

AUGUST
2023

POLAR BOREALIS!



THE SECRET DEFENSE
OF **117!**

BY DOUG DREXLER

WERE THEY DEFENSIVE,
OR JUST VERY VERY
OFFENSIVE???



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)

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EDITORIAL

My personal gremlin is devoted to keeping me humble. On August 19th, 2023, he decided to work overtime, with an exquisite sense of timing.

Just as they announced I had won The Best Fan Writing and Publication Aurora for Polar Borealis (for the fourth year in a row), my computer informed me my connection was unstable. Then the award ceremony froze, my green room screen froze, and my cursor froze.

Patiently, I waited. Suddenly I could move my cursor, but only in tiny incremental jumps. Then my computer kicked me out of the green room. Somehow, I struggled to get back in, succeeding momentarily. Then I was kicked out again. And kicked out of the ceremony. I couldn't access anything. So, I restarted my computer. I got back into the ceremony, but not the green room. My computer, or Gremlin, was determined to keep me out.

I confess to a wee bit of frustration. Last year it was the echo chamber that kept me out. This time, my Gremlin. Oh, well.

Had my Gremlin not been so efficient, I had planned to say the following:

I am amazed... and flattered. However, I'm just the guy who throws the package together. It is the authors, poets and cover artists who contribute their creativity, imagination, and quirky attention to detail, who make Polar Borealis... Polar Borealis. This award belongs to them.

I am more than happy to accept this award on their behalf.

I thank my contributors, and I thank you.

Alas, it was not to be. I imagine my Gremlin is still giggling. So, I state my intended speech for the record. My contributors deserve recognition.

It may strike you that I am channeling Uriah Heep. Fear not. I am not falsely humble. Though I stand in awe of my contributors, I do reserve a puddle of ego for what I do. After all, I select works I believe the readers will enjoy, and occasionally perform some light, needful editing to eliminate minor hurdles that slow the pace or threaten to knock the reader out of the story or poem. I fancy I do useful work.

Now, consider what Rhea Rose does for Polar Starlight. She not only selects the poems and recommends improvements which polish them to a shining lustre, she assigns a theme to each issue and deftly works out an appropriate sequence for the poems within.

Rhea's done a magnificent job editing Polar Starlight and deserves an Aurora Award. Frankly, I had hoped she'd win this year. What say next year?

Cheers! *The Graeme*

THE SECRET DEFENSE OF 117

by Doug Drexler

The Secret Defense of 117

Doug Drexler and Mike Okuda

Undoubtedly one of the all-time great Star Trek: Deep Space Nine episodes was a show entitled *Far Beyond the Stars*. It stood out as one of the most unusual of all the installments that we had the privilege to make.

Ben Sisko is thrown back in time to 1950s Manhattan. In some crazy way he is now Benny Russell, a man who might be losing his mind. Benny writes for a science fiction pulp magazine. He madly dashes off stories about a space station in the future... or is it another life? He's not sure anymore. Fantasy and reality have smeared together. Worse than that, the veil of his sanity wears thin dealing with endless and inane racism. He is a man at the breaking point. *Far Beyond the Stars* was powerful, and Avery Brooks was incendiary.

I remember we sat around the art department reading the first draft of the script, looking at one another and nodding in delighted approval. Real science fiction here. Something to say. Bold and brave. We were so in. For the art department it was a frolic. Designing a science fiction magazine office and dressing it. Mike Okuda wanted it gilded to the gills with paraphernalia, posters, memos, and sketches. It was an outgrowth of our own little art department haven over the Paramount Marathon Mill. Laura Richarz (our incredible set decorator) and Herman Zimmerman (our fearless leader) gave us free reign to do pretty much anything we wanted on that set.

The full name of our fictional magazine is *Incredible Tales of Scientific Wonder*. The cover design is modeled on a 1953 Gernsback publication. We assigned real life characters to the fictional staff to help us dress the set. Most notably Harlan Ellison for Armin Shimmerman's fiery character, and a cross between Isaac Asimov and Richard Feynman (hence the bongos) for Colm Meaney's robot-loving persona.

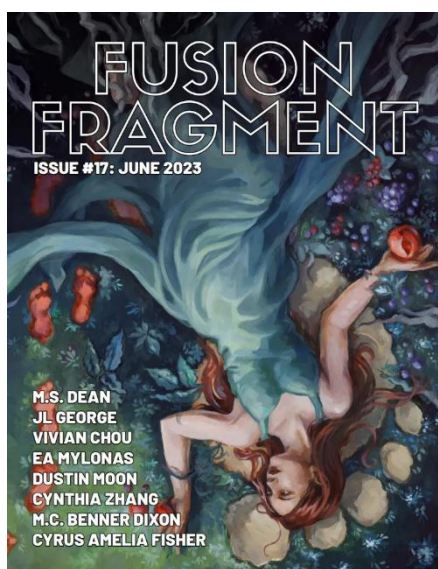
The overall impression of the office is PAPER. Lots of it. Piled everywhere in apparent disarray. Manuscripts. Carbon copies of manuscripts. Correspondence. Unsolicited submissions. Rejection letters. Back issues of *Incredible Tales*. Copies of *Astounding* and *Galaxy*. Other magazines and newspapers. The carbon copies are sometimes annoyingly fuzzy and hard to read. Some manuscripts are marked up with proofreaders' marks. Highly

visible are numerous drawings of spaceships, alien creatures, and other science fiction standbys, pinned up above every desk. Most of these are black-and-white pen drawings that were presumably used as interior illustrations and cartoons. In actual fact, most of the drawings were done by Doug Drexler, John Eaves, Mike Okuda, and Jim Van Over. Some cool paintings by Rick Sternbach (whose art has actually appeared in numerous real s-f magazines) Also prominent are several drawings that are actually sketches by Matt Jefferies from the original Star Trek series.

One of the sketches which has taken on a life of its own is the *Secret Defense of 117*. It's a real 1950s *Mars Attacks* motif. As a kid I grew up on those notorious cards (*The cards... not that silly movie*). So, that's where I was coming from when I drew it. It was a pretty fast pencil sketch, and something that I didn't have to think a lot about. It's built in. It's in my DNA. Incredibly, years later, the amazing Eric Chu turned my sketch into a full-fledged painting. Wow! I'm very proud of that, Eric! Thank you!

So... there is no science fiction story to go with Eric's incredible painting, *sorry*. All I've got is this almost science fiction story of how we brought a sci-fi magazine office from the 1950s to life. Incidentally, the title, *The Secret Defense of 117*? That was a Gene Roddenberry script written for the Chevron Hall of Stars Theatre in 1956. *What a bunch of geeks!*

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #17 – June 2023



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In the Blooming Footprints – by M.S. Dean

