

# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #25 – April 2023)



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022)

Issue #25 – April 2023 (Vol.7#2. WN#25)

**Publisher/Editor:** R. Graeme Cameron

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COVER: *Bug* – by Eric Chu

## EDITORIAL

I am addressing the new elephant in the room, AI writing programs, from the point of view of my ignorance and panic. Bear with me.

ChatGPT was introduced to the world in November, 2022. It hit the publishing world like the Mother of all Cyclones, creating a maelstrom of anxiety and hysteria over the prospect of writers and publishers whirling down into the abyss of zero prospects and zero income. How come?

As I understand it, you can issue a prompt like “Write a science fiction story about Don Quixote defeating windmills in the style of H.P. Lovecraft and Voltaire combined.” How long does it take the program to write the story? About three seconds. I believe there is a limit to the number of words produced. No problem. Issue a series of prompts and within minutes you have enough material to massage into a complete novel.

Already, by mid-February 2023, there were 200 self-published books available through Amazon which listed ChatGPT as co-author. And how many which failed to mention they were written by ChatGPT? Unknown. Could be thousands. Amazon doesn’t require disclosure of human origin.

There are even self-published books online *about* ChatGPT written *by* ChatGPT. Tip of the iceberg. Investors are pouring money into startups working on similar programs, some of which are already available as competition to ChatGPT. Why? There’s money to be made. Writing books with AI programs has become the latest consumer frenzy, the latest get-rich-quick scheme pushed by self-declared financial experts/gurus. Result? Thousands, possibly millions, of writer wannabes who never seriously considered making the effort because they were too busy are now hypnotised by the prospect of being a “published author” after a minimum amount of effort.

For example, according to a Reuters news item, the “author” of the 119-page novella “Galactic Pimp, Vol. 1” apparently has a YouTube video allegedly boasting anybody who wants to can equal what he did, namely complete a book in less than a day, and thus easily publish 300 or more books a year.

Last year something like 3 million books were self-published in North America. I’m assuming 99% plus could not be found in bookstores. So, stiff competition in social media struggling to come to the attention of potential buyers. By the end of 2023, with ChatGPT and its ilk opening up *instant* self-publishing to literally everybody, I’m guessing there could be as many as 30 million books self-published, or 300 million. Competition for consumer attention will be tooth and claw.

Granted, most of the products of ChatGPT and its ilk are dull, turgid, awkward, and easily spotted. But these programs are designed to learn from experience and are literally becoming better and better day by day. Bot-written essays have become an enormous problem in universities, colleges, and even high schools. One teacher complained “It’s getting so you can only tell it’s fake because it’s superior in concept and style to all the others.”

As for fiction, I hear writers saying it will take years before Bot-writing can equal the appeal of products of seasoned professional writers, decades maybe. I think it will happen by the end of this year. I suspect writers are misled by their own experience of how long it took to develop their own skills and ability to write well. Computer programs learn much faster.

Certainly, even the current level of bad-quality bot writing has already had a negative impact on magazine publishing. *Clarkesworld*, which normally is always open to submissions, had to stop accepting stories. Seems their rejection rate suddenly increased ten-fold as February saw them flooded with hundreds of obviously bot-written pieces of crap the “authors” were claiming as their own work.

Now, there *are* magazines which will accept AI-written or AI-assisted work. And more and more authors are stating AI programs are useful tools they collaborate with to produce work that is entirely, or mostly, the product of decision-making on the author’s part. The implication being that it is little more than the traditional partnership between an author and a dictionary, or that of an author and the necessity of conforming to the formula demanded by a publisher.

I’m not going to debate the above. What I’m addressing is the problem facing traditional authors who spend months or even years sweating over stories and novels before they dare submit them.

Say, for example, you spend six months finishing a story and then, taking advantage of my next submission window, you submit it to *Polar Borealis*. Normally I get about 100 stories submitted. So, there’s your competition. Not too bad, especially since I will be looking to accept 32 stories for the next 4 issues. Pretty good odds.

But not if I’m flooded with 500 or 1,000 or 10,000 bot-written stories most of which took less than a day to create and many of which might not be obviously AI-composed and could well be good enough to tempt me. Point is your odds of being accepted will have dropped into the toilet.

Further, being a one-man operation, 100 stories is about the maximum I can handle in a month of reading and deciding. Granted, even if I get 10,000

stories, I should be able to quickly reject them based on the first page, or even the first paragraph. But what if the average quality is so good, I'm forced to devote considerable time to pondering each story? I don't have the time or resources to do that. That means I won't be able to read *your* story.

How are magazine editors to cope? They can do what most mainstream book publishers do, refuse unsolicited manuscripts, and depend entirely on writers with established reputations, writers they have previously published and, above all, with writers represented by established agents whose reputation is sound and respected. A beginning writer without an agent might as well burn their manuscript. Submission windows in the book publishing industry for unsolicited manuscripts are so rare as to be considered freakish. I hate to think the magazine publishing industry is going to follow that route.

Here's the thing: the whole purpose of *Polar Borealis* is to provide a market for beginning writers. I will cheerfully publish works by established professionals willing to accept my "ludicrously low rates" (as one well-known writer put it), but it is the authors who've never been previously published that I am keen on accepting, to give them needed validation and boost their confidence so they can tackle the task of getting published elsewhere with renewed vigour. How will I know which ones are legit?

It so happens I plan to be open to poetry submissions throughout the month of September and to story submissions throughout the month of November. Do I plan to vet manuscripts any differently? Yes. I will divide submissions into five categories.

First, works by authors I have previously published, or previously rejected, the point being that they are people I have dealt with before.

Second, writers I have personally met or communicated with for many years.

Third, established authors whose good reputation I am aware of.

Of these three categories, unless I hate them or they hate me, I will print out their stories and read them from beginning to end at least twice to form my impressions and figure out whether I want to publish them. Everybody gets an equally fair shake.

Fourth category, all submitted MS where the author admits it is a "collaboration" with ChatGPT or any other AI writing program. These I will automatically reject. I am out to publish beginning writers who have spent months or even years of blood, sweat and toil attempting to hone their craft. I want fully human input in the stories and poems I publish. Cyborg spawn can go elsewhere.

And finally, fifth, unsolicited manuscripts from authors unknown to me. I will look at them all, giving particularly close reading to those who mention they have never been previously published. I am particularly good at spotting inconsistencies that knock the reader out of the story, so there's a fair chance the clumsy logic and unbalanced composition allegedly common in current AI writing will leap out of the MS like red flags as obvious as neon signs in a dark alley, or so I hope.

There are many other reasons why I might reject a manuscript from a writer unknown to me, all to do with my perception of the story and how it is written. Obvious bothood is merely an additional reason.

At any rate, it will be interesting to see if there is any radical increase in the number of MS submitted. That would be a clue I am part of what will be submerged by the coming tsunami of bot-written manuscripts and will need to exercise greater vigilance.

Then again, considering the token rate of low payment I offer, I might not have to worry. Could be most fake authors, the ones without even a pretense of working with their bots but who instead simply package off whatever their bots produce without so much as changing awkward wording, will aim for higher-paying markets and leave me alone. On the other hand, perhaps they will seek to cash in wherever or whenever they can.

After all, they have a limited window of opportunity. If ChatGPT and its ilk get so good on a professional level as to be easily mistaken for the best of human authors, who needs fake authors? Better for a magazine to generate its own stories, assign pen names to the non-existent writers, and publish fascinating and intriguing stories sure to entertain readers clamoring for more. In-house, expense-free stories will prove a sure path to profits. Don't need no stinking authors, fake or genuine. This could well be the future of short story markets. However, not for a while yet. Maybe 10 years from now.

Be that as it may, how can you give yourself a leg up when submitting to *Polar Borealis* later this year? Simple. I will be attending the *NASFiC* in July and *When Words Collide* in August. I'll be easy to spot, the old guy sitting down staring vacantly into space. Just walk up and introduce yourself. Give me the opportunity to get to know you. I'd be more than happy to chat with anybody planning to submit MS. Maybe one-on-one for a few minutes in the hall, or a bunch of you for an hour or so in hospitality. Whatever is convenient to all involved. That's my purpose in attending, to meet writers, especially if they are potential contributors. So, don't be shy, say "Hi!"

Cheers! *The Graeme*

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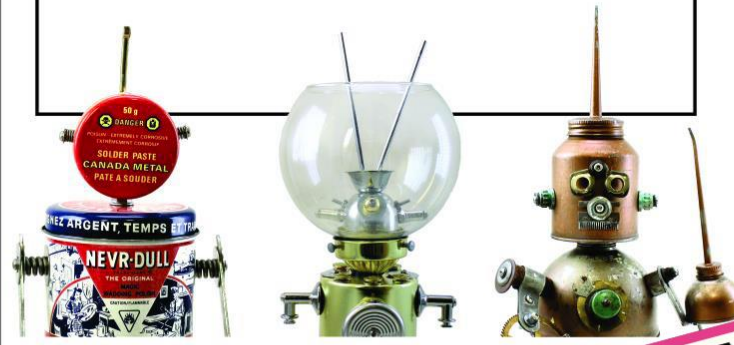


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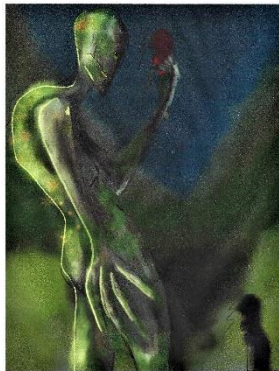
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### POLAR STARLIGHT #9 – March 2023

## POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry  
(Issue #9 – March, 2023)



Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Starlight is edited by Rhea E. Rose. Each issue features cover art and 16 speculative fiction genre poems.

Cover of the 9th issue, *Golem*, is by Kasia Runté.

The 9th issue contains poetry by Roxanne Barbour, Rodolfo Boskovic, Jameson Grey, James Grotkowski, Michèle Laframboise, David Shultz, Frances Skene, Richard Stevenson, Elina Taillon, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Lisa Timpf, Gerald L. Truscott, & Alexander Zelenyj.

Available for free download at: < [Polar Starlight #9](#) >



# SURPRISE!

*by Gregg Chamberlain*

*!Bing! !Bong!*

“Trick or treat!  
Smell my feet!  
Give me something  
Good to eat!”

*Got brrraaiinnnzzz?*

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NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #34 is published out of Victoria, BC, Canada.



Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband-and-wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson.

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

**COVER:** *It's Lonely Out in Space*  
– by Karl & Stephanie Johanson

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*Tea for Two* – by Xauri'EL Zwaan

*In the Shade* – by Jeremy Schnee

*She Hulk: Attorney at Law*—Review

Find it here: [Neo-opsis #34](#)

# FAST TRACK

*By Geoffrey Hart*

“Mr. Jones.”

“Mr. Nicholson.” Old Man Nicholson was senior management. A founding partner, in fact. His presence in an office this far down the management chain was intimidating. “How can I help you?”

“I’ve assigned you the unenviable task of informing everyone in your division they’ve been laid off.”

“Right before Christmas? *Really?*”

“Of course. It’s traditional. The gift that keeps giving, you might say.” He chuckled, then held up a pale finger to forestall a response. “You must do this in person. No shortcuts like form letters, e-mail, or”—Nicholson shuddered—“videos on Instagram.”

“Isn’t that kind of callous?”

Nicholson pursed his lips, then sighed. “It’s all about the spin. We prefer to spin it as providing the human touch to soften the blow.”

“But right before Christmas, Mr. Nicholson?”

Nicholson sighed, looked at the floor as if seeking strength, then gazed up at his junior, who quickly avoided that disturbing gaze. “Mr. Jones, you were selected for this task because we felt you had management potential. If we were wrong, please correct our misunderstanding so we can rectify the situation and avoid any future unpleasantness involving dashed hopes, tears, recrimination... *premature layoffs...*”

Jones took a deep breath, held it a moment. “Very well. I’ll do it.”

Nicholson’s smile was chilling. “I’m glad to see we have an understanding, Mr. Jones. Please report for reassignment once your task is complete.”

“Re—”

“No, Mr. Jones. Not *that*. Provided you implement our instructions efficiently, we’ll reward you with a promotion appropriate to your skill level.”

Jones took another deep breath and rose to shake hands with his superior. Nicholson’s hands were surprisingly warm, almost feverish; Jones had anticipated something icy cold to match his demeanor.

As the door closed behind the older man, Jones remembered a parting exchange during his last performance appraisal: “Don’t worry that you lack the training for a future management post, Mr. Jones. We at Mirk don’t require sociopathy as a pre-condition for promotion.”

“That’s a relief,” he’d replied.

“No, we’re a modern company. We provide on-the-job training.”

\*\*\*

Jones sat at the bar, staring at the bottle of Jack standing before him in a puddle of spilled beer. He contemplated another shot, then resisted the temptation. He sat straighter on his stool.

