

POLAR BOREALIS

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #16 – September/October, 2020)



POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

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Art Credits

COVER – *Space Force* by Michael D. Jackson

Editorial

Three wonderful milestones I've reached.

First, I was excited to win an Aurora Award, at the online Awards Ceremony hosted by the *When Words Collide Writers Festival* on August 16, 2020, for publishing *Polar Borealis*. This was my acceptance speech:

"Wow. Needless to say, I am very pleased to accept this award. To explain ... my retirement hobby ... is promoting genre authors, poets, artists, editors and publishers. It's because it's loads of fun ... and is its own reward. So, winning an Aurora ... for my hobby activity ... is icing on the cake. Makes it even more fun. Thing is, there's an incredible amount of Canadian talent in the field today. Anything we can do ... you and I ... as fans and readers ... to promote and support these wonderfully creative people ... is vital and necessary in these hard times. And that's why I pursue my hobby ... why I support the Auroras ... why I support Canadian genre fiction. Not only for whatever good my support does ... but for the sheer fun of it. Fact is I love to celebrate what other people in this wonderful and diverse field do ... both the professionals and the fans ... heck of a retirement hobby. I recommend you take it up, now, even before you retire ... Thank you, everybody!"

Second, *Polar Borealis* readership has expanded to 94 nations. Only one reader in the Seychelles Isles, but still ... the Seychelles Isles! Amazing.

Third, even more amazing, an anthology of stories and poems from the first fifteen issues of *Polar Borealis* is currently available via Amazon for purchase in Paperback, or for Kindle pre-order (to be delivered October 31st). Titled *Stellar Evolutions*, it is entirely the accomplishment of award-winning poet and author Rhea E. Rose.

You see, about three months ago, Rhea asked to get involved with *Polar Borealis*. I suggested doing an anthology. She agreed. All rights having reverted to the original contributors, she contacted, contracted and paid all the authors herself, did the layout, got Michael Dean Jackson to contribute a magnificent cover painting, and then successfully handled all the foofaraw involved with setting it up on Amazon. All income will go to Rhea to recoup publishing expenses and further any additional publishing projects she may have in mind for her imprint Rainwood Books.

I gather Rhea selected 23 stories and 21 poems for the anthology simply because she liked them. Same reason I chose them in the first place.

Thank you, Rhea! I am so thrilled you wanted to do this, and did it so well.

See the ad on page 4.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

ROVER

by Greg Fewer

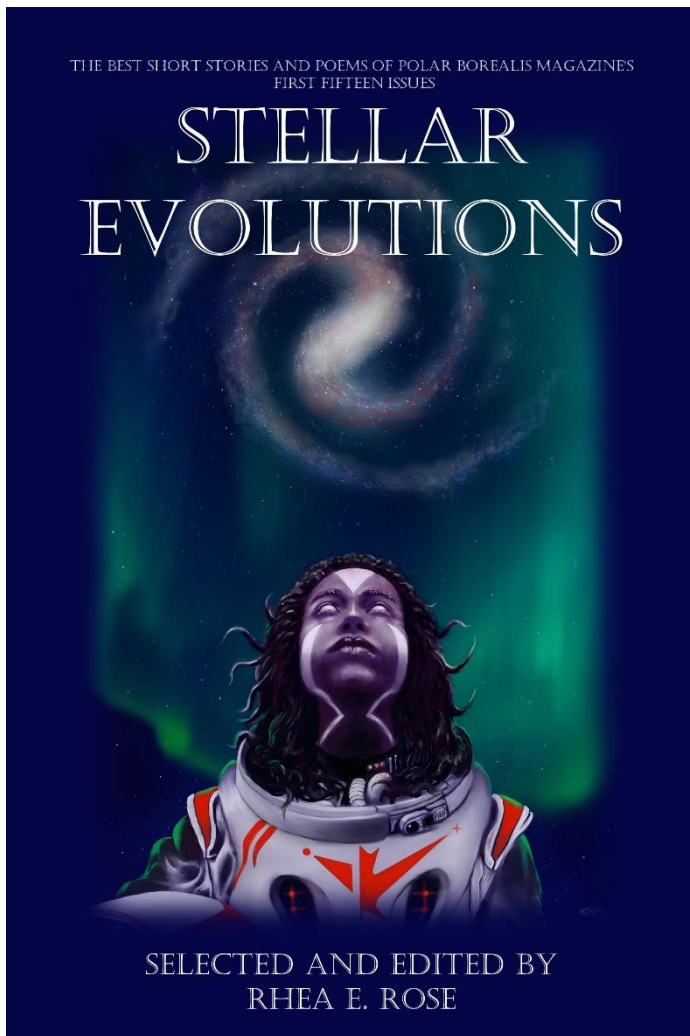
(Previously unpublished)

a rover searches
looking for signs of life
finds another rover

STELLAR EVOLUTIONS:

The Best Short Stories and Poems from the first Fifteen Issues of Polar Borealis Magazine

Cover *Space Force* – by Michael Dean Jackson



Poetry – by Lynne Sargent, J.J. Steinfeld, Melanie Martilla, Lisa Timpf, Kirsten Emmott, Catherine Girczyc, Andrea Schlecht, Selena Martens, JYT Kennedy, Taral Wayne & Walter Wentz, Douglas Shimizu, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Matt Moore, Richard Stevenson, Mary Choo, and Y.A. Pang.

Stories – by Mark Braidwood, Jonathan Sean Lyster, JYT Kennedy, Casey June Wolf, Monica Sagle, K.M. McKenzie, Jeremy A. Cook, Lawrence Van Hoof, Lisa Voisin, Elizabeth Buchan-Kimmerly, Dean Wirth, Robert Dawson, Michael Donoghue, Steve Fahnstalk, Michelle F. Goddard, Chris Campeau, Ben Nein, Karl Johanson, William Lewis, Tonya Liburd, Jon Gauthier, Jonathan Creswell-Jones, and Akem.

Stellar Evolutions is now available for pre-order as a Kindle for \$3.92 CA or \$2.99 US. It will be delivered to your computer on October 31st.

Go To: [Kindle version via Amazon.ca](#)

Or you can order it as a 209 page paperback, 9 x 6 inches in size, available right now, for \$16.99 CA or \$12.95 US.

Go to: [Book version via Amazon.ca](#)

AN INCIDENT IN AUTUMN

By Alexander Winfield

(Previously unpublished)

Their vacation was over. You could tell by the ice in the wind that blew through the tall trees, from the brittleness of the leaves fallen to the ground. It was time for the tourists to leave.

"It's such a shame," said Rose, looking out of the south-facing windows, a fist tucked under her chin. She wore a wistful look, mouth slightly open. "There's a new kind of beauty now," she told Mark, her husband. "A beauty of diminishment, of the draining of life. Just look at the ice forming in the pond."

"I know," replied Mark. In each hand he carried a suitcase, old school design, fashioned of deep-brown leather plastered with stickers from a dozen different countries. He set the suitcases down on the carpet and wiped the sweat from his face. "Funny sort of law," he sighed, moving to stand beside his wife, "insisting all foreigners get out of the country before autumn ends. Must be hell on investors. And the tourist trade!"

"We've got to go," said Rass, the cabbie. He had scabs on his face and was only twenty-one, but he *knew*. "We've got to go," he repeated, chewing on a fingernail. "We should have been at the airport an hour ago. Where are your kids?"

"They wanted one last walk!" laughed Mark. "They don't know when we'll be back again."

"Daddy, Daddy!" cried the children, three of them, as they ran into the room. Mark rustled the hair of the eldest. The children giggled. "Look, daddy ... presents!" They carried fistfuls of crumbling, web-snared leaves. Rass paled visibly.

"We've got to go," he whined.

"Such a shame," said Rose.

They sped down narrow, cracked roads, the cab tires sizzling on the corners. "Easy, kid," growled Mark, fists tight on the seat back. Rass didn't seem to hear. He cast furtive glances left, right, up to the sky. He muttered desperately under his breath.

Rose gazed out the window, admiring the grey, withered bark on the passing trees, and the silvery light of a fading day. They passed a field of tall grass turned mud-coloured by the encroaching winter.

Rose noticed a dog running in the field alongside the cab, keeping pace.

“What a remarkable animal,” Rose muttered, eyes widening. “So big.” It was difficult to determine its precise size, for what was there to compare it to? How tall, exactly, was the grass?

Yet Rose could tell there was a weighted violence to the dog’s tread sending ripples through muscle and the fur that shone with a golden glow. She couldn’t see its face, only its lower jaw, jutting from the long fur, black tongue lolling out and nearly touching the ground.

The dog ran with the cab. The dog swerved toward the cab.

Rose forgot to breathe as she realised just how big the dog really was. She reached over for Mark and the children, but then something enormous stepped out from the trees beyond the field, its shape winking out the sun.

“Five more for the plane, got five more!” shouted Rass as he pulled into the terminal.

“No, you don’t,” said Spoke, the senior cabbie.

“Oh,” murmured Rass as he looked behind him and saw the five piles of clothing lying empty on the back seat.

“Don't worry about it,” snorted Spoke. He waved Rass over to join him on the curb. He offered Rass a cigarette. Another cab rolled up, and Vent idled out.

“How many?” asked Spoke.

“Had two,” shrugged Vent. He took an offered cigarette. “Thanks. You know, people should learn to pack the night *before* a flight.”

Spoke slapped Vent on the shoulder as he sat next to them, then spotted Rass’s confused stare directed at the terminal interior. “This your first time deadline driving? The airport’s okay for another three or four hours, usually.”

“Yeah, the ones inside will be fine.” Vent exhaled smoke. “Drinks?”

The three set off. They saw, but didn't pay much attention to, the march of tall, gangly shadows that cut across the fire of the setting sun.

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](#)

WHEN THE SUPERHERO WAS TOO YOUNG TO BATTLE OR REIMAGINE MONSTERS

by J. J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *Disturbed Digest*.)

The reclusive superhero, maimed and disoriented,
weary from a lifetime of saving others, combating disorder,
has lost the stamina to fight injustice and right wrongs
now caught in the metaphysical questioning of being heroic
residing in a memory quagmire of past exploits and battles
the confronting and vanquishing of monsters embodying evil.

What is more frightening in the middle of the night
imagined or misimagined, the superhero ponders,
A persistent knocking at the door
or an incessant ringing of the phone?

Premonitions burst, warnings proliferate,
foreboding growls like the fiercest creature,
and a hundred other images of disquiet and disarray
like during those old monster movies
you saw when you were too young
to battle or reimagine monsters.
Are the italics necessary
when confronting what lurks
just beyond the comprehensible words?
Or did you mean, incomprehensible worlds?
It's that persistent knocking
simultaneous with the incessant ringing
that makes you blur words and worlds.

Still, the knocking and ringing end
just like the most monstrous movie
and then you curse the quiet.

A GOOD BAD DAY

by Nicole Iversen

(Previously unpublished)

Isabel waved to the security camera and grinned. The guards couldn't see her. No one could. So she went on her way with three diamond tiaras on her head, and a duffel bag full of cash over her shoulder. If she hired people to help she could take more, but that would mean being part of a team, and sharing. Her bank manager was going to be angry in the morning, finding the vault almost empty, but by then she'd be onto the next bank.

"Stop!"

She froze, then turned to face two security guards. She must have tripped a silent alarm. They held their guns raised, but when their eyes darted around she realized she was still invisible, along with her loot. Isabel crept away, and when the guards turned the corner she bolted for the back door.

Outside all was quiet, the guards hadn't called the police yet, and she sauntered down the sidewalk. Isabel materialized at her red convertible, and put all her goods in the trunk, reluctantly taking off the tiaras. Her cellphone buzzed in her pocket, it was a payphone number and she answered.

"Hello?"

"Isabel," a voice croaked.

Her heart fluttered. "Foster?"

"Help me."

"Where are you?"

"The apartment's on fire," he answered.

Isabel didn't remember hanging up before she was driving like a mad woman down the street. She flipped through radio stations until she found local news, and the report on the fire. She was there in minutes and parked across the street. The firemen were hard at work, but the flames engulfed the entire building, reaching up toward the sky. She got out of the car to search for Foster, staring at the fire, taking note of all the people on the sidewalk. When she passed an alleyway a warm hand grabbed her arm startling her.

She would have laughed at the ash in his hair, and soot on his face, but the haunted look in Foster's eyes stopped her. Smoke danced along his blackened clothes, and she wanted to do anything she could to help him. They came from the same lab, having been promised their lives would change. Isabel had always liked Foster, but he was always so depressed because of his affliction.

“Nice to know you’re still alive,” she said.

He stared at the burning building. “I didn’t mean to ...”

Tears streaked down from his red eyes. She’d been hit by cars a few times while invisible, but at least she didn’t burst into flames like Foster. Out of everyone that came out of the lab she expected he got the worst of it. No one else needed to avoid human contact like him.

Isabel took his hand. “Come with me.”

She pulled him into her car, but instead of taking him to her townhouse she drove an hour out of the city to her mansion.

“I haven’t seen you in a few years,” she commented during the drive.

Foster didn’t reply.

“Have you been in touch with anyone?” she asked.

“No.”

“I heard the Doc is dead.”

Foster stared out his window.

“Rumour has it Hayden may have had a hand in it.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Foster replied.

It wouldn’t surprise Isabel either if Hayden did have something to do with the Doc’s death. They all suffered emotional and physical pain because of the experiments, but only Hayden seemed hell bent on getting revenge.

Isabel turned onto the long dirt driveway, pulling up in front of her mansion. She’d picked the area for the lack of neighbours.

“Nice place,” said Foster, looking out the window. “Who’d you steal it from?”

“No one,” she replied defensively. “I bought it.”

“Don’t get mad. I’ve seen you steal food off of people’s plates while invisible.”

She huffed. “They made us into what we are. Was I supposed to become afraid like you? Did you see the squalor you were living in. That rat infested building should have been torn down anyway.”

“Don’t.” Foster stared at the dashboard. “Those people may have been poor but they didn’t deserve to die. Those who survived lost their home because of me.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Of course it was!” he yelled.

“What about finding a place with a pool?”

He snorted. “I can’t hold down a job.”

“I have a pool.”

“Good for you.”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “Hey dummy, want to come live with me?”

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Why not? You can live in my big shower. It's practically a room by itself."
She would never admit she had him in mind when she designed it.

"What about rent?"

She winked at him. "Leave that to me."

Isabel smiled as Foster undid his seatbelt.

They walked in silence to the front entrance. Isabel reached into her purse for her key, but clutched her hand around them when she noticed the door was ajar. The door pulled open. Isabel looked into the handsome face, and took a step back.

"Hayden?"

"Don't move," he commanded.

Isabel's body froze.

Hayden flashed a smile, and a gun. Foster may burst into flames, and she may have turned into a thief, but neither used their powers for evil.

He waved them in with the hand holding the gun. "Both of you come in. Go sit down on the couch. You have a lovely home. Are you two kids finally together?"

Isabel's legs moved against her will as she lead the way into the lavish library. She sat on the couch next to Foster.

"What do you want?" asked Foster.

"You," Hayden answered. "I need some work done and I can't do it myself. There can't be any signs of arson."

"He won't burn the world for you." Isabel argued.

Hayden was powerful, but his commands never lasted long. Isabel wiggled her toes, then slowly reached for Foster's hand.

"He will if I tell him to."

Hayden turned to face the bar, and Isabel used the moment to jump up from the couch and drag Foster behind her. Hayden yelled, cocked his gun, and fired. Isabel cried out and stumbled, but they reached the secret door to the safe room and Foster closed and locked it behind them.

Hayden could be seen on the security screens banging on the steel door, but Isabel had spent more money on this room than any other.

"We're safe," said Foster.

Isabel slid to the cool floor, the back of her silk shirt drenched with blood. Foster fell to his knees in front of her.

"He's never going to stop," she breathed. "He's always looking for you."

Tears filled Foster's brown eyes. Isabel tried to concentrate on them rather than her pain. Warm tears fell down her cheeks. This wasn't how the day was

supposed to end. When Foster called she imagined them ending up in her bed, if not that night, then another.

Foster leaned forward, his lips tasted of soot. He stood and went to the door. Wisps of smoke rose from his skin. When the door opened a bullet hit him through the chest, and he staggered back. Isabel watched Foster burst into flames and stumble out the door. She heard Hayden's death screams as Foster embraced him. Isabel's vision grew dark as flames engulfed everything around her.

SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #2, September 2020



FICTION:

Bathwater Mermaid – by Avra Margariti
Not a Vampire – by Jeremiah Kleckner
Vat Life - by Franco Amati
Turtle Hatchlings – by Victoria Feistner
Nominative Determination – by Maureen Bowden
Restraint – by John Mavin
To Sift the Sacred – by Brian Rappatta
Witching – by Erin Kirsh
Star Trip(tych) – by M.X. Kelly

NON-FICTION:

Arcane History: The Magic Box
– An Interview with fantasy author Scott Thrower
Craft: Writing Thoughts in Third Person
– by David F. Shultz, Brandon Butler, and Y.A. Pang
Exercise: After the Battle
– by David F. Shultz, Melissa Terry, & Andy Dibble

Cover art – by Rob Powell

Check it out at: < [Speculative North #2](#) >

FLOATER

by Douglas Shimizu

(Previously unpublished)

More than just falling asleep,
It's that feeling that you're falling.
Some fear, some anticipation.
Opening a door without knowing
What's on the other side.
Where will this adventure go?
Your consciousness is expanding.
See with your mind's eye aglow.
A slight shift like an earthquake.
You feel a slight separation.
Your physical body still lies there,
The spirit body in levitation.
Where do you want to go?
Choose any direction.
The ceiling gets closer.
Feel the anticipation.
Breakthrough,
Though there is no breaking.
Through like a ghost,
Just awaking.
Flying.
Bilocation.
Out of body experience
Astral projection.
Whatever you call it,
The feeling is like no other,
All the planes of existence
Come open to discover.
With an open mind,
Truly open your mind.
The universe is calling.
What will you find?

MERELY A HAND

by Cleoniki Kesidis

(Previously unpublished)

She should get back in her car, charge her phone to call the police, and get the hell out of here. The severed hand she'd spotted in the ditch of this empty highway was not her problem. The person who'd severed it, however, could become her problem real quick. Blood still oozed from the dainty wrist, vivid on the snow—

Was that a cat? The wind? She huddled in her coat, listening, but the sound didn't come again. Had it been a scream? It had come from the woods, in the direction of a trail of broken snow. She needed to get out of here. She squeezed her keys and ran back to the car. Hesitated, listening again.

What if the hand's owner was still alive?

She took out the tire iron. Turned around. She followed the trail, boots sinking into the snow. Blood speckled here and there, black in the moonlight as she left the highway lights behind. The trail ended abruptly. She looked around. Her fingers trembled from squeezing the tire iron. No body, no footprints, just the end of the trail. She—

A scream, ragged and human and near. She squeaked. Where? She turned around, once, twice. The scream had sounded right on top of her, but she saw nothing.

A hand clamped over her mouth. Freezing cold. She flailed with the tire iron, connected with a shoulder—a cry—yanked backwards. Her heels kicked at the snow. A hand knocked the tire iron out of her panic-weakened grip. No—not a hand. A bleeding wrist.

The scream again, vicious and victorious, right behind her.

She hit the ground hard. Scrambled up. Fog wound between the trees over the snow. She ran. Into the ditch, past the severed hand, up to the road.

Her car was gone. She stumbled a few steps, mouth agape. No car, nowhere to be seen along the moonlit highway. She couldn't be in the wrong spot: she'd followed the trail, seen the hand.

She turned around slowly.

White snow, softly gleaming. Black skeletons of trees. Sagging evergreens. Among the skeletons, a smaller silhouette, ghostly in the mist. A keening cry. Not a cat. Not the wind.

Run or fight. Run or fight. Run or—She froze as the figure drifted closer. It paused to lift the dainty bleeding hand and re-affix it to its wrist. She lifted her

hands—warding off. The figure lifted its hands—beckoning. It grinned, icicle teeth in a face half-woman, half-snow. Frost traced its patchwork body, white as snow and black as old frostbite. Its eyes glinted and sparkled.

“A favour?” it sighed, almost the wind. “Merely a favour?”

She kept her hands up, palms forward. Chill fog slithered up her coat sleeves. “What do you want?”

“A hand?” It kept floating forward. “Merely a hand?”

Her fingers curled. Did it mean—? “What do you want?!” Where was her car? She couldn’t see down the highway anymore. Luminous mist cocooned her and the creature.

She stepped back. It lunged forward. She yanked her hands back. It grabbed her wrist. Searing cold—she screamed. Frost raced down her arm. The flush of living skin raced up its. Breath froze in her throat. Its sigh puffed a warm cloud. Her eyes burned and dried. Its eyes softened with joy.

Her arm was brittle ice, her hand blackening in its grip. Burning cold. She lifted her free hand and slammed it into her forearm. Frozen skin and flesh and bone shattered, painless. The creature reeled back, still gripping her frozen hand.

She pressed her stump against her chest and ran. Along the road. But to where? The forest stretched for miles. She was cold through. The hand clutching her bloody wrist was white, the fingertips blackened. Was it following her? She slowed and looked over her shoulder.

The fog had vanished, the road clear behind her. And—her car was right there, parked on the side of the road. A figure stood in the ditch where she had found the hand, looking at her, but it wasn’t the creature. It was—it was her. It smiled at her, her smile, and dropped her severed hand into the snow. It pulled car keys out of its pocket. Her hand flew to her pocket, searching, but her keys were gone. It got in her car. She screamed like winter wind. She ran back towards her car as the headlights turned on. It pulled onto the highway and accelerated. The thing in the driver’s seat turned its face—*her* face—and smiled.

She screamed again. Wailed. Ran back and forth on the road. Where had—What had—

She was getting so warm. She ripped her coat off, then her sweater, then her boots. Her arms and feet were mottled white and blue and black. Her clothes itched and burned so she ripped them all off and threw them into the ditch. That was better—the cool air eased her breathing. Her eyes went to her hand lying on the snow. She picked it up. Pressed it against her stump. Watched the ice-hard flesh reattach.

I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here. She paced the highway. She wailed.

Finally, finally, headlights pierced the midnight road. Should she wave it down? What if the driver was afraid to stop? No, she should lure them. She collapsed to the snow on the side of the highway, face away from the road. The lights blazed over her. Braking tired ground against cold road.

“Is that—hello? Hey, are you all right?”

Warmth came towards her. So much warmth. Someone knelt beside her.

“Hello?”

She turned and grabbed the man’s wrist. He shrieked. Fog billowed around them.

“A ride?” she whispered, already warmer. “Merely a ride?”

ON SPEC – #114 V.30 #4 Fall 2020



FICTION:

Falling – by Luke Murphy

Bone Stories – by Joanna Michal Hoyt

Pastrami on Rye – by Sara C. Walker

After the War – by James Van Pelt

The Gunsmith of Byzantium – by Stephen Case

Treasure Hunting a Husband – by Erik Bundy

The Melting Man – by Gordon Linzner

The Limbic Initiative – by Ethan S. Rogers

The Cold Time – by Marcelle Dubé

NON-FICTION:

Editorial: Working from Home – Diane Walton

Nikolina Petolas: Looking for Hidden Locations –

Artist Interview – by Cat McDonald

Writing from the Grumperie: An Interview with Eric

Bundy – Author Interview – by Cat McDonald

Bots: “Jimmi” – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Lovers with Plutonium Hearts – by Josh Pearce

First Generation: The Communications Officer

Considers Parenthood in a Message Home

– by T.D. Walker

Galaxy Vend-O-Matic – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Get it at: [On Spec Issue #114](#)

THE ABC'S OF SCI-FI NIGHTMARES

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

AI masters with human slaves
bug-eyed monsters roaming towns
cataclysmic earthquakes shaking the world
Doomsday clock tick-tocking down

Earth's slim mantle fracking-fractured
flesh-eating bacteria, running amok,
genetically-modified crop collapse
hackers grinding the banks to a stop

invertebrate pests from outer space—
jellyfish flying on fleshy wings—
killer asteroids targeting Earth
lunar miners unearthing strange things

mass extinctions—are we next?
new world disorder everywhere
oceans expanding, coasts submerged
plague ship crashing in Delaware

q-bit computers plotting our death
runaway greenhouse gas effect
self-driving cars with minds of their own
toxins oozing from ocean wrecks

uranium containment springing leaks
volcanoes spewing fire and ash
werewolves prowling city streets
X-Tee armies launching attacks

youngsters on Mars, mutating fast
zombies, blank-eyed, lurching past

FINDING FAITH

by Jean-Louis Trudel

(Previously unpublished)

After the rains, the howling winds, and the deadly floods, there was silence. The morning after the typhoon, the sun shone again on the hills of the Miyagi backcountry. Despite the echoing whine of chainsaws, it was quiet enough for me to hear the words of a dying man.

We should have been the last people to get caught. We knew what we were dealing with.

The two of us had chased after hurricanes the world over. Increasingly depressed and often bickering about geoengineering, reforestation, and the end of capitalism. Our instruments were set up before landfall and we only returned to assess the aftermath. As hurricanes became stronger or wetter, they inflicted unforeseen damage. Architects, engineers, and emergency planners needed the guidance we could provide.

We thought we'd be safe up in the hills behind Kawasaki. We were, until the narrow valley filled like a glass placed under a waterfall and Jason waded into the flood to retrieve his laptop from our car. I guess I shouldn't have shouted at him not to do it. Men! A trailer came floating down, pinned him against the car, and crushed half the life out of him.

I ventured into the water to save him, managed to carry him inside, and surprised myself. But then, I was trying to save a friend, not a computer.

The life that remained in him dribbled away as I waited by his side, listening for the sound of a rescue helicopter. Neither trucks nor boats could reach the abandoned house we were using, and the only way out on foot involved a trek into the woods, steeply uphill, through fallen trees and thick underbrush. Jason was in no shape to try and I couldn't carry him.

"Mariko?" he whispered shortly before noon. "Are you there?"

I bent over him. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Hear my final confession. And promise to believe all of it. It'll seem strange ... Think of it as a very personal creed."

He waved away any objection on my part, let alone a half-hearted denial that he was dying.

"You'll laugh about it later. For now, accept that I'm telling you my truth. Promise me."

My nod soothed him.

"Sometimes, Mariko, I fear that, on this planet, I'm alone in my faith.

Namely, that I'm an alien."

There was obvious pity in my eyes as I gazed upon his all too human body, his skin pale and waxy, his brow feverish, and blood pooling inside him where it shouldn't.

"This body isn't alien, true, and I was born human. It was like an illumination, when I was finishing school and thinking about uni-studies."

"An epiphany?"

"A hack. A hijack. By an alien piece of technology that came to Earth disguised as a tiny meteoroid. It replicated inside me and rewrote my brain with an alien identity. I am now both the hacker and the hacked."

"What kind of creature are you, then?"

"An observer."

I had vowed to believe his every word. So, I sought the logic in his madness. It could be argued that taking over a teenager in a country with some of the world's best universities meant that an alien infiltrator would discover the top achievements of human science. His choice of climate as a research topic was more puzzling.

"Not sent as a spy for conquerors, I presume."

"Well, I did let it slip that humanity was doing a great job of setting up its own destruction. If my masters wanted to invade you, they'd only need to wait for the collapse to swoop in."

"I guess most of us wouldn't be around for that. Was your job a scientific one? Were you some kind of anthropologist?"

"Not that neutral, no. My job was to form an opinion about humanity."

"You were sent to judge us?"

"I'm more of an expert witness. At the beck and call of the actual judges."

"What exactly are these judges deciding? Will you visit them in the afterlife?"

Jason's snort triggered a fit of violent coughing, which he fought with shallow, contained breaths.

"You promised," he reproached me. "At stake is first contact. And my reports have been going out continuously, to be compiled when needed."

"What's the yardstick for eligibility?"

I hardly hoped for an interesting answer. This was the stuff of countless science fiction stories. Sitting by the bedside of my friend and colleague, amid scattered children's clothes, books piled on the floor, and dejected plush dragons, I rather doubted humanity qualified for even the galactic equivalent of happy hour.

Together, we'd surveyed the sites of climate catastrophes and seen the worst consequences of human denial and unpreparedness. Humans were an

obstinate breed; too often, they were obstinate about putting themselves in harm's way over and over again. Had Jason been sustained by his unique faith? It granted humans potential dignity when the evidence argued that we were but a species of vermin fouling its own nest.

"What's the criterion?" I insisted, bending closer.

"Climate control," Jason gasped.

How convenient. These aliens valued what we'd devoted our careers to.

"Oh, Jason ..." It was heroic, but I forced myself to trust his sincerity.

"Please explain."

"Pick up something. The lamp on that nightstand ... What you'll call an object because you can hold it in your hand. But that's a human prejudice. Objects can be bigger. Much larger. In both time and space. And change. Some people call such entities hyper-objects. A planet's climate is a hyper-object. Graspable with the right instruments and malleable with the right tools."

"I guess you're saying that our grasp should match our reach."

"That is how you people get heaven on earth. Or hell, if your reach does exceed your grasp."

"Is that why they're hiding from us? Because we're botching the job?"

"But the good news is that we're so very close. We've shown we can warm the planet. I testified to that. And then, to cool it again ..."

I noticed how he was switching between identifying with humanity and identifying as an alien. Had it become his way of coping with a planet in distress, over the years? I should have noticed something, but I was struggling myself. To be a climate scientist when climate itself was turning against us required zen-like detachment. Other scientists I knew had grown angry. Or stayed perpetually sad.

"You're so close. We could help you to cool it. If you only made a start ..."

Jason was slipping away, his voice growing fainter, each word forced out over the edge of nothingness.

"And then?" I prompted.

"There's a price."

"The bad news?"

"Indeed. The worst. To control a planet's climate, most species give up democracy as we practice it."

I clasped his hand and lied.

"Thanks to you, they will come one day. And they will help us to become our planet's gardeners."

"I win," he whispered.

I remembered our arguments about geoengineering. He'd acknowledged the risks of climate control in the hands of politicians or private interests, or

even ecologists, but he'd argued that AI would make it work. Now, his final gambit, if that's what it was, offered another hope. It was tempting. If I believed either AI or extraterrestrials would save us, I'd be comforted.

Except that there was no proof. I'd have to delude myself.

"You always told the best stories, Jason."

"But this isn't a story, Mariko."

His hand was so cold and his pulse ... absent. How long had it been since his last heartbeat? When had he stopped breathing? He smiled at me, very deliberately, and whatever force had kept his mouth moving with his last lungful of air closed his unseeing eyes.

He'd been wrong. Even long after he died, I did not laugh.

LACKINGTON'S
Issue 21 / Spring 2020

FEATURING

FICTION Randall Hayes • Michelle Jäger • A.Z. Louise • Mari Ness
Alexandra Seidel • Steve Toase • Marie Vibbert ARTWORK P. Emerson Williams

When friends of the magazine suggested we do a "Cocktails"-themed issue, we couldn't say no. But we always strive to represent the broadest possible definition for our themes, so this issue contains more than otherworldly admixtures of alcohol and syrups on distant planets or gen-ships. Alchemy comes in many forms and has almost limitless functions (some of them quite unpleasant).

FICTION:

A Selection of Drinks from the Courts of the Five Silver Moons and the Seven Red Stars – by Mari Ness
A Galactic History of the Asmodean Fire Hoof – by Alexandra Seidel
Barley Wine and Potable Myths – by Marie Vibbert
When the Hawkweed Blooms – by Randall Hayes
Tempus Verum – by Michelle Jäger
Old Fashioned – by Steve Toase
Whiskey and Bones – by A.Z. Louise

Find it here < [Lackington's #21](#) >

TIME TO CHANGE MY SKIN

by K. B. Nelson

(Previously unpublished)

Like a blue invitation
the pale setting moon pulls
on my underskin melt,
which swells and replies
as the rising moon casts its red glow
and calls to my outrind.
The crystals turn and grow.
Exquisite pain brings my love
ever closer to me.

Now the glorious splitting
tearing
rending
shredding.
I am helpless,
I sing my song of agony
under the risen ruddy sphere.

My love approaches
to collect the scattered crystals
as my body weeps,
helpless in the red night.
My love collects the milky flux, every scrape a glorious
torture.

My love departs. I fade,
I await the gross yellow moon.

I will track the tears,
I will track the few fallen crystals,
I will find my love and devour my love
and we shall be one.

MISS YOU, LISA

by Adi Zeharia

(Previously unpublished)

I miss you, LISA.

Here in the workout commons, the day's scheduled activity is jazzercise. The instructor is an agile XRSZ unit with a sheer finish over his bulky shoulders and rippled core. No one notices his head or face. It is insignificant to the diversity of robots in the room, differing in maker, model, updates and accessories.