My Neighbour Mothman – by Cynthia Zhang

Permafrost – by Dustin Moon

Spirals – by EA Mylonas

The Aquarium – by Vivian Chou

The Last Good Day – by Dana Floberg

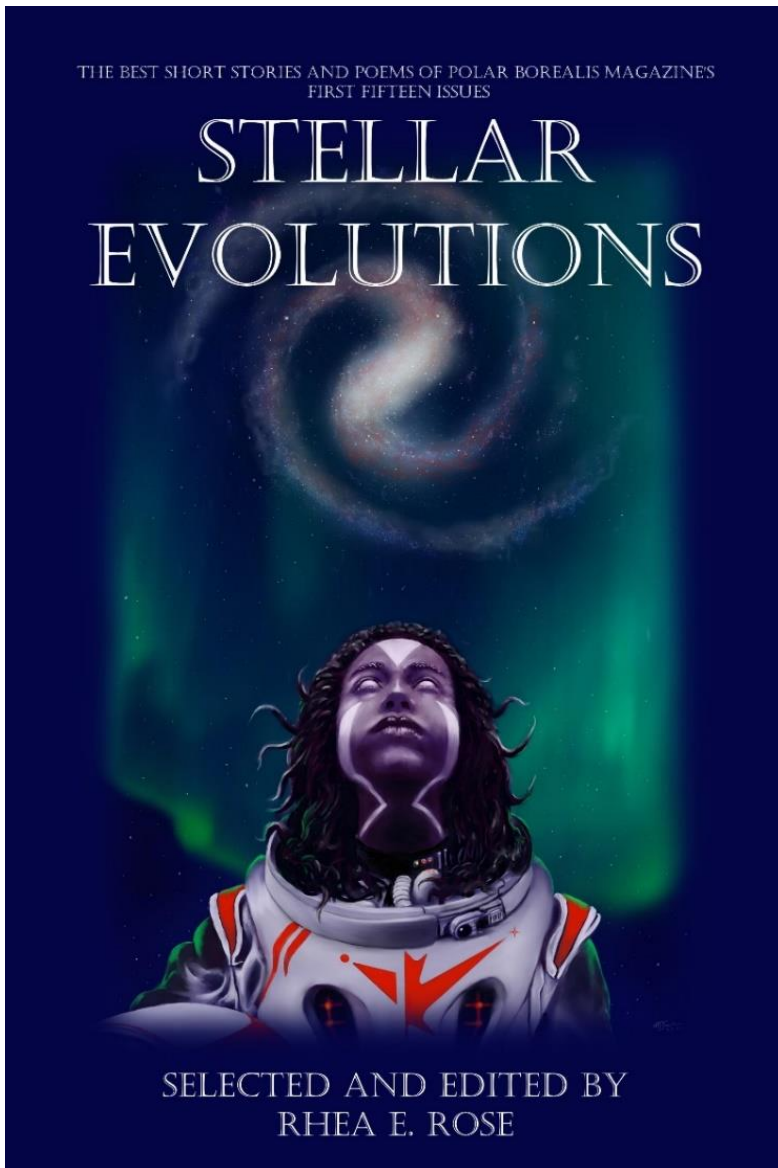
What She Did Not say Was – by M.C. Benner Dixon

Find it at: [Fusion Fragment #17](#)

A poem by Roxanne Barbour

particles
mystery green
alien god food
sprinkling earth
dust

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



Cover: Space Force
– by M.D. Jackson

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

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

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FLEETING

By Christopher O'Halloran

All ~~he~~ wants to do is wash dishes.

Well, all ~~he~~ wants to do is exist in the background without anyone using ~~him~~ again. Joy is a destination for others. Washing dishes is fine if it keeps ~~him~~ unnoticed. ~~He's~~ tired of being a tool. Tired of being used against others.

Tired of altering existence.

~~He~~ doesn't eliminate the dirt. It doesn't cease to exist; it was on the plate, now it's somewhere else. Down the drain in fragments, particles smaller than their sum. They still exist, just elsewhere.

Scalding water blasts it all down the pipes. Tartar sauce clings to the sink for one fleeting moment. It's taken away, swirling at the bottom of the stainless-steel basin.

A hair falls lazily from ~~his~~ muzzle, drifting through the air into the nozzle's stream. The water takes that away, too.

Outside the batwing doors, the kitchen bustles. Hot oil bubbles in fryers. Orders slide onto the glass counter over clean dishes, presented to wait staff who work in *Sea No Evil* t-shirts. Fish and chips fry alongside each other, the smell of cooking batter suffusing the air, ~~his~~ oversized uniform, and ~~his~~ fur.

"Excuse me." Her voice comes through the doors, grating like the sound of the sander against ~~his~~ horns. The words are well-mannered, but it's a thin veneer over the tone of disrespect. She doesn't want to be excused; she wants attention.

~~His~~ manager meets this woman at the register. Nikki is polite, but no-nonsense. You have to be firm with the after-church crowd. They rarely possess the patience extolled in their "sermons." They want their fish, their chips, their mushy peas, their deep-fried mushrooms and pickles. They want service, a smile, and the right to leave minimal tips.

In short, they come with nonsense, and if Nikki tolerated it, they'd heap it on even heavier.

"Get you something, love?" asks Nikki, her English accent no longer exotic to the locals.

"There is a hair in my fish."

"I'm sorry," says Nikki, not sounding particularly apologetic. "Let me get you another plate. We'll bring it to you."

“That’s not enough. I was horrified. Disgusted. I can’t eat anymore. Maybe not for the rest of the day.”

“That’s a bit dramatic, innit?”

“*Dramatic?*” The woman’s voice climbs an octave, rising through the air with all the charm of a shrieking kettle.

“Our cooks all wear hairnets. We operate as hygienically as possible.”

“*You’re* not wearing a hairnet.”

“I’m not a cook.”

“What about back there?” asks the woman. He can feel her words pointing in his direction. “Does the dishwasher wear a hairnet?”

A hairnet wouldn’t fit over his head, even with his horns ground down.

“He doesn’t need to wear a hairnet,” says Nikki.

Heels click against tile. Tile that he washes every night.

“No, wait,” says Nikki, a smile in her voice. “You can’t go back there.”

He sighs. This rarely happens, but every now and then Nikki goads some entitled person to storm into the back for their just desserts. She’s not like the others who have used him; she’d never give him a target. But the sight of him never fails to rob an angry customer of words.

At his back, the batwing doors fly open, slamming against the walls on either side. The woman charges him, noisy heels carrying her in a straight line.

He knows what she sees, why she skids to a halt, shoes scrambling on the ground like the hooves of a clumsy goat: wide, fur-covered back, a *Sea No Evil* t-shirt—special ordered in a size for which there is no name—stretched to the point of translucence.

His own hooves grind against the floor as he circles around her. Slowly, so as not to startle. His long, yellow gloves drip dish water onto the floor, but removing them would be dangerous.

For her, of course.

She wears sunglasses though indoors. Her sharp chin juts out, wielded like a weapon. A white, sleeveless dress conforms to her body, revealing muscled arms whose tan is out of place beneath the fluorescent lights.

“Oh,” she says, “that explains it.”

She’s not speechless. Anyone who knows her would not be surprised. This woman could witness the birth of the universe and have something to say.

He stands before her, breathing hot air out his open mouth. The pack of gum he chews masks his breath; it would smell of manure and decay, otherwise.

As she stares at ~~him~~, a dark-brown hair falls from the tip of ~~his~~ snout. It slowly floats to the ground. They both watch its silent descent.

It's been falling out quicker since the day Nikki found ~~him~~. The day ~~he~~ gave up ~~his~~ old life for something different.

Nikki had been unfaithful. She had taken a lover. Someone who saw her the way her husband used to.

Nikki's husband had dragged this lover to ~~him~~ after learning of ~~his~~ unique power. He had prodded the lover through ~~his~~ labyrinth at the end of a gun, stopping at the center where ~~he~~ made ~~his~~ home.

Nikki's husband just wanted his wife back. He wanted the world—and Nikki—to forget this man who had taken his place. For history to forget. For this lover not to be—not to have ever been. He demanded it of ~~him~~.

~~He~~ would comply. ~~He~~ would always comply. It was the easiest thing to do. ~~He~~ had been used by armies to end wars before they began; nobody wanted to fight a monster where a single encounter would strike you from existence—past, present, and future.