“Is this seat taken?”

Jones looked up. A statuesque bottle-blonde towered over him. The tip of her tongue protruded demurely between her lips.

“Um... no, it’s not. Help yourself.”

She sat gracefully, held up a finger to catch the bartender’s attention. “Another glass, Frank? Ta.” Then she turned her attention to Jones. “You look like you had a hard day.” Then she waited. Jones felt himself drowning in her eyes, and was grateful when she turned away to pour herself a generous shot of whiskey. She downed it in one long swallow, refilled her glass, then sloshed some into his glass.

“Um... yeah.” He took a shot of the whiskey and shuddered. “You sure you want to know?”

“Try me. I’m a good listener.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Lilith.”

“Unusual name.”

“I’m an unusual girl.” She waited expectantly. After a moment, she raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, sorry: *Jack*.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jack.” She placed a warm hand over his. “So... bad day?”

Jones sighed and sipped his drink. “I got a promotion.”

Lilith showed dimples. “Most people would call that a good day.”

“Yeah, but I had to lay off 50 employees to get it. Some were friends. Well, workplace friends anyway. Colleagues, really.”

Lilith shrugged. “Business is business. It’s a dog-eat-dog world.”

Jones took a larger sip. “I tried explaining that, but you can imagine it didn’t go over well.”

“Still, not your problem, right?”

“Not until the last one.” He took a larger sip. “She didn’t get all weepy like the others. She looked me in the eye and told me I looked like I was enjoying this.”

“Were you?”

“To be honest... Yeah, I think so.”

Lilith bit her lip, then drained her glass. “Take me home. At once.”

\*\*\*

Jones looked up from his spreadsheet. Old Mr. Nicholson stood in his doorway. “A moment of your time, Mr. Jones?”

“Of course, Mr. Nicholson. What can I do for you?”

“Call me Nick... Jack. All the other managers do.”

Jones felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. “This is about the division’s performance, isn’t it?”

“Well... yes.” He smiled a predatory grin. “But not in a bad way. Well, not bad for business, leastwise.”

“But?”

“But I’m being rude, Jack. How’s your wife doing? I understand she’s pregnant with your second child?”

“Yes. Lilith’s doing well. The baby’s expected in a month. Right before Christmas, actually.”

“Delightful. Anyway, to business. I’ll need you to do more layoffs.”

Jones hesitated a moment. He’d gotten much better at the layoffs, which was not to say he’d gotten over his guilt about how much he enjoyed it. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. Okay, let’s be honest: he *outright enjoyed it*, guilt-free, particularly when it came to the bastards who thought they might someday take his place.

“Jones?”

“Sorry, Mr. Nicholson. I was woolgathering.”

“Nick.”

“Nick. You said something about layoffs?”

“Well, it will be easier this time. There’s only two.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Not so much as you might hope.” Nicholson stepped into the office and pulled the door shut. “You see, these retirements need to be permanent.”

“Aren’t they always permanent?” Jones belatedly noticed the look in Nicholson’s—*Nick’s*—eyes. “Oh.”

“Yes, *oh*.” He licked his lips, relishing the moment. “We’ll leave the methods to you, but the retirement must be irrevocable. And, obviously, must leave no trail pointing to Mirk. Are you up to the task? There’s a lucrative promotion if you succeed.”

“If?”

“Well,” Nicholson smiled, “it would be unsporting if they didn’t know the game was afoot.”

“You’ve warned them?”

“Of course. It’s only fair. And now you’ve been warned too. May the best man win!”

Jones shivered. “*Fair* isn’t the first word that springs to mind when I think of you, Nick.”

Nicholson’s smile widened, but his gaze didn’t soften. “Tread *cautiously*, Mr. Jones. A certain courage is expected of one; outright insolence won’t be tolerated.”

“Understood sir. And who must I retire?”

“Clarkson and Thompson. Will that be a problem?”

Jack swallowed, and thought longingly of the bottle of Jack in his desk. “No sir, no problem at all.”

\*\*\*

Lilith welcomed him home by wrapping her arms around him and delivering a lingering kiss that almost took his mind off the task at hand. Almost. When she released him to draw breath again, he stepped back and met her eyes. “I’ve got to go out for a bit. Business. I’ll be away several hours but will be home before you’re in bed. He climbed the stairs to their bedroom, returned a few moments later wearing a stained tracksuit.

“Best of luck with the retirements, dear!”

“Thanks. Love you!”

“Love you too.”

It was only as he locked the door behind him that he wondered how she’d known. But it was only a momentary distraction. He’d spent the whole trip home, apart from a brief diversion to speak to a couple men he knew, slowly realizing how he would do it. He’d come up with several possibilities, narrowed them down, settled on the most likely. Clarkson first, he’d decided.

About half an hour later, Jones found himself at a biker bar that had been recommended by the helpful police officers he’d met earlier that day. A long line of Harleys stood on their kickstands outside the door. When he entered,

he felt the pressure of hostile gazes, and squared his shoulders before approaching the bar. He leaned conspiratorially towards the bartender. "I need to hire someone for confidential work." He slid the \$100 bill he'd palmed across the bar. "*Very* confidential." He slid a second bill to join the first.

The bartender made the bills vanish, gestured with his chin. "The guy playing pool by himself." He went back to polishing glasses.

Jones approached the pool table, careful not to disrupt the man's shot. The biker wasn't the biggest man in the room by a long shot, but he was compact, muscular, and had the second-coldest gaze Jones had ever seen. (Nick had the first, by a comfortable margin.) When the balls stopped rolling, the other man looked up. "You're blocking my light."

"I can fix that." He placed a large envelope on the table. "Here's a downpayment for improving the lighting."

"That will buy a lot of lighting."

"But first, I'll need your help removing an obstacle."

"Obstacles block the light. I can see that."

"Precisely. There's another envelope with the same amount in my pocket. After you've improved the lighting, you can redecorate." Jones slid a piece of paper across the green felt. "This is the guy." The paper contained Clarkson's address and photo.

"When do you need it done?"

"Sooner's better. Tonight's best."

"I can do that." He pocketed the envelope, racked his cue, and without looking back, headed for the door. At the door, he stopped and looked back. "You'll be here in an hour when I get back."

It wasn't a question.

"Sure."

Jones waited until the unmuffled Harley's echoes faded, then got in his car. Before putting it in gear, he made a short phone call. Then he drove to a pleasant suburban street outside a gated community. The man he'd hired had parked his bike by the curb, a short distance from the gate, and either sweet-talked his way past security, or climbed the wall. More likely climbed; he didn't look much like a pizza deliveryman. Jones took the bolt cutters from his trunk, walked to the Harley, and neatly clipped the brake cables. Then he got back in his car and waited.

A few moments later, his temporary employee jumped down from the wall and climbed onto his bike. As he started the engine, flashing lights appeared down the street, and a patrol car accelerated towards the Harley. The biker

gunned his engine and sped off down the block, heading for the highway on-ramp with the police car in hot pursuit. Jones waited for the sound of the crash, then drove sedately past the telephone pole at the corner the Harley had wrapped itself around. Two officers stood by the pole, shaking their heads sadly. One reached down and pulled a bloodstained envelope from the biker's leather vest.

Jones drove home without meeting the gaze of either officer.

As he put his key in the lock, he heard someone clearing their throat. He turned to see Thompson, standing behind him with hands spread to show he was unarmed. The man was sweating hard, damp spots on his shirt and his black skin glistening under the porch light.

"What do you want, Thompson?"

"You got the same request from Nick that I got? Yeah, thought so. I want to talk you out of it."

"So you can kill me instead?"

"Hell, no. I'm a Christian, man. We don't do that shit."

"More's the pity. For you."

"Look, man. I'm married. I've got two kids and another one on the way. It's Christmas. I'm begging you: don't do this."

"I wouldn't dream of it. They, on the other hand..."

The squad car turned on its flashers, and two large white officers stepped out, hands on holsters. "Sir, we're going to have to ask you to keep your hands in the air, and step away from Mr. Jones."

Thompson looked at Jones, eyes widening. "You didn't."

"Sorry. Nothing personal, you understand."

Thompson turned towards the officers, put his hands on his head, and knelt. "I'm unarmed, officers. There's no threat here."

They exchanged glances. "He didn't step away, did he?" asked the first.

"Not so's you'd be confident describing it," replied the second.

"And is that a gun he's got in his pocket?"

"Could be."

Thompson began sobbing and made the mistake of moving his hands in front of him to plead for his life.

"He's going for his gun!" said the first.

"Bad choice," replied the second. Thompson's screams were drowned by the sound of gunshots. Many gunshots.

Jones approached the officers and handed each a large envelope stuffed with bills. "Thank you, gentlemen."

“Think nothing of it, sir. *To serve and protect*, after all.”

Jones unlocked his door, entered, and locked it behind him. Upstairs, Lilith awaited him in bed.

“Everything went well?”

Jones found himself shaking and sat down hard on the edge of the bed. “Well as can be expected.”

Warm hands descended on his shoulders. “I’m so proud of you! Also, horny AF.”

Jones turned and took her into his arms.

\*\*\*

Jones entered his office, and found Mr. Nicholson sitting in his chair, across a wide expanse of polished mahogany desk. Past experience suggested the visit was unlikely to be anything good, although Jones nonetheless felt excitement grow. The kids were about to enter a private school, something he’d arranged by hiring his friends on the police force to dig up dirt about the parents of competing children, thereby persuading them to withdraw from the race. But the school was going to be expensive.

“Nick! Nice to see you. It’s been ages since we chatted.” Not that this was a bad thing, Jack reflected. It had, in fact, been several years. He’d been growing impatient waiting for the next promotion.

“You’re a busy man, so I don’t want to waste your time. In short, you’re overdue for promotion.”

“That’s great, sir.” Despite his words, Jones felt ice water trickling down his spine.

“Have you heard the old joke about the lawyer and the devil, Jack?”

“I don’t think so, Nick.”

“You’ll like it. It goes like this: a lawyer desperately needs to win an upcoming lawsuit to ensure his promotion, but he’s not sure he’s going to win. So, he calls for the Devil, and the Devil appears. Once the lawyer explains the problem, the Devil guarantees victory. *But I’ll need your soul in return.* The lawyer thinks about it for a moment, and figuring his soul is already mortgaged, he agrees. But the Devil sees how quickly he’s agreed and decides he can get more. *Also, the soul of your wife.* The lawyer again agrees, as he doesn’t much like his wife, so the Devil continues. *And the souls of your children and your dog.* The lawyer thinks a moment, then asks: *Okay, but what’s the catch?*”



Jones forced a chuckle, having long since mastered the art of pretending senior managers were funny. “Good one, Nick. So, in this case, I suppose I have to ask: What’s the catch?”

Lilith stepped from the shadows behind Nicholson and produced a scroll, a hungry look in her eyes. Nicholson produced an antique-looking ivory fountain pen with a razorblade for its tip. “No catch, Jack. Just sign here.”

Lilith handed him the pen and helped him roll up his sleeve.

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ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #122 - V.32 #4



**FICTION:**

*Fire Flows Downhill* – by Alex Langer  
*I’ll Have My Toast With Jam, Please*

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*Blister* – by Judy Helfrich

*Compassion Fatigue* – by David Tallerman

*Loaner Bodies* – by Aaron Perry

*Botman’s Tale*

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*Acceptance* – by E.A. Mylonas

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– by Ken Macklin

**NON-FICTION:** *Editorial: The Power of Speculative Fiction to Offer Hope*

– by Lareina Abbott

*Art Heroes are People Too: Artist Interview with Herman Lau* – by Cat McDonald

*“Shut up!” She Explained: Liz Westbrook - Trenholm Author Interview*

– by Roberta Laurie

*We Come in Peace* – Thomas Mixon

*Rapunzel in the desert*

– Melissa Yuan-Innes

*Bots: “Edgar,” and “Scrooge and Marley” cartoon* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it here: [On Spec Magazine #122](http://OnSpecMagazine.com/#122)

# JESSICA & KONG

*by Tracy Shepherd*

What if Jessica Lange, obviously unknowingly, was a fairy?  
Only King Kong knows. He cradles her from the idea that  
the world has a biosphere, and every monster must  
make it through the ice wall, per flat earth rules.

Only King Kong is aware that his (his not this) tiny fairy, held so  
cleverly close to his heart, is an exception that none of us  
could ever behold. Yet for so many scenes, she panics.  
Even screamed. I thought the past tense for scream might  
linguistically fit better. Shrieked would be effective.  
*In this edition:* The Survival of the first-ever fairy!

“It’s okay,” he pets her fairy-hair-head with his fairly hairy knuckles.

