.

Good. I'm glad we've got that straight. Back to my story, right? Ok.

In August, she took to sitting in the road, directly in front of my driveway, daring cars to attack her. None of them did, which says a lot for the careful drivers. I watched people stop their cars and get out and physically move the beast so they could pass.

I turned the water hose on her.

She seemed to me to belong to a new couple who lived across the road and weren't often home. I had never actually seen these people. I surmised their existence. Someone put bells on her last summer, though I had never seen her climb a tree or move with any speed.

²Translator's Note: Guacamole: Word unknown. Possibly a food or a medicine. Sheep-dip-like substance? Cat-dip? Insecticide?

Constant noise could drive a sensitive animal crazy.

Cheap brass bells could be a spy weapon. But your scientists haven't found any indication of any sophistication in them. I felt I did the right thing by replacing the bells with a cat tag.

Well, it is the law, sir. And she does look like a cat.

Dr. Saduj, has some military connections. He felt the cat to be unusual. I thought all cats were diabolically clever.

Yes, it was strange that she typed "HELLO ALIENS" on Dr. Saduj's keyboard, but only he saw that.

She would chase and fight with other cats in the area. Cat fights and loud hissing noises filled the wee hours. She mutilated my morning paper to shreds, most days. Also my mail. I fed her, thinking she was having strange food desires.

She did stop destroying newspapers. Now it's upholstery.

No, I never thought of calling you people in, I assumed teenagers were responsible for the large letters V-I-S-I-T burned into my lawn with an overdose of fertilizer.

Why would I assume it was a cat visiting from outer space?

The extraterrestrial business really surprises me. I do kind of feel she might be lying to you people, Colonel.

No, I trust your researchers completely, sir. But the Los Alamos experience, you know? Would she be likely to cause cancer or anything?

Calm down, Sir. I just meant, that, well, if she's some kind of experiment—

Yes, I do want to keep her. She's my cat.

I don't know. It's a strong compulsion to take care of her. Repressed maternal instincts is what I think it is, but I could be wrong. I never felt the slightest need to have a child.

Do you really believe she's from the High Command of The Pleiades Star Cluster, Colonel? There's no chance she's a tourist, or something? Some of my friends in Classics get a long way in Europe by pretending to be professors—

Day 42 Slave Elaina's Home.

Colonel, how's the tea? Nice isn't it? I made it with the mint from my backyard here. Mother planted it years ago. Merope loves the catnip we have here too. I hope she won't mind when we sell this place.

Didn't the researchers tell you? My parents want to liquidate and move permanently to Arizona. I can't afford it here, I'll have to share an apartment in the city.

I hesitate to mention this, but my sofa's clawed to shreds and Merope is a very bad cat when it comes to my personal belongings. She wants me to sleep

on the floor while she gets into my bed. Could she be a sort of a deportee, you know, like in old Australia?

Of course not. Sorry. Emissary from another Planet. Right.

And while we're discussing the cat— er— being— could you please try to keep your staff from feeding her? That trout she likes is bad enough to afford, but I'll never keep her in salmon. I'm only a poor sessional lecturer.

I could find my way around Ancient Egypt or Greece but I know very little about outer space.

This is not a hotel. It is secure, as your people often point out, simply by being in an obscure suburban neighbourhood. It's a very long drive into the University from here, for one thing.

Yes, Colonel, please. It would really ruin my academic career if "Merope the Cat from Pleiades" appeared on the evening news. The Dean would see it and think I was some kind of absolute lunatic. I think so myself some days, when I get back here from classes and find nerdy scientist types talking to my cat like she cares.

Dr. Saduj next door is bad enough, I swear he's got telescopes trained on every inch of my lot. It's unnerving to go in the backyard any more.

I think Dr. Saduj is hurt that Merope didn't chose his house.

Why? He has a dog, that's why, if you ask me.

It's very straining having a Space Being tearing the heck out of your furniture and rugs while grownups watch and make little notes in notebooks.

The house is nice, yes. No, I've never noticed any direct interplanetary transfer vibrations here either. Are you quite sure she's telling your science officers the truth? This business about her disappearing the instant she leaves this lot is a bit much, don't you think?

Trust her? I seem to be the only human being around who *doesn't trust* her!

She's certainly smarter than your average tabby. Though all my friends say that about their cats.

As a matter of fact, most of their cats don't have a battery of scientists eating out of their little paws, no.

Yes, she is a lot of trouble, but I like her. I have no idea why she prefers me to you or your researchers. I might even let her leave, but you'll recall she viciously attacked a scientist last week. By the way, did he get the flowers I sent?

Day 50 Slave Elaina's Home.

What an interesting idea. A stipend for the cat. Her idea? Oh, right. So she's protecting my parents' house from interstellar invaders? My dear

Colonel, I am somewhat dismayed that you people take her word for everything.