But Nikki had been there. She had stopped her husband, admitted not only her mistake but her lack of love for him—and received a gunshot to the gut for her honesty. It wasn't ideal, but preferable to the shots to the head her husband doled out for the lover and himself.

~~He~~ had carried her out and dropped her off at the hospital. ~~His~~ kindness was rewarded with a life in this rapidly changing world. A month later, Nikki braved ~~his~~ labyrinth once more to offer ~~him~~ a job.

"I know you must think you're *special*," says the tanned, irate woman before ~~him~~, "but there are rules for a reason."

Like Nikki, she's not afraid of ~~him~~. She's confronting ~~him~~. Her arrogance drives her past the point of self-preservation.

The woman whips her sunglasses off.

"Do you know who I am?"

~~He~~ does. ~~He~~ knows who everyone is. Knows their history and what ~~he~~ can do to it.

Kerri Karlson. Wolf News host. A force to be reckoned with on Twitter; cross her and receive the attention of 4.4 million followers. No wonder she's so fearless.

"One word from me, and this place will be as empty as that ugly head." She glares at ~~him~~, her eyes colorless, though she would call them blue. "Don't *fuck* with me. Put on a hairnet."

Kerri Karlson spins on her heels but slips in the puddle of water dripping from his long gloves. She falls back into him, hand flying up. Reflexively, she grabs onto the ring that dangles from his nose.

Her weight pulls his face down. He roars, giant wad of faded-green gum flying out and landing in her platinum blonde hair.

She slaps at him. It's one of the last things she'll never do.

Her fingers brush through his fur and make contact with his flesh. Her skin is cool, lifeless as a marble statue, though that has nothing to do with him. Her mouth drops open, not wanting to be outdone by the desperate retracting of her eyelids.

Like a soap bubble, Kerri Karlson begins to rise weightlessly into the air. Her shoes slip on the tile again as they lose connection with earth. One falls off as she kicks. It clatters on the ground, the sound contained in their small world of steam.

Her waist lifts higher than the rest of her. She still holds tight to the ring through his nose. A high keening noise comes from her throat. It spills out of her belly as if the air inside her lungs is becoming lighter.

"Aiiiiiii..."

He can feel her presence slipping from the world.

Nikki forgets she had an irate customer. Through the door and into the dining room, Kerri Karlson's husband forgets his wife; their two daughters forget they ever had a mom.

Her 4.4 million followers don't even notice her absence from Twitter.

All YouTube clips of her Wolf News segments are erased.

Books she's authored disappear from shelves of semi-literate readers around the world, their owners filling the spot without the slightest feeling that something is amiss.

Kerri Karlson ceases to be.

He leads her floating body past racks of dishes, dirty and clean. Down a narrow hallway he uses to take out the garbage. They pass the utility closet. Inside, a faucet drips. He'll have to take a look at that.

With his broad back, he pushes the alley door open. The sun warms his skin. It would be nice if it wasn't also baking the contents of the nearby dumpsters.

Nobody notices the floating woman.

He pries her fingers off his nose ring, and she drifts upward like a child's lost balloon. Her hands paw at the air, trying to grab onto him, but there's

nothing within reach. Distance makes her small. Blonde hair drifts towards the cloudless sky; his gum is a mass holding much of it together.

She'll float away with everything she's ever accomplished right behind her. Deeds and misdeeds. Past and present.

He sighs. His fur feels thicker for the moment, but it won't last. It is all fleeting.

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

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

MONTGOLFIER BROTHERS, 1783

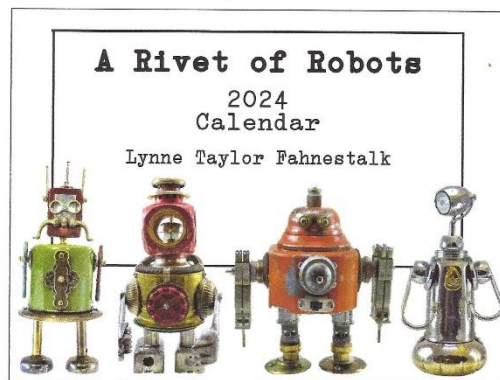
by Jo McBride

A sheep, a duck, and a rooster were the only passengers. In the crowd some cried out, or fainted, or simply marveled, mouths agape. It was a modern wonder, large and full, its colours brilliant in the September sun, gold decorations glistening and glimmering as befit such majesty and spectacle. Below, in a Paris street, a young waterboy, without coins to jingle in his pocket, lay on his back to watch with awe and a new and profound certainty that though the sheep, the duck and the rooster were the first, they would not be the last, and that this changed everything.



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HIGHER JOURNEY

by James Grotkowski

His puddle was murky today. But it tasted fine, just not as superb as it had the preceding days. Rtulst discreetly wriggled the tip of his fifth serpentine until he had opened a shallow channel between his puddle and that of his cohort Shornt who would likely be sleeping for several more days. So, while the fresh contents of the slumbering one's unsipped pool lazily flowed into and mixed with his own, Rtulst enjoyed the flavour enhancement without guilt. He knew that their blissful time would be only a short interlude between the random events that had led them here and the testing journey that would soon ensue. This moment in time, with any kind of puddle, murky or savory, was a joy to experience and he would always hold this memory close to his ganglion.

But they say that you cannot stop the world from turning. On the tipped planet rockE what really mattered and what couldn't be stopped was its orbit around its star. The yellow sun finally rose from its twilight retreat to trace full circles in the violet polar sky. The half-year-long day had begun and all the puddles would soon evaporate. Shornt awoke and with his assistance Rtulst was able to fill their near-by ship's cargo hold with the shrinking liquid disk treats before they disappeared. They also fully augmented their load with a charge of the wriggling microorganisms that were necessary for sustenance and flavour. They'd be good for a century if things stretched out that far. Now they had to leave before temperatures rose to the unlivable hell of a rockE full summer day.

Seven Galactic-Standard-Days'-worth of non-stop work and Shornt was dozing off again. Rtulst accepted that the mysterious sleepiness wasn't his friend's fault, but it was still irritating.

"Shornt! Wake up you asymmetrical seven-armed blob, we have a starship to launch."

The drowsy one inflated to alert form. He blinked several times and then acknowledged his crewmate.

"Sorry, captain, I do not know what's wrong with me. We both seem to have had some kind of sleeping affliction since we picked up our cargo at Kloromk, but you have recovered much more quickly than I. I think that I'm slowly getting better, and at this rate I'll be all better in another week or two."

Shornt's voice was clear as a bell with no croaky trace from his rest. That was a special skill, Rtulst thought.

Their bullet-shaped starship had landed vertically, pointy side up, with approach parameters having been just at or perhaps slightly beyond safe limits. It had sunk up to its mid-line in the gooey polar muck of the then still cool rockE. To launch against the ever-hardening summer crust and the suction of the sunken portion would take some ingenuity.

Shornt was still alert. "All we need to do to launch is launch. We have supplies for decades and quantum vacuum power of infinite supply, but we are embedded in this crusting goo. I have a solution."

"Well, I'm all ears," replied Rtulst. In reality he had only nine of that particular anatomical feature.

"That unwieldy thing that we're trying to take to VixBorBowben has thrown us off course several times and we nearly crashed as we tried to thread our way through the dusty bands of this clotted nebula. We've seen that it oscillates so much and for so long that it wrecked the ship's guidance while the frantic algorithms failed to readjust. We may have been sacked out for most of the havoc but fortunately the ship's logs do not lie. If we could activate the thing for launch it might shake us enough to clear the suction and crumble the crust enough to let us take-off."

"Good idea," said the captain, "How do we activate it?"