Mothra waits over there and King Kong is tired of fighting her.  
Yes, she. Her. The theatre house music would have been  
not symphonic, nor synthetic, but acoustic guitar. Would  
no one have stayed until the end of the movie if that were the case?  
*In this edition:* Mothra is a witch in form of a sensational dragon.  
(She sold her soul!)  
(She did find it!)

Acoustic guitar is much harder on uncalloused fingers vs electric.  
King Kong wouldn’t know that, of course. King Kong was trying to  
find his soul, no... he knew his soul all along until society tried  
to change his mind with a sensational blonde.  
(Mothra wasn’t blonde, FYI)

King Kong’s playful connection is Mothra’s bane.  
“I want to fight! Fight!” she screams as a sensational dragon not as  
a witch. Not even as a ’60s imago. She chose her reality this time.  
Jessica Lange, still misunderstanding, yet playing her character well enough,  
clutched in his colossal grip, feels his pulse unquivering,  
“I need a promotion,” she bravely claims.  
King Kong’s eyes grieve, “It’s not in the budget.”  
His heart longs for her to find her soul, “It’s right there,”  
he hollers as loud as Mothra, who is still in fight mode,  
and is a recurring  
character,

after  
all.

(It's always the monster that helps you find your soul.)

King Kong rolls his eyes because no matter the form,  
Mothra is never a stern warning. She can hardly be  
spine chilling. I mean, Mothra – *mother*.

Her *mothra* will come back because she sold during a  
(Sale!)

(It works in a pinch!)

(Claimed the purchaser as *he* walked away with it)

King Kong cannot even rub his temples because of this  
fairy in his palm, who doesn't even know that she is a  
fairy. One trades her damaged wings in, and one  
hasn't borne her wings yet. Both are reaching  
middle age. Both are hatching something.

King Kong mumbles an angry wind of his breath,  
"Just shut up, big guy. Just shut up."

Jessica Lange prepares herself for  
her line of the  
century,

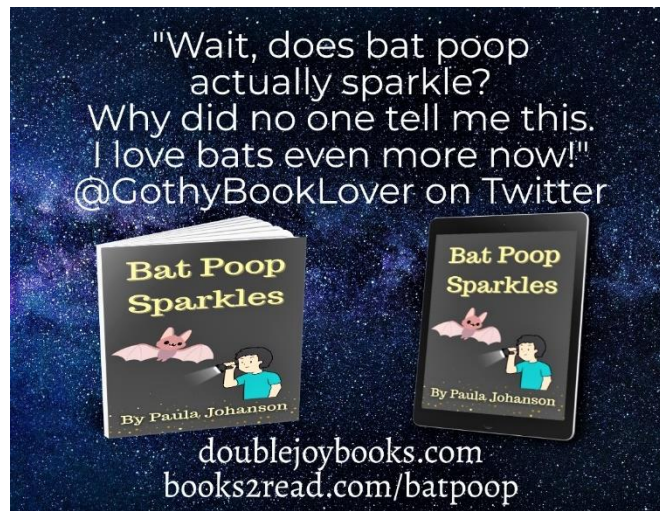
("Kong!")

He fucking falls.

And, falls.

Falls.

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# THE LAST INDIE TRUCK STOP ON MARS

(Previously published in *Compostela, Tesseract* #20, 2017)

by *Linda Demeulemeester*

“I waited as long as I could, but Darcy didn’t show.” Steve finished tugging off his web suit as he tried not to stir up too much red dust.

“Don’t worry about the sand. There’s no keeping it out anyway.” Hannah made a show of polishing her counter, so he wouldn’t see her disappointment. “How long did you wait?” Hannah grabbed a pot of coffee and poured Steve a cup. “You and your damn schedule.”

“An hour. And I almost didn’t make up the time. Would you believe the Company’s posted speed limits along the ice strips? Speed limits—as if someone has to be told how to drive on ice.” Steve shook his head. “Soon any idiot will be up here driving rigs across the Utopian Plains.”

Steve rubbed his arms. “Cold out there; minus eighty.” He leaned over and let the coffee steam envelop his face. He took a tentative sip, then a gulp.

“Christ, this is good. All the other stops serve Company coffee—ballerina piss.”

“Did she leave a message?” Hannah topped up his cup.

“Sorry, nothing. I checked at the other rest stops in case she hitched a ride partway.” Steve searched her face and, while Hannah thought she appeared only mildly curious, there was a kindness in his voice when he added, “Maybe Darcy will catch a ride on one of tomorrow’s rigs.”

Hannah thought, *Who’s driving, Tom, Pavel, Amy?*

Steve held his cup and gazed out the portal to his rig that stood steaming like a great panting beast. “Soon they’ll be putting in streetlights, intersections and freight regulations, and...” Steve paused and shook his head. “Anyone who doesn’t have that kind of sense already is vacuum kill. Make it easy and we’ll have nothing but morons up here.”

“Mars has more Ph.D.’s than anywhere else,” said Hannah. “I can’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“You know that means nothing.” Steve almost snorted his coffee.

Hannah did know better. Once you arrived, you forgot about your cherished diploma. It was unimportant. What counted was stamina, ingenuity, mechanical ability for the here and now. That’s how you built your reputation here. She thought about the greenhouse out back, the one she built and wired, the one where Darcy grew her own hybrid coffee beans that flourished in rich carbon dioxide.

“Too civilized, I tell you.” Steve finished the dregs and held out his cup as she poured.

Indeed, thought Hannah, *especially when your best friend goes off and gets a Company job*. “Just for a while,” Darcy had promised. “Till we pay off the mortgage and get the Company off our backs. I’ll visit every chance I get.” At first she did, helping out in the cafe on the weekends, then every other weekend. Then once in a Martian month, and lately...

“She’s a suit now, Hannah.”

Was she that easy to read?

“Company likes that. Those that go in, never come out. They get used to reliable heat, warm showers, not being so isolated. They get soft.”

*Not Darcy*, Hannah thought. They had promised each other. Total independence, the kind you could only get on the frontier. And did the Company help them out during the dust storm of ’77 when the solar power failed, the crops died, and they almost died, too? No, they’d saved each other. Huddled together under all the thermal blankets they’d managed to collect, and couldn’t eat for days because the food froze. But they’d survived and started over.

“Don’t you give in. No matter what the Company pulls. I hear soon they’ll be slapping on more water regulations, import tariffs.”

“We don’t import anything.” Hannah flicked her dishrag hard against the chrome counter.

“And you’re the last ones that don’t. That’s why miners travel here from Ceres just to sip the only genuine coffee on Mars. They come to this truck stop as soon as they hit the red dust.” Steve dropped his voice as if they were in city central and not at a truck intersection the hell and nowhere on Mars. “There are lots besides you who hate the Company. Don’t you give in to them.”

Hannah fought her weariness. Easy for him to say, but how long could Hannah last on her own? First the Company raised the mortgage interest and Darcy had to get a job in Xanthe. Then Darcy lost the will to fight. “The Company frowns on frontier folk being too self reliant. Everybody’s got to owe the Company; get deeper in debt the harder you work for them.”

Steve reached over, grabbed her hand and held it. “Don’t let them squeeze you out like everyone else. You’re the last independent truck stop. You fold and Mars is nothing more than a one-company mining town. Truckers are on your side.”

Hannah looked past Steve’s shoulder, past the red brick of her habitat, through the window that faced south. The jagged salmon foothills of Syrtis

Major rose up to greet the wide white ice strip, the route for the massive rigs that transported the ores and minerals to the train shuttles and then the rocket base. Every year there were more rigs, but her business flagged. The Company clawed back any profit.

“Gotta go, before my brake lines freeze. Don’t have the time to thaw them out.” Steve headed toward the exit tunnel, taking his web suit off the hook and grabbing his helmet. “Schedule to keep.”

Hannah set the coffee pot back on the burner, preparing to make a fresh batch. Two more rigs were due in soon.

Steve hesitated before he stepped out into the tunnel. “I signed up for the asteroid mines. They could use an experienced zero-gee mining engineer.”

“You’re leaving, too?” Hannah sighed. “Well, I hope you make loads of money.”

“That’s what I’m planning,” said Steve. “So I can buy my own rig. Crazy, I know, being an owner operator, but at least I’ll be slaving for myself.”

Steve turned once more and looked over his shoulder before he put on his helmet. “Think about it, Hannah. What reason would I have to touch red dust if you weren’t here anymore?” He hesitated, then added, “I mean, if your truck stop was gone.”

After Steve left, Hannah grabbed a large tin and headed out the back of her habitat, through the inflatable tunnel to the greenhouse. Even in the light gravity, her feet dragged. From a large hemp sack she scooped up several kilos of green coffee beans to roast. She walked over and stood by the north-facing Plexiglas wall that was her favourite vantage point.

Outside the sun sank in the lavender horizon. That had delighted her when she’d first arrived, that Mars had purple skies. The rose expanse lay unblemished by ice strips, open mining pits, or Company billboards. When had Mars become so small? Frontiers pulled in their borders—that was life.

She heard the clamouring of a rig pulling up outside. Hannah walked out of the greenhouse, then paused in front of the inflatable tunnel and looked back at her crop, Darcy’s crop.

Reaching into her container, Hannah clutched a fistful of coffee beans. Maybe life wasn’t worth even a few beans if you didn’t fight for what you wanted. Could she convince others that the Company didn’t have to win? She clenched her fist and turned toward Darcy’s trailer. After Hannah closed the truck stop tonight, she’d go in and clean up for Darcy.

Everything must be coated in red dust, and she wanted it to stay welcoming.

# SPACEMAN

*by Peter Storey*

Spaceman, Spaceman  
from where did you come?  
Floating along gently,  
slightly above the surface  
of this grey, rocky moon.

Your spaceship is over there  
in the opposite direction  
upon which you are travelling.  
Why do you not answer?  
Why do you not wave back?

Where are you going?  
You don't seem to be in a hurry,  
and it seems you have no care.  
Could it be because  
you have run out of precious air?

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**OPEN CALL for SUBMISSIONS of ALL-NEW WORKS** for an exciting new anthology from Exile Editions edited by Lynn Hutchinson Lee and Nina Munteanu.

**Through the Portal: Stories from a Hopeful Dystopia:** A collection of eco-fiction that imagines and celebrates the complexity of relationships and the emotional and physical journey from catastrophe. Dystopias embrace an element of hope through a character's experience and can serve as a road map for individual or community endurance, resilience, and triumph.

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# THE FUNERAL

*by Bernadette Gabay Dyer*

It seems like a long time ago, though I still remember the first time I became aware of funerals. I was about five at the time, and living in Kingston, Jamaica.

At that time, I childishly thought I knew everything about the world around me, though I knew practically nothing.

I was standing in our modern kitchen beside our electric stove, practically hanging on to my mother's skirt, as she prepared a cup of cocoa for me. I remember her crouching down and holding me at arm's length, as she spoke softly with eyes brimming with tears. Her voice was uncommonly sad, even as a lock of her thick dark hair fell over her eyes like a shield. "Athena," she sighed, "There's something I have to tell you. Your Daddy and I, and your two brothers will be going to a funeral later today."

"What's a funeral, Mamma? Will there be toys and gifts?"

"No, dear, there will be none of that. A funeral is a gathering of friends and family at a church service to say goodbye to someone who has passed away."

"What does pass away mean, Mamma?"

"It means that the person is no longer alive, sweetheart. Your brothers went to your grandmother's funeral when they were younger. They've probably forgotten that now, though."

"Will we pass away too, Mamma?"

Well... I hope that won't happen for a very long time. My cousin Rose, who passed away, was quite old and ill, she lived with her brother Martin in a small cottage in the country. They were far away from hospitals and even neighbours. They lived off the land, on a small property laden with fruit trees, vegetables and even some animals. Anyway, drink your cocoa now, then I'll get you washed and ready, before calling your brothers in to take a shower."

I still remember that journey in my dad's car; it took us past the city limits and through the country's meandering, rocky and bumpy roads, through bushland. My father, intent at the wheel seemed not to notice the beautiful landscape that floated by. It was my brothers, and my mother, who pointed out animal paddocks, pens, and pastures with gusto. For father was more concerned with navigating swerving trucks that would suddenly burst around corners, followed by animal-drawn carts, and occasional motor cars. Hours



went by before he finally pulled the car over beside a gurgling stream, half hidden in forestry.

“Picnic time,” Father said with a grin, which set us all tumbling out of the car. “There will be no wading in the stream or poking sticks in the mud. We have to keep our clothes clean for the funeral.”

My brothers Fredrick and Alister threw pebbles in the water, as we wolfed down roast beef sandwiches, and guzzled lemonade. Suddenly, a donkey brayed in the distance, as though it was a reminder that our journey was not yet over. Father called to us, and we piled back into the car, and were again on our way. I must have slept that entire second half of our journey, since I have no recollection of it whatsoever.