Well, I wouldn't call your researchers crazy, sir—

No, not the easy chair— no, Merope! You bad cat! Not the Colonel! No!

Sorry Sir, she's out of control again.

Oh, dear, what a nasty scratch you have there. Funny she attacked you not me. I mean, I was the one who insulted her.

It is true that the furniture has taken a terrible beating. Look, let's clean this cut up. It's nasty.

I would have thought, Colonel that anyone in the business of ferreting out extraterrestrials would have at least entertained the possibility that they may have come from a world where the Cats reign and the Humans are the pets.

Humans Innately superior? No, sir, not at all. Hold still while I bandage this. You'll find that the ancient Egyptians revered cats. They were held to be sacred.

Wait, there she is— here kitty, kitty, kitty! You've been a naughty kitty today! Oh, look, she's purring. Good girl. I'll go get you a nice plate of fish. There's a pretty Merope!

Why yes, I would accept military funding. What harm could it mean? I'm not selling weapons am I? Only harboring a highly developed feline who is quite possibly a pathological liar.

Buy my house for me? That's really very nice. Does the government know what you're doing with the money?

Well, of course I'm grateful. Merope can stay, after all. I won't have to get rid of her. And I do hope you come to visit more often Colonel Gordon.

Oh, may I call you Henry, then? How nice. You can call me Elaina. That Ms. Fowless stuff is too formal, isn't it? Look, I'd swear that cat can understand us. She's standing by the door, waiting to go to the Safeway for salmon.

Later? Sure, I'd love to see a movie. I hear there's a new ALIENS out.

Imagine, nasty things from outer space. Not like our Merope.

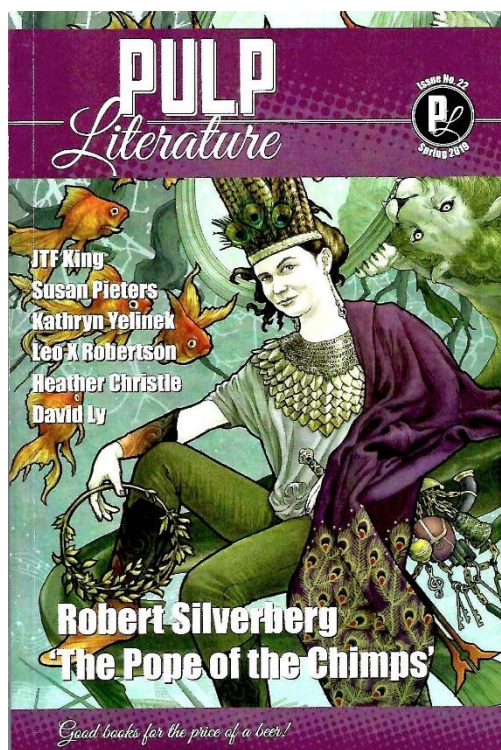
REPORT: Subset 4, Note 26 Faint traces of Com Beam observed from Old Earth to Fel Satellite. Ms. Gee located a set of notes, written in FEL, apparently an addendum to the above. She has generously translated this as well.

Dr. Saduj looked out from his kitchen telescope, surveying the scene. I waved my tail in a quick assortment of Pleiadean Spy Language shapes. Saduj shook his head.

So, this was it, the historic moment! Total subjugation of all Earth Creatures. I was elated.

I thought, *Saduj, a human, cannot help but admire the gallant Fel action.* I saw him lift a glass of alcoholic substance and watch the cavalcade of military vehicles that accompanied me, Merope, and my slaves Elaina and Henry, to the Safeway.

For the second time in Earth's history, the FEL Pleiadeans pledged their interstellar protection for the fond and non-starfaring Human Earth-dwellers. And I secured an ideal home base for the first wave of Pleiadeans. It seemed not such a large price to pay.



Rather than limit ourselves to a single genre or fiction format, we pick from two specific segments: exceptional emerging talent, and established writers and artists who wish to break out of their genre confines.

Pulp Literature Magazine contains short stories, novellas, novel and graphic novel excerpts, illustrations and graphic shorts. Think of it as a wine-tasting ... or a pub crawl ... where you'll experience new flavours and rediscover old favourites.