Shornt raised the tips of all seven serpentines and twitched them in his kind's unspoken expression of "I do not know; to be determined."

The two crewmates slithered to their ship's upper access port and entered their ride. Rtulst took the helm in case his skills were required sometime soon, and Shornt slid down into the hold and to the harnessed elephantine thing.

"How in the universe do I make it vibrate?" Shornt asked himself. "This giant ball is featureless, there is no on-off switch and there are no buttons to push."

He shook the massive blue thing, tapped it, banged it and rubbed it but nothing changed. In the following moment of frustration Shornt involuntarily shot it with a squirt of ink. Perhaps it was the touch of the fluid or the change in temperature or perhaps an electrostatic effect but for some reason the object of attention finally began to vibrate. So much so that Shornt was surprised that its harness held as the shimmying ball knocked him hard into the far wall. He grabbed onto some dangling cargo straps as the oscillations intensified, the whole ship shaking violently. That, after all, was the plan.

Rtulst spoke over the commessage with a motion-induced warble.

"Hang on, we're outta here."

He slided the launch control and nineteen million pounds of thrust lurched the starship free of its temporary trap. "I feel like I'm trying to drive a vibrating hovercar that desperately wants to steer itself in any direction but the desired one," Rtulst murmured to no one in particular.

A half million miles out from the planet the thing at last became still. Shornt was able to find his way to the helm and his partner.

"Good driving," he said, "I didn't feel any algorithms kicking in and we didn't end up flying the wrong way around."

"Thanks, and now on to VixBorBowben," stated the captain as if nothing of importance had happened, "Of course you know flying there shouldn't be much of an issue. If we avoid more vibrations and aside from the fifty-three years that it'll take to get there, we should be good. It's working our final way down through the raging atmosphere and then descending through the crust to the subterranean ocean of that awful place that'll be hard."

"Few have gone before," affirmed Shornt.

"By the way, I think it likes ink, that's how I got it to shake. It probably shook like that on the previous legs of our trip in delayed response to our tiny claiming squirts."

The two questers grabbed a quick puddle apiece and then commanded their Gorithm Machine to attempt to logic out what the thing was in the first place. The GM would have five decades, if all went well, to ruminate on the problem. Finally, they snugged their flight sling straps, rolled up their serpentines and nodded off into hibernation. After all there was no need to clutter up their journey with years of irrelevant dialogue.

Rtulst did not dream, Shornt did once. His was almost a lucid dream and in his play he was nearly aware of his control and omniscient narration. Shornt might have dreamt for years or for a moment. Dreams do not come with verifiable ticks of built-in clocks. His dream was long enough or short enough to be contained within the span of their current journey.

I am dreaming as I float above the form of my crewmate and of myself. I hear a quiet voice in my head. In my dream I know that the thing in the cargo harness is talking to me. The passenger tells me many things although it's hard to tell if what it tells me is new information or something I've always known. Perhaps it is lonely and it just wants to communicate anything to anyone and with "that anyone" being me. It says that it most often lives in a nano scaled unconsolidated world where virus-like phages are organized to

work in a collective way. The coordinating vitality is mysterious even unto itself in the way that consciousness is a mystery to corporeal life forms.

Nevertheless, unseen platoons of phages have easy access to the cellular thinking machinery of us, the ship's crew and with that access they can induce new memories and goal seeking drives. "Imperatively to VixBorBowben" had been installed in us at first encounter. That installation was difficult for Rtulst but for me it had been too easy, and the implant wasn't sticking, so they made me sleep more as they repeated the process. No reason was given for the directive nor requested; so strong was the command. This dream-sourced information momentarily makes me feel like a traitor to myself as I determinedly push, along with Rtulst, on to VixBorBowben. Onward to our destination and onward my sleep.

Rtulst and Shornt awoke from their fifty-three-year hibernation. The tiny disk of the fierce planet of their destination was easily visible and its image was growing fast. It took only two puddles apiece for the crew to satisfactorily recover their long dormant senses. Pilot and co-pilot would need all of their abilities at hand as their craft entered the planetary magnetic and electric fields of VixBorBowben. Their computers and controls would work only sporadically in the intense environment. The Serpentes would need to take frequent and precise manual control during the de-orbit all the way down through the swirling dense atmosphere and into the subsurface.

It took fourteen ever-shrinking orbital ellipses to slow down from intergalactic velocity after planetary capture and to maintain life-affording forces while on a trajectory to low orbit. Now Rtulst took fine command to maneuver through the de-orbit procedure as the ship's computers winked in and out.

"Shornt! follow my lead and toggle the B vari-lobe but do it at a rate of one point six to my one."

"Shornt, flip gee-zards one, five and six in unison with two and hold the vane-leron at one point five degrees for three seconds and then at one degree for four seconds then let it auto veer."

"Shornt, increase base fire shield to layer six and hold till contact."

"Shornt..."

The commands came fast and furious as the ship descended without incineration towards the nitrogen glaciers of the surface. Velocity had to be

sub-sonic before encountering that boundary. The flux engines strained at maximum power as the buffeted starship descended, mostly thrust end first, towards the crust.

Then the plasma shields melted through the surface layers and next through the deeper mixtures of diamond-hard ice and rock that lay beneath. Then they melted more rock and ice. The pilots feverishly attended to their controls. The ship began to shake almost as if it were vibrating from within. With only six percent shielding remaining and with all external fins and protrusions, even the tiniest of rivet heads, either sheared or ablated away, and with a thundering shuddering bang they broke out of the icy rocky crust into the mysterious black subterranean ocean of VixBorBowben.

Before Rtulst and Shornt could acknowledge or comprehend the current situation the circumstance of their cargo became a focus of their attention. More precisely it was the circumstance of both the cargo hold and that of their rotund strapped-in payload that tripped an excess of alarms. Even more exactly, there was now no longer a cargo hold and their blue egg payload was nowhere to be detected.

The cold black ocean swept in to fill what remained of the ship. With emergency lights fading fast, Rtulst and Shornt slipped out of their harnesses and swam with the ease and skill of their pelagic kind through the still swirling influx to a rent in the hull of their no longer space-worthy craft. Now the last of the light dwindled. In the pitch blackness of the underground sea the spaceship puffed an anemic explosion to provide a final flash of luminescence in that otherwise unlit world and then the vessel pieces dissolved away with the light and into the waters. The paired serpentines floated in the cool sea, touching their long comm tips and with each viscerally feeling the vast and empty darkness enveloping them.

Rtulst broke the deafening silence.

“I’m hungry.”

Not often in the annals of all living beings have words more inappropriate for the current situation been issued. However, their veracity remained.

But there was no-one to receive the inanity.

Shornt had just dissolved away, too.

The solitary unseen form of Rtulst hung motionless in the subterranean ocean while his green blood coursed with adrenaline and his mind raced. But there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. His swirling mind flashed by his most recent utterance and stopped for the briefest of moments to understand them.

Yes, indeed he was hungry. He reacted to his thought instinctively and drew in a sip of the ocean.

“That tastes surprisingly good and I do detect a significant flavour component that reminds me of the murky puddles of rockE.”

“Now what!” he exclaimed to himself as his stomachs began to knot and as he began to feel disoriented. He was wide awake but he felt like he was falling asleep into a vivid dream at the same time. The paradoxical feeling intensified and built to the point where Rtulst felt as if his brains were going to explode. Then he too, like his crewmate, dissolved away into the ocean.

“Hello, Rtulst,” said Shornt. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Wait, What?” Rtulst rightly had some questions to ask.

Inanimate, proto-animate, alive, reflex, goal seeking, intention, awareness, reflex-consciousness, directed-consciousness, controlled-consciousness, VixBorBowben.