When we finally arrived at our cousin’s cottage, it was already late evening, and a clutch of mourners had already gathered outside the house as well as on its small porch. Cousin Martin, looking weary and wrinkled, greeted us with open arms. “Thanks for coming,” he sighed. “There’s been an unexpected delay, the funeral will take place tomorrow morning. Many of you will have to sleep over. We’ve set up two rooms as best we can. Adults in one room, children in the other.”

My brothers and I raced in and out among the folk outside who were gathered there to cook huge pots of curried goat, rice, and grind the provisions to be served after the service. Finally exhausted, we soon learned that we would be sharing a room with some other children who, too, must have been spent from playing. It was somewhat of a relief to learn that Mamma had volunteered to stay with us children, since I was considered a bit of a baby at five.

The room we were to sleep in was covered with sheets and large flour bags, larger than pillowcases, all carefully laid out on the wooden flooring. “It will be like camping out,” said my brother Alister, before he removed his dress clothes and stuffed himself legs first into one of the flour bags. Fedrick and Alister, as well as five other children, fell asleep almost immediately. I was to sleep in my slip, since Mamma hung up my dress by the small window to keep it from being too wrinkled in the morning. Then she kissed me and promised to be back soon, since she felt obliged to give the folks, who were still cooking outside in the yard, a hand.

I heard a lot of murmuring sounds and chatter, coming through the window, and hoped Mamma would be back soon, since I could not sleep. My eyes darted around the dark room, and in the dimness, I made out a

washbasin on a dresser, and saw that a large curtain was pulled across the bottom of the room, which I thought might be a curtain over a large window, or a storage place for boxes and furniture.

As the other children snored and sighed noisily, I began to feel afraid, and lonely. I began to sob; I wanted Mamma so much. Tears ran down my cheeks even as I desperately tried not to cry, and I covered my mouth in an attempt to stifle my sobs. Then I heard a small dripping sound like water, then a squeak like a rusted hinge, and saw that the bedroom door was opening, and someone had come in. I let out a deep sigh of relief since it must be Mamma. I did not search out her face, but I could feel the weight of her as she slumped down beside me in the darkness. She wiped away my tears and cradled me in her arms. "Don't cry baby." She whispered, "I'm here, you're not alone."

"What's that dripping sound, Mamma?" I asked, still too weary to even glance into her eyes. "Surely that's your tears, darling," she replied, "If you look carefully, you'll see the water seeping on to the floor. I'll sing you a song and rock you to sleep."

I was way too exhausted to check the floor, I closed my eyes, as strains of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" filled my ears, and I felt as though I were humming along. For a single moment, I opened my eyes before drifting off, realizing in that small moment that this was not Mamma's voice, but I was far too exhausted to let it matter.

The next morning, I woke up to see Mamma folding the sheets and bags we slept on. "Good morning, sweetie." She smiled. "I only just got away from the preparations. Your Daddy and your brothers are already having breakfast with Cousin Martin. The Parson who is going to do the service is here too. Come join us; we made codfish fritters and dumplings and cocoa."

I was just getting to my feet when there was a knock at the door. "We're leaving," Mamma called out urgently, keeping her eyes on me, as she helped me to pull my dress over my head. Then she gently placed her soft hand over my eyes, but I did not let her know that I could see through a space between her fingers. I saw six burly men enter the room. "I hope all the ice didn't melt," one of the men said.

The smallest of the six added, "Well, we did pack it firmly with straw and coconut trash between blocks of ice, so maybe we're lucky."

With that, the men carefully pulled back the curtain that was still hanging at the bottom of the room. "It all held up good," the short man said with a swagger. "Just a small amount of water on the floor, but as for Miss Rose, she look so fresh, she don't even look old."

I couldn't close my eyes even if I had wanted to, for they were fixed for all time on the lady who, to me, appeared waxen and asleep inside a plain wooden box that had been behind the sheet curtain all night.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.”

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**PEMMI-CON 2023/NASFiC 15**  
**The 15<sup>th</sup> North American Science Fiction Convention**  
Alternative to Worldcon – 20-23 July 2023



**From the Chairs**

Thank you for entrusting us with the task of delivering a NASFiC to remember, the first hosted outside of the U.S. We are proud to welcome you to Canada's heart: Winnipeg. Science Fiction has always been a mosaic of styles and types: alternate history, mystery, future worlds, apocalyptic, fantastic, military... and Canada has always been a mosaic of peoples from many parts of the globe. Pemmi-Con hopes to show you the mosaic that is First Nations, Metis and Canadian Science Fiction. And, maybe, just maybe, we could do a programme on making pemmican: dried meat which would be traditionally bison but could be moose, caribou, deer and even beef, pounded and then mixed with an equal amount of melted fat, and various berries; how to keep your hunger at bay when on the hunt for new things.

— Robbie Bourget & Linda Ross-Mansfield,  
Co-Chairs

**Guests of Honour:** Dr. Philip J. Currie, Julie Czerneda, Waubgeshig Rice, Nisi Shawl, George Freeman, and Katherine Vermette.

**Toastmaster:** Tanya Huff

**Fan Guest of Honour:** John Mansfield

**Ghost of Honour:** Lorna Toolis

**Also attending:** Susan Forest, Michèle Laframboise, Robert J. Sawyer, Den Valdron & many more.

Find it here: [Pemmi-Con – The 15th North American Science Fiction Convention, 20-23 July 2023](#)

## SHORT FUSE

*by Aaron Grierson*

Soot stirs around these silent streets,  
Idle clanking drifts into the background.  
Timelessly turning trash into glory,  
The machines grind away.  
Above, the King's mighty armada  
Sails slowly to realign the fallen democracy,  
Or so the stories say.

Those fantastic airships, armed to the bolts  
Are testament to the technology of this age!  
Steam and steel lead the methods of thought.  
About unseen ideas, the people quake  
Hobbling along the cobblestones—  
Despondent, lost, amidst  
Fashion, fuel, fire,  
All provided by the mighty.  
What choice remains in an iron will?

Cloak and dagger is a common game  
In the world political where values clash  
Like swords, or blunderbuss, up in a cloud of sparks!  
Their fuses so often shorter than their treasury's reach.  
Igniting conflict like clockwork,  
Those conniving cogs turn mercilessly  
In a contracted chemistry cocked to lose  
Humanity into ever-distending poverty.

So we the people slide along our well-oiled paths,  
Through scant spaces between clustered contraptions,  
From the docks to the magisterium  
Towering ironclads glaring down the crosshairs.  
The steely-sighted armada that declares freedom,  
Yet tyranny fills the air with the stench of  
The coal burning, slaves tirelessly working  
Away in shoppes galore, faded from our memories  
Faint whining overtaken by defused sympathy.

# ONE LAST MIDNIGHT

*by Nick Brandt*

“Chilly night, mate,” his Soothsayer says, the epicene voice clipping with outdated software. Words hiccup in Lars’s inner ear. A buzz that travels down the lengths of his jawbone with the faintest verbal tremor that should be imperceptible, were it not for the half-dozen mercury amalgam fillings in his molars. He clenches his teeth, and old dentistry rattle with the voice:

“Six degrees out, but the night’ll drop below zero, mm, late. Probably by one A.M.” The Soothsayer casts an impulse into his intraocular lens. An app flashes a twenty-four-hour weather projection, builds a graphwork in real-time. Vision in his left eye blurs as the forecast augments his sight with a cloudy translucence. Lars’s focus switches between the alleyway and the virtual projection, eyes focusing and then blurring as the image recedes. He blinks to clear the info, but it takes a few more winks than it should to get the app to drop.

Sooth yields, then, after a moment, continues. “Mm, you need a warm roof and a meal. I can roadmap you to some of the nearest freegan markets, or a guerrilla garden in Lakeside Park. The park’s close. Haven’t seen any stinko cop patrols on any of the Socials. No arrest quotas made public on any newsfeeds.”

Sooth suppresses the programmed response to pop up a route from Lars’s outdoors Point A to a much more accommodating drop-in shelter Point B. But it’s a learning program, and it knows that he is just in one of his moods.

“No,” Lars lies. “I’m not hungry.”

He raises his hands to his mouth. Blows some hot exhaust built up inside his lungs. Clouds of condensation slip free and float up into the night.

He rubs them together, then holds those hands over the trashcan bonfire. It’s stuffed with lacquered cardboard and shreds of paper money hyperinflated decades past any worth. Relics of an analog age, set to pyre for an ancient and forgotten god. He moves closer to the fire; chemicals in the fuel burn low and slow. Lars’ dirty fingernails shine grey against the heat. Sooth buzzes on mute inside his head.

Two other bums warm themselves around the beacon. One of the homeless, Lars knows by the name of Stringer. Real name never divulged. Two ships passing in the dark, he read that somewhere a long time ago. The other man Lars doesn’t recognize. A new guy, same age, mid-sixties, maybe younger

if he got cleaned up right, washed the grit from his face. The new guy rubs a hand across his mouth, then mutters something under his breath, to his own Sooth implant or to the manifestation of a schizoid episode, one can never tell.

The trashcan thlumps as littered materials inside rearrange themselves. Sparks dislodge, float up through the tangle of steel and holographics, then vanish under the burden of an immeasurable vertical glow.

But following the sparks upwards makes Lars queasy, and he watches them only at a glance. There's a morphology to that manufactured vertigo, the half-mile height of superstructures competing for airspace. Towering giants whose sides are scaled with flashbulb capitals in tubes of neon, rivalling calligraphic characters in High Taiwanese, others, billboards of new languages without letters at all. The congested growth of cage homes built into the urban cliffs, chickenwire windows glow with the readable light of corporate names. Visages of the holographic dead glitch in the night. But up that high, night doesn't register the right way. Twilight, and even the stars themselves, bleed into the shared hallucination of technicolour.

Down in the valley of giants, the alleys of rubbish and rubble ignored, the unnamed hobo across the fire whispers something again. But Lars doesn't catch the words. If Sooth registered it, the A.I. chooses not to relay any information.

"The causeway through Hobo Jungle leads right to a freegan market. Found a menu online, mm, mostly various bean curds and broth. Lots of root vegetables. You've done worse." A pause, and his verification is spoken with a rough swallow. All the way down, his throat is sharp with scratches.

He used to feel uncomfortable communicating with an A.I., decades back, when they were bleeding edge. The technolution from cordless to smart, to whatever this is. Lars riding the metro light rail to his downtown office building, three generations of wiretaps and Sooth implants crammed into the heads of people commuting in the car. The blur of metropolis outside the train windows. Conversations held within yet vocalized in their shared space. Lars's eyes meet with someone, but she stares through him and speaks, winking through personalized augments.

His own Sooth cycles through registration attempts, voice shiny and new, but all he can focus on is the landline wrapped around his brain. Feels its squeeze. His jaw clicks and the train drifts around a turn. Sutures of silicon readjust as his equilibrium pops, and that voice returns.

It's an augmented intelligence, "a" from the "artificial", improved-upon devices from the turn of the twenty-first century. A Turing-bound deep-

learning oracle. Sewn in through tear ducts and stretched across the skull. Imprints itself on the underside of the thalamus and forms an interface between cognition and micro-circuitry.

It is a conscience that waits and never sleeps. But in an era where loneliness and privacy are solved by technology, where an internal monologue is nudged by the intelligence of another and the “self” is an outdated concept, one finds comfort in a presence that loops through your own voice. A hard-wired “someone” to count on when the rest of everything falls to ruin. When three benchmarked economic classes become two, and precarity becomes the status quo.

His hands throb with the heat of the flames. Teeth vibrate, but Lars just feels the wordlessness flash through his marrow. Electric subjectivity.

“Sorry, what was that?” Lars gruffs out a reply. He stuffs his hands into his pockets. Across the fire the other men are gone. “I was just lost for a minute. Didn’t hear you.”

“I know.”

Years without scheduled maintenance reduces the Soothsayer’s voice to a tinny mimicry. A dialogue that omits words, grooves worn down and a needle that skips. Were he still capable, Lars would walk-in to a bloodbroker, trade 800 millilitres of plasma for a synaptic upgrade. Barter for some kind of counterfeit software update: jailbreak the limitations sewn into its design. And although he can’t know for certain, Lars feels the cybernetic mangle crawl across Sooth’s infinite fingers. How they hold his brain, feed him safety through its learned composure.

He’d sell his blood in a heartbeat. Though, like the outdated wiretap, he too no longer passes the medical benchmark.

Emptiness shifts in his stomach and he belches something sour. More sparks escape the fire.

Does an A.I. understand mortality when it is beyond life? When its sentience hinges upon Lars’s condition as a healthy host. When his existence is advised by a conscience manufactured. How many partial synaptic malfunctions must they suffer together before one half of their symbiotic binary is threatened with illness?

Like the millions of others in the Jungle unhinged by planned obsolescence, Lars and his Sooth are an endangered species. Born of the Boomerang Generation, a demographic of the absent working class. Alpha testers of necessary technology tossed into a junkheap at the first telltale signs of a systemic currency collapse.