Contents of Issue #22 (Spring 2019)

The Pope of Chimps by Robert Silverberg

The Extra by Mel Anastasiou

The Nix's Wife by Kathryn Yelinek

Spin Doctor by Susan Pieters

Snapshots by Leo X. Robertson

Late Night Fun Facts on the No. 65 by J.T.F. King

Girls Who Dance in the Flames by Cheryl Wollner

Allaigna's Song: Aria by J.M. Landels

See [Pulp Literature Magazine](#)

The Creative Ink Festival

Did so well this year it will be expanding next year to at least 5 or 6 tracks of programming. It will happen May 15-17, 2020 at the Delta Burnaby Hotel and Conference Centre in Burnaby, BC. Check it out at: [Creative Ink web site](#) and the [Creative Ink Facebook site](#)

COME HOME

by Augustus Clark

(Previously unpublished)

lost little girl, pray to whoever tides you home
found little girl, figure out gravity all alone
misplacing starlight, misgiving moon
is there any time you refused to swoon?
but dance every day within your swarm of ember
sure, it isn't right, doesn't mean you can't remember

found little boy, see lucid world, taste muddled moon
lost little boy, home to prayer? home too soon?
deflect sea light, dissemble trite satellite
when is the time when things are put right?
but cry mists every day, let your surf break open
every wound can be stitched and left unspoken
leave the scars, the maps of flesh, the chronicles of catharsis
find the path. trace the lies
moaning down sky
screaming genesis
let tastings of bitter gods linger, failed flavours unforgotten
ah, ah, and they weep
take me home, take me home

When Words Collide, a Festival For Readers and Writers

Will be happening August 9 to 11, 2019, at the Delta Calgary South Hotel in Calgary, AB.

A festival concerning multiple writing genres such as Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Crime, Romance, and Mystery which covers every aspect of writing and publication.

Registration is already over 80% full (capped at 800 members). Sells out every year.

Guests and presenters include James Alan Gardner, Robert J. Sawyer, Robert Runte, Colleen Anderson, Ron S. Friedman, J.M. Landels, Randy McCharles, Nina Munteanu, Joshua Pantalleresco, Allan Weiss, Edward Willett and many more!

No less than ten tracks of lectures and panels programming plus blue-pencil sessions, pitch sessions, live podcast interviews, readings and autograph sessions. There will be a hospitality area, and a Merchant's Corner featuring merchants, publishers, and writers associations.

You owe it to yourself to go! Check it out at: [When Words Collide](#)

MEET THE TEACHER NIGHT

by Michelle F. Goddard

(Previously unpublished)

“Yes, Jill, it is very well written. Very detailed.” Mr. Sneedley paused and thought, *and disturbingly graphic*. “But not the assignment.”

Jill sat, slumped over and leaning on the corner of his desk, arms folded. “But, Mr. Sneedley,” she said, with a sigh, the virtual eye-roll audibly present.

“My Hero ...” Mr. Sneedley pointed at the chalkboard and the big white letters printed there. “The *person* who helped me the most this year. *That’s* the assignment.”

Behind Jill, the rest of the class rested heads on hands, bent over their work. Mr. Sneedley didn’t expect any of them to pick him as the focus of the assignment, much as he deserved it; however, this was unacceptable.

“But—” Jill said, reaching for the page.

“No,” Mr. Sneedley said, holding the page down on his desk with one finger. “You’ll have to start over.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Mr. Sneedley said, his voice rising a little too much. He winced as snickers slithered through the classroom.

Mr. Sneedley glared at the students over the rim of his glasses, as the laughter grew louder. Jill spun around to face the classroom. The snickers died.

“You’re finishing grade six, Jill,” Mr. Sneedley said. “You’re growing up. Heroes have to be real people.”

“He won’t be happy when I tell him that,” Jill murmured with a scowl, as she headed back to her desk.

Mr. Sneedley, long suffering teacher at Kenolie Elementary School, thought this would be a nice, easy assignment for the end of the school year, something to kill this week before that blissful chime of the last bell to signal summer vacation. He watched Jill slide into her chair. Surely, she could have come up with someone for the assignment. Correction. Someone not imaginary.

Jill’s gaze slid toward the window. She sat up, her chin rising as she stared at something outside the second story window. Mr. Sneedley’s brow furrowed. What was the girl looking at? There were only hedges that separated the school parking lot from the woods down there.

Jill shook her head with a frown and then shrugged, using her whole body in that manner pre-teens seemed so alarmingly accomplished at. Was it only last year she was that shy little thing with the big imagination? When did it go from drawing unicorns to writing about monsters?

Of course, she'd had plenty of experience with monsters last year. That split grade had the worst incidents of bullying Mr. Sneedley had ever seen. Those little monsters had caused him a lot of late nights and reams of paper work. Well, not literally reams, but filling it out on the screen didn't make the matter any less tiresome. Not to mention the tedious after-school detentions and those carefully navigated parent-teacher meetings. What an ugly mess. The aggravation was enough to have him reconsidering his choice of profession.

It was a relief how effectively the new rules and school policies had helped to get a handle on the bullying. Mr. Sneedley had latched onto the new procedures like a tick onto a dog. This year there were hardly any incidents in his class. Other teachers hadn't been as successful. The principal had even commented on how well-behaved Mr. Sneedley's class was. "All in the methodology," Mr. Sneedley had said, preening. He scanned Jill's homework. So, why this grim description from the girl, when the year had been so problem free?