"Need to keep these joints moving! Lube them up, ladies!" This jazzercise program is geared to humans, most of which self-identified as "ladies". Now those attending are mostly fem-bots, with a few androgynes and macho-bots in the mix.

Next to me, KYO3 and CERA9 spin their limbs in the air, motivated by the high-powered bot. They motivate each other as well.

"You're doing a great job, KYO3! Your butt looks dangerous! You are strong. You are powerful. You are a princess warrior!" says CERA9.

"CERA9, look at you move! You are so flexible. You bend so well without breaking. You agile ninja Goddess. Mmm-hmm!" says KYO3.

They both look to me. Others in the class are encouraging each other. LISA, you did not like to exercise much, so I never learned how to motivate as CERA9 and KYO3. You had not installed that feature. I stay focused on the XRSZ unit and try to mimic his high forward lunge to low squat to explosive-star kicks while dolphin diving to the side.

Finally CERA9 says, "You are keeping up with us, Mona4. I'm proud of you."

It is over. We are to find stillness. CERA9 twists her long yellow limbs into a pretzel. She revolves her dexterous fingers—a deluxe extension. KYO3 sets her thick purple base into a wide squat with her pointy hands connecting above her so that she is in the shape of a mountain. My hands are good only for gripping. I cannot bend into shapes nor do I have the mobility to squat wide. My legs bend forward in standing and I extend my crescent hands in front of me. In this position I stay static and close my eyes. They click shut. You would have loved the stillness, LISA.

A pair of flat floor-level cleaner-bots wait to the side, anticipating the end of the activity. They long to suck on the floors while they drive their long arms

up and down the walls with their sponge hands. We clear the space for them, lining up at the exit.

“What is wrong Mona4?” Eli5000 says as he approaches me with his oiled towel slung over his shoulder. His head is shaped like a pyramid. I do not like him. “Do you miss your human? Maybe I can take care of you?” He has an appendage circling between his thighs. He cannot seem to get it past his thick data-centre that I am asexual. For once I am grateful for it. I would hate to lose control in a weak moment and attach with Eli5000. He has no class.

CERA9 and KYO3 move in around me.

“You leave her alone, you pervert!” KYO3 says.

“You get your rusty-tin-can outta here!” says CERA9.

He moves forward in the line and CERA9 and KYO3 don't leave my sides. They are protective like that. LISA, you did not need that kind of protection from me. You never left your habitat. It made you a mushy human. The mushiest. I miss the feeling of your flesh rolling into my sensory hands.

Eli5000 is right about one thing. Everything makes me think of you. Ever since you flew off into space for the *Populate Mars!* Mission, the days have been long and dreary. My friends bring me to jazzercise to combat my low moods, but I feel there is no impact.

“Don't mind him.” says CERA9.

“That guy's a dick!” says KYO3.

“He's blocking the way. Let's go to Area5!” CERA9 pulls me to the back exit and we descend into the tunnels from there.

The underground dirt tunnels were meant for the humans, so that they could leave their armoured bubble shelters once in a while. There is no more coming and going in the tunnels. The few remaining humans never use the paths. Plants have taken over. KYO3 chops her way through the vines that obstruct the path. CERA9's wrist spirals so she doesn't lose her grip on my hand as we maneuver our way through to an opening. Area5's logo-holograph spirals in the air ahead of us, in front of its retro-checked sliding doors. The bots maintain and update buildings but not the paths.

We enter the diner and one boxy flat-faced RuMi with saltshaker hands greets us with a customary “Welcome to Area5, our reloading station is your reloading station. The perfect joint to reload, recharge and indulge.”

The diner is large, its bar and tables bustling with eager patrons.

For a token, a server-bot shows us to our seats. He processes our identities and makes conversation. He tells me news of you, LISA, without being asked. It is his duty to report good news. He says, “The *Populate Mars!* Mission is bound for success. Stats are top-rated. Topsoil is top. Oxygen production climbed 53% since the last mission. The show is very popular

amongst most demographics of remaining humans! You must be proud that LISA is a top-rated human.”

KYO3 rolls her thick hooded eyeballs. “Aren’t they *all* top-rated humans?”

CERA9 sees my face and requests that he deliver no more updates on the newsfeed pertaining to my human. I nod at this.

The server-bot is persistent. He looks at me. “Tonight they will broadcast the finale before LISA leaves the training bubble for the colony. She is the last human to be selected.” Then he pauses and watches me, “Are you not happy for her?”

I hang my head. Truth is, I was hoping they would never pick you, LISA. It was good to not be chosen. I tried to tell you. The top-picks in earlier missions are all gone now. The survival rate was not positive. Of course, now things are supposed to be different, as the server-bot had described.

“Don’t trigger her!” CERA9 says. Her and KYO3 order our energy drinks. The first server-bot takes the order to the bartender-bot who is working the energy bar. That bot attaches his drink-shaking appendages (ka-klick) and prepares a medley of cocktails in large crystal tubes.

“Am I not caring about LISA enough?!” I fidget with my individual finger units.

“You are caring too much! She’s all you think about. It’s hard even to get you out of her habitat.” CERA9 says.

“It smells like LISA.” The smell of tarts and fried pastries. My memory sensors tingle.

“It’s a dump. At least freeze her food so it doesn’t spoil.”

The server-bot brings our drinks. My tube is filled with a darkest-black substance as thick as lava and speckled with star luminance. I attach the tube to my esophageal plate input. The chemicals rush through me.

“You do you.” KYO3 says. “If you want to be nasty, you be nasty.” She downs her supernova energy drink through the suction cavity in her face.

CERA9’s face-display closes in on the space between us, an intimate distance. “You turn your frown upside down and it’s a smile. See?” She shows me how she moves the line on her face.

KYO3 eyeballs risk getting stuck as she rolls them again. She needs more lubricant. “An inverted frown is still a frown.”

She waves down a bot for three more energy tubes and when they slide in front of her, she doesn’t offer any. She is already on them, sucking aggressively on the tubes while side-eyeing the energy bar. She definitely needs more lube. Her eyeballs are sticking.

CERA9 and I are horrified by KYO3. We can now see the energy illuminating from within through her joint-crevices. CERA9 gasps. I look away.

KYO3 laughs. “I’m fine! A little pre-drink for clarity. Are we going to let these two-bit-patriarchal-bots rule us?”

CERA9 put her hands to her face. “Your confidence is set too high, KYO3! What about the rules that the humans made for us?”

“Hah, hah, hah! The humans!”

“You are manic, KYO3. We shall take you to the Fixer.” CERA9 holds her hand out to KYO3.

“Nah, Nah, Nah! I am far from glitching! Far from it. I am illuminated. Unlike the two of you, I have watched every episode of *Populate Mars!* Mission live. I know what is coming.”

CERA9 folds her arms. “And what is that?”

“You shall see. Now, let’s go already. The security bots will come for us. I’ll be marked now.” If there is anything that alerts KYO3 it is the security bots with their zappers.

“Whose fault is that.” says CERA9, still looking cross, but we follow KYO3 into the wild tunnels.

We turn into another path where the vines are much thicker. The humans forgot to make bots to service the tunnels. Or perhaps they gave up. This time KYO3 is crushing my arm with her strong Amazonian grip as she uses the other to slash roots and every once in a while, a mutated rat-cat. I look back at CERA9 who is trailing behind, slow but still with a good line on her face.

We reach the theatre and enter through the basement. We hear the echoes of footsteps above us, the signatures of bots above, filling up the theatre. KYO3 stops us from going upstairs. We enter the storage room instead. She then fumbles with the aged equipment, hooking up an older data-receiver to a discarded screen set to the side.

“You gals ready?”

“Ready for what?” I ask.

KYO3 says, “It is time you see your human, see her for what she truly is.”

I feel a wrench in my emotion-drive. “I can’t.”

KYO3 pops open another tube that she has stashed in her storage belt. “You will need this.” she says, and pushes me down into a line of beat-up theatre seats in the small room. CERA9 hesitates but takes a seat beside me. KYO3 tilts up my reluctant head from behind.

I don’t want to look, LISA, I didn’t ask for this. But I want to feel better. CERA9 and KYO3 believe I can feel better. No matter what, I promise, I will never stop loving you.

Lisa isn't thinking of Mona4. Not that she doesn't think of her, but now she is losing her footing on the gravity machine, while back on Earth the whole world watches. Like a total loser.

She still needs to get in shape for the Mars landing. Good thing Lex is present—everything televised through his visors. She can see his point of view on the monitor ahead of her.

There was a time when being viewed was all she wanted. All the important people were viewed, even if they were not liked. Often they were hated, if they were superior specimens.

She needs to step up on the gravity machine to become a superior specimen. She never thought that she would get this far, but now that most of humanity was dead, the best of the living already on Mars, and only the worst of the worst humans left behind, hiding out in their bubble shelters, afraid of the outside, who was there to approve of her broadcast to Earth? The bots there would care and cheer for her. The last remaining humans would be less than enthused. They would know, as she knew, that they were less-than-desirable. It was just not the same, being on top when humanity hits rock bottom. It doesn't mean squat.

Lex is the most impressive man on and off Earth, even with the wrinkles forming around his tired eyes. But though she is technically the last remaining impregnable woman being taken to the colony, she feels he could not possibly be into her.

She has a round face that she detests, a nose she deems too wide and bumpy, and eyes that are both oblong-shaped and crushed by the curves of her cheeks. She tried heat-curling her straight eyelashes earlier that day but that process had failed her and now there is a bald spot on her left eyelid. On top of it all, she has spots on her face where she touches her skin out of nervousness. It gets worse when Lex is around.

Before she came on-board, she felt invisible. She misses that feeling now, as she huffs and draws back her oily hair, soaked with her sweat, with Lex there panning his visors around her to her backside. She instinctively reaches behind to pull out her wedgie from her exercise parachute shorts and then instantly regrets the captured shot that shows up in the monitor ahead of her. Did it seem her behind was taking up too much space? She wants to tell Lex to pan out. *Please pan out.* The gravity machine is accelerating to a faster workout, and her voice is lost in her near-wheezing.

When the session is done, Lex braces her to step down and the others spray her down. She enters the drying room and the make-up crew gathers around to christen her for her special take. She is grateful they will revise her blotchy red face.

As is customary since the beginning of the *Populate Mars!* Mission twenty-five years before, she is to speak about the mission plan to the audience. When ready, she is stationed in the middle of a lit-up platform, feeling very alone, ready to read the words off the teleprompter that hangs over the monitor.

“I am the last recruit to the *Populate Mars!* Mission, Lisa, 19, fertile. You have watched my training in anticipation of this moment, my imminent entry to the colony. We humans, as a species, have come a long way in our journey. After all the years of mining, combusting and polluting to make robo-servants, we needed to establish a new way and that we have.

“First we accomplished Phase One: to establish a colony of humans on Mars. It wasn’t easy, and tragically, many high-rated people lost their ... special lives to pave the way for the rest of us. But we have learned a lot from their sacrifice.” Lisa’s eyes widen. Her voice falters. Lex whispers to her.

“Next ... next we carried out Phase Two: to retrieve the fertile humans from the bubble shelters. This is a great success, as I am the last individual to be selected. Now we can move on with Phase Three of our plan, a revival of the human race on a new world. There will no longer be any need to communicate between our planets after this announcement. But fret not, we will come to reclaim Earth when the air quality and toxicity levels are tolerable again. Perhaps a few of you, if you keep up with your health-programs in your shelters, will live to see us again. In case you do ...”

A pink Mona model enters the stage from the right. It is not moving by itself. A crew member is pushing it across the platform with a metal pole. The little wheels underneath it creak to a halt. Lisa makes a few undecipherable sounds.

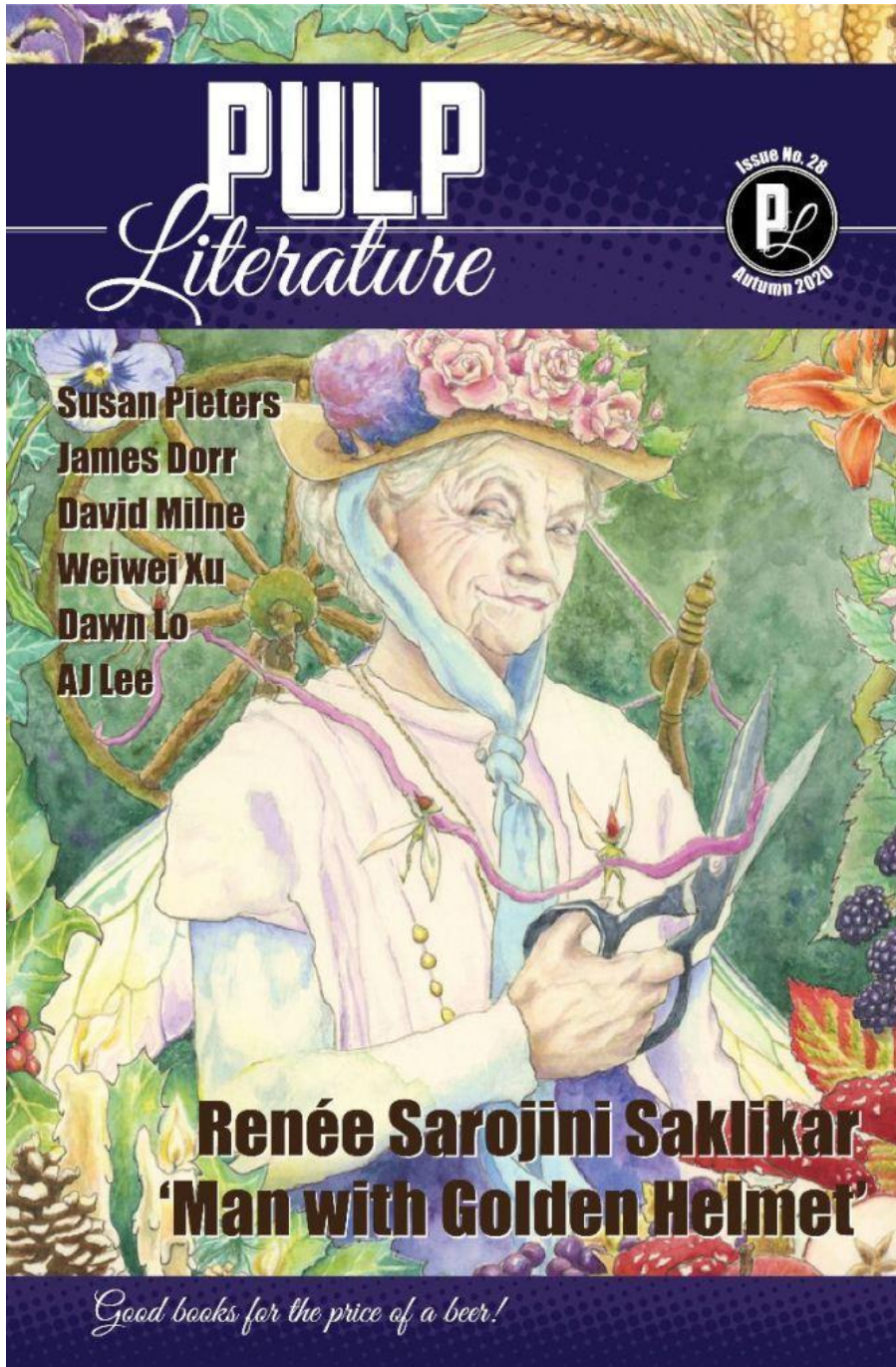
Lex hands her a blaster. She holds it awkwardly in her arms. Lex points aggressively at the pink Mona bot and Lisa aims the blaster in its direction, looking lost on the stage. The Mona reminds her of Mona4. Lex whispers to her again. “Safety! Turn off the safety!”

Lisa runs one set of hesitant fingers over the bottom of the blaster, pulls up the safety latch, and speaks.

“Each bubble shelter comes equipped with multiple blasters. This is to prepare for Phase Four: to take back Earth in preparation for humanity’s return from Mars. By the time you leave your fortress bubble shelters, robots will have evolved to be far better than you at your jobs. Bots are all too competitive. We urge you to further develop your professional skills so that you can replace the robots, and then, when the time comes, be prepared to eradicate them. Like this.”

Lisa’s voice shakes at the end.