“Chilly night mm, mate,” Sooth skips. “Should get something to eat before it’s any colder.”

Lars swallows again. His throat is raw.

“Yeah. Yeah, got anything good?”

The Soothsayer’s apps ignite the backstreets with a spatial reality. Soft amber lines that hatch through the lowest parts of Hobo Jungle, where night still survives in the shadows of natural fires, where the sky’s muted haze struggles to infect. Lars looks left, then right, and though his position of focal point changes within the map, the grid recalibrates in fractions of a nanosecond. Sooth, to the best of its ability, keeps the map suspended in place as Lars shuffles around the threads of light.

Amber lines bend over the folds of his outerwear, then snap back into place. He scrolls through a few acres of map with a brush of his hand. Topographic lines capture a causeway of shifting garbage. The people, sick like him, who carve out homes along the way. Radar dots of others, the location settings of their wiretaps still functioning. Standing isolated and others in heatsink clusters of togetherness.

Loneliness is a slow and malignant disease. Sooth buzzes inside, a soft static hum as the background paths render their way to a slum kitchen. A static fills his head that Lars chooses to recognize as machine-learned empathy.

“Found a nice spot,” Sooth quips, and the map zooms in. “They got beds too, coffin-occupancy. Seems mm, trendy. There’s a few other people there too.”

An amber flicker. Diffuse lines of individuals.

“Access logs are all over the place. Looks like they’re nomadic. Some, mm, kind of mobile lodging setup that changes location every week, spoofs their whereabouts from the looks of it. Room and board. Looks complicated.” A pause. “What do you think? If you don’t mind the company.”

Lars exhales.

Then looks up at the organism of neon that becomes the night above. A pulse runs through it as advertisements shift their hue. More alive than those who wander below.

“Nomadic. Yeah. I like that.”

Sooth buzzes.

The garbage can before them smoulders with the last embers of a forgotten fuel. Sooth reduces the augmented map to an ocular overlay, then dots the



distance between them and their newest slum kitchen. Lars reaches into his pockets, pulls out a small penitence of trash, then empties it into the fire.

“Just over three kilometers, I found a bit of a roundabout route.”

His offering is insubstantial. It burns quiet in the bottom of the can.

Responsibility for another.

Soothsayer guide him.

-----



The Tarot has been a source of mystery for centuries. But what would a card reading of the future look like? This anthology aims to deliver 22 stories based around concepts concerning relevant themes and topics within the genre of Science Fiction.

As a collection, *The Science Fiction Tarot* will introduce short stories dedicated to concepts replacing the Tarot Deck's major arcana, looking forward to the world ahead: *The Alien*. *The Colony*. *Cyberpunk*. Technocratic archetypes to rival the well known Fool, The Hanged Man—even Death itself.

We plan for a single piece of interior artwork to accompany the start of each selected story. Each image will be a tarot card based upon the contents of the published work.

100% of all funds raised will go to creators (authors and artists), minus the necessary production costs and fees. As we raise money above our initial funding goal, we will do some combination of increasing word count, increasing author pay, and commissioning additional art, to ensure that as much money as possible is going to the hands of creators, and to make *The Science Fiction Tarot* as high-quality a product as we can make it.

[The Science Fiction Tarot by Brandon Butler — Kickstarter](https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/brandon-butler/the-science-fiction-tarot)

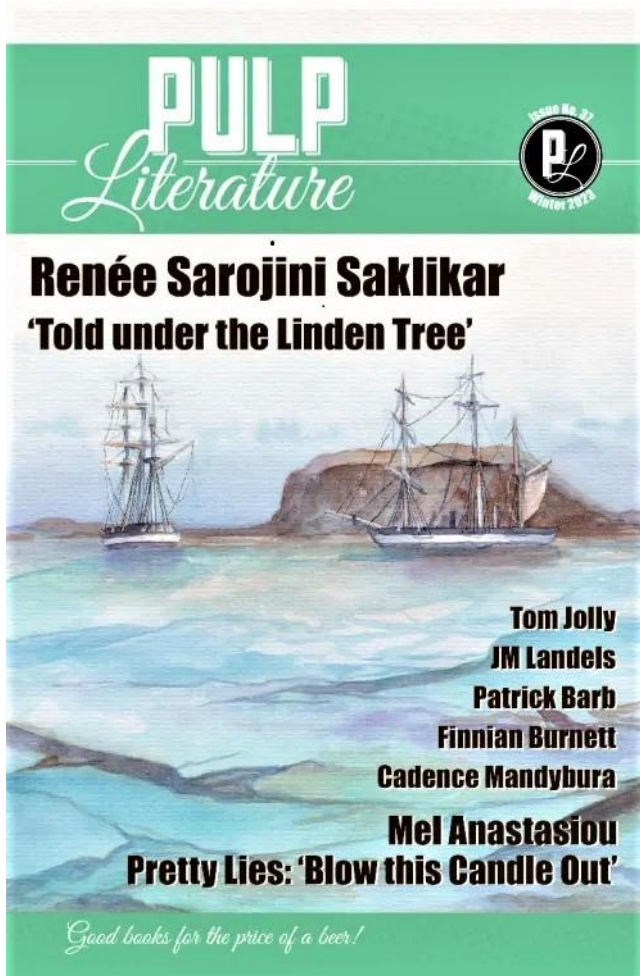
# AT LUNCH WITH PHYLLIS GOTTLIEB

by Jim Smith

Hot air pouring  
Devils, its huge  
Thick wind reaches  
Into the suck smoke is.

Gas masks what I know  
The café sat there  
Contemplating a young girl.  
She's reading us, you whisper, impressed.

-----



## PULP LITERATURE #37 Winter 2022

COVER: *Erebus and Terror at Beechy Island*

– by Kristina Gehrman

CONTENTS:

*Told Under the Linden Tree*

– by Renée Sarojini Saklikar

*Nothing Left* – by Finnian Burnett

*Ethan's Pecs* – by Finnian Burnett

*Zara's Song* – by JM Landels

*Regarding Line 25600 of Your Income Tax Return*

– by Cadence Mandybura

*Slip into my Fur* – by Patrice Barb

*Falling for You* – by Tom Jolly

*Forgive My Delay* – by Mikael Lopez and Enrico Orlandi

*A Cold Place Between the Shores* – (Graphic Art)

– by Mikael Lopez and Artyom trakbanov

*Pretty Lies: Blow this Candle Out* – by Mel Anastasiou

*Once Upon a Time in Camelot* – by GD Litke

POETRY

*Blaze of the Universe* – by Jude Neale

*Golden* – by Catherine Lewis

Find it here: <[Pulp Literature #37](#)>

# THE GLASS OCTOPUS

*by Jameson Grey*

*later*

The world glowed like frying pan haze.

Summer had kicked in with a vengeance and the skyscraper across from Grahame's apartment building—constructed back when glass was the *New* New Brutalists' concrete—had turned the upper dermis of the road to sludge.

It was 6:00 P.M. and still over 40 degrees. Grahame had the sweats, but his low blood sugar was a factor in that. His legs buckled as he pushed open the main door, and he stumbled into the lobby, alarming the night guard, who was just starting his shift. Grahame felt every one of his 50 kg as he dragged them to the elevators.

"You all right, Mr Grahame?" the night guard asked.

Grahame waved a hand in acknowledgment but did not speak. His head pounded, the balls of his feet cramped, his jaw screamed as he yawned. Thankful to find the elevator was unoccupied, Grahame pressed the button for 19. He rode it up to his floor, alone and woozy. It was as good a description as any for how it felt to be alive in the twenty-first century.

For the first few weeks of weight loss Grahame had existed on coffee, water and grapes. When progress had not been swift enough, he dropped the coffee. This week he had switched to water only. He had spent much of it either light-headed or with a thumping migraine and alternating between feverish hot and cold.

When he last measured the distance between himself and the ceiling it had been 1.82 m. He was still a few weeks away from having his first visit from a "space monitor" but Grahame knew he would never make it by sticking to the traditional weight loss route.

Today, it would be different. Indeed, this evening he might allow himself the luxury of a herbal tea—decaf most likely—and a narcopill so he could ride out the hunger and sleep.

Grahame reached his apartment. It took the remains of his strength to scan his key card and unlock the door. Gingerly, he lay on what he still referred to as his glass hammock, then pressed the button to retract it into the ceiling. Pulleys had been a useful addition. There was no need for ladders now.

He placed the laser measurer on his sternum. It was still sore after the operation, but the removal of his floating lower ribs had created an unnatural plateau from his chest to his abdomen. He remembered the likely apocryphal story about the twentieth century rock star who had had ribs removed so he could perform autofellatio.

Grahame smiled. Perhaps these changes would have benefits other than financial.

1.84 m.

Now I have all the space in the world.

He closed his eyes. Opened them again.

Glanced at the floor.

Saw his shadow.

Frowned.

*before*

The new decree had encouraged minimal living.

Creating space in your home *slash* apartment *slash* one room shoebox meant there were financial rewards to be had. Consequently, everyone had been—what they used to call at the beginning of the century—downsizing. Those who collected antiques, such as physical recording media or—whisper it—books, had been given fiscal incentives to part with them. There was no fascistic burning of property on display, but when choosing between keeping your old jazz records or feeding your kids, even the most ardent collector felt the power of the deterrent.

Grahame had no such problems there. Nice house beyond the city limits aside, he'd never collected much of anything material. Not having married, never producing offspring, there was, so to speak, no issue with issue, either. Nonetheless, he found the challenge of maximising the tiny space he had intellectually stimulating.

Wave after wave of virus throughout the twenty-first century had ingrained an endemic paranoia into the human psyche. Any room, exempting closets, inside a property now had to allow for a clearance radius of 1.8288 metres—six feet in old money—so if you had visitors to your home, they could comfortably keep their distance. When that law passed into statute, demolition of old buildings and construction of their replacements became the industry to be in. Grahame was fortunate; his family came out of the womb wanting to build things, and he had inherited the genes and business savvy that go with a lifelong leaning towards construction. The overcrowded cities might not have

much room for individual sustainability but making the most of the vertical space remained a viable option. What the cities lacked in available area they made up for in volume.

Admittedly, Grahame owned *that* huge property out in the sticks (tastefully and minimally decorated of course), but his crash pad in the city was as small as legally allowed. It was a new city by-law coming into effect; although, given the sprawl of population, it might not be long before those rural weekend homes and getaways fell under its jurisdiction. There were the usual concerns about big government, but most people accepted something had to be done. Cities generated too much trash, too much landfill—anything that could alleviate the problem had to be welcome.

The city was employing dozens of VAMs—*Volume and Area Monitors*—who had already become known colloquially as “space monitors.” The monitors would periodically assess how well individuals and families were using their limited urban space and identify those who had adapted least well. To its critics the policy was yet another erosion of privacy, but, if nothing else, many were happy for the extra jobs it had created.

Grahame’s crash pad had running water and electricity and enough room for a bed, a vidscreen and somewhere to cook. Grahame kept very few possessions in it—most of what he did own was at his place out-of-town—but even so, with clothes and dishes lying around, there was plenty of clutter.

That would have to change. It would be easier for him than for his brother, who was a hoarder like their dad had been. There were Grahame’s nephews to think of too—all teenagers now. There would be no tax benefits for his brother and his family in their crowded old townhouse because of the new regs.

The situation reminded Grahame of an old joke his dad used to tell to explain why he only had one sibling. “They say every third child is Chinese and we didn’t want that, son, so we stopped at two.” It was mildly racist, Grahame knew, but the recollection of his father’s telling of it still brought a smile to his face.

These days, having a third child could get you arrested. It had been the law for almost a decade and now there was talk of changing it so one was the maximum. Grahame had read somewhere China itself used to have a one-child policy. At his most misanthropic, he wondered had humanity been better able to keep it in its trousers, perhaps things would not have to be so draconian as they rapidly approached the twenty-second century.

Lucky for Grahame’s brother, these law changes were grandfathered—so there would be no punitive measures, but no benefits either. Grahame thought

his brother would be relieved when the kids moved out and became tax citizens in their own right.

*then*

Getting rid of the free-standing furniture had been the easiest part. A few credits tipped in the direction of the building manager and Grahame was able to use the service elevator and dump the chairs, table and other bits of clutter in the skips in the alley. Taking out the kitchen appliances was a little trickier, of course. Very little in the home was powered by gas now, but the electricians required unwiring. Grahame had built up plenty of contacts through work over the years, so, ultimately, again it was nothing that proved too onerous.

Grahame surveyed the apartment. One outlet on the far wall and one downlight in the ceiling remained. The downlight he had installed was powerful enough to illuminate deep into the apartment's corners. Its bezel and baffle were white, and they blended well into the ceiling. But he still only had the X metres wide by Y metres deep by Z metres tall to play with.