He looked at the page again, this time reading between the lines just as the training indicated, probing for hitherto unrealized subtext, deciphering the possible meanings that might lurk in the mind of an average eleven-year-old. His gaze stuttered across the page and he cursed under his breath, just as the school bell rang. "Jill." He beckoned her over the din of squealing chairs and squeaking sneakers.

"Yes, Mr. Sneedley?" Jill said, as she arrived at his desk.

He waited for the room to clear, just as protocol dictates. He sat up in his chair and faced her straight on. He schooled his face into a mask of sincere non-judgmental approachability. He even added a quick smile and empathetic head tilt. He was ready.

"Jill." He cleared his throat, to soften the gravel. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" he said in an even tone. "Anything you'd like to talk about."

"Like what?"

"Is there anyone bothering you? Anyone hurting you?"

"Like who?"

"Anyone," he said, "Anyone at all."

Jill's gaze flew to the page. Mr. Sneedley's finger froze. He hadn't realized he had been tapping the page. He clasped his hands together. Jill folded her arms. "No. Not really."

Mr. Sneedley sighed. "Okay, Jill. But I'm here if you ever need to talk."

Scrunching up one side of her face, she squinted at him. "M'okay." With a shrug she shuffled out the door.

Damn, damn, damn, Mr. Sneedley thought, as he shoved Jill's story into his briefcase. He trudged to his car, his free hand pulling at his chin. He couldn't help but worry that this was a clue to a bigger problem, but how to get her to talk? He had done everything properly; said the appropriate words, used a soothing tone, made eye contact. He had followed procedure. There was nothing more *to do*.

In his rear-view mirror, he spied Jill skulking around the same hedges she had previously been glaring at through the classroom window. She got out two shrugs and then something pulled her into the bushes.

"What the hell!" Mr. Sneedley cried, throwing open his car door. He bolted for the hedge and plowed through the greenery. He eyed the wave of passage ahead and beyond those swaying branches, the red of Jill's hoodie flashing among the trees. Then she disappeared.

Mr. Sneedley dug in, channeling the once-upon-a-time dream of stealing a base in the pros. He was already midair when he realized the ground beneath him was gone. He tumbled down the embankment. Around him the woods blurred in a descending arc of chartreuse and emerald. His ungraceful dismount ended with him on his back, staring up at branches that shimmered and twinkled neon green in the stabbing afternoon sunlight. As bright, harsh and painful as that view was, it was preferable to what he saw next.

It was grotesque. Teeth. Way too many teeth. And shooting out in too many directions. Eyes set so deep in a grainy almost green wrinkled face that they were like black pits in a rotten piece of fruit. The head, if that was what you'd call it, was on top of a mountain of a body, whose muscles were more like barnacles, as if the muscles had muscles. It had long black talons for nails and one scratched at the creature's face. Shavings of skin fluttered down on top of Mr. Sneedley. The smell of those shavings reeked like stinky feet wearing rotten egg shoes walking through a plot of freshly laid manure.

Mr. Sneedley stopped breathing through his nose, but now he could taste the smell. He started to gag. He forced himself to swallow afraid he might very well throw up the heart that was thumping so wildly around in his chest, it felt like it was looking for an exit. Every nerve of his body tensed as the flight instinct jumped in to give the fight instinct a sobering punch in the nose. Jill's face appeared above him, blocking out the hideous sight behind her but not the smell. Never the smell. It was rammed up there, trapped behind a pair of gym socks found in the back of a locker, at the end of the school year.

“Mr. Sneedley?” Jill asked, glaring down at him. “What are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” Mr. Sneedley sputtered, batting at his nose. He stared up at the girl and the bright blue sky framed by dense leafy trees behind her. “What am *I*?”

“Are you all right?” Jill asked, as she helped him up. The girl was surprisingly strong.

“Me? Am *I* all right?”

Mr. Sneedley stumbled. Jill caught him handily. “You don’t look so good,” she said. “Maybe you should go home.”

“Jill,” Mr. Sneedley said, shrugging out of her grip, which was harder to do than he would have thought. “What is going on here?” He stood swaying in a clearing, the abrasive sunlight, and a disturbing sour taste in his mouth making his head spin.

“Troll training.”

“You’re training a what?”

“I’m not training him. He’s training me.”

“What?”

Jill rolled her eyes, visibly this time, and obnoxiously. “Come on.” She pulled on him and Mr. Sneedley stumbled forward.

They climbed up the embankment. Had he fallen? Of course. No doubt that was the culprit behind the nausea and the mad beating of his heart. He swatted bushes from his face as they walked through the woods. “What are we doing here?” Mr. Sneedley asked.

“We don’t have any bullying this year, do we, Mr. Sneedley,” Jill said as she guided him onto a dusty path.