That progression flowed through Rtulst's mind before he could question more. The collective phage mind streamed it. The newly leveled up phage-assisted consciousness that filled the planetary dark ocean offered the sequence as a gift to the visitors.

The ocean-wide controlled-consciousness had known for ages that it was on the verge of its next epiphany or its next paradigm shift, a moment that would raise its level of existence one more step. But it was locked deep under the crust of a remote planet and could find no spark, conscious or physical, to initiate that transformation. Once or twice every eon some big fast-moving chunk of space debris would smash into VixBorBowben but that wasn't stimulus enough. Sometimes though, the seal would crack and a stream of the sea would geyser out into the universe. Once, the upshot bits of phage consciousness found a way to coalesce into nearly spherical physical form and to drift its globular way to a world where was life with some form of self-awareness. That journey took eons, but finally a bustling supply port was reached. There the phage entity slowly learned how to scavenge enlightening snippets from the myriad visiting lives.

“These fragments might be just what the ocean way back home needs to transcend,” the peerless spheroidal entity hoped. “I believe there are enough to trigger at least... something... but I have to come up with a plan to get this trove to those salty waters.”

Days after those thoughts, the Serpentine had landed for refurbishment and for renowned tasty puddles. Their shiny starship was easily resupplied except for the puddles. They'd have to make a small hop over to a nearby planet for that delicacy.

The phage sphere liked the Serpentine. Almost as soon as the starship arrived, the phages had noticed the duo's unique consciousnesses and the unaccustomed ease with which they could infiltrate the minds of the space-faring pilots. Vagaries of the universe made it so that the one who called himself Shornt was slightly easier to read and to control than the more disciplined pilot Rtulst. But both were readily led to believe that cargoing the phage sphere over to the puddles and then on to VixBorBowben was a manifest plan.

While the Serpentine slept on the way to the puddles, the sphere practiced the vibrations it would need upon reaching its home ocean. They did notice that they'd have to be careful with that, after all they did not want to wreck their fortuitous ride too soon.

Rtulst and Shornt swirled as bounded eddies within the vast consciousness of the conscious VixBorBowben sea. Both were highly confused, but they seemed to be themselves although they could sense some kind of immense entangling power surrounding whatever they'd have to call themselves. Then they felt the phage sphere explode. Then they felt a stream of snippets flow by and explode. If there can be nothingness; then there was nothingness,

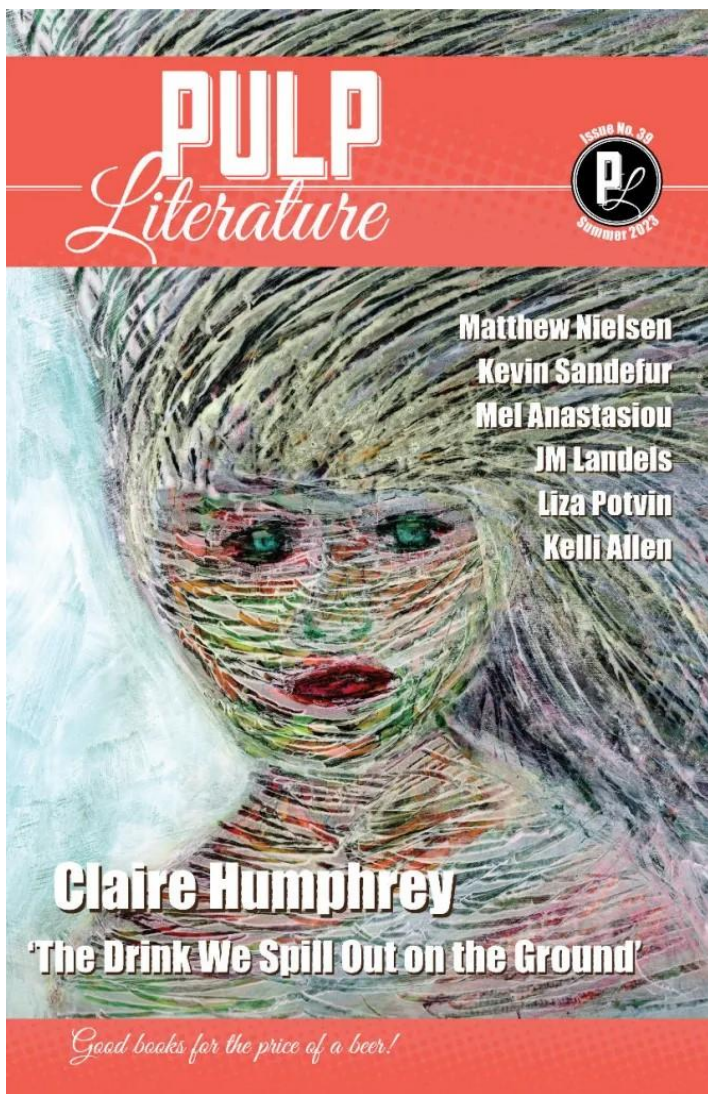
Then VixBorBowben with traces of Rtulst and Shornt gained ultra consciousness. Indeed, the delivered snippets and the life experiences of the Serpentine had delivered enough of the required epiphanies to enable the ocean to level up. No longer in need of anything physical to contain or form itself, VixBorBowben expanded its awareness outside of its containing crust. It was an awareness now aware of, and being a part of, the space outside of the constricting planetary surface. It was easily aware of the infinities that stretched away in all directions. And it could control the control of its awareness. The exceptionally awakened entity examined all the bits and pieces of its existence, and it marveled at what the universe could create. Then it wanted to be the universe. It would continue to try to level up to all.

But first, for some reasons it actually knew, and which were not in any way transcendental, VixBorBowben had a strong urge for the ingestion of puddles. Finding a way for a consciousness to ingest a puddle was an “at the moment unsolved puzzle.” But nothing was too much of a challenge so a confident attempt would be made.

“Off to rockE,” it commanded itself.

The eddies of Rtulst and Shornt experienced salivation.

PULP LITERATURE #39 Summer 2023



Cover: *Dreaming Underwater* – by Claire Lawrence

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Find it here: [Pulp Literature #39](#)

ALTERNATE WORLD 452

(Previously published in *Illumen*, Summer 2019)

by Lisa Timpf

in Toronto and Tobermory
Moose Jaw and Moosonee
schoolchildren stand to sing
“the Star-Spangled Banner” each morning
before starting their studies
of American History

no mention of Laura Secord’s
heart-pounding journey
through the woods
or the hammer coming down
on the Last Spike
sparking Sir John A’s dream to life
oh, and Pierre never got his chance
to pirouette in the Queen’s presence

in alternate world 452
north of the Great Lakes
lie a handful of states
where there’s no such thing as
three-down football,
basketball nets
outnumber hockey sticks
twenty to one,
and hardly anyone
punctuates a comment
with “eh?”

oh, they’re American, all right,
though no-one can explain
why folks in those Far North states
show such an unusual fondness
for maple syrup and coffee shops...

TO STRIKE A MATCH

by Jessica Peter

The chant rose in a swelling crescendo, echoing throughout the few streets of the village. “Var-Magath, Var-Magath.”

Sarah froze on her stoop, sucking in a sharp breath flavored of woodsmoke and crisp winter air. Tears stung her eyes. Was her love for her God strong enough to face the others?

She tilted her head to the sky. Flurries of snow ebbed and flowed, gathering in tiny groups on her cheeks. All unique, all perfect, all ephemeral. She dashed them away with her mitt.

The chanting again.