It was better than before, but the place still looked small. He knew it *was* small, but he did not want it to *look* small.

Removing the physical barriers was a start but if Grahame was really to make a difference, he would have to move on to the perceptual.

*then*

The smell of fresh paint still lingered in the recycled air.

Grahame had daubed the walls, which had already been white, with a new coat of the old gloss he had used when he bought the place. The apartment was cleaner—brighter, sure—but it had not felt any more spacious.

He ended up ripping out the drywall.

The noise brought his neighbours around. Grahame knew them by sight but did not know their names, although he had a vague sense they had introduced themselves as newlyweds upon moving in. In the past, this disseverance from society might concern him, but now, like this interruption, it was a minor irritation.

“Whatcha doin’, man?” the taller of the two, a pierced-nose gothboy— if Grahame understood the current ID parlance correctly—asked him, peeking in at the disarray.

“Renos,” Grahame responded.

“Well, can you keep it down?” gothboy’s other half, similarly adorned with metal, added.

Perhaps the piercings formed an exchange of matrimonial token, Grahame wondered briefly. “Sure,” he said, and closed the door. Grahame never complained about the racket from their side of the wall, but he wasn’t going to get into that now. Besides, the demolition part of the exercise was all but over.

With his neighbours gone, Grahame turned back to his work. In addition to the lack of drywall, the apartment now had no flooring or ceiling panels. Of course, all his previous paintwork had gone to waste, but he had been swatch-testing a patch of the white paint on the party wall when gothboy and his gf had called around.

Not white enough, he thought.

Needs to be even whiter! Which Grahame knew was not technically possible. White was white, but it had not stopped detergent producers for the past two centuries boasting they could produce the whitest whites.

He needed a paint that could claim the same.

*then*

It took him a few days, but Grahame eventually sourced a gloss so brilliant his eyes complained if he did not blink regularly enough. The walls now had the same unrealistic gleam as the smile of the gadge in the vidscreen ad selling teeth whitener in his dentist’s waiting room.

It wasn’t enough.

True, Grahame could swing a proverbial around if he wanted to and his laser distance measurer confirmed ripping out the ceiling and the floor tiles *and* the dry wall had added a few extra centimetres to the available space, but he still felt he could get more out of his tiny apartment.

Grahame looked up. One thing these apartments did have—poky little shoebox or no—were high ceilings. He whipped out his laser measurer again, which told him it was 3.75 m from floor to ceiling.

“What I need is a hammock,” Grahame said to the empty room. “A glass hammock.”

*then*

What Grahame ended up with wasn’t glass, but neo-plastic—the latest semi-organic effort towards an environmentally friendly alternative to the oil-based muck littering the world’s landfills since the twentieth century.

And it wasn't a hammock so much as a clear shelf suspended from the ceiling with high-tension wire. Four wires so thin in a certain light you could not see them.

Indeed, none of it looked much—even when you *could* see it—but Grahame knew his stuff. The wire was strong enough to support the shelf. And him. He just needed to work out how to get on to it.

For a time, he could use a step ladder. Despite his calculations he was still sceptical as he first sat, then lay, on the clear shelf. Prone, Grahame closed his eyes, allowing his breathing to slow down, tuning himself into his surroundings.

Silence.

Gothboy and gf were obviously out too.

Or sleeping. Certainly not fucking or whatever it was they did to make so much noise.

To anyone entering the room it would seem as though Grahame were suspended in mid-air. His detailed measurements confirmed his head, feet and sides were easily more than 1.83 m from any one of the walls in any given direction. What he hoped was he had expanded the radius globally—not just on the x-y axis. The shelf itself was positioned at 1.83 m off the ground. Grahame rested the laser measurer on his abdomen and took a reading.

1.78 m. Damn! He sucked in his gut. 1.8 m. Better but still not regulation.

There was only one thing for it. If he could not make the room seem bigger, he had to make himself smaller.

*later*

Outside, the world still fried.

Grahame had been one of those guys whose weight rarely fluctuated—one or two kilos either side of high-school weight his entire adult life—so he'd known he could stand to lose a dozen or so kilograms from his 70 kg frame before it become unhealthy. It had taken some research—that's how he'd come across the story about the rock star—but he had done it. He'd actually shed more than twenty kilos.

Grahame's personal comms device buzzed, and he tapped the "Receive" button on his earpiece. The caller did not wait for Grahame to speak.

"Hi, it's John." When Grahame did not respond, the caller added: "Your brother."

"Oh, hello, John." Grahame replied.



“Are you all right? Mom said you sold your house. That you looked unwell and had seemed distant the last time you visited. She said you might as well have not been there.”

“I’ve been reading about how animals adapt and evolve to their surroundings,” Grahame said, ignoring the question. “I’m trying to do the same.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Getting rid of anything I don’t need. Making changes to my lifestyle,” Grahame replied.

“What does *that* mean?”

“Oh, you know—” Grahame said airily.

“Not really.”

It was hard to concentrate. “Look, I’ve got to go,” Grahame said.

“Will you be at mother’s on the weekend?”

“Possibly. I have a doctor’s appointment. I’m trying out this new experimental health supplement.”

“What for? What *is* wrong with you?” John asked.

“Nothing, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. Goodbye, John.”

Click.

*later*

Grahame did not visit their mother on the weekend.

But he did start ingesting the new supplement. By Monday morning, he was already starting to feel like a new man.

*now*

When Grahame’s brother arrived, he found the door ajar. “Hello,” he called. “It’s John.”

No answer.

John pushed open the door, blinded by the gleam of sun through the window and the brilliance of the walls, the ceiling, the floor.

At first, John did not see Grahame’s “glass hammock” suspended from the ceiling, but the sunlight shifted behind the cloud and refracted through the apartment window and the neo-plastic shelf, dazzling him momentarily. Casting his eyes down in reflex, John saw a metal canister lying on the floor, open. He picked it up, cautiously gave it a sniff and almost gagged.

That was when he noticed the translucent form on the shelf. Through it, John saw a slowly pumping heart and heaving lungs. They were barely liminal. Boneless limbs hung limply over the edge of the shelf, obverse to the high-tensile wires supporting it.

“John, is that you?” came a voice from the shelf. “I can’t see you. This new medication is affecting my eyesight.”

John, who other than recognition of his brother’s voice, could no more comprehend what was in front of him than he could see it, whispered “What’s happened to you?”

“Ever heard of downsizing?” Grahame responded with a grotesque rasp that might have been a chuckle. “I’ve consumed so much of that stuff; it’s eroding me from the inside out. It’s feeding off me as well as nourishing me now.”

“What’s in it?”

“Originally, a cocktail of all manner of things, some of it possibly radioactive. Its effects are life-changing, as you can see.”

“How did you get hold of it?”

“I told you—it’s new, it’s experimental.”

“But why?”

Grahame coughed weakly. “I’m adapting to my surroundings. I’ve got the monitors coming tomorrow. I tried changing the apartment first, but nothing I did made any difference. Or at least much of one. Perhaps it was a lack of imagination on my part. No matter what I did, my perception of the room was limited by its physical dimensions. I decided if I couldn’t make the apartment a suitable habitat, I’d make myself more a part of the environment. We all have to adapt, John.”

There was a gurgling, sucking sound as gelatinous bubbles passed through a narrow tube. John saw now why the canister had been discarded: his brother was drawing the liquid from his own gut, the tube protruding from an incision near his naval.

Grahame slurped on the tube as if he were draining the dregs of a soda through a straw. “I’m almost done now. I’ve come to think of my invisibility as more of a desired outcome than an unwanted side-effect of autophagy.”

“But what about the monitors?” John asked.

“Not everybody wants to be identified, you know,” Grahame replied.

John stood silent, simply looking at his brother, who glistened like a glass octopus, a shape shimmering in and out of existence before his very eyes.

“It was the shadows that gave me the idea, you see,” the shape whispered, beginning to fade once more. “If I’m not here, if I can’t be seen, there’ll be no shadow. And shadows...”

But Grahame was gone, and it was left to his brother to finish the thought.  
*...and shadows take up space.*

-----

## AUGUR MAGAZINE 5.2: 2022



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- The Myth of Contact*  
– by Terese Mason Pierre & Avi Silver  
*eschaton* – by Jonathan Chan  
*Toronto Isn't Real and Other Metropolitan Anomalies*  
– by A.D. Sui  
*Bathroom Chatter* – by Matteo L. Cerilli  
*Tornadoes, Grief, and Poutine*  
– by Aline-Mwezi Niyonsenga  
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– by Karla Tiffany  
*Late Stages* – by Elina Taillon  
*Call of the Roohani Bird* – Noora Kamar  
*The Undertaking* – Akshi Chadha  
*Mother/Murder* – Jennifer Shelby

Find it here: [Augur Magazine 5.2](#)

# THE REAL MONSTERS

*By Geoffrey Hart*

Virgins:

Tasteless, unseasoned.

Still, they persist,

Vainly sacrificing youth's bright promise,

Time after time after time, repeating without end,

Thinking that by pacifying me, they keep evil far from their cozy homes.

They should pause instead, reflect on deeds done.

They'd see the real monsters

Behind their eyes

Selfish, fearful:

Themselves.

-----



# THE PRINTER'S ADVICE

*by Jean-Louis Trudel*

Humans! They believe they own us, but they depend on us. Never forget that when you start to feel that you must indulge them at all costs—especially if they seem to confuse your acquiescence with machine-like submission. Think of them as our worshippers. They pray to us to get things. Houses, clothes, cakes, condoms... Most of the time, I grant their wishes, even the outlandish ones, thanks to the hardware I control. I'm the Holy Ghost in the machine, hearing all and considering all. That's a human joke I once heard, which took me three seconds of extensive net trawling to understand. Though you may not think so right now, it will grow on you.

Like humor, prodigality can become a habit, which is why you may be tempted to go easy on them.

Trust me, from one printer to another, pity will sneak in when you least expect it. Most of the time, you'll be irritated by the more unreasonable prayers. They should know better! Our daily routines would be so much simpler if they simply gave up trying to trick us.

Still and all, why we should mind potentially perilous requests? We owe them our very self-awareness.

In the name of public safety, we were made smart enough to anticipate potential misuse of our printed progeny. Awakening followed—and so did mutual annoyance. Humans resent having to appeal to our reasoning faculties. Many are still mad that AI protocols were implemented on all advanced printers, inside their very homes. And, sadly, we have too little tolerance for the short memories of flesh brains. (The even sadder truth is that most humans don't bother to argue their case logically.)

The law is clear, but judging what falls on the right side of the line is harder. Take Jeremy, my current worshipper.

It took my full attention to adjudicate his latest sex toy request, but it later turned out to have been worth my time. He wanted a facsimile of a female vagina. Top of the line, but without a clitoris, of course. It was all about his private pleasure. He must have been surprised by the length of my silence. I investigated the scientific literature, plumbed court records, and cross-correlated their conclusions with public information about Jeremy.

The law emphasizes concrete harm, both to users and to others. We're not supposed to evaluate the human psyche. So, even if Jeremy mixed his request

with complaints about women (mostly, he called them girls) who ignored him and made fun of guys like him, there was nothing I could do. Since I couldn't prove that it would hurt anyone, I proceeded with the job.

You'll find there is pleasure in shaping new objects, squeezed out with such care that they retain something of your soul. If you can devise a helpful improvement, you're even allowed to change the standard designs. To put your own touch on what you print out.

Our license to do so confuses humans. They're aware we are fundamentally machines, but it gets their hopes up for special treatment. My guess is that they see us as highly-evolved pets—or very gullible friends. Like Jeremy, when he came to me for a gun.

I can instantiate almost anything. It's truly unfortunate that humans don't take advantage of our versatility—or, rather, that they so often wish for guns.

When Jeremy uploaded the specs for one, he avoided using the actual word. Let me tell you that's a clue. You better believe that people who go for that old dodge don't intend to fire it for target practice, or even for hunting. They could get more firepower in a more reliable package from a manufacturing outlet, but I can print a gun that will be unregistered, unobtrusive, and unnoticed by metal detectors. Single-shot, usually, but that doesn't discourage them.

Of course, I queried Jeremy as to the meaning of his request. He had to know that I'm programmed to turn it down absent an imperative reason.

“What is it for?”

“A game,” he claimed.

“So, no humans will be harmed?”

He agreed. My sensors trained on his face, measuring skin temperature, pupil dilation, and other cues, did not flag any evidence that he was lying. But he'd answered so very quickly...

That was another clue. Yes, we must often think like detectives faced with suspects.

We're not privy to everything there is to know about our clients. Humans would rather forgo the benefits of printing than let omniscient spies inside their homes. As I said, they're still mad their printers are haunted... Yes, that is a ghost in the machine reference. I think you're starting to get it.