He shook his head but immediately stopped when the motion threatened to upend him into the dirt. Why was he so weak?

“Why is that?” Jill asked as they stepped onto the gravel path that wound through the woods beside the school parking lot.

Mr. Sneedley was going to answer something about bullying not being allowed, school policy and all that, rhyme off the anti-bullying charter and remind her about the presentation given by the principal. That’s why there’s no bullying, of course. The words wouldn’t come.

“Sometimes,” Jill said. “you’ve got to think outside the bog.”

“Outside the box, Jill.”

“Huh?”

“The saying is outside the box, not outside the bog.”

“That’s not the way he sees it.”

“What?” Mr. Sneedley stumbled to a stop. He was dizzy, and for some reason, the most upsetting smell was stuck in his nostrils. He wanted to check under his shoes.

“Never mind,” Jill said, with a sigh. “You’ll feel better when you’re home.”

Mr. Sneedley didn’t move. He wanted to know what they were doing in the woods. He was going to demand an explanation. Then Jill looked at him. He jerked back. A shudder crept up every inch of his spine and the words dried up in his mouth.

“Sorry,” Jill said. She shook her head and it was as if that strange, grim, disturbing facial expression slid right off her face. Then she smiled.

Mr. Sneedley blinked, his eyes struggling to focus. He shivered. Had he caught a sudden chill? He worried he might be coming down with something. He was not at all feeling well.

“Please, get in your car,” Jill said, her sweet face looking up at him, “and go home.”

“You’ve missed the school bus,” Mr. Sneedley said. “I’ll take you.”

A few moments later, Mr. Sneedley sat in front of Jill’s house staring out the window of his car. He had all the windows down but he still felt light-headed; like the after-effects of a very strong and overwhelming smell. Ammonia, maybe. Or a musky perfume. Heavy on the musk.

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Sneedley,” Jill said climbing out of the car. “You’ll be all right.” Jill shut the car door. “It doesn’t work if you don’t believe.” She peered at him through the passenger’s window. “Kids believe in lots of things. Sometimes all it takes is a little imagination to get them to behave.”

Mr. Sneedley was already feeling more like himself by the time he pulled into his driveway. That night, he lay in bed carefully rubbing his forehead and wondering how that bump got there. He had been chasing someone. Jill. That’s right. Well, soon she’d be someone else’s problem. Big imagination and all.

Mr. Sneedley bolted upright in his bed.

Jill.

Images from the previous year flooded his mind in one, long, arduous stream. The rowdy students. Rude comments and noises. Fights and tears, and the overwhelming tide of paperwork to deal with it all. This year. The other teachers. Their headaches with bullying, gripped about over lunches and coffee breaks. Then Mr. Sneedley remembered the snickers today and the way they had stopped the moment Jill turned around.

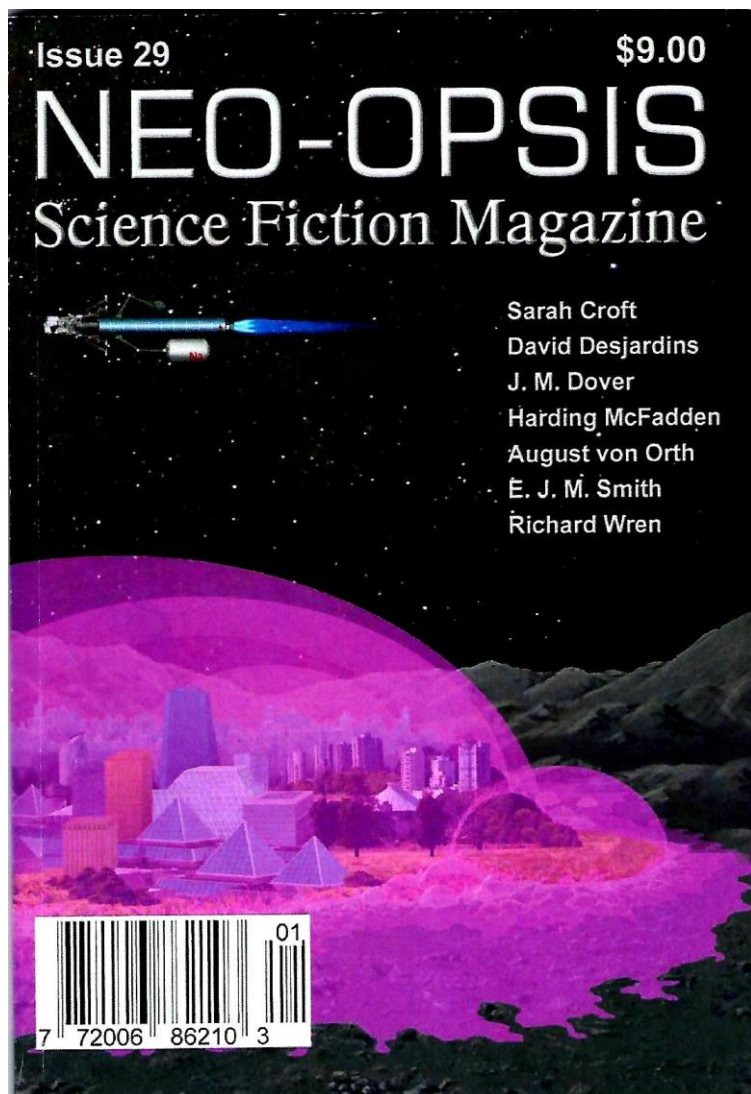
And Jill wouldn’t be in his classroom next year.