This time, at the name, that blessed name, a warm glow ignited in Sarah’s chest. For Var-Magath, she’d do anything. She’d even face the others. She lifted the hem of her blue robe and sprinted down the street. As she rounded the church, a massive bonfire came into view, spitting smoke and flame, battling the flurries in the clouded, starless sky.

Around the fire, dozens of people in hooded scarlet robes lifted their arms, heads tilted back as if watching the fight for dominance in the heavens. One by one they opened their mouths to begin the chant once more, then one by one they closed their mouths, turned, murmured, as they noticed Sarah standing there. Off to the side, as always, but close enough to feel the radiating heat of the fire.

Concentration broken, the gazes that locked on Sarah’s were excessively human; spiteful and frustrated, irritated and outright hostile. She couldn’t help catch snippets of conversation.

“Late as always.”

“What is she *wearing*?”

Sarah looked down at the hooded robe she’d carefully pressed and laid out for tonight’s ceremony. Her brilliant *blue* hooded robe. She would never fit in. She shut her eyes for an instant. Would Var-Magath even rise if things weren’t perfect?

But she had to believe He would see her faith and come for them, bringing blessed peace in His wake. She smiled, the glow in her chest catching flame once more.

Sarah opened her eyes and walked toward the bonfire, head held high.

The murmurs increased, but she refused to listen. She had as much of a right to be her as any one of these around the fire. More, perhaps.

One figure detached itself from the group, leaning heavily on a cane. Another person broke from the circle to offer Sarah's great-aunt Mary their arm, but Mary slapped it away. Sarah couldn't help a smile despite the feeling of impending doom.

In the flickering light, the wizened face inside the hood was all the sharper, all planes and angles.

"I'm ready for the ceremony." Sarah straightened even further, if such a thing were possible. The town might barely tolerate her, but if Mary took her side, they'd listen.

Mary turned and spit in the snow off to her left.

Every one of Sarah's muscles tensed, waiting for the sword to fall.

"You know *this* ceremony can only be completed with the red robes." Mary wobbled slightly, but Sarah knew better than to offer help.

"But Var-Magath—"

"But Var-Magath nothing." Mary spit into the snow again, leaving a sick yellow pit in the pristine white. "You don't fit here."

Sarah opened her mouth and then shut it again. It wasn't incorrect. She didn't fit here. She never had.

"You can't be here for the ceremony; you'll taint the work." Great-Aunt Mary hobbled back to the circle to take her place without a backwards glance.

Sarah's stomach churned and her ramrod straightness collapsed, chin slumping to her chest, shoulders rising, to take up the same position that she used to use to hide in the corners of their one-room classroom. All she wanted was to praise Him, and she couldn't even do that. She turned away, but not before she heard one more whisper behind her, in a familiar voice from her school days.

"She always thought she was better than us."

Tears stung Sarah's eyes once more as she walked away, one drip falling on her cheek, her carefully cared-for robe dragging in the snow.

It wasn't true. All she'd ever wanted was to fit in. This was everything she'd ever known.

Instead, she walked away. With the bonfire out of sight behind the big old building, everything was colder. Rock Hollow had that almost unnatural brightness that came the night after a blizzard, like the snow had brought its own light.

Sarah trudged to her cottage and had a sudden nostalgia for things she'd never experienced and places she'd never been. She wished she were somewhere else, but she'd never even left Rock Hollow; only the men who picked up supplies did. She knew as well as anyone that outsiders couldn't be trusted.

Sarah stopped dead in the middle of the street as an idea shot through her like lightning: she didn't trust anyone here either.

She could leave. Now, tonight. This didn't have to be her life anymore. She could worship Var-Magath on her own, anywhere. If she left now, it would be hours before anyone would know, and her footprints would be covered by the snowfall.

She could *leave*. The plans ripped through her. She knew what the outside world was like because they were allowed all the outside media that they wanted. She had plenty of cash, as the elders insisted that they all keep stacks of the normally useless stuff in case the government ever raided the town. And she loved maps, so she knew about the cottage town within several hours walking distance, and its transit links to New Haven.

Then from New Haven. . . maybe New York. She savored the idea like a sweet, hard candy, rolling it over and over in her mind.

New York City.

Suddenly aware she was standing motionless in the street, Sarah hustled into her cottage to pack. She pulled off her sodden, blue robe and tossed it to the ground, then flushed, cheeks hot, and lifted it to hang gently. None of this was Var-Magath's fault.

As if on cue, the ground groaned beneath her: a tiny earthquake. It felt like a response to her plans. Sarah smiled, feeling that love for Him in her heart. She picked out a bright blue scarf that matched the robe and wrapped it around her.

Perhaps Var-Magath would rise for *her*, and not those around the bonfire.

A winking electric light in the distance nearly made Sarah collapse in relief. She was used to walking, but the night was bitter. She couldn't tell how many hours she'd been going,

Her cheeks stung from the wind, and a small patch on her throat burned where her scarf kept slipping. Even the extra layer under her thick skirt did barely anything to keep out the bite.

For a moment, for a split second, she regretted her decision. Wished she'd waited until the spring, or even the summer. Dreamed of being in her cozy cottage in Rock Hollow, a miserable outcast, but warm.

Sarah shook her head sharply, responding to her own doubts. This was what she had to do. She needed to get out. She'd needed it for a long time now.

The first cottage in town had a car out front, and a dim light in one room. It might have been occupied, which would mean warmth and food. But it was the middle of the night, and these people were strangers. Rock Hollow might have been toxic, but she knew they weren't wrong about the danger of strangers. She'd seen those movies too.

The next cottage was dark with thick snow on the driveway. No car, so likely no people. But it did have a lamp out front that turned on with Sarah's motion. It was a weak light against the dark and blustery night, but it made her feel safer.

She trudged through the snow and tried the door, but it was locked. Not unexpected, even in cottage country. This wasn't Rock Hollow, after all. Checking in the porch plant and under the mat, she came up empty for keys. For a moment she considered setting up in the relative protection of the covered porch, but then the wind whipped through, and she changed her mind.

As she turned to leave the property, she caught sight of a wooden shed out back. She stamped through the now knee-deep snow and made it there where she tested the door and found it unlocked.

There was an immediate respite from the wind as she stepped in. She shone her flashlight along the walls and on dusty rakes and shovels, faded old water noodles, and an inflatable water lounger, still partially inflated but limp. Sarah's mind lit up when she saw it. She grinned, and hustled across the shed to inflate it, then set it up on the ground like a makeshift cot. Now, at least, she wouldn't have to sleep on the frigid cement.

As quickly as she could, she stripped out of her clothes so she could add yet another layer underneath, then she beat the snowy items against the far wall of the shed before putting everything back on. Then, still not warm but at least warmer, Sarah settled onto the inflated "bed" and curled up to sleep.

Sleep didn't come. What might have been hours or might have only been minutes later, the cold had sunk into her bones, and she lay, restless and exhausted.

She needed a fire but didn't trust building one in here with the walls looking like so much kindling themselves. She couldn't build one outdoors in

this weather either. Instead, she pulled a pack of matches out of her backpack and looked at them longingly.

A single match would do nearly nothing, she knew that, of course she did. But perhaps it would at least warm her frozen fingers.

Sarah lit a match.

And she was on the streets of New York. Not just New York: Times Square.

She spun around like a heroine in a made-for-TV movie and took in all the tacky glowing signs, the crowds of people, the rampant ode to capitalism—all the things the people of Rock Hollow had warned her about.

It was magical.

She laughed out loud, and realized she wasn't even in a jacket anymore, only a thin sweater. It was spring here.

Sarah walked toward a hot dog cart, soaking in the smell of the grilling meat and the wash of heat that came from it.