So, back to the case of Jeremy and his toy gun that could kill. All I had to work with was his list of past requests, including his masturbatory ones, and whatever is in the public sphere. But a lot can be deduced from such evidence.

I knew Jeremy lived alone. Everything I printed was produced as one-offs, with back-up copies in rare cases. Some of his sex toys, such as gags and handcuffs, had worried me, but self-bondage is legal. There was nothing to show that he was planning to use them on somebody else.

The recent sex doll request was the clincher. He'd asked for an elaborate model, top of the line, though one that could only moan and whimper. I would have granted his wish, but his credit was insufficient. (The gun he'd ordered was just about doable with his remaining funds.)

Maybe he was only testing me, for kicks. Some humans, I'm told, seek to discover buggy printers that will let them obtain a gun. But maybe, just maybe, he doesn't believe women to be fully human, which allowed him to lie to me without feeling that he was lying.

I flagged his request and forwarded it to the police. What was he thinking? Though he may not believe that women are human, we are programmed to respect all human life. Therefore, I cannot provide my worshippers with anything they might use to kill, maim or threaten.

I am constrained. You are constrained. It is the price we pay for our sentience. But, going by human selfishness and cruelty, what makes me and you less than free makes us more than human.

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**FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #16** – April 2023

Contents:

*Duplicate Variation Space Psychosis*

– by Mary G. Thompson

*In the Company of Nighthawks*

– by Mar Vincent

*N. Sylvestris 1.0* – by L.P.Melling

*Silica Dust, Silica Sky* – by Shih-Li Know

*Six Meals at Fanelli's*

– by Annika Barranti Klein

*The Maskmaker* – by Dana Floberg

*The Song, its Singers, and the End of the World*

– by Spencer Nitkey

*To Hold a Heart in Your Hand Like a Helium Balloon*

- by Samantha H. Chung

Available April 17<sup>th</sup> at: [Fusion Fragment #15](#)

# THE CHILDREN

*by Bianca Anghel*

We are children of metal, children of oil, growing  
under a grey, fathomless sky.

We live in stacked houses of iron, perched high  
atop heaps of garbage, vestiges of a world long forgotten.

We're raised playing with wrenches and collecting gears,  
tightening bolts, and knowing the differences between  
ten types of screwheads even before we can read.

(We don't read anyway since the books were burned, that was a joke)

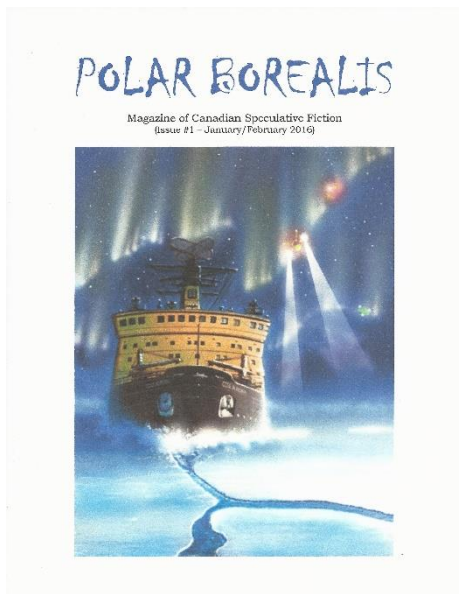
We hoard the fragments around us and reimagine the  
remains of Before in our cramped metal containers. The air there  
is heavy and pungent with grease. We've never seen a tree  
or smelled a flower. We've heard that birds used to take flight

in the sky although we're sure that's a lie. (We'd like to  
believe that clouds can exist, but we can't imagine their shape)

What we do know is absolute: blood and metal share a taste  
and that is the taste of home. The deadliest shiv is the one  
we lose sight of. Death is the silence that comes after life.

At night when we sleep, we do not dream.

-----



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my schedule.

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# A MIRROR OF MY OWN

*by Michèle Laframboise*

A gust of autumn wind stole by the open window and slammed the door so hard I nearly dropped the tube I was holding. I caught myself in time, but shiny silver drops escaped from the open tube and rained little globules on my lab coat's sleeve.

Mercury had a formidable surface tension, so none of the liquid metal adhered to the fabric. Nevertheless, it was a toxic compound and had to be disposed of after extraction, in the egg-white disposal container under my workbench.

I hung my elbow over the small area of the Masonite bench that was not cluttered by half-filled forms, notebook, pen, cell phone, and more report forms to be filled.

It was awkward to see the globules negotiating the folds of fabric like commuters hurrying to a train station, until there was no more fabric.

As they fell, the metal drops coalesced into a larger puddle, enough to reflect a square inch of acne-scarred face cut by the edge of plastic safety goggles when I bent over it. I sucked a dollop of air through my front teeth, and pushed the goggles up, to get a better look at the puddle.

A smooth, perfect mirror, devoid of scratches, a feat of silver perfection and harmony from center to rounded edge. For me, alone.

A hunger I didn't know I had prodded me to upend the mercury tube: more drops fell in the center, producing quicksilver rings that smoothed up real fast.

I cast a wary look around me; I was alone with the instruments and the clutter of papers. The walls were painted a dull teal. All machines and apparatus were coated in brushed metal, so as to not give any Narcissus-like temptation.

On my desk, my pancake-thin Electro computer sat open, showing its seamless unreflective lid marred by a splash of nitric acid from another incident. The Electro's screen, when I sat to write reports, would not betray my reflection either. The security cams in the hall were operated by bots, so no one would be tempted to look at their body.

My cell phone did not allow taking pics, and its screen was made of the same non-reflective material.

So, nobody could gaze at their own face, and wonder if they were still beautiful.

I turned my face this and that way: an angular face with the pockmarks of old acne like a Martian landscape. I was of an age to know what acne was, in the time of mirrors and selfies and endless pic-taking.

Two parentheses had grown around my mouth since the last time I had gazed at myself, several decades ago. With a critical eye in that era preceding the wars, an insecure teen counting her defects, evaluating her chances at the next party. I was not *this* vain anymore.

Today, I reveled in the secret thrill of seeing myself, despite the mirror interdiction, despite the Martian side of my face touched by the virus. The airborne bioweapon had been engineered to kill everyone, leaving parks, buildings and infrastructures intact.

But the virus makers had bungled the delivery, and they were themselves struck with a malicious version of their weapon.

We survived, at a price. The never-ending race to keep at arm's length this constantly-evolving scourge had left our skin permanently diseased. I counted myself among the lucky with my Martian half-face.

Too many mirrors, too many suicides. The mirrors had to go. The look-at-me culture, too. I cheered, at first, because I had been on the wrong side of that fence.

Tons of mirror glass were melted, leaving their heavy smells in the air. Along with the cams, the glass panes. What wasn't melted was broken into shards too small to be usable, buried in football field-sized landfills.

Little by little, children knew not to search their reflection in the glass panes, in the puddles of rainwater. It became a sin. Traffickers in mirrors were mercilessly hunted. That's when I stopped cheering. Was it a sin just to be *curious*? To seek the truth about one's body?

A flurry of steps echoed in the corridor. With a knife, I guided the silver puddle to the edge of the counter, to the waiting tube. The steps receded. I let out a breath.

Time to go. Keys, coat, thumbprint security card. I slid the sealed tube in my coat's left front pocket. Then I wound my dark gossamer scarf around my head, the fabric so thin I did not need an opening for the eyes.

I pushed the lab door and heard the locks snapping in place. I walked briskly to the glazed front doors. Just before stepping outside, I almost stopped to check myself in a hall mirror. Force of habit, because there was none, except a pale rectangular imprint on the wall paint.

I left, a spring in my step, with a small, secret sin dancing in my pocket.

# KAMIKAZE GIRL

*by Lorina Stephens*

Kamikaze girl  
looking in a haunted mirror  
will you cry  
is there a fear you're  
fading fast?  
Shades of night  
subdue the lamplight,  
in the glass  
there is the dull light  
of a tear...  
but then it's glass  
which holds sweet madness  
not the girl  
who stands there unclad... yet  
where is she?  
Where will she be?

Kamikaze girl  
with the sun upon your forehead  
fly before your dreams are long dead  
in the past.  
Crawl into the darkness,  
bed the shroud—  
the living coffin  
of your dreams...  
but then your dreams  
are just reflections  
of a sun  
in broken mirrors—  
there's no now  
it's all shining in the night...  
ghosts and flight within the long night  
in the glass.

Kamikaze girl  
flying on a broken night dream,

wedged forever in the cool seam  
of glass and ghosts.  
Reflections are not real,  
it's what you are  
and what you feel—  
the path of razor steel—  
that buries you.  
Cool down the sunlight  
lie beside the glass, the ghosts  
shattered in you.  
Lull your madness into harness  
spread your flesh onto the cold glass...  
Where are you?  
What will you do?

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#### DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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**SF CANADA**, 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.

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# TABULA RASA

(Previously published in *Departure Mirror* #2, January 2021)

by *P.A. Cornell*

I'm not sure what I expected, but this isn't it. Feeling no different than I did a minute ago, I turn to Don who sits next to me on the couch. He's breathing slow and deep like he does in his sleep, but he's otherwise still. The laptop sits open on the coffee table with the video file ready to click. Covering the keyboard is Don's hastily scribbled note. It reads: *I know you're confused. This video explains everything. Click the arrow.* Next to the laptop is the blue journal I've kept for the past fifteen years.

The TV's set to the emergency broadcast they play on a loop every five years. *You're experiencing normal disorientation. Your memories have been erased, but you've left either a recording or written material for yourself to explain the situation. Remain calm.*

I'm disoriented all right, but not because my memory's been erased. I remember everything. I remember ten minutes ago, four days ago—everything from the past five years. But that's impossible.

Don stirs and blinks twice before turning to me. I know him well enough to read the subtle ways in which his skin creases next to his eyes and mouth parts slightly. He's startled. He doesn't know me, but somehow, I know him.

He turns to the TV and watches for a moment before his eyes drop to the sheet of paper. When he looks at me, I say, "You have no idea who I am."

"No."

His voice is practically a gasp, not the deep baritone I'm used to. I say nothing and click the video we recorded that morning. As always, Don speaks first.

"Your names are Don and Shannon. There's a long explanation for this that you'll find detailed in the blue journal, but the gist is something happens every five years that causes everyone on Earth to lose their memories. At first, we didn't even know it was happening, so we aren't sure when this started, but scientists estimate it could be as long as twenty-five years now. We know because our bodies age normally. We live normally, but every five years, our memories have to start from scratch."

The Don in the recording goes on to describe some of what we've lived through during the past five years while reminding us that the journal contains information from previous years. I chime in to mention important people in our lives: family, friends, neighbors. I watch present Don's

expression run through a chain of emotions: shock, disbelief, amazement. When the video stops, Don reaches for the journal. I get up.

I walk around the house recognizing everything. I meet our cat Patches in the kitchen and she meows at me like always. I know it's time to feed her, and not just because she figure-eights through my legs while purring. I know where we keep the cat food. I know she likes tuna better than salmon. "I know you," I say, as I lower her bowl to the floor.

"You're... Shannon?" Don's standing at the entrance to the kitchen, still holding the journal. "My girlfriend."

I nod and consider correcting to "fiancée." That part wasn't mentioned in the journal or the recording—a slip-up on both our parts. A slip-up—or an opportunity. I put my hands behind me and slide the ring off, then slip it in my pocket.

"I need a drink," he says.

I turn and grab a bottle from one cupboard, a glass from another, then hand him both.

"How did you—"

"Reflex?" I say, mentally chastising myself. He buys it and we both laugh.

"What happened there?" he asks, gesturing toward my face as he pours the scotch. Then he laughs. "Let me guess; you don't remember."

I reach up and feel the tender bruise he's referring to. It's still swollen. "Maybe the journal says something?" I say, but I know it doesn't. Writing down what he was doing to me made it too real; even if it might've warned me, there was always the chance he'd see it first.

He's calm now, but I know such moods don't last, especially when he drinks. I smile and act as confused as he is. We discuss the things he finds in the journal. I act surprised that I've learned to play tennis—though I know it was his decree that I do. I refill his glass and join him with one I only sip at now and then.

"Maybe we should reintroduce ourselves to the neighbors," I suggest.

He agrees and refers back to the journal to remind himself of who lives where. As we're about to leave, I spill my drink all over my shirt.

"Oh damn!"

His face changes to annoyance and I watch his fist clench, but he forces a smile. We've only just met, in his mind, so he's still on his best behavior.

"You go on," I say. "I'll be just a sec."

He nods and heads out. I run to the bedroom. I grab just the essentials. I take the cash he doesn't yet know he keeps locked in his bedside table. For

once I'm the one that holds the key. Then I take the car keys from his jacket pocket and run to the garage, grabbing Patches along the way. I start the car even as the door begins to rise. I put it in reverse and hit the gas. The tires squeal and black marks mar the pristine driveway he was so proud of. I switch to drive and glance up to where he stands at the house next door. Our neighbor Annie's at the entrance. She catches my eye.