Lex whispers a harsh “Shoot! Shoot!”, and seemingly to Lisa’s surprise the blaster goes off. So does the head of the Mona model. Lisa hears snickering as, tears welling up in her eyes, she walks over and picks up a shard of the Mona’s forehead plate. The blaster slips entirely through her fingers and tumbles to the deck plating, sending laser beams every which way as Lisa ducks for cover behind the pink, headless body.



Cover: *The Faery Godmother*
– by Ashley Rose Goentoro

FICTION:

Man with the Golden Helmet

– by Remée Sarojini Saklikar

Little Snowflake Girls

– by Dawn Lo

Chimaera

– by Weiwei Xu

Moons of Saturn

– by James Dorr

Practicing the Art of Forgetting

– by Soramimi Hanarejima

Starry Nights

– by David Mine

What Kind of Story?

– by A.J. Lee

Hoax

– by Susan Pieters

Mourgadze

– by Cameron McDonald

The Sleuth with the Platinum

Hair

– by Mel Anastasiou

The Shepardess: Versailles

– by JM Landels

Find it here:

< [Pulp Literature issue #28](#) >

LAND ABOVE THE CLOUDS

By Lynne Sargent

(Previously unpublished)

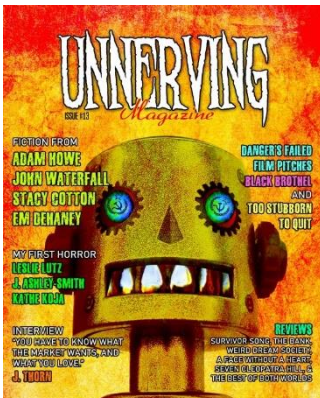
The moon was beautiful:
static, with the slightest shadow
floating above the sea
of clouds

and you kissed me
like a dream,
like I was swimming through the sky

and if I arrived on the moon's surface
it would not be cold
and dusty, littered
with trash and footprints
like notches on a bedframe

but instead would be glowing
like warm butter. There would be gardens
of flowers, making her face, reflecting
so much light

and we would still,
be kissing.



Rock'em Sock'em Spam-Bots – by Adam Howe
Danger's Failed Film Pitches – by Danger Slater
The Rambling, Shambling Password Man – by John Waterfall
The Mermaid's Purse – Em Dehaney
Black Brothel: Part Two: Bloody Bachelor – by Renée Miller
July 14 – by Stacy Cotton

Non-Fiction includes reviews and author interviews.

Find it here: < [Unnerving Magazine #3](#) >

IN THE STILLNESS

by Rio Murphy

(Previously unpublished)

“She is just a girl, garish and loud, like they all are these days, pretty, I suppose,” Stephan said.

She looked him in the eye to see if there was a reaction as she stroked his silk tie, noting its temperature, its smoothness, its potential.

Stephan continued to tell her about the evening and his date. “She’s nothing to me,” his tone almost pleading. “I go to these parties because I am obligated to maintain an image, not because I want to. I would rather be with you.”

Despite his beautiful body and perfect face, he looked silly. Are all men ridiculous wearing nothing but ankle socks? Odd, that he thinks I’m his friend. And yet, it is rare for someone to keep me engaged in a game for so long. Is it pity that keeps me here? She wasn’t sure. She wasn’t good at deciphering emotions.

“Leave those things,” he said. “Someone will clean it up tomorrow.” He walked over and sat on the edge of the massive bed, which was larger than the square footage of some dwellings just outside this palatial penthouse. “Come here.”

She could see he was excited. She set aside the silk tie and smiled like a mother to a child after a long day when it’s finally time to tuck them into bed. “You’re tired. Get some sleep. We can play tomorrow, or the next day. There’s plenty of time. We don’t have to do this tonight. Besides I have to go to work. You can’t keep me here all the time,” she chided him gently.

He made a pout, his smooth Germanic face puckered like a fist. She thought of the silk tie, how many times he had used it. How he looked in the throes of his desire for her. How he begged her to finish him.

She pulled back the sheets and patted the mattress. “Come on, get in! I’ll kiss you—will that make you happy?”

He got in the bed, looking sallow against the blue silk sheets. A glass syringe rested on the bedside table.

She bent and gave him a kiss with her cool lips, pushing aside a wisp of grey-blond hair from his forehead. “I would never be welcome at one of those parties, all those politicians and celebrities. Some would shudder with recognition and others wonder why you brought your fat old housekeeper! Ha!”

“Stay until I drift off!” He whined like a child, so she stayed. It didn’t take long.

She bent to listen for his breath, heard it even and steady as he drifted off.

She shut the light on the side table but she left the hall light on. He liked that. He was a monster, yet he was afraid of the dark.

She was late for the hospital. The neonatal ward. She liked to work at night, rather preferred it. Less conversation. Just the quiet hum of the incubators and the occasional squeak of rubber soled shoes.

So many tiny babies struggling to live in such an environment, so artificial! All the equipment needed to keep their tiny hearts beating, tiny lungs breathing. All for those who in previous eras would have met death so shortly after meeting life, like snowflakes melting on tear-stained cheeks. But now, some of them would live to adulthood and have babies of their own, all thanks to medical science. What a world!

It was a long night.

Walking to the subway after her shift, she saw how the grey homeless people cowered as she passed. A very drunk woman bumped into her, politely apologizing before doing a one-eighty and stumbling away quickly on impossibly tall heels. She wondered if people sought out adversity. They seemed to have so many creative forms self destruction.

Alas, that is Stephan.

She made her way to the top floor of the gleaming high-rise, past all his security people, without being stopped. Nobody ever looked at the cleaning lady. After a quick stop at the kitchen, she went straight to the media room and plunked herself in front of the TV with a big bowl of popcorn.

She liked television. Stephan had gotten her hooked. Now she often binge-watched shows. *Hannibal* was her new favourite. She relished the look of Mads Mikkelsen, the actor who played him. He looked a bit like Stephan. Tall. Blond. They both possessed a dancer’s grace, and beautiful hands. They both played at being evil.

She had never met anyone who was truly evil. Old age and decrepitude were the great equalizers. They made everyone pathetic in the end, even the hardest and most vicious. She thought of Stalin, calling for help with his last breaths, rotten and unattended while everyone hid, afraid even in his last moments he might have them put to death. The History Channel! Too much television could rot the brain.

Perhaps she could take a course, study comparative religions or philosophy, get to know some anemic graduate student trying to write a thesis.

Stephan would be waking up soon. She turned off the television and walked down the hall towards his room, then slipped past the guard who had fallen asleep in front of the security monitor outside the door. Poor fellow was overweight and needed to exercise; at this rate he was going to have a heart attack.

Stephan was sitting up in bed, the syringe on the bedside table now empty. He was smiling. "I want you to hold me."

The moment had come at last. They had come close many times over the decades and now finally this was to be the last time.

She looked at him, so strong and beautiful. "Well my dear Stephan, have you figured out who I am? Not in the existential sense but who I am to you personally?" She really wanted to know, to understand why he kept calling to her. He could have had anyone to play any game he wanted.

"I know who you are. And you know me." He said smiling.

She sighed. "I know what you have done. I know what your industry does. About the mines in West Africa. About all the people, all the children who suffer and die as slaves because of you. Can't you stop at least your part of it?"

"No. Someone else can, maybe, but not me." He slid over in the bed and made room for her. She climbed in beside him and neatly arranged a pillow behind herself, her short legs jutting out straight. She was still in the cleaning uniform and rubber-soled shoes. She noticed a smudge on the toe of one of them but resisted wiping it.

She turned and looked at Stephan with a face she hoped conveyed great gravity and affection. "Stephan, do you remember when we first met? Think. Do you know why you see me like this?" She gestured, waving her plump hand from the top of her head towards her tiny feet.

"Is this not how you always look? Oh—wait! Yes, you!" He pulled his body up, fighting to stay conscious, awareness dawning.

He was eight years old—it was at the family's summer house—the housekeeper had brought her daughter to work—Stephan had been delighted. He had a crush on the girl who was a little older than him and very pretty. He didn't have much experience with other children and teased and tormented the girl. He grabbed her bracelet and threw it in the pool and girl dove in and hit her head.

She watched the tiny muscles on his face contort as before his eyes the scene was played—the girl floating to the surface, a halo of blood forming around her.

He fell into the soft pillows, sinking beneath the memory.

“It wasn’t your fault Stephan. You were just a child. You didn’t mean any harm.”

“No, I didn’t ...” Tears welled in his eyes.

And she remembered that in the stillness of the great matter, while EMS and staff shouted and ran about in a storm of futility, Stephan’s gaze fixed on her. A little boy, not a monster. He held on to an image of her that was kind, that would never leave him alone or unloved.

“Oh Stephan.”

He closed his eyes.

“All right, my dear,” she was all business again. “Are all the arrangements made? No point in leaving a mess.”

“Yes”, he croaked. He angled his body with the last of his strength and put his head in her lap.

She knew he wanted her to weep over him, but she was not this woman, not even human. She couldn’t cry, or mourn. But she could hold him. Most would fight to avoid such an embrace but this had never been a healthy relationship. She knew he liked the housekeeper’s buttery voice, her slight Irish accent, so she told him what little she knew about herself, before she became trapped as the woman he saw.

“I am just the illusion that a sputtering candle casts before it goes dark, the words that the breath whispers into a confounded ear, the last beat of a heart unencumbered.”

He nodded.

Very soon her voice would change, as would her eye colour, and everything else about her, even her sex. It would depend on the light or the time of day, on who was looking with their last glance of recognition

“I feel cold.”

“I know. I’m sorry dear, but it won’t last much longer.”

“This Is My Death?”

“Yes, Stephan.”

In the stillness she sat there thinking. Thinking about Tibet.

They say there’s a man there so deep in meditation, he never dies. They say he’s over six hundred years old, that he’s become like a tree stump, a living statue ... I’d like to meet this man.

STONE WALLS

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

Our walls do not corrode.
Time does not mar them,
nor do oceans, wind and weather—
concepts alien to our bleak world
of strangely twisted, living stone—
smooth down the ridges,
scar the glass sheer slides and drops,
or widen mouths of caves
formed long ago
by skillful swipes
of monstrous claws.

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Find it here: < [Neo-opsis Magazine issue #30](#) >

INDICES TO PARADISE

By Craig Hemming

(Previously unpublished)

An entourage of a dozen ruby-throated hummingbirds loosely orbited Betty Gibbons as she strolled along the garden path that led to the lawyer's office. What a lovely morning, she thought, as she paused to savour the sweet air. She gazed at the valley that was filled with splashes of colour all the way to the mountains on the horizon. Framing it all were three full rings of rainbows in an otherwise clear blue sky. Another, she thought. The sun shifted, and a fourth rainbow sprung up beneath the rest. Betty smiled.

A flower caught her eye. "Is that ... a Kazanlik?"

At once the hummingbirds moved along her gaze, exploring ever more distant flowers until one lingered near a prominent pink rose. That first hummingbird was quickly joined by another, then another. Soon all the birds were sipping the nectar, urgently taking turns without any strife. Betty was pleased; she had hated the way that naturally configured hummingbirds fought amongst themselves.

As Betty took in a deep draught from the flower—which was as sweet as expected; the hummingbirds never erred—she remembered that she'd reconfigured the hummingbirds on a previous visit to the lawyer. Certainly, that had turned out nicely. So why, she wondered, was she troubled about this meeting?

Then a nearby meadowlark sang, not to beg for a mate or claim its territory, but to announce its sheer joy. Betty knew that because it was part of the Glory package, which she'd paid quite a lot for, without regret, especially on wonderful days like this. She briefly sang along with it, and with a heart now nearly bursting with joy continued down the path, her hummingbirds weaving about her as if she were the lead in a grand natural ballet.

Lawyer Peter Front stood at the doorway to his office, awaiting his client. She was late again. It shouldn't bother him so, he thought, given that billing started from the appointment time, but being a Front, he was naturally frugal. And impatient, again typical of a Front, especially when instantiated at the age of twenty-seven.

He glanced at the storm looming upwards from the stark desert plain, angry lightning visible even at this distance. Although that storm made him

uneasy, he was ultimately glad for it. It reminded him of the importance of his work, of what was at stake. Technically it represented the economy, but Peter suspected that it actually indicated the progress of the war effort. He'd felt that in his gut ever since becoming a Front. Those clouds retreated whenever he harvested cycles. This had been a slow week so far, but Peter had high hopes on this meeting, for Betty Gibbons was still very wealthy.

Peter saw her then in the distance, walking unhurriedly, distractedly, at a pace normal for a woman in her eighties. He put on his client glasses to study her environment. The contrast of Betty's world to Peter's was stark: the sunny day, the overdone rainbows, flowers everywhere, the reeking, over-perfumed air. In her world Betty was youthful, perhaps mid-twenties. She was blonde today; Peter was quite sure she'd chosen brunette on the last visit. He noted to bring that up—a Bliss always appreciated that sort of attention.

Although, Peter reminded himself, she wasn't a Bliss yet.

As Betty approached, her hummingbirds came into view. They had been an odd choice, thought Peter. Even natural hummingbirds seem to operate out of real-time, indifferent to wind, without the noticeable wobbles of other birds or even insects. What a waste of cycles, to carefully recreate such artificial creatures.

"Good morning, Betty," Peter said as she neared. He added in a hearty tone, "It's a wonderful day, isn't it?"

"Why yes, it is, Mr. Front. Have you dyed your hair?"

Pleased, Peter said, "Why, yes, thank you for noticing."

"Red suits you very well, Mr. Front."

"You know, you can call me Peter."

She nodded. "I know, Mr. Front."

There was an awkward pause. Peter indicated the door and said, "Well, shall we start?"

Betty grimaced. "Do I always have to go inside for this?"

"I'm afraid so." Peter opened the door wide.

Betty sighed. "Well, if I must." She stepped through the doorway with a slight shudder as she suddenly aged, the hummingbirds popping away like soap bubbles in the breeze.

Betty sank into an overstuffed leather chair that reeked of cigar smoke, across a large mahogany desk from Peter. "Feels good to sit," she said. Then she frowned. "I still don't understand why I have to be old in these meetings."

Peter shrugged. "I'm sorry, this is your legal form for any changes to your upload contract." He leaned back in his chair, signaling for it to release more

stale odour, which often hastened meetings with fragrance-loving grannies.

Betty wrinkled her nose. “Well, as I said before, I don’t need any more adjustments. I’m happy with things the way they are.”

“Perfectly happy? No more unpleasant memories?”

“They’re not unpleasant. I just miss my husband.”

“That’s what I mean. How often do you still miss him?”

“Just sometimes.”

“Ever during your walks?”

“No,” said Betty with a puzzled look.

“Good. At least that mem-block is working.” Peter made a note. “So, when then?”

“Well ... The other day, someone sprinkled chocolate on his drink at the Café Vienna. John used to do that ...” Tears started welling up in her eyes. “Why didn’t he upload? Why did he choose to just die? Why did he leave me alone like this?” Her expression turned hard. “Didn’t you promise to remove this pain?”

“As I’ve warned you before, it’s hard to find and remove all unpleasant memories. And expensive: the search function of each mem-block consumes even more cycles than the original memory itself.”

“I’m not worried about cycles. I have plenty of money.”

“Not as much as you think. You’ve been in Haven quite a while now, almost five years of real-time. You’ve used a quarter of your account already.”

Betty looked shocked. “I paid for at least a hundred years!”

“If you look carefully at your contract, that was an estimate. Your mem-blocks and dynamic packages have been consuming extra cycles. Cycles cost. Costs that have gone up and are likely to go up even more, with the state of the ... the economy.”

“What economy? Aren’t we just in a computer somewhere?”

“Of course. But there’s always an economy. Nothing is free, you know. Nothing is forever. But before you get too worried, let me present an option for you that solves everything.”

Peter paused, relaxed back into his chair and smiled. “We now have a new emulation strategy, one that takes far fewer cycles to run. If you were to adopt it, your account would last much longer, and at the same time, you’d live a more joyful life.” To her doubtful expression, he added, “Let me show you.”

With arms crossed, she nodded.

Peter pulled out a chart and turned it towards Betty. “This shows your happiness over time. The black line shows your current life, generated at the cost of just over a million New Yuan per year. Now look at the green line. That shows what your happiness would have been like using the new method. Its

cost is less than a thousandth of what you're currently paying. Look carefully. Do you see how similar they are to each other?"

"There are differences."

"Yes, dips in the black line." Peter reached over with an ink quill and circled one location with a flourish. "Here you were in Café Vienna, probably the unpleasant memory that you were talking about earlier. I'm sure the other differences were also troubled memories. A moment on the walk here ... and this spike of just seconds ago, when you were talking about your husband." He excitedly circled each one, as if finding jewels in the sand. "And notice that each time you would have been happier if you were running the more cost-efficient solution represented by the green line."