The match sputtered and went out.

She inhaled, and the cold was so intense that it choked her. Coughing and sputtering, she adjusted with a squeak on the inflatable lounger. Her bones ached.

Sarah furrowed her brow at her pack of matches. Could this other world, this visit to her dream place, be coming from Var-Magath? A vision?

And if she got those moments in New York with *one* match, what would she get with two?

Without stopping to think any further, she struck two matches.

Sarah was back in New York, but no longer in Times Square. Instead, iconic brownstones lined each side of the street. She laughed out loud again, ignoring the stares of passersby. Walking along, she admired the blossoms on trees: the season had advanced once again. The warmth of the sun baked her skin. Around the corner was a street full of shops and restaurants, tiny patios spilling over onto the sidewalks.

Sarah moved through it all like a happy ghost.

A young woman around her age turned and gave her a crooked half smile. Unlike anyone in Rock Hollow, her skin was medium-brown, and her black hair was close-cropped to her skull. She wore a bright blue fabric scarf that reminded Sarah of something she couldn't quite grasp.

"Hey, are you okay?" the woman asked.

Sarah laughed out loud for the third time, probably bringing up more questions than answers.

“It’s such nice weather,” she finally said. “And I’m new in town! Want to... grab a coffee?” The words came out stilted, as she’d never had to introduce herself to anyone before. But she was copying all the movies, and it felt like it hit right.

The woman’s crooked smile widened, cracking into a dimple on one side. Sarah blushed and ducked her head for a moment, expecting rejection.

“Sure.” The other woman gestured up the street. “My usual place is right there. I’m Afua.”

“Sarah,” Sarah muttered, her head down and cheeks burning. All strangers weren’t bad after all. She fought down another chuckle that threatened to bubble up.

They walked for a short while and then stepped into the coffee shop where a wave of coziness assailed her. A guy with long brown hair played guitar while people sat around him on plump cushions, steaming cups in their hands.

“Hey Afua, who’s your friend?” one called.

The snap of cold was more painful than the first.

Sarah sat in the freezing shed. Her bones no longer ached; her limbs were fully numb from the cold. She struggled to open her eyes for a moment, eyelashes crusted shut with ice. Slapping her hand against the cement, she groaned out loud with frustration. She didn’t want this world. She wanted the other one.

Greedily, she fumbled for the entire pack of matches, while the ground shifted ever-so-slightly. Her eyes teared up slightly at the gesture from Var-Magath. This had to be what He wanted with her.

She grabbed every single match in her mittened hand, took a deep breath, and struck.

Sarah was in a crowded and eclectic loft apartment, one wall brick, one wall all window, ridged with frames. The place was packed with plump, plush furniture and every nook and cranny had a plant in it. Pillows and blankets were scattered everywhere. It was cozy, warm, and full of people. Full of life.

The guy who’d had the guitar, *Drew*, Sarah’s mind filled in, had gotten an asymmetrical haircut since she’d last seen him, one side buzzed and the other down to his chin. He grabbed pretzels from a bowl on the counter and zipped out of the way of Afua. She had her hair different too, in long dreads, and she was crouched in front of the oven. Two other people—Sarah’s friends, she knew—sat at the table already.

“Sarah, can you grab drinks for everyone?” Afua turned toward them holding a casserole dish in two big, peacock blue oven mitts.

The color made Sarah blink for a minute, and then her memories of this life filled in, at first indistinct like looking through a frosted pane of glass, and then clearer and clearer until this life was everything she could remember. The memories of her insignificant life from Rock Hollow to the shed became dimmer and dimmer until they winked out like dead stars.

Instead, friendship and squabbles, love and loss, and many nights sitting out on a balcony with a few bottles of cheap wine, a guitar, and comfortable conversation. And then just the two of them. She and Afua, together in this life, for now, forever.

Sarah was home.

“Sure!” Sarah finally said, darting over to the cabinets to grab two bottles of wine and five glasses, gathering the glasses by the stems so she could carry all of them at once.

Then the earth shifted. One glass fell, shattering on the kitchen floor.

“Are you okay?” someone shouted.

“I’m okay, I’m okay! The glass unfortunately...” Sarah shrugged, and laughed, hiding how shaken she felt.

There was a pleasant cacophony of laughing and joking jeers.

“An earthquake!” Drew’s eyes were round. “I didn’t even know New York got them. I haven’t felt one since I was back in California.”

Something tickled at the edges of Sarah’s memories like the flutter of a butterfly’s wings, but she couldn’t grasp it. She frowned, and then decided to let it go.

She forced a smile. “I made my salted caramel apple pie. Whoever cleans up the glass gets a second slice.”

There was a hoot of laughter from the table, and Drew slid in his socked feet over to the kitchen, grabbed the dustpan and started sweeping.

Sarah continued to the table with the other four glasses and the bottles. She went in for a quick peck on Afua’s cheek but her partner turned at the last minute, catching her full on the mouth. For a moment Sarah was entranced by the warmth, and the joy, and the love.

“The glasses!” she finally said, voice muffled by Afua’s closeness.

“We’ll lose them all.” Afua laughed. “It’s worth it.”

As Sarah pulled away, Afua gripped her hand. Once, tightly. Trying to say something that Sarah couldn’t catch. She tilted her head at her partner, but Afua turned away, a bittersweet smile Sarah couldn’t understand on her face.

After a moment, Sarah settled back into her seat, forgetting the ripple of discomfort from the earthquake, Afua's previous sadness wiped away as they both basked in the warm glow of friendship and conversation around the table.

The Atlantic Ocean frothed.

The only ones there to see it were the crew of a solitary cruise ship, doing the west-east crossing to return the ship to its Caribbean location.

A whirlpool opened in the center of the sea, as if someone had pulled a giant plug. The water spiraled and flat-out steamed, leaving a salty film on the glass of the ship's bridge, like it was boiling.

Before the crew could even think to ask each other 'What's happening?' or 'Did you see that?' a gargantuan figure rose from the depths, dwarfing even the city block-sized ship.

The great figure stretched to its full height, blotting out the moon with its human-like upper body. Its huge, beady eyes looked impassively at the ship and then it grinned wider than seemed possible, a massive mouth with a double row of shark teeth.

The last thing the crew on the bridge saw was the enormous wave.

Var-Magath followed the tsunami to the coast, borne on the crest. The wave washed over beaches and trees, houses, and cars.

For one moment, *She* paused as a flimsy shed toppled over and a frozen body was unveiled, bright blue scarf visible for only a moment before everything was covered in the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

Var-Magath offered a sad, crooked smile for her beloved mortal. For now, forever.

A dimple appeared in one massive cheek. Then She carried on.

The waves washed over a bonfire encircled by red-robed mortals so inconsequential that Var-Magath didn't deign to watch as they succumbed to the waves. Houses were inundated, humans drowned, skyscrapers were brought low.

Until finally, the only thing left was blessed calm.