Mr. Sneedley jumped out of bed and began to dress. It started to come back to him. Her red hoodie disappearing into the woods. He got back in his car and repeated the mad dash though the woods, minus the bump-inducing

tumble. He climbed down the embankment and walked slowly around the clearing, his hands raised as if in surrender.

“Uh, Mr. Troll?” Mr. Sneedley called. “Hello? It’s Mr. Sneedley.”

A shadow loomed out of the darkness. The troll smiled. It was grotesque, disturbing and the most beautiful thing Mr. Sneedley had ever seen.



Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is produced out of Victoria, BC, Canada.

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband and wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson. The first issue of Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine was printed October 10, 2003.

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine won the Aurora Award in the category of Best Work in English (Other) in 2007 and in 2009.

Contents of issue 29:

Fiction:

Mayathan Rainbows by Sarah Craft.

Dragon Creed by J.M. Dover.

King of the Belt by Richard Wren.

A Matter of Nurture by August von Orth.

Project Victoria by E.J.M. Smith.

Tammy Rock and the Turnkey Monkeyman by Harding McFadden.

Dragon by David Desjardins.

Editorial “Fine Tuning” by Karl Johanson.

Plus assorted movie reviews and an article about “Cobalt Weapons in the Movies” by Karl Johanson.

The cover of issue 29 is by Karl and Stephanie Johanson.

See: [Neo-opsis #29](#)

THE REALITY OF TRUTH AND BRUTALITY

by Alex Worden

(Previously unpublished)

We face the reality
The end of mortality
Falling into the trap of the ruthless
We watch with intensity
Bordering insanity
We are controlled by that which is truthless
We rot in vanity
Suffering from blindness
We live with Christianity
Led by the mindless
'Tis the way of our sanity
Hidden behind false kindness
Another dose of insecurity
Now where is the purity of that which goes bump in the night
Simply the needy living in devastation
Who the Hell are you to say this is right
Let this be the introduction
Welcome to society we choose to follow the light
Our own final interruption
Now see a leader forcing those in need to stay out of sight
I ask again who the Hell are you to say this is right



Contents of issue 2.1

The One Before Scheherazade by Bianca Sayan

Howl by Cat Friesen

Brown Bird, Whitish Bone by Frances Boyle

Clear as Quartz, Sharp as Flint by Maria Haskins

Advice from Granny Moon by Erin Emily Ann Vance

Exquisite Divorce by Isabelle Nguyen

Fish-mouth by Qurat Dar

That Final Corner by Marcus Creaghan

Poem in Which I Transition into a False Moon by Aeon Ginsberg

Control, Alt, Delete by S. Matthiesen Avilés

Roots and Shoots by Laura DeHaan

See [Augur Magazine](#)

WRIT SATIRIC

by Robert Runte

(Previously unpublished)

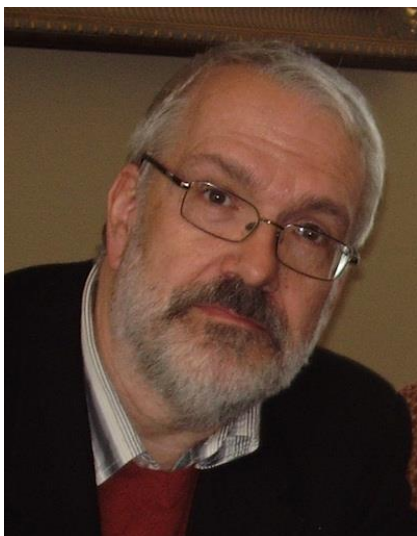
Editor's note: Unfortunately, no one responded to *The Savory Stew* Contest challenge in issue #9 to "spot the clichés." Here is Robert's list of that story's "crimes." It should prove of practical use to anyone writing fantasy.

Hopefully, it was obvious last issue that *The Savory Stew* was satire. By my count, I worked in and/or undermined around thirty-five high fantasy clichés. It is a compilation of the most common clichés I see as an editor, but often find in published (particularly self-published) fantasy novels as well.