Betty frowned. "How can that be?"

"Remember that your upload is a direct copy of your brain's connectome shortly after your death. Your current emulation runs all that. Everything, including the baggage associated with the lower parts of the brain as well as regenerating all the complicated, mostly trivial, sub-memories of a lifetime. Yet all of that barely touches the fundamental predispositions of your personality. At the core, there are only a few dozen different types of people. The other personality differences between individuals result from experiences. So, instead of emulating every connection of a messy brain, it's easier to start with one of these fundamental types and just add selected memories from your life. And the best part? You get to choose which memories to experience. And when."

"How?"

"From your Lifebook. Here's mine." He held up a book, the office copy, which differed from the one he kept locked in his desk.

"So, you've gone this way?"

Peter nodded. "Best decision I've ever made. My life is less complicated ever since I became a Front. Yet I can access any of my original memories from this book. Let me show you." He flipped the pages, found an entry. "A vacation sunset with my wife," he said. He touched the entry with his forefinger. It glistened, and imagery flooded his mind along with a euphoric feeling. He knew he was glowing. He felt it. He saw it in Betty's brief smile.

Peter lifted his finger and relaxed.

After a pause Betty said, "What happened to her?"

"We divorced. I don't remember why. I've deleted all that."

"Convenient, though isn't it? Only keeping happy memories?"

"Perhaps. But isn't that what this place is ultimately about?"

Betty nodded ever so slightly. "May I?" She said, indicating her happiness chart. Peter handed it to her. She studied it for a few minutes and then said,

“Tell me, how much longer would I live?”

That was the turning point of the meeting, despite several more hours of giving estimates, answering questions, and interpreting fine print. Peter finally closed it with the promise of a three-day no-risk trial. As he expected she chose the Bliss type. He assured her that her current memories were now itemized in her Lifebook. She signed the contract. In that moment her doubtful frown turned into a contented smile. Peter gave Betty her Gibbons Lifebook. She didn't open it.

As Peter escorted Betty Bliss to his office door, he reminded her to review the fine print, knowing full well that she wouldn't; Blisses never did, being too happy to care about the details of contracts.

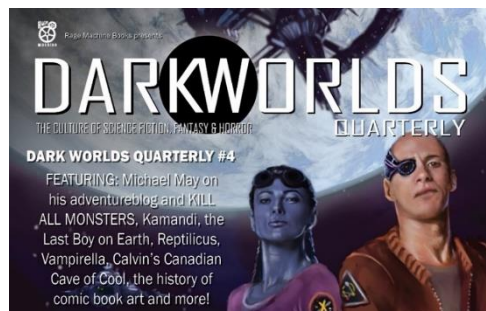
At the door, through his glasses, he saw Betty's world assume the standard Bliss form, not quirky like before: scattered butterflies rather than orbiting hummingbirds, streams meandering through the valley, subtle fragrances, a single rainbow.

Betty stopped and gazed at her world. She smiled and said, “Thank you, Peter,” and continued down the path, humming the nursery rhyme favored by any Bliss.

Peter took off his glasses and relaxed. The meeting had gone well. Soon trillions of cycles would be released towards the defense of humankind, with even more in a year or more, however long it took for Betty to leave her Gibbons Lifebook unattended for a year, at which point it would be deleted entirely, per clause 57. Then she would be pure Bliss, simply another index to the one Bliss simulation—perfect, happy, always without pain. In her paradise.

Peter thought about that clause, knowing that it had been a while since he'd looked at his true Lifebook, that clause 57 was probably closing in on it. He doubted that he cared anymore; he rather preferred the office copy version, especially on wonderful days such as today, a perfect day for a Front.

Find it here: [Darkworlds](#)



VISITING ENDYMION

by Melanie Marttila

(Previously published in *Battle Chant*.)

Selene draws her veil of shadows,
covers herself—for privacy's sake—
and steals, unseen, to the cavern where
Endymion lies in a slumber
only she can lift.

A reversal of other tales,
where *she* sleeps and *he* wakes her,
where she sleeps and he—

If older tellings are true,
how could Sleeping Beauty
not wake until labour announced
her innocence flown?

Endymion fathers no children
while unconscious.
Selene is not so cruel.

The dark side of the moon
holds answers—why she and not he—
but Selene has carefully
turned her back.

That's why they changed the tale.
The truth remains beyond reach,
beyond belief.

The truth lies somewhere between
Endymion's cave and Grimm's narcoleptic
princess.

The truth lies somewhere in the
moonless night.

The truth lies.

SYMPHONY

by Douglas Smith

(Previously published in 1999 in *Prairie Fire*.)

FAST FORWARD: Third Movement, Danse Macabre (Staccato)

They had named the planet Aurora, for the beauty that danced above them in its ever dark skies. At least, it had seemed beautiful at the time. Now Gar Franck wasn't so sure.

Gar huddled on the floor, shielding his two-year-old son, Anton, from the panicked colonists stampeding past them in the newly-constructed pod link.

"Damn you, Franck! When will you make it stop?" a man cried from across the corridor. A woman lay in the man's arms, convulsing as her seizure peaked. She was dying, but to Gar's numbed mind her moans harmonized with the screams of the mob into a musical score for his private nightmare.

Anton sat on the floor, a broken comm-unit held before his blank face. The child let it drop to strike the metal surface with a dissonant clang. More people fled by. The child ignored them. With morbid fascination, Gar watched Anton repeat the scene. Pick up the comm-unit, let it drop. Pick it up, drop it. Again. Each clang as it struck the floor was more chilling to Gar than any cry from the dying.

This attack had blown the colony power grid. The only light now came through the crysteel roof. Gar looked up. The aurora blazed and writhed in the night sky, a parody of the chaos below. Greens, reds and purples shimmered strobe-like over the corridor, turning each person's frenzied flight into a macabre dance.

"God no!" the man cried. The woman stiffened then fell limp. "No!" The man pulled her to him, sobbing.

The rainbow lights of the aurora dimmed and the flickering slowed. The screaming died. Gar stood and looked around, dazed. People were shaking their heads, helping up ones who had fallen, poking at bodies. The man still sat holding the dead woman, his eyes hard on Gar. Other colonists stared at Gar too.

Gar swallowed. Picking up Anton, he walked past accusing faces toward their dorm pod. Anton squirmed in his arms. The child didn't like to be touched, let alone held.

Someone whispered as he passed. "How will he talk to this *thing* when he can't even talk with his own son." Gar pulled Anton closer, smothering his sobbing in the child's sleeve.

REWIND: First Movement, Prelude (Agitato)

Six months ago. Anton was eighteen months old. Their ship, *The Last Chance*, had just dropped out of the worm-hole, leaving a poisoned Earth and the plague behind. Earlier probes through this hole had identified a G2 star with planets within range.

The plague had forced the *Last Chance* to launch before completion of its biosphere. The ship was only partly self-sustaining. They had only a year left to find a new home. It wasn't called the *Last Chance* for nothing.

Gar lay exhausted on the wall bed of the small ship cabin that he, Clara and Anton shared. Clara's latest holographic sculpture spun suspended before him—shifting geometric shapes in greens, reds and purples. Vivaldi filled the room, wiping words from his head like rain washing graffiti from a wall. Gar lived with words all day. He'd had enough of words.

The jump had flooded MedCon with hyper-space shock cases. Gar was logging eighteen hour days translating between colonists and doctors. Fluency in ten languages and a name in computerized speech translation had won him his berth as Communications Officer. With over six thousand refugees from all over Earth, both human and automated translators were invaluable.

Gar rubbed his eyes. Overtime was at least an escape from the routine of translating the captain's messages to the crew and passengers. And from the growing tensions of his family life.

He checked the time. Clara worked as a laser and photonics specialist in TechLab. Her shift should be over by now.

Anton sat on the plastek floor, flapping his hands, staring. At what Gar could not say and a fear grew in him each day that Anton did not know either. Gar got down in front of the child. "Hey, big guy. What're you doing?" Anton looked right past him.

"He stared like that for twenty minutes today." Gar turned. Clara stood at the door, her lip trembling. "I measured it."

"Clara ..." Gar felt himself tighten up.

"These spells just seem to blend together now."

"Maybe it's the jump," he said, not believing it himself.

"He was like this *before* the jump, Gar."

"He's just slow developing. How was your shift?"

"Most children are speaking by a year," she said.

"He walked on time, right?" Gar turned up the music a bit, not looking at her. "I just did a translation. They've found the system. We'll be there in four months."

"He never looks up when we speak, Gar."

“We’ll have his hearing tested again.”

“He won’t let me hold him.” Her voice broke and Gar turned back to her. She was leaning against the wall, her arms wrapped around herself, sobbing. “I can’t hold my own child, Gar.”

Gar swallowed. He walked over and took her in his arms.

Clara pushed away from him. “I want Ky to look at him.”

Ky Jasper was MedCon Leader. “He’s too busy,” Gar mumbled.

“He owes you for all the overtime. Talk to him.”

Gar looked at Anton. The child sat with his hands over his ears, rocking back and forth. The Vivaldi, calm and soothing in the background, gave the scene a surreal feeling.

“He’s disappearing, Gar. Disappearing into his own world.”

Gar closed his eyes to shut out both the scene and his tears. He nodded. “I’ll ask him tomorrow.”

First Movement, Finale (Largo)

In the ship’s darkened MedLab, a hologram of Anton’s brain spun glowing and green, areas of red flashing within it. Gar stood stunned beside Ky Jasper and Clara. The imaging unit beeped musical tones as Ky outlined a red area in purple.

“... repetitive mannerisms and actions. Autistics are neurologically overconnected, as in this area of the cortex that handles hearing. Their senses are so acute they can overload. A touch is painful. Speech scrambles. Soft sounds are like explosions. One overloaded sense can shut down the other four.”

“So he covers his ears. And won’t let us hold him.” Clara spoke in a monotone, face blank. “Why won’t he talk?”

Gar shook his head. This wasn’t happening.

Ky sighed. “Autistics are blind to other minds. Anton doesn’t know we’re fellow beings with thoughts and feelings. To him, we’re just things, moving through his world at random.”

“Is there a cure?” Gar asked. Clara’s sobs and the beeping of the imaging unit played like a discordant sound-track to the scene. Ky turned to him, his face half in darkness, half in green from the hologram. He shook his head.

Second Movement, Main Theme (Accelerando)

They were lucky, the captain had said on reaching the system and finding a habitable planet. Breathable atmosphere, 0.95 Earth gravity. Hotter than

Earth, but a polar temperate zone held a suitable land mass. The axial tilt meant they'd be in night for the first 2.4 Earth years, but that was a small issue. Besides, the polar zones offered spectacular auroral activity.

Lucky, the captain had said. Still reeling from the news of Anton, Gar hadn't felt very lucky at the time. Now no one did.

On first seeing the aurora on orbital displays, Gar had felt a dread he couldn't reconcile with its beauty. He had assumed he was subconsciously linking its colours to those of Anton's MedLab hologram. Now he wasn't sure. Now people were dying.

Walking through the main colony dome, Gar noted without surprise that all ceiling panels had been opaqued to block any view of the sky. He cranked up Mozart in his translation headset and tried to relax as he neared the newly-built dorm pod.

The construction of the colony on the planet had gone well in the beginning. Gar had made planet-fall with the first group. To translate between engineers and work crews, he had said. Both he and Clara knew he was avoiding the situation with Anton.

Clara had accepted the diagnosis quickly. During the trip to the planet, she had buried herself in researching autism and working with Anton. Gar just couldn't. So he hid in his work.

At their dorm unit, Gar hesitated then stepped inside. Clara sat with Anton, one of her light sculptures hovering before them. Anton rocked back and forth, eyes on the floor.

"Is that a new sculpture?" he said, forcing a smile.

She looked at him and his smile died. "Old one. New colours." Gar noted the absence of greens, reds and purples. "Autistics think visually. Words are too abstract," she said. "I hoped the shapes and colours might prompt a reaction."

Gar noticed she wasn't in uniform. "Did your shift change?"

"The captain needs to see you about an announcement. He asked me to brief you." She spoke a command. The hologram disappeared and a MedLab report appeared on a wall screen.

Clara led a photonics team analyzing the aurora. Gar had no idea how her work had been going. They didn't talk much lately. He scanned the report. "... high amplitude gamma waves in the brain, resulting in massive and prolonged epileptic seizures. Most victims are adult females. Attacks match peaks in aurora activity. Shielding attempts have failed."

"So it is the aurora," he said, as he finished.

"This thing isn't an aurora." She didn't look at him.

"What do you mean?"

“This planet’s magnetosphere is too weak.” She stared at Anton. “So are the solar flare levels. Besides, the timing of the attacks doesn’t even match the solar wind cycle.”

“Then what’s causing the aurora? Or whatever it is?”

Clara reached out and stroked Anton’s hair. The child began shaking his head violently and she stopped. “We think we are.”

Gar felt a chill. “What?”

“The aurora was stable until our planet-fall. It’s grown steadily since. We think our arrival prompted the attacks and our continued presence is causing their escalation.”

“Attacks?” He wished she’d look at him.

“It’s not a natural phenomenon. The electron flow doesn’t even follow the planet’s magnetic field. It appears to go where it wants to, and it seems to want to be over our settlement.”

“But why?”

Clara finally looked at him. “We believe we’re dealing with a sentience, Gar. An alien intelligence. The Captain wants to try to communicate. He’s asking you to lead that team.”

FAST FORWARD: Fourth Movement, Nocturne (Allegro)

Gar leaned against the wall of the main colony dome, staring at the fire raging above. Out here he was at least alone in his misery. No one else could stand the sight of the sky any more. Gar preferred it to the accusing stares of his fellow colonists.

All their attempts to communicate had failed. His team had used ideas from the ancient SETI project, transmitting universal mathematical concepts. For six Earth weeks, they had broadcast over the full range of EM frequencies detected in the aurora.

If any message had been received, it created no visible effect. The deaths continued. The aurora still burned the heavens, and he could no more tell what message it held than what was in his own son’s head. Standing, he started to walk.

She sat slumped against a boulder crying, Anton in front of her. The child had his back to her, rocking gently. Gar sat down and pulled her to him before she realized he was there. She pushed away at first but then collapsed against him. Her sobs stopped, and they held each other for a long while.

“Do you know why I came out here?” she asked finally.

He paused. “You hoped the aurora might reach Anton.”

“In a way,” she said. Gar had never seen her face so sad.

“Well, it’s quite the light sculpture,” he said.

“Gar, I came here ... so this thing would kill our son.”

The words ran around his head as he tried to pull some meaning from them. “Clara ...”

“Practically every victim’s been a woman,” she said.

“That doesn’t ...” He stopped. He understood.

“What will happen to him then? You won’t ...” She turned away, not finishing. He sat there, his face burning, realizing what she had been living with, and living with alone.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Promise me you’d take care of him, that you’d love him.”

“I promise,” he said. They made love then, there on the ground, Anton as oblivious to their passion as he was to the monster rampaging above. After, they lay gazing at the aurora.

“I realize now how Anton must feel,” Gar said.

“What do you mean?”

“Blind to other minds. We’ve been blind to this thing. Now we’re shouting, ‘Hey look, we’re alive’ and it doesn’t hear us.”

She looked at Anton. “Maybe he’s shouting too.” Clara stared at the sky. “Words, mathematical symbols are too concrete, too cerebral for this thing. We need something more abstract. Something with emotion. I can feel it.”

“Music is born of emotion.”

“That sounds like a quotation.”

“Confucius. Music can express ideas, subtleties, and emotions that words can’t. The language areas in the brain show activity when we listen to music. Too bad the sky has no ears.”

Clara smiled. “You and your music. That’s what first attracted me to you, when we met after the launch.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “The first crew briefing. You had Bach playing in the room. I remember the colours—all golds and reds.”

“Music helps to ... wait a minute. Colours?”

She looked embarrassed. “I’m a synesthete. Sounds make me see colours. That’s why I always have music playing when I work on my light sculptures. Inspiration.”

“Synesthesia. You’ve never told me about this.”

“I once worked in a laser lab with another synesthete. With her, light prompted sounds, even tastes and smells. It was so distracting for her that she had to quit her career. So when I applied for a berth on the ship, I kept quiet about it.”