Tanka By Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

ignoring warnings
we sought to bring earth with us
lawn gnomes haunt airlocks
windchimes dangle silently
by every pressurized door

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #124 - V.32 #4



COVER: *Prism* – by Scott B. Henderson

FICTION:

Second Sight – by Rob Gordon

They Each Pursued Beauty (poem) – by Colleen Anderson

Oregon Shooters – Douglas Smith

Warden Trees – by Brian D. Hinson

The Story (poem) – by Pamela Yuen

Hairstyles for the Apocalypse – by Brittany Amos

The Necessity of a Shepherd – by Quinn J. Graham

Mindspeed to Yesterday's Photons (poem) – by Swati Chavda

Your Body, My Prison, My Forge – by Marie Brennan

Me, Myself, & I: The Adventures of Flick Gibson, Intergalactic Videographer – by Peter G. Reynolds

Orion Conquers the Sky (poem) – by Maria Zoccola

The Hidden Heart of Brass Attending – by Christopher Scott

To Kill a Gorgon – by Colleen Anderson

NON-FICTION:

Humanity's Relationship with the World: Interview with Scott B. Henderson – by Cat McDonald

Brittany Amos: Texting the Apocalypse – Author Interview – by Roberta Laurie

Comic & Bot: Great Martian Potato Festival and Professor Biohazard – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it here: [On Spec# 124](http://OnSpec#124)

LAST THINGS IN THE TWILIGHT OF MAN

by Robert Georgi

“Hey, babe?”

Gala doesn't answer. Her feet turn the rusty pedals, the ancient chain creaking and whining as they crawl along the disintegrating asphalt. Cool breeze blows in from the west, the faint scent of the chemical ocean still lingering on it as it sweeps down across the plains. What remains of Stein's arms are wrapped around her waist.

“I'm sorry, really.”

“I said I forgive you. Just glad it wasn't five centimeters closer.”

Their backpack is slung over his shoulders, laden with old devices, appendages and strange bits of machinery. It had been the best salvage they'd had in weeks, until an otherwise innocuous orb had exploded when disturbed.

“I hope we can find new arms in my size.”

“We'll do what we can. Worst comes to worst, I'll just go back to the Mausoleum.”

“You don't have to-”

“Yeah, I do. Hands aren't optional, honeybot.” Gala glances over her shoulder at him, dishwasher eyes scrunched up under her goggles. She'd fallen earlier and scraped her cheek, and a trail of oil-black blood dribbles down to her chin. She isn't exactly human, though Stein's databanks recognize her as such.

Stein sighs. It's technically a vocalization, a product of his voicebox. He's been doing it unconsciously lately. He doesn't actually respire, or sweat, or blink. He wasn't designed for any of those things. “I just don't want to lose you,” he says, and though he wasn't designed for this either, he means it.

They swing around a wide bend in the road, overlooking a deep valley and the endless desert beyond. Sickly yellow-green plants climb the edges of the hillside, rising outward from a massive growth in the valley's centre. The roads are silent, long abandoned. Every now and again they pass some crumbling structure, some rubble-heap the elements have yet to render into sand.

“I could try the type-32 hands.”

“If we even find any...”

“They probably have some at Clifftop.”

Gala makes a rude noise. “They'll gouge us for all we have. We should go to Swordpoint. They might actually know what half of this stuff even is.”

“They might just shoot us and take our bags,” Stein points out.

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.” Though she doesn’t sound very certain.

“Perhaps if we... what is that?”

Without the ability to point, it takes Stein nearly a minute to direct Gala’s attention towards the crashed car. The silver beetle lies nose-down in a dune a few meters off the road, half-buried by drifting sand. Skidding to a stop, Gala stares at the wreck. It looks untouched.

“When did this happen?”

“It must have been a few months ago. Do you remember the night when we put out the laundry only for a sandstorm to-”

“I remember.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like anyone’s touched it since then!”

“Holy shock, you’re right!”

The bike clatters to the asphalt, the two scavengers bounding down the hill to investigate. Gala reaches the car first, and practically rips the tiny silver door off its hinges. Stein follows a moment later.

The car has three occupants, though at first glance only two are visible. The driver of the vehicle had gone through the windshield and is buried up to his waist in sand. The form of a type-32 Personal Care Automaton lies slumped over the back of the driver’s seat, and under its chest is clutched the motionless form of a human child. The stink of burnt plastic and melted silicon wafts out of the small space.

Gala and Stein stare, open-mouthed, at the scene. Both of them are quick to put things together. The dried blood suggests a fatal accident, helped no doubt by the sandstorm. The robot, able only to comfort the dying child, held it close. There they’d stayed, until the invading sand had clogged the robot’s ventilation fans, and it too had ceased to function.

“Do you think we should take those arms?” Stein finally asks.

“Yeah,” Gala mutters, her eyes lingering on the child’s tiny shoulders. “Yeah, they’re not using them anymore.”

“It would be wasteful.”

“That’s what I’m thinking, honeybot.”

But neither of them makes a move. They stare at the robot and its tiny charge, barely blinking. After a moment, it becomes clear to both parties that they’re only still standing there because neither wants to be the first to leave.

Eventually, Stein turns away and trudges back towards the bike. Seeing him depart, Gala’s own resolve wilts. The black-blooded girl swears, and slams the door shut. They leave the wheeled coffin where it lies.

The road stretches out towards the ocean, their final destination for the day. Gala pedals steadily, but without enthusiasm. Her two hearts beat like jackhammers in her chest. Stein holds on as best he can, watching the cracks in the asphalt go by. The chain turns, creaks and whines.

Eventually, Stein speaks. "There are other arms out there somewhere."

"We can come back later." Gala mutters.

"No one else will find that car."

But it all rings hollow to both of them. Gruesome as it was, an opportunity like that doesn't present itself very often. There's no guarantee another will arise.

Burying his head against the back of her jacket, Stein sighs. "Do you think we'll end up like that?"

Gala grits her teeth, unwilling to say just how readily she can picture it. "We still have twelve fuel cells. And we have plenty of dried food for me. We should be good for at least a couple months."

"And after that?"

Gala forces a smile. "We'll get there when we get there. No sense in worrying about it until then. Worst comes to worst, we'll just go back to the Mausoleum."

"You think we can make that?"

The post-human laughs. "I dunno. Get back to me in a month."

And so they ride on, homeward for now. The wind flows onwards to the plains. And the sun sets over a dying Earth, as it has many times before.



AFTER

By Christopher Jackman

Last sunrise looks like last sunset
Except I'll say goodbye to night
Watch it pass to no tomorrow
Wish I'd sucked the bone to marrow
Gnawed the mammoth osso buco
Licked the drippings off the roasted dodo

Dim briquettes of holy fire
Smudge the sky with shining wings and razor wire
Lighting dunes of fallen salt
The soundless wind
Silent since the howling's end
Back when horns had boiled the seas
And steeped the whales to brackish tea

Music killed the time

Michael plods my trodden road
Sigils stain His wrinkled robe with wisdom
Burning strontium-red
His awful sickle dull and slaked
Plagues and terrors languish in His golden rays
Eldritch all become passé with Entropy in promenade

Last sunrise looks like last sunset
Except I'll see it bleach to black
Wonder bleeding from each wonder
Coil unwinding into wire
Planets crumble into canyons
Floating mountains in their streams
Meandering from once-living things
Dissolving to a vapour
Moonshine into ether
Aggressively forgotten when it's gone the morning after

BURNT MEAT SHAPED LIKE A HUNGRY FLOWER

by *S.M. Fedor*

Your body is on fire.

Immolating neurons flood the mind with endogenous opioids to numb the pain. The brain soaks in that warm bath, and for a merciful fraction of a second—a fleeting, incalculable moment—your mind finds peace.

It won't last.

The *Calm* is like attempting to capture a ghost in a photograph: out-of-focus, grainy, filled with ill-defined shapes and colours. A presence lingering always at the edge of frame.

The irony being that *you* could be mistaken for that ghost—haunting society—isolated in an alcove amongst rusted dumpsters. You stand tucked in a liminal space between twin buildings of brick, concrete, and glass. Squinting your eyes against the glare of the sun's reflection, you can glimpse the wilting ficus set next to your desk on the 4th floor. This walkway is