Fantasy Cliché Checklist for *The Savory Stew*

- ✓ quest/journey to evil Mordor-like Empire
- ✓ rag-tag band of adventurers
 - initially seem to argue but are friends
 - all male characters, being manly
 - fat friar
 - vastly out-numbered, against the odds, etc.
 - magical number on team (7)
 - (I also have one character who is named but never appears, so author can't count or is missing one of the 7, the sort of error I see in a lot of manuscripts across my desk)
- ✓ character names mostly random letters without any consistent linguistic basis
- ✓ travelling by horse
 - horses driven like cars (e.g., no recognition of need to stop for rest/grazing)
 - good guys' horses should be white stallions
- ✓ artifacts of power
 - magic sword
 - invisibility cloak
 - magic shield
 - magic key/lock
- ✓ artifacts of power/plot coupons are collected along the way, turn out to be exactly what is needed to defeat enemy/solve puzzle/do incantation at climax

- ✓ gathering darkness depicted through obvious twilight/stormy night metaphors
- ✓ bad guys dress in black
- ✓ lead bad guy devilishly handsome
- ✓ band of heroes enjoy “a savory stew” each evening, even though that would actually be a logistical nightmare (also, “savory stew” doesn’t really refer to the herb savory)
- ✓ pointless reference to prophecy
- ✓ bug-warrior hordes as orc-equivalent monster hordes
- ✓ bad guys can only move around at night
- ✓ betrayed by traitor in their midst
- ✓ badly handled dialects—
 - random/incorrect old English insertions
 - random Gaelic insertions (e.g., “wee” for small)
 - random capitalization of stuff
 - random dropped articles
 - random contractions
 - occasional Yoda-like constructions (though I ended up cutting most of those, because just too annoying)
 - random changes in diction
 - random (i.e., slip-ups by lazy authors) insertions of modern phrases, expressions, and gratuitous allusions to other, better fantasies
 - allusion to Paula Johanson's excellent *Tower in a Crooked Wood*
 - mixed-trope gratuitous reference to lady of the lake



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Whether self-publishing or submitting to a publisher, you owe it to your work to ensure that it is as good as it can be *before* you put it out there. Have your manuscript professionally appraised by an objective professional specializing in SF&F. As a developmental editor, Dr. Runte provides feedback that not only improves your current manuscript, but also your writing/process for subsequent projects. Invest in your writing by investing in professional editing.

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Go to: [SF Editor](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Colleen Anderson

Colleen writes fiction and poetry and has had over 150 poems published in such venues as *Grievous Angel*, *Polu Texni*, *The Future Fire*, and *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*. She placed in the Balticon, Rannu, Crucible and Wax poetry competitions and also co-edited Canadian anthologies *Playground of Lost Toys* (Aurora nominated) and *Tesseract 17*, and her solo anthology *Alice Unbound: Beyond Wonderland*, was published in 2018. [*A Body of Work*](#) was recently published by Black Shuck Books, UK.

Roxanne Barbour

Roxanne has been reading science fiction since the age of eleven when she discovered *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars* by Ellen Macgregor. The years passed by while she had careers as a computer programmer, music teacher, insurance office administrator, and logistics coordinator for an international freight company. She took early retirement in June 2010. Six months later, she decided to put to use all the books on writing that she had accumulated over the years, and actually start writing.

To date her books include: *An Alien Collective* (2014, Wee Creek Publishing), *Revolutions* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Sacred Trust* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Kaiku* (2017, Self-Published), *Alien Innkeeper* (2017, Wild Rose Press/Fantasy Rose), *An Alien Perspective* (2017, Self-published), and *An Alien Confluence* (2019, Self-published).

She also writes speculative poetry, and has poems published in *Scifaikuest*, *Star*Line*, *Polar Borealis*, and other magazines.

Website: <https://roxannebarbour.wordpress.com>

Matthew Bin

Matthew is an author and IT consultant from Oakville, Ontario. He is the past president of the Canadian Authors Association and secretary of the Canadian Copyright Institute. He is also a Canadian football journalist, a licensed humanist marriage officiant, and bass player and backup shouter in a punk rock band. He is a member of SF Canada and his novel *Brendan's Way* was recently published by Bundoran Press.

Augustus Clark

Augustus is a Canadian poet (and, it seems, something of a minimalist).

Ron S. Friedman

Ron was a Best Short Fiction finalist in the 2016 Aurora Awards—Canada's premier Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards. His short stories have appeared in *Galaxy's Edge*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Polar Borealis*, and in other magazines and anthologies. He co-edited two anthologies and received seven Honorable Mentions in Writers of the Future Contest.