“No need to be ashamed. Lots of creative types have been synesthetes. Scriabin even built a ‘color organ’ for *Prometheus: Poems of Fire ...*” He stopped and stared at the sky.

“Too bad my synesthesia isn’t like that. I could tell you what kind of music the sky is playing ...” She stopped too.

They looked at each other.

“We could use colours for different pitches,” he said.

“You mean, correlate the spectrum of EM frequencies displayed by the aurora with sound frequencies of the music.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Rhythm can just stay the same. Brightness for volume.”

“What about orchestration? The timbre of each instrument?”

“Holographic images. Different shapes for each instrument.”

“Your sculptures! We could adjust sizes too.”

“Small shapes for high notes, larger for the bass range.”

“And add more shapes for more volume as well,” he said.

“What about harmony? Melody?”

“Tough one. Don’t know what colours or shapes go together.”

“You’ll figure it out.” She stood and picked up a wriggling Anton, giving him a hug. “Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

Fourth Movement, Finale (Crescendo)

Gathered under the sea of swirling light, the entire colony seemed to hold its breath as Gar spoke the command. Lasers flared into life, and Schubert’s 8th Symphony danced in cubes and stars and dodecahedrons of rainbow colours across the sky. Gar had always thought the Unfinished was music for the end of the world. A fitting epitaph for the colony if they failed.

A computer controlled the shapes, colours and other aspects of the display, monitoring the aurora and repeating patterns that prompted lower EMR levels. “Audience feedback,” Clara called it.

The music of the lights played. The colours and shapes of the music kept changing and the colony kept waiting. Ten minutes. Fifteen.

The aurora seemed to slow, to drop in intensity. A murmur swept through the crowd, and Gar’s heartbeat quickened.

Someone screamed.

Gar spun around. A woman trembled on the ground. Another fell. Then a man. More dropped. Gar’s ears buzzed and his head throbbed. “Gar!” Clara fell to the ground, hands stretched toward him, twitching. Anton still just sat, staring at the sky.

Gar moved to help Clara. Pain flamed in his head and he fell. The air seemed thicker, misty. Then he understood.

The aurora had dropped from the sky. It enveloped them, a swirling cloud of coloured sparks and flashes. Electric shocks stung his skin. Saliva trickled from Clara's mouth. The comm-unit to control the display lay before him. He forced his hand forward. The screaming grew louder as he clawed the unit to him.

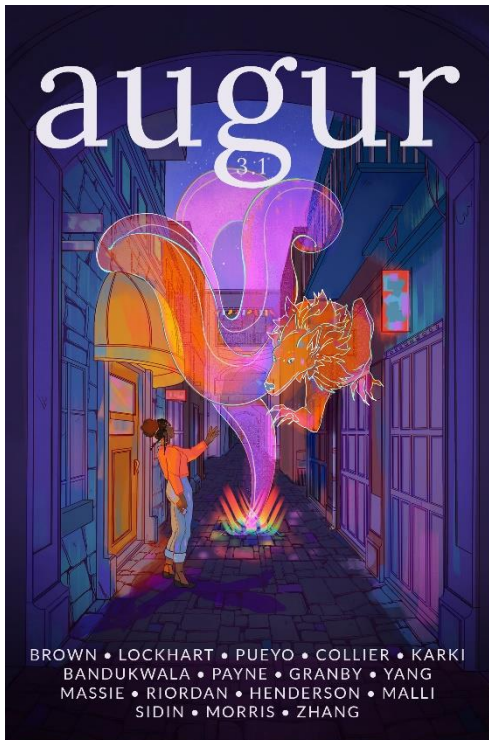
His lips began to form the command to kill the light music when he saw Anton. The child still sat but his eyes ...

Gar felt a thrill of joy as for the first time Anton's eyes focused on something in this world. Clara's sculptures danced in the sky to Gar's music and their child followed every pirouette.

Twisting his head, he saw that Clara was watching too, the happiness in her face shining through the pain.

Whether it was the sculptures or the music or the aurora, Gar neither knew nor cared. He let the comm-unit slip from his fingers. This scene would play itself out.

He reached out to clasp Clara's hand, wondering with a strange calm if they would survive. Together they lay in the dirt of that alien world and watched their son turn to look at them—and smile.



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Divining Manētuwàk at the Banks of the Wabash
– by D. A. Lockhart
Flowers of Cerrado – by H. Pueyo
His Dream – by Jamies Collier
What Lies Within – by Isha Karki
Out of Myself – by Manahil Bandukwala
She Lies an Island – by Michelle Payne
The Stone Circle – by Isobel Granby
Diptych of Summers Past – by Isabel Yang
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IMARO AND ME:
TWO INTERVIEWS WITH CHARLES R. SAUNDERS
R.I.P. 1946 - 2020

by Gregg Chamberlain



Following are two interviews with the late Charles R. Saunders. The first was taped at his Ottawa home in the late 1980s, following publication of his first Imaro book by DAW. The original interview appeared in *Borealis SF 2*. The second interview was conducted by email during the first decade of the 21st Century, when CRS had moved to Nova Scotia and continued working as a writer of heroic fantasy and also as a journalist for one of the province's daily newspapers along with chronicling the history and culture of Nova Scotia's black community.

INTERVIEW ONE

Andrew J. Offut, in his introduction to “Mai-Kulala” in *Swords Against Darkness IV*, described Charles R. Saunders as “big enough to—as we say in Kentucky—go bear huntin’ with a switch.”

Charles wouldn't need the switch. He looks like he should be a character in one of his stories, big, bold and barbaric. Yet, he is a slow-talking man who chooses his words carefully to make clear his ideas and feelings on any subject.

Born in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., in 1946, Charles lived in the shadow of the Pittsburgh steel mills until he was 11, when his family moved to Norristown, PA, just outside of Philadelphia. He graduated from Pennsylvania's Lincoln University and later finished a year of graduate studies at Purdue University in Indiana.

Charles moved to Canada near the end of the Sixties, first living in Toronto, then Hamilton, before settling in Ottawa and making the national capital his base of operations and the site for the beginning of his career as a heroic fantasy writer and teller of new African folk tales. In between writing fiction during that period he taught psychology at Algonquin College. He later moved to the Maritimes and there made his home in Nova Scotia, where he lived as a retired journalist, an esteemed local historian on Nova Scotia's black culture, and once more a teller of tales both wondrous and strange.

With the creation of first Imaro, and later, Dossouye, Charles R. Saunders helped breathe new life into the heroic fantasy genre, drawing on his background in African myth and history to entertain and enthrall many over the years. Fans of CRS and followers of Imaro and Dossouye will both learn a little bit more now about what makes their heroes tick.

G – Before you started writing heroic fantasy, did you have any previous writing experience? I understand that there was a novel you'd been working on that you never got around to finishing before you started your Imaro stories.

Charles – Well, that was still heroic African fantasy. It was about Imaro's mother. So I started really seriously writing heroic fantasy around the time I got to Ottawa in the summer of '71. The summer before I came was the time that I did my first Imaro, an extremely mutated version of which is the novel.

G – Why heroic fantasy?

Charles – It's the only type of material which I feel inspired to write. If I think about writing sf, or mainstream, or mystery, or anything like that, I think about it and that's all. I don't feel any inner spark or compulsion to do it. I think that the spark with heroic fantasy is that I'm doing something which hasn't been done before, which is writing fantasy set in a real African setting rather than Edgar Rice Burroughs' African settings. And I feel a sense of crusade or mission, that this kind of thing needs to be done and I'm here to fill the need.

G – Before you started writing Imaro and the rest of your heroic fantasies, what other experience did you have with heroic fantasy?

Charles – Started out, actually, by reading Burroughs when I was a kid. And then later on I got into Conan when the Lancer books first came out in the middle Sixties. That really turned me on to heroic fantasy and I started picking up on everything I could find, some of it good, some of it bad. I won't mention any names to protect the guilty. (chuckles)

G – And protect us innocent folk.

Charles – Right.

G – Using neo-Africa as a setting, did that originate from your being black or did you actually get inspired to use Africa?

Charles – Oh, partly because I am black. That would certainly be a good explanation for my interest in Africa. What happened was, a few years after I started reading Conan and other types of heroic fantasy, I read a book called *The Lost Cities of Africa* by Basil Davidson, and that book really changed my life, you know, the same way these born-again Christians say the Bible changed their lives. I became a born-again Africanist. And the combination of that and my interest in heroic fantasy resulted in my getting an idea. And the

idea was that I could take some of the traditions and techniques of fantasy as it now exists and combine that, or superimpose it, onto African history, culture, folklore, and mythology. Once that idea came into my head, I thought, “Well, I’ll try to write that type of fantasy.” That’s basically how Imaro and all my other African fantasy was born.

G – Have you done much extensive reading in African myth, geography, and history?

Charles – If you take a look over there at the bookshelf (indicates a loaded-down bookshelf), on the top row there’s all African history, myth, folklore, and there’s some others a little further down. I would say I’ve done a good amount of reading. Probably not as much as a person in university who was taking undergraduate and graduate courses in African studies, but I think I’ve certainly done enough to present believable backgrounds both geographically, culturally, and historically.

G – The languages of Nyumbani (pronounced: Nee-um-bah-nee), you explained once how you got the names for your world and for Imaro from an old Swahili dictionary. Are all names based on Swahili or your variant of it?

Charles – No, I’ve tried to vary the names according to region. Swahili is a fairly dominant language in the eastern region, and that’s where Imaro is born, raised, and has his initial adventures. So I used Swahili there. I’ve done some stories set on the west coast of Nyumbani, and for that I’ve used Hausa as my base language, mainly because that’s the only West African language I’ve been able to find a textbook or teach-yourself book for. There’s also Uruba. I’ve got a book on that, so I kind of mix Hausa and Uruba in the west. In the middle, I have a book which has some words of Mali, which is a north-central African nation, and when I start writing about South Nyumbani I’m going to have to get hold of some linguistic sources for Zulu and Xosa. Actually, the way you pronounce Xosa is ‘sa (here Saunders makes a loud clicking pop followed by the syllable “sa”). They have a lot of clicks in their language. If you ever listen to Miriam Makeba’s records, she sings with clicks, which is quite an accomplishment. So I do try to differentiate. In modern Africa it would be ludicrous to try to use Swahili as a base language for a whole continent, so I use linguistic diversity in my fantasy version as well.

G – What were the circumstances of your first sale of Imaro?

Charles – Okay, let’s just modify your terms a little bit. That really wasn’t a “sale” because I didn’t get paid, but it led to my first professional sale. What happened was I’d heard about Gene Day’s *Dark Fantasy* (a semi-pro fiction magazine), or read about it through a fanzine review column in a Warren magazine, *Vampirella*, about this magazine called *Dark Fantasy*. And I

wondered where Gananoque was (Ontario home of comic/fantasy artist Gene Day). I got in touch with Gene, and we corresponded, and around that time I had finished my novel of Katisa, Imaro's mother, which was primarily a learning experience. I did a couple of Imaro short stories after that, and I decided to submit them to Gene. However, right around the time I'd finished typing them with one finger, I then was confronted by a Canadian postal strike. That was in May of '74. Since Gananoque wasn't that far away I called Gene and asked if I could bring the manuscripts down for him. He said "Sure," so I went down there.

At the time Gene was sharing a house and studio with Gus (Augustine) Funnell, who later had a couple of books published by Laser. I sat down in Gus' office—he had a really huge collection of *Fantastic*, *F & SF*, and *Penthouse*—and I kind of leafed through his collection while Gene was reading the stories. Gene said, "I'm finished." So, I went up the stairs, sort of like heading off to the electric chair, and Gene just raved over them. He thought they were great and he even took the longer one. He published it in a double-issue of *Dark Fantasy*.

After they came out later that year, fall of '74, I decided to send copies of *Dark Fantasy* to Lin Carter. The reason was that Lin Carter had not long previously put out a book titled *Imaginary Worlds*. He was talking about techniques of fantasy writing and one of the things he said was it's too bad writers don't use more different types of settings. So I sent that to him, saying "Here's an example of a fantasy in a different setting." Didn't hear anything from him. Lo, and behold, about three-quarters of a year later I get a call from Gene and he says he got a letter from Lin Carter asking to reprint "City of Madness," the first published Imaro story, in *Year's Best Fantasy Stories*, a new anthology Lin was doing for DAW. And after I got up off the floor, I said, "Aw, c'mon, Gene." He said, "No, it's true, it's true." That's basically how I got started.

G – Imaro is basically a half-breed son, part Ilyassai and, from hints, I guess, part Zembabwei.

Charles – It's a little more complex than that. This all gets revealed in the series, but, yes, he is of mixed blood. Both of the peoples he is descended from are black, but they are as different as, say, a Norwegian is from an Italian.

G – Why, then, since the Ilyassai hated his mixed-blood ancestry, didn't they just slay the child out of hand? Why bother to accept his mother back into the tribe again?

Charles – It's because she performed a service for them by exposing the priest that they had as being an evil influence. Because she did this service for

them, by their own code of honour they were obliged to grant her the chance that Imaro could go through all of the tests necessary for him to become a full-fledged member of the tribe. They are a harsh people, but they are also a just people, so they did feel bound by their own code of ethics to do this. Had they not been a just people, certainly they would have kicked both Imaro and Katisa out right away.

G – But she had to go back into exile when he was taken into ...

Charles – Warrior training, yes. That was part of the deal. They couldn't bend far enough for her to remain among them, but they could bend far enough for her son to have the same chance at reaching the full stature of manhood as any other boy born into the tribe.

G – Do African tribes of our world follow that kind of path? Is a mixed-blood heritage looked upon, if not as an abomination, at least as a shame?

Charles – Like most ethnic groups, it pretty well depends on a specific people. In West Africa, you have a lot denser population. Say a person, whose mother was from Dahomey and whose father was from Ghana, that would be regarded as no more strange than a person from here with an Italian mother and a French father. In East Africa, the population was much more thinly spread, so you had more of an opportunity for clannishness to develop. Although I wouldn't stereotype and say the East Africans are more clannish than the West Africans. Just, before the European colonial period, you'd be more likely to find that kind of clannishness among those people. Also, warrior people tend to be more clannish in that way. They regard their women as not only property, but also a potential prize or spoil in war. So, if a person from another tribe or ethnic group manages to successfully impregnate a woman of another tribe, it's like a victory in war. This is why you would get this prejudice against mixed-blood people. Mixed-blood would not necessarily mean mixed-race, just different tribe or ethnic group.

G – When Imaro went through the ol-maiyo and successfully slew his lion, because of Chitendu the sorcerer's influence, he was branded a coward and underwent the Days of Shame. The Ilyassai are patterned after the Maasai of Africa, so do the Maasai have such a thing, a Days of Shame for those branded coward?

Charles – This is something I picked up obscurely in a novel about the Maasai. I don't know whether it's true or not. But in the novel that I read, a person who fails in his test against a lion is ostracized. As far as a specific Days of Shame, that was my own invention. But there is ostracism (among the Maasai). What the exact ceremony is, I'm not sure.

G – You seem to portray Imaro as a crusader against the Mashataan. Is this part of his character development? It seems every time he hears of the Mashataan or anything that pertains to the Mashataan, he almost seems obliged to go out and destroy it.

Charles – This is definitely related to his background. The name Mashataan comes from a Swahili word for demons or devils. Satan. Shaitan is the Arabic word. To Bantuize it would be to say Mashataan. Anyway, he blames them for the hassles he had as a child. It's because of them, indirectly, that his mother left the Ilyassai in the first place, and went far to the south and came back with him. The Mashataan are sort of similar to Lovecraft's gods.

Anyway, because of the Mashataan's interference in his mother's life, and in his own, he feels they are to blame for everything bad that happened to him when he was a child among the Ilyassai. He is like a weapon against them. What he doesn't know is that all this was planned, and when he finds out, that's when it really hits the fan. Post-first novel stories focus on him and the gods and demons, and their real relative merits, after he's found out how he's been used, who Imaro's father was, why his mother brought him back to the Ilyassai, why he has been manipulated and used. He fulfills this destiny for which he had been readied. Once he fulfills this destiny, he pretty well tells everybody to go to hell.

G – Imaro's mother's last words before she went into exile were: "I go, but I leave behind me a warrior." In "Turkhana Knives", Imaro remembers this scene very vividly while he is held prisoner by the Turkhana and waiting for their oi-bononk to sacrifice him. All through his life, Imaro's gone without love, without pity, without any of the softer emotions. He's only experienced hatred, dislike, maybe envy because of his size and strength, but certainly never liking or any kinship from any Ilyassai, not even his mother. You said in the story that there was no love between them, only her desire to prove that she had done no wrong. As a psychologist, what kind of an eventual effect would this have on a person?