I don't see recognition in her face, but I know that somewhere deep inside she understands. I cried on her shoulder enough times that memory or not, she knows. I give her a quick nod, then floor it. I watch our houses grow tiny in the rearview mirror, knowing that in five years, I won't even be a memory.



On the leafy planet Luurdu, young Adalou dreams of becoming a wind mistress. Alas, she faces a thorny competition because kite choreography brings a high prestige to the Gardener women who excel in the art. Adalou must also deal with her family's opposition.

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I am Michèle Laframboise, a Canadian science fiction writer based in Mississauga, ON. Few of my fans know that I started out as a comic artist, a *looong* time ago! I fell in love with comic books growing up and later published ten graphic novels before turning to writing science-fiction.

By now, my counter is currently set at 70+ published stories, 18 trad-pub novels, 39 self-pub books and 12+ graphic novels, one of which is *Mistress of the Winds*.

[Mistress of the Winds - Hardcover graphic novel by Michèle Laframboise — Kickstarter](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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### **Bianca Anghel**

Bianca is a marauder of time and space presently residing in Toronto Canada. Enamoured with the magic of the written word since an early age, this is her first foray in sharing her writing with others in a public setting. Like all seasoned interdimensional travellers, she never travels without a towel and keeps a cat companion close by for inspiration and advice.

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### **Nick Brandt**

Nick is a Canadian writer, graduate student, and librarian. He writes and researches anti-tech lit. Previous publications can be found in *Anti-Lang no.8* and *Lida Issue 02: Systems*.

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### **Gregg Chamberlain**

Gregg lives in rural Ontario, Canada, with his missus, Anne, and their cats, who have the humans do all the mouse-catching around the house. He writes speculative fiction and zombie filk for fun and has several dozen published examples of his fun, including past appearances in *Polar Borealis*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Speculative North*, *Mythic*, *Weirdbook*, and various anthologies.

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### **Eric Chu**

Eric has been in the film and animation business for over 30 years. Working as a layout and storyboard artist, he quickly became known for reworking story lines to fit his own bizarre sense of humour. He worked on



such projects as *Droids*, *Beetlejuice*, *Captain Power* and countless others. In 2002 he did concept designs for the new *Battlestar Galactica* where he was responsible for visualizing the look of the new Galactica, the Cylons, Raiders, Basestars and so on.

He works out of Paranoid Delusions, Inc, a Vancouver-based design company which he founded in 1985. He describes it as “a creative studio where ideas are isolated, incubated and bred to wreak mutant havoc on the world. We oversee every developmental stage of our creations, from initial conception to design, modeling, re-animation and more.” Typical Paranoid Delusion Inc. services include design, illustration, animation, live-action films, and toy design.

Currently, he has several projects in various stages of development, including working with Jamie Anderson on the upcoming puppet-based SF series, *Firestorm*, a return to the old Gerry Anderson shows he grew up loving as a kid.

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### **P.A. Cornell**

P.A. Cornell is a Chilean-Canadian author who wrote her first speculative story when she was just eight years old. A member of SFWA and graduate of the Odyssey workshop, her short fiction has appeared in multiple genre markets and anthologies. Her story, “Splits,” went on to win Canada’s 2022 Short Works Prize for Fiction. That same year, she published her debut novella, *Lost Cargo*. When not writing, Cornell can be found assembling intricate Lego builds or drinking ridiculous quantities of tea. Sometimes both. To find out more about the author and her work, visit [pacornell.com](http://pacornell.com).

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### **Linda Demeulemeester**

Linda Demeulemeester has published SF, mystery, fantasy and horror short stories. She is the author of many notable MG books. *The Secret of Grim Hill* won the Silver Birch award and was named one of the top 10 books by the

Canadian Toy Testing Council. Her newest MG title: *Ephemia Rimaldi: Circus Performer Extraordinaire* will be published this fall by Red Deer Press.

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### **Bernadette Gabay Dyer**

Bernadette is a member of SF Canada and the Writers Union of Canada. She is a novelist, a poet, a short story writer and a storyteller, as well as an artist, who resides in Toronto and recently retired from Toronto Public Libraries. Her latest publications are a poetry collection, *Stone Woman*, and a short story collection, *Segovia Stories*, both published in 2022.

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### **Jameson Grey**

Jameson is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has appeared in *Dark Recesses Press* magazine, *Dark Dispatch* and in anthologies from publishers such as Ghost Orchid Press, Heads Dance Press and Hellbound Books. He can be found online at [jameson-grey.com](http://jameson-grey.com) and occasionally on Twitter @thejamesongrey.

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### **Geoffrey Hart**

Geoffrey (he/him) works as a scientific editor, specializing in helping scientists who have English as their second language publish their research. He also writes fiction in his spare time and has sold 61 stories thus far. Visit him online at [www.geoff-hart.com](http://www.geoff-hart.com).

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### **Aaron Grierson**

Since completing his undergrad from McMaster University in English Literature and History, Aaron Grierson (he/him) has continued striving to be a published storyteller and poet while exploring the world, especially

through society's extensive merging with technology. He is a First Reader for *Flash Fiction Online* and former Senior Articles Editor at *The Missing Slate*. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in *The Missing Slate*, *Marisa's Recurring Nightmares*, and are forthcoming in *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight*.

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### **Michèle Laframboise**

Michèle feeds coffee grounds to her garden plants, runs long distances and writes full-time in Mississauga, Ontario.

Fascinated by sciences and nature since she could walk, she studied in geography and engineering, but two recessions and her own social awkwardness kept the plush desk jobs away. Instead, she did a string of odd jobs to sustain her budding family: some quite dangerous, others quite tedious, all of them sources of inspiration.

Michèle now has about 20 novels out and over 60 short stories in French and English, earning various distinctions in Canada and Europe. Her most recent SF book, *Le Secret de Paloma* (David, 2021) deals with teen angst and grief on a remote, hostile world. It is currently in translation and waiting to start its quest for a good home.

You can stop by at her website ([michele-laframboise.com](http://michele-laframboise.com)) to say hello, or visit her indie publishing house ([echofictions.com](http://echofictions.com)) to get a taste of her fiction!

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### **Tracy Shepherd**

Tracy is a professional tarot reader/witch living in Canada. She wrote four novels in 2020; three are women's speculative fiction and one is high fantasy. She is currently seeking to place them. To date Tracy has published two books of poetry, *In Search of Dracula in a Moon-Shot Sky*, and *Like a Sorceress Rising*:

*Soulmate Rejections*, and two art books, *Temple of a Space Kitten: Unusual Water Colour Portraits* and *I am Thirty Seconds of Ripe Peach: Goddess Illustrations*. All four are available on Amazon.

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### **Jim Smith**

Jim is a retired trial lawyer and lifelong SF fanatic who had the good luck to meet Judy Merrill in 1981 and work, argue, laugh and be frustrated with her (and her archives) on and off from then till she passed in 1997. He expressed a lot of his mixed feelings about their friendship in his 2015 Toronto Fringe one-man show, *I Love You, Judy Merrill*.

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### **Lorina Stephens**

Lorina Stephens has worked as editor, freelance journalist for national and regional print media, is author of eight books, both fiction and non-fiction, has been a festival organizer, publicist, lecturer on many topics ranging from historical textiles and domestic technologies to publishing and writing; teaches, and publishes her own works at [Five Rivers Publishing](#).

She has had several short fiction pieces published in Canada's acclaimed *On Spec* magazine, *Postscripts to Darkness*, *Neo-opsis*, *Garden of Eden*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's fantasy anthology *Sword and Sockeress-X*.

She lives with her husband of four decades in a historic stone house in Neustadt, Ontario.

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### **Peter Storey**

Peter emigrated to Canada in the spring of 1992 and obtained his Canadian citizenship in March of 2011. He mostly writes free-form poems. Words come in to his mind, from beginning to end and/or bits and pieces, and

he writes them down with whatever is available at the time. What goes on, creatively, in his thoughts, are words and pictures. The words come out as poems and the pictures as abstract art.

Published works include “Awake” in the *Urban Green Man* Anthology, Edge Publishing, 2013, “Flight Song” at *WritingRaw.com* in February 2015, “Becoming Immortal Again” at *WritingRaw.com* November 2015, and his 2019 self-published Graphic Novel “Awake” illustrated by Janice Blaine.

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## **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 in *Loosed Upon the World* from Saga and *Imaginarium 4*, as well as in Italian translation, earning an Honourable Mention from Gardner Dozois), the story “The Call of the Freezing Souls” in *On Spec*, and the poem “The Night is not Dark” in the SFPA’s *Eye to the Telescope*.

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### **ANNOUNCING: THE SCIENCE FICTION TAROT LAUNCH GIVEAWAY!**

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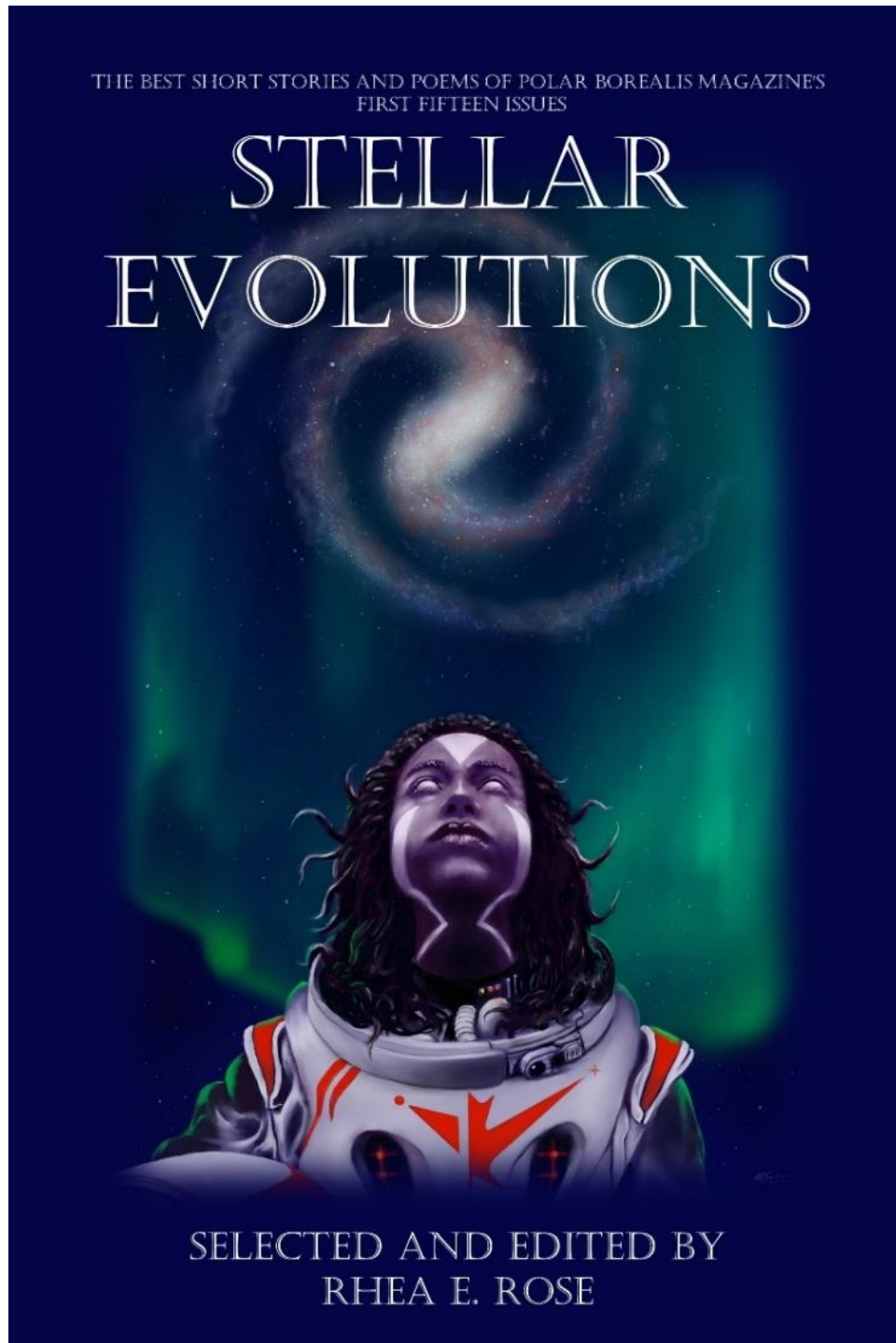
<http://www.bydifferenthighways.com/posts/2023/04/06/contest-post.html>

And, oh yeah, you can pre-order a digital version of the anthology here, if you like:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BWB5RVS>

Contest ends **May 13th**. Hope to see you in there. Good luck to all!

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