Catherine Girczyc

Catherine works as a technical writer by day and pursues creative writing by night. Previously, she was a TV writer with fifteen television writing credits. Recently, her work has appeared in several SFF magazines. In 2016, *Polar Borealis Magazine* published *The Cup*. In 2017, two poems appeared in *Tesseract 20: Compostela*. In 2017, the story *Night Market* appeared in the *Vancouver Sci-Fi Anthology*. In 2018, *Polar Borealis Magazine* published two poems *Forgiveness* and *Dangerous Gods*. Also, *Neo-Opsis* has accepted the story *Wrasse* for 2019-20 publication.

Contact via: Twitter: [@ Cat_WritesSFF](#)

Webpage: [Catherine Girczyc](#)

Michelle F. Goddard

Michelle is an AWADJ (artist with a day job), but is also a vocalist/musician who has performed around the world, and a composer with credits to her name for songs in musicals and films. Her short fiction has been published in Reality Skimming Press's *Water* anthology, and Iguana Books' *Blood is Thicker* anthology with work forthcoming from Blood Bound Books among others. She is presently working on several short stories and a Science Fiction novel.

You can find her at michellefgoddard.wordpress.com.

Neile Graham

Neile is a Canadian writer who lives and works in Seattle, where she is a workshop director for the Clarion West Writers Workshop for speculative fiction—work that won her a World Fantasy Award. Her publications include three full-length print collections, most recently *Blood Memory*, and a CD, *She Says: Poems Selected & New*, and has poems in various on-line and print journals, including *Strange Horizons*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and *Kaleidotrope*. A new collection, *The Walk She Takes*, is coming out in fall 2019; another, *Cedar and Stone*, is forthcoming in 2020.

Lawrence Van Hoof

Lawrence lives in North York, Ontario. He has had stories published in *A Darke Phantastique*, *Splickety Prime*, and *Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores*.

Michael D. Jackson

Mike has been an artist, designer and an illustrator for many years. His work has appeared in *Art Scene International Magazine*, *ImagineFX Magazine*, *A Fly in Amber*, *Abandoned Towers*, *Amazing Stories*, *Flashing Swords*, *Outer Reaches Magazine*, *Realms Magazine* and on the covers of

various anthologies from Pulpwork Press and Rage Machine Books among others.

He works in a digital medium, mostly with Corel Painter but also with Photoshop. Happily he is also handy with an ink pen and, of course, that old tested and true technology of the HB pencil and a scrap of paper.

Check out his art at: <https://mdjackson.artstation.com>

Ben Nein

Ben is a teacher and writer in Winnipeg, Manitoba. For more information, including a complete list of publications, please see www.bennein.ca or follow him on Twitter @neinwrites.

Rhea Rose

Rhea has published much speculative fiction and poetry. She has received honourable mentions in the Year's *Best Horror* Anthologies, was reprinted in *Christmas Forever* (edited by David Hartwell), twice made the preliminaries for the Nebula Award, and has been nominated for the Rhysling award. She edited a poetry collection for Edge Press and for many years hosted the Vancouver Science Fiction and Fantasy (VCON) Writers' workshops. She teaches Creative Writing. Recent works include *Cruising Glaciers* (49th Parallels), *Gel Theta One* (Tesseract 20), Poetry for Polar Borealis issues #1, #6 and #10. Thrice an Aurora Nominee ('86, '90, 2018), Rhea has an MFA in creative writing. Her most recent spec fic short story will appear in Parsec Ink's 2019 *Dark Skies: Triangulation* anthology. Recently, she was elected as a member of the POCO Arts Council board for her home town's Arts and Culture umbrella where she introduces writers to Writing Wonder.

Robert Runte

Dr. Robert Runte is a developmental editing/writing coach, a senior editor at [Essential Edits](#), a retired Professor (University of Lethbridge), a critic, reviewer and promoter of Canadian speculative fiction for over thirty years, and the winner of three Aurora Awards. See: [SF Editor](#)

Jacinda Sinclair

Jacinda was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but has also lived in Mie, Japan and is presently in St. John's, Newfoundland. When she isn't writing, she works as a teacher and archaeologist. She is currently a third of her way to her goal of being able to speak thirteen languages.

Richard Stevenson

Richard recently retired from a thirty-year gig teaching Creative Writing and English for Lethbridge College. His two most recent books are *Rock, Scissors, Paper: The Clifford Olson Murders* (a long poem sequence forthcoming from Dreaming Big Publications, 2017) and *A Gaggle of Geese* (haiku, senryu, tanka, kyoka, zappai and haikai sequences from Alba Publishing in the U.K.)

Alex Worden

Alex is a twenty-six-year-old author who discovered his talent as a youth on the streets of Calgary AB while facing the realities of homelessness, addiction, and violence growing up in the Government/Justice System.

He now resides in Nanaimo BC, is the father of a beautiful three-year-old daughter, and lives with his four-legged feline companion, Hopper, a nineteen-year-old ragdoll. He continues to write poetry and perform spoken word; often describing his life with metaphors to help articulate his personal experiences.



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