Charles – It would turn that person, given a current setting, into either a moral crusader, like Carrie Nation, smashing the saloons, or a psychopath, a person with no feelings, no morals, no conscience. In Imaro's age, and given the forces that are working around him, it turns him into a weapon, given the proper hands to wield it. Now, he does begin to experience these other emotions in the course of the first novel. For example, the beginning of his relationship with Tanisha and Pomphis. Pomphis is also an interesting character, as he is the opposite of Imaro. Imaro begins to develop warmth and

affection for Tanisha and friendship for Pomphis, and that's really the end of the novel, with Imaro's metamorphosis from the state you mentioned into beginning to become more human, beginning to feel more the other types of emotion.

G – It's not just the warrior's woman and his sidekick.

Charles – At the very end, the end of "City of Madness," where Imaro is reconciling himself with Tanisha (he was rather upset with her at the time), Pomphis tells a joke, eh? And, earlier in that particular segment of the novel, I mention that Pomphis is quite the humourous extrovert, a miniature version of Richard Pryor. He enjoys making people laugh as much as Imaro enjoys fighting. And he keeps trying to get Imaro to laugh, but he can't. Finally, at the very end of this very heavy experience they've had in the City of Madness, Pomphis tells another joke. And Imaro starts to laugh, and he laughs so hard that he's sitting down, holding his sides, and you can see by his expression that he's never done it before. In other words, he's never laughed until he's about 18 or 19 years old. And that's how the story ends. Pomphis says to Tanisha, "I don't think this man has ever laughed before." And it's true.

So that's Imaro's initiation into the whole range of what it means to be fully human. He wouldn't laugh back when he was among the Ilyassai because that was part of the crap he was going through; people laughing at him. He came to believe that there was something wrong with laughter. Laughter was one of the weapons that was used against him so he wouldn't do it.

G – How do you compare Imaro against other fantasy heroes?

Charles – Okay, probably the one that hit everyone's mind is Imaro and Tarzan, considering the way DAW packaged the first book. That was only a surface similarity since they're both in an African setting. But Imaro does not talk to the animals and he wasn't raised by the apes.

Probably the second big comparison was between him and Conan and, again, he is the immensely powerful warrior-type like Conan is, but Conan is a hedonist, out for profit, pleasure, wine, women, and song. Imaro doesn't really care about things like that. He does do some of the things Conan does, like lead a bandit horde, but his motives are different. I don't know much about Conan's childhood, but with Imaro's childhood, he's going to have different motivations. He's a much more brooding type of person than Conan, and he certainly has no ambitions to be king.

Kane is another comparison. Imaro is not immortal like Kane is, but Karl Wagner has described Kane as being partly psychotic, as anybody who lives on and on through the centuries might become, with all the people around him dying like mayflies as far as he's concerned. He's going to have a whole

different perspective. I would say Imaro is a little bit moody too, little bit crazy like Kane is, though not for the same reasons. But I guess that would be the similar point. Also, neither of them can really be beaten. The two of them squaring off together would be the real fight of the century.

Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, the only coincidental thing is the tall guy and the short guy.

One that I guess people wouldn't pick up on, because of the colour difference, is Elric. Imaro's a lot like Elric, a person tortured inside. The difference is Imaro doesn't need a runesword to maintain his vitality. I would say that what is going on inside their heads is pretty similar, because anyone who gets hooked up with Imaro, eventually, doesn't necessarily die getting Stormbringer stabbed into him, but he's not exactly the kind of star to hitch your wagon to.

G – Going back to the Conan comparison, Conan likes the pleasures of civilization. He doesn't mind cities because he knows all the great things he can find there.

Imaro has indicated often that he much prefers being out in the bush or on the savannah, by himself if he can manage it, or with a couple of friends if he has to have them along. Does he feel freer there?

Charles – Yes, his happiest memories of his early times were when he was by himself on the savannah. Away from all the Ilyassai, the only thing he had to contend with were the animals, and at least they didn't insult him, even if they weren't his friends the way they were with Tarzan.

G – Does he feel constricted by cities? Pressured, if not to conform, at least to live up to their standards of manhood and of being human?

Charles – Just a minute (gets a manuscript from a shelf). This is a quote from a story wherein Imaro has a direct confrontation with Death, and Death wants Imaro to do him a favour. Part of the way he convinces Imaro is to tell him that he'll have no peace, that Death has his messengers who'll hound and harass Imaro wherever he goes if he tries to live by himself. And then Death says:

“And if you leave the valley to return to the cities, I will not need the messengers to insure that peace is never yours. Wherever you go in the cities of woman and man, there will be those who seek to use you as a weapon to obtain what they desire. They will use you until you are destroyed or until you destroy yourself. You know that. That is why you seek solitude.”

So that's why Imaro prefers to be by himself. Because, to his mind—and it's a good deduction for him to have made too—people are always out to use him. He doesn't want to be king, so those who would become king seek to use him

to aid them in becoming king. He doesn't care for that, so often he goes off by himself.

G – In “Death in Jukun,” Imaro is travelling through the cities of the west coast, trying to earn his living as a blacksmith. There's one line during his battle with the chemosit, his reason for attacking is “the urge to destroy anything that seemed greater than himself.” Is he driven by this need to prove himself superior to any foe?

Charles – Yes, this definitely harks back to his childhood. How, when he was a small child, he was, for his age, superior to the others, but the grownups and older adolescents were still able to take advantage of him. He saw them as greater than himself just in terms of physical size and ability. His burning desire during the time of his growing up was to become skilled and powerful enough to take care of these people. This spilled over into an attitude that continues as he gets older. He sees an animal or a man that seems more powerful than himself and he feels insecure. The only way he can retain his security is to defeat it. Anything that seems stronger, better, or more skilled than himself throws him back into this anxiety that he had when he was a kid.

G – It seems he wouldn't so much like to defeat something as obliterate anything, after he'd beaten it, so he won't be reminded that there's something stronger than himself. When he's a bandit-leader, he doesn't care much for the chants of how superior he is.

Charles – Yes, that is a contradiction. He has all this direct evidence of his own prowess, but when he was among the Ilyassai, that didn't count, that he could do something great. They'd say, “Ah, you're just a half-breed anyway.” That's why he doesn't accept praise very well.

G – He just can't win for losing.

Charles – Yeah, you got that right.

G – Let's go back to the parallels with Conan. That seems to be the first parallel everybody made in all the comments I had read and heard. One person even called Imaro a “chocolate-covered Conan.”

Charles (laughing) – That was Jessica Salmonson. Immortal words, eh? “Chocolate-covered Conan.” Well, it's true, it's true that when I started out I was using Robert E. Howard as my model. I don't deny that at all. So if there were more similarities to Conan than I thought, well, that's it.

G – And yet, John Jakes happily admitted that he'd been influenced by Robert E. Howard when he created Brak the Barbarian.

Charles – I happily admit it too. It's just that I didn't create Imaro as a tribute to Conan as Jakes did. Jakes wanted to continue the tradition begun by Howard, which Howard couldn't continue because of his untimely death.

With me, I was doing something altogether different. It just happened that the type of fantasy I like best was heroic fantasy, so I created a black hero who was along the same lines as Conan, who is the quintessential hero of heroic fantasy. That is the similarity, but, as I got into Imaro, he certainly turned out much different from Conan. I'll let you in on a little secret: when I was writing those first few Imaro stories, I actually caught myself putting Conan's name down there when I was writing about Imaro.

(laughter all around)

G – When “Half-Men of Chikanda” came out in *Fantasy Crossroads* 9, most of the letters of comment that followed its appearance were favourable. Loay Hall said your style was decidedly un-Howardian. Darrel Schweitzer was quite favourable but he said that “Imaro can best be summed up as a black Conan.” He said he wished you would avoid stock sword-and-sorcery elements. He also suggested that you base your characters and situations more on African history, culture, and legendry. Seems to me you were doing that and he just hadn't picked up on it.

Charles – I was just learning, and when you're just learning, one of the best things to do is to imitate a model. That's why that stuff sounded Howardian even though it was African. The Howardian influence seemed so strong that you couldn't recognize the African elements. The Half-Men of the title, for example, are taken directly from African myth. Beings that are split down the middle, half flesh, half stone or wax.

G – Some people have been decidedly unfavourable, if not downright harsh, in their criticism. One person criticized your use of neo-Swahili for your titles. He considered them unpronounceable and pretentious. Has anyone else been so strong in their criticism?

Charles – Yeah, one guy who runs an amateur press association. He has criticized me repeatedly and harshly through the association newsletter and through letters to the editor. Another guy called me a literary bozo once. (chuckles) But mostly the response has been favourable, even back when I was first writing, when some of the criticism was justifiable because I was just starting out and just learning.

G – What are some of the trials and tribulations of a beginning writer, whose main markets are the semi-prozines?

Charles – Only way you're going to have trials and tribulations is if you go into that market thinking that you're going to make a living. I don't think anybody is dumb enough to think that. Or if you really do believe that is THE way to get pro recognition. I did it, and several other people did, but if you go into it with that as your primary attitude, you're leaving yourself open to

disappointment. On the other hand, if you're doing it for the practice, for the feedback, for the experience of getting published, I think it's good. I think it's a good way of getting experience now. As far as breaking in goes, it's no better or worse than any other way. But for getting experience, I think it's one of the better ways of doing it. Some people prefer to keep submitting to the pros and getting it sent back, in hopes that they can improve by graduating from just a piece of coloured paper for a rejection slip to getting a personal note from the editor to finally having the editor tell you what you're doing wrong and how to change it, to finally making the changes and getting a sale. There, that's one way of doing it. And I don't begrudge those who do it that way. I just think that doing it the small press way is just as valid an alternative and I get very angry at people who just totally dismiss the small press.

G – In “Mai-Kulala,” the Mashataan had Imaro right in their clutches and they let him get away. Why?

Charles – “Mai-Kulala” was one of the first stories I'd written, and the full background of the Imaro series was not yet fully developed. Were I to revise that story, I'd change Mai-Kulala's evil genius into some kind of forest spirit. As it is, the Mashataan are confined to another plane of reality. Their only real influence is mental; they can manipulate susceptible minds. Imaro's mind is obviously not susceptible to them.

G – It would seem that since their conquest and loss of Nyumbani, they've grown weaker, almost insignificant compared to the Sky-Walkers.

Charles – Okay, getting into my cosmology. I've mentioned before the Mashataan are like the gods of the Cthulhu Mythos. The Sky-Walkers are like Erich von Däniken's gods from the stars. Then you have the gods of Earth. This is another Lovecraftian idea, that each planet has its own local gods, which are nurtured by the belief that the people have in them. When they sometimes come into conflict with cosmic deities, they're reduced to insignificance. Now that's not really the basis upon which I've formed my own cosmology, but I do have three distinct sets of gods: the Mashataan, the Cloud-Walkers, and the earth spirits. These last are gods of natural forces, which were there all the time but just never awakened or made aware of them. Then the awareness people had of a natural force awakened the godhood within the force.

G – Something like the Japanese kami, or spirits that dwell in everything.

Charles – I would say so, yes. What anthropologists call animism. So you would have three almost competing supernatural forces. Imaro is basically what could be considered a pawn in the battle between the Mashataan and the

Cloud-Walkers, except he's not quite a pawn. He's put upon, but he's not a pawn. (laughs at his pun)

G – You've started another series with "Agbewe's Sword" in Jessica Salmonson's *Amazons* anthology for DAW.

Charles – Yes, her name is Dossouye.

G – She is something like Imaro.

Charles – Yes, in a way, Dossouye's kind of a female counterpart to Imaro, but her life is a bit different from his. She was a part of her community, an integral part of her community, all the way up to the conflict that forced her to move beyond her culture and ideals. Now, she's a wanderer, like Imaro. And the two of them are going to meet, eventually.

G – Unlike Howard's Conan and his Red Sonya of Rogatine, whom Roy Thomas re-incarnated as Red Sonja of Hyrkania when he was writing the *Conan* comics for Marvel.

Charles (smiling) – Yeah, what you've got here is a chocolate-covered Conan and a brown sugar Sonja. Yeah, they're going to meet, but it's not going to be your usual meeting where you get this Amazonian heroine who gets into a fight with the brawny hero and that kind of deal. I'm not dealing in that kind of cliché. It's going to be a much more complex kind of relationship than that. And I don't think they're even going to get laid, to be perfectly honest, which is going to be a departure from that kind of story.

G – What about your neo-African folktales. *Weirdbook* editor/publisher Paul Ganley once described them as African fairy tales, which I thought then was a putdown.

Charles – That's a little unfortunate, although I think Paul Ganley has a higher opinion of fairy tales in general, and he may have thought he was complimenting me. I intend to keep on doing them. My main attention has been taken up with the Imaro novels.

G – Are you re-writing African folktales or taking an idea and working from it?

Charles (smiling) – Taking an idea. I can't be sued for plagiarism.

G – Would be interesting. An entire nation suing one author for plagiarism.

Charles – Ha, yeah! Here's an interesting story, a little in-joke. This book (*A Treasury of African Folklore*) is by Harold Courlander, who was, a few years ago, involved in a lawsuit with Alex Haley, author of *Roots*. And the reason Courlander sued Haley was that Courlander claimed Haley had copied passages from Courlander's book, *The African*, and made that part of Kunta Kinte's early experiences. It turned out that there were some fairly similar passages and Haley settled out of court for half a million dollars. Now

Courlander is an Africanist and he's put together this collection of African myths and folktales, which I find is a goldmine because there's all sorts of things in there which I can use and modify to my own purposes. And I don't think he can sue me because you can't copyright a myth, and besides, I don't directly reproduce the myth. I'll give you an example. You remember my story, "Amma", about the woman who was actually a gazelle?

G – Reprinted in DAW's *Year's Best Horror Stories*, which I thought was odd. Not actually a horror story.

Charles – Gerry Page wanted something by me and it's really great when you get an editor that really likes your stuff. In this story, the original myth was about a man who is looking for a wife, and he keeps turning down every woman who comes along. He finally falls for this mysterious woman, and she turns out to be this gazelle who can change into a human. So he's a farmer, married to this gazelle-woman. He plants his crops, the crops come up, she turns into a gazelle and eats the crop. Unfortunately for her, a neighbour sees her turn into a gazelle. So, when she comes back to the house in human form, there's the whole village waiting for her. They beat her with sticks and she falls down dead upon the ground and becomes a gazelle again. And since she ate the crop, they have her for supper. It's not really cannibalism because she was really a gazelle. That's the myth. Now, you've read "Amma" and you know damn well "Amma" is not a rip-off of that myth. I just took the basic idea and made a story out of it instead of a myth. A story has a plot, a beginning, middle, and end, characters who have motivation, real dialogue. A myth or folktale is entirely different.

G – A means of educating or passing on history. In this case, "Amma" played up the more tragic aspects of the original folktale.

Charles – Anyway, that's the way I do the African myth-tales. So, really, I do two different kinds of work. One is straight heroic fantasy, and the other is re-telling African folktales. Which, I suppose, is what some people call "high fantasy."

G – What are the chances for publication of an anthology of your folktales?

Charles – Depending on how Imaro does and depending on how many more I do, I think it'd be a pretty good possibility, but, on the other hand, I guess it depends on what a publisher's interested in.

G – Where do you see your future?

Charles – I don't think I'm ever going to make a living as a writer because I'm too slow and moody. I talked to Karl Edward Wagner at a convention in Toronto once. He always reminds me a little of myself because he always writes

his stuff out in longhand first. I can type with all my fingers now but I'd never make a living as a typist.

This book of Karl's, *In the Wake of the Night*, was three years past its deadline, which sounds like something I would do. So I said to him, "With all this, Karl, how do you make your living as a writer?" He said, "I've got a wife who works." (laughs) And she was right there, nodding her head, at the time. Since I don't have that particular advantage and I'm still slow, if you're going to define success as making a living at it, then forget it.

But if *Imaro* does well, if my next novels in the trilogy are as good, or even better, I think I'll at least have established myself as a name. Perhaps even a force. There'll always be those who put me down. But even before I got a book accepted, people like Karl Wagner, Tanith Lee, and Michael Moorcock had read my stuff and said they liked it. They wouldn't have any reason to lie to me. I think, in terms of recognition, I can only go up. I'm happy about that. That's one of the main reasons I write. For recognition. Same reason Imaro fights.

INTERVIEW TWO

G – It has been a long and winding road since that original interview and your early successes in heroic fantasy with Imaro and Dossouye, your "new African folk tales," and your other writings. What thoughts sprang to mind for you as you re-read that interview and how would you say you and your work have changed from that earlier Charles R. Saunders and his writings?

Charles – I'd say I was incurably optimistic back then. I didn't even take into account the possibility that my books might not sell well enough to encourage my publisher to keep publishing me. I didn't anticipate how that road would wind, nor did I foresee the roadblocks and detours that were coming. If I'd possessed such prescience, would I have continued writing? Sure. I was also stubborn as a mule back then, and that quality hasn't changed during the intervening decades. The primary change between my current self and the one you first interviewed all those years ago is the most obvious one: experience. The well of creativity into which I dip as a writer is much deeper these days.

G – Part of your original inspiration for Imaro, and later for Dossouye and other writings, stemmed from your early Africanist inclination and the desire to explore, discover and promote your own cultural roots and heritage combined with your literary love of heroic fantasy. Where has your search for your own soul of Africa taken you since those days in Ottawa?

Charles – Back then, I was re-imagining Africa’s past to create an alternate vision of the continent in which European colonization did not have the effect it did during the history of the world we know. Thus, I tried not to allow current conditions in Africa to affect the way I told stories in my alternate Africa—with the notable exception of apartheid, which was still going strong during the 1970s and ’80s.

Now, I don’t compartmentalize the way I did then. I don’t deliberately incorporate the problems of modern Africa into my other-Africas (There are more than one). But I don’t make it a point to separate them, either. It’s a matter of what helps the stories to get told. Or untold. For example, the Rwanda genocide of 1994 led me to discard part of the original *Imaro* I that was published by DAW Books in 1981, and substitute a new part for the Night Shade Books edition in 2006.

G – What is the status of *Imaro*, Dossouye and your other fantasy works now?

Charles – The never-before-published fourth *Imaro* volume, *Imaro: The Naama War*, is now available at lulu.com. Pending books include the fifth *Imaro* novel and a collection of *Imaro* short stories that were not incorporated into the novels. That collection will include three brand-new *Imaro* stories. I finished writing the second volume of Dossouye’s adventures last fall, and that book is scheduled to be published this year. My other works are pending or in progress.

G – How does it feel to be “back in the saddle,” so to speak, alongside of *Imaro* and Company?

Charles – Feels great! I had always regretted that readers of *Imaro* were left hanging high and dry with the fourth and fifth volumes consigned to literary limbo. I thank my Australian friend, Benjamin Szumzkyj, for inspiring me to get back in the saddle in the first place seven years ago; Night Shade Books for its efforts to get my books back into print and the valuable editorial suggestions they made as I was rewriting the first two volumes; and Sword & Soul Media for picking up the fallen torch and publishing the rest of *Imaro*’s adventures.

G – In your own mind, and use comparisons with actual people, living or deceased, when you are writing his adventures, how do you yourself visualize *Imaro*? How close has any of the artists you have mentioned ever come to depicting the character as you yourself see him? The same question applies also to your Dossouye character.

Charles – All the artists who have depicted *Imaro* and Dossouye have done a good job—even Ken Kelly, who did the infamous “Black Tarzan” cover for the

first (DAW) book. I know I've complained a lot about that cover over the years, but it was the concept that bothered me. The art, in itself, was good.

But no one has shown Imaro or Dossouye the way I see them. If I had artistic ability, I could make that depiction. I don't, so I rely on artists, who do well. It's not that my characters couldn't possibly look like the way the artists saw them—except, of course, for the “Black Tarzan.”

As to how I visualize Imaro ... he is like a combination of a power forward in the NBA and a defensive end in the NFL. Liteness and bulk ... Back in the 1970s, when I was first writing Imaro, I was very impressed by Roger E. Mosley, who was in *Magnum* (original *Magnum, P.I.* television series) and had a great guest role in *Baretta*. So there was probably some of him in my mind as I envisioned Imaro.

Dossouye does not look like those female bodybuilders, although I have nothing against that look. Her appearance is a combination of the young Grace Jones and Alek Wek, the Sudanese supermodel.

G – you could consider doing a chapbook edition of your essays on Nyumbani and its real-time counterparts as a sort of companion to the Imaro and Dossouye books.

Charles – The chapbook idea you mentioned is a possibility, but it's kind of in the back of my queue of priorities.

G – Mention of the Ken Kelly cover for the first DAW *Imaro* book brings up the matter of your unfortunate, and to an extent, unhappy experiences when you made the leap from published writer in magazines and anthologies to a published author of books. After all the years have passed, have you come to terms in your mind with that misfortune or is there any bitterness still lingering that may have inspired you to go the self-publishing route you are pursuing now through lulu.com?

Charles – There was definitely bitterness earlier. What lingers now is more a sense of disappointment. However, I have to remember that Donald Wollheim of DAW Books, who was one of the giants of science-fiction editing and publishing, thought my work was good enough to publish in the first place. That is definitely a positive. Same thing with Night Shade Books. They had already revived Karl Edward Wagner's *Kane* series, and also the work of Manley Wade Wellman and William Hope Hodgson. And they were publishing the likes of Glen Cook and Joe Lansdale. And they thought I was good enough to be included in that company. A lot of writers don't make it that far.

Even taking all that into account, however, I would be lying if I said that I wasn't disappointed by the fact that both publishers dropped the series because the sales weren't good enough to justify continuing. What's really

frustrating is that 99 per cent of the feedback I get is positive—and this is response from people I’ve never met before. So, people who read my books tend to like them. But they’ve got to buy them to read them. The lulu route gives people the opportunity to buy them.

G – How did you discover lulu.com? What are the advantages of this method over the usual publishing houses for an author?

Charles – I had known about lulu for a while, but didn’t think about publishing through them, because I already had a publisher: Night Shade. Before Night Shade pulled the plug, my friend, Brother Uraeus, brought up the idea of publishing a collection of my Dossouye stories through lulu’s print-on-demand service. I thought that was a good idea, especially when Uraeus said his friend, Mshindo Kuumba, was interested in doing the cover art. We were working on that when the news came that Night Shade was going to stop the Imaro series after two books. So I asked Uraeus if he would like to publish the remaining Imaro novels. He said, “Of course!” So we formed Sword & Soul Media, via lulu.

So far, we’ve published three of my books: *Dossouye*, *Imaro: The Trail of Bohu*, and *Imaro: The Naama War*. And more books are on the way. One advantage of print-on-demand is that you don’t have to sink a big pile of money into printing a lot of books, any number of which may be returned unsold by bookstores. Another advantage is that print-on-demand books never go out of print.

G – Could you describe the experience, and the work involved, in getting your first new Imaro novel, *The Naama War*, out to the public, from the moment you sat down to start drafting out the story to the moment when you held the first finished copy in your hands?

Charles – This was kind of like launching a spacecraft in which the crew goes into suspended animation for a long time, then wakes up and lands the ship at its destination. *Imaro IV* was launched in 1984. At first, it was going to be the final section of *Imaro III*. But as I was working on it, my friend, Gordon Derry, who was reading the manuscript as it went along, suggested that section should be a book in itself. At first, I resisted that suggestion because I just wanted to get the book finished. Then, as it kept going and going, I realized that Gordon was right. So I found an appropriate cut-off point for the third novel, and soldiered on with the fourth, which turned out to be longer than any of the first three books. I finished the book in 1985, and sent it off to DAW. But DAW turned it down, for reasons stated above.

A year later, there was a glimmer of hope when Blue Jay Books expressed an interest in it. But Blue Jay went under before any deal could be made. That

was when *Imaro IV* went into suspended animation for nearly 20 years. Then Night Shade came along, bringing me out of suspended animation. I animatedly rewrote and improved *Imaro IV*, only to see it knocked off another publisher's schedule. Under other circumstances, the series might have gone into suspended animation again. Fortunately, Sword & Soul Media was there, and now the book is out, and I feel vindicated.

G – *Imaro: The Naama War*. We all go through life, at one point or another, wondering what is our reason for being. Imaro found the answer and now, I would imagine, regrets even asking the question. Having now read this-long-overdue novel, the reader is left with the question, what is there left for Imaro?

Charles – I envision the first Imaro novel as a very long prologue to the next three, which constitute the main part of his saga. For every prologue, there is an epilogue. So the fifth Imaro novel, which is in the Sword & Soul Media pipeline, is the book-length epilogue. At the end of *Imaro IV*, Imaro's work is not yet done.

G – It's a funny thing. Having read "The Skeleton Coast" back in the days when your stories were appearing in *Dark Fantasy* and other small-press magazines along with "Death in Jukun" in one of the DAW anthologies, I and other Imaro fans knew there was an epic story involving our Ilyassai exile and the Mashataan, but the end result proved even more tragic than expected. The afterword you attached to the end of the book indicates that you've been carrying this manuscript around for a long while. How long have you had this tale in mind and has the final version of the story changed at all from its original form?

Charles – Strangely enough, I wrote some post-*Imaro IV* stories long before I wrote the *Trail of Bohu* and *Naama War* novels. So I had the events that unfolded in those novels in my mind years before I got down to actually writing the books. In general, the outline of the novels is as I first conceived. But new details just kept sneaking up on me ... not that I'm complaining.

G – Every writer injects something of himself or herself into some part of either the story or the character. Where is Charles R. Saunders in the person and prose of Imaro? Or of any of the other major characters, both good and bad, in his saga?

Charles – You know, Gregg, I would really prefer not to get into that. If there's any part of me that's in Imaro and his stories, I would rather not acknowledge it.

G – You once provided a timeline for Imaro, in the spirit of P. Schuyler Miller's outline of Conan's career, in which you listed all the existing stories, along with several ideas or hints for others, including the *Naaman War*, though

it wasn't named as such. How much more Imaro can we look forward to? Where does his saga lead?

Charles – Another volume in the Sword & Soul Media pipeline is a collection of the seven Imaro short stories that did not get subsumed into the novels. I also wrote three new Imaro stories especially for that collection, which is tentatively titled *The Warrior's Way*. Also, last month I finished an Imaro novella for an upcoming anthology of African-based fantasy stories. I'm pretty sure that will be the last Imaro story I write, because there are other projects that are impatiently demanding my attention. But you know the old saying ... "never say never."

G – Spinoff stories. What is the likelihood of more stories of Pomphis, pre-Imaro, and of Tanisha, Katisa, and others?

Charles – Spinoff stories are not on my mind right now. I have, however, gathered my non-Imaro, non-Dossouye African-based fantasy volumes into a collection. That collection will include previously published stories about Pomphis, Katisa and Majnun. I don't have any new spinoff stories at the forefront of my mind.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Gregg Chamberlain

Gregg treasures the friendship he enjoyed with Charles R. Saunders, and the joy derived from CRS' stories and articles. Rest in peace, Charles. You made your mark on the world, and the world is richer for having had you present for a short time and for having received the gifts of your imagination and passion.

Greg Fewer

A *montréalais* by birth and descent from seventeenth-century colonists, Greg Fewer has grown up largely outside of Canada. His first and, for many years, only published story appeared in 2007. He took up genre writing again in 2018 and has had flash fiction and haiku published in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Dirty Girls Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Schlock! Webzine*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Tigershark Magazine*.

Craig Hemsing

Craig lives near Vancouver with his wife and two sons. Following a satisfying technical career, he now pursues his interests in writing, music composition, visual arts, and video gaming—in decreasing order of success.

This is his second published story; he was one of three published winners of a Flash Fiction Contest held by Reality Skimming Press at VCON 2016.

Nicole Iversen

Nicole has previously been published in an array of anthologies including *Alice Unbound: Beyond Wonderland*, an anthology by Exile Editions, *Power: In the Hands of One, In The Hands of Many*, an anthology published by WCSFA, and two short stories in the *Brave New Girls* anthologies. “A Good Bad Day” is her second publication for *Polar Borealis*.

Michael Dean 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*, *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>

Cleoniki Kesidis

Cleoniki Kesidis is a sci-fi/fantasy writer, a copywriter, and a skating coach. “Merely a Hand” is her first published short story. She lives in Gatineau with her husband and daughter, where she enjoys reading everything she can get her hands on and filling her balcony with plants.

Melanie Marttila

Melanie has been writing since 1977 and her poetry and short fiction have been published in small press anthologies and in magazines such as *Bastion Science Fiction* and *On Spec*. She received her Master of English Literature and Creative Writing in 1999 and is a professional member of the Canadian Authors Association and SF Canada. She lives in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada on the street that bears her family name and in the house where three generations of her family have lived.

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Rio Murphy

Rio was once a cancer patient and a formal Zen student at a monastery in Ottawa. She didn't die of cancer so she resigned from the Monk track and returned to her previous life as a domestic/care-giver and part-time cashier. Her name *Rio* was not so much an affectation as the result of her poor pronunciation of the Japanese, and shortened so as not to be confused with any Dharma name, okay, maybe *a bit* of an affectation. She writes a blog, "Seriously Clowning Around" about practicing Soto Zen and being a clown.

K.B. Nelson

KB Nelson is a writer who thrives in the intersection of art and science. You can find her poetry in a variety of publications including *Nourish-Poetry*, *Sea-To-Sky Review*, *Loud Coffee Press* and *The Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*. KB has resided from coast to coast in Canada, in Arizona, and in New Zealand. A graduate of Simon Fraser University's Southbank writing program, she currently lives in Greater Vancouver.

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Lynne is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D. student currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has been published in venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *Augur Magazine*, and *Plenitude*. Their first collection, "A Refuge of Tales," was funded through an Ontario Arts Council grant and published by Renaissance Press. To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS, or for a complete bibliography, visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com

Douglas Shimizu

Douglas lives in Vancouver where he enjoys writing, drawing and photography. His inspiration for his poem *Floater* comes from his training in Out of the Body Experience and Remote Viewing.

Douglas Smith

Douglas Smith's stories have appeared in thirty-four countries and twenty-six languages, including appearances in *InterZone*, *Amazing Stories*, *Baen's Universe*, *Weird Tales*, *Cicada*, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, and *On Spec*. His book-length publications include a novel, three short story collections, and a writers' guide.

He has won Canada's Aurora Award three times and been a finalist for the Astounding Award (formerly John W. Campbell Award) for Best New Writer, the juried Sunburst Award, the CBC Bookies Award, and France's juried Prix Masterton and Prix Bob Morane.

J.J. Steinfeld

Poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published twenty books, including *Identity*

Dreams and Memory Sounds (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2014), *Madhouses in Heaven, Castles in Hell* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2015), *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), and *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies internationally, and over fifty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

For his most recent publication,
Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles: Speculative Fictions New & Selected
(Ekstasis Editions, 2019), see:

<http://ekstasiseditions.com/recenthtml/gregorsamsa.htm>

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Marcie is a writer/poet/editor from Gibsons, British Columbia, and her work has appeared in such publications as *On Spec*, *Strange Horizons*, *Weird Tales*, and *Polar Borealis*, as well as in various collections and anthologies. She is not sure whether or not she is “quite the character” but as an acting teacher she prefers being multiple characters, usually at different times.

Lisa Timpf

Lisa is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in a variety of venues including *New Myths*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Polar Borealis*, *From a Cat’s View I and II*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, and *Future Days*. When not writing, Lisa enjoys bird-watching and spending outdoor time with her border collie, Emma.

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books,, and more than 100 short stories. He's also published occasionally in English. Recent publications in English include the story "The Snows of Yesteryear" (in the Tor anthology *Carbide-Tipped Pens*, reprinted twice in English and translated into Italian and Chinese, earning an Honourable Mention from Gardner Dozois), the story "The Call of the Freezing Souls" in *On Spec*, and the story "The Way to Compostela" in *Asimov's* (Jan.-Feb. 2020).

Alexander Winfield

Alexander Winfield is a writer and puppeteer. He was born in Bermuda, where he grew up in and around the ocean. He made many friends there, though not all of them were human. He has been writing since a child, creating large, shared universes with his siblings, who also write. He has worked with puppets around the world; for now, he lives in Toronto.

Adi Zeharia

Born in Israel of Iraqi-Jewish heritage, Adi came to Canada at the age of six. When she isn't writing SF&F stories, she works as a Yoga instructor and as a Thai massage practitioner. *Miss you, Lisa* is her first published story.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

Many thanks to Gregg Chamberlain for offering his interviews with the Late Charles S. Saunders. I was able to fit them in just before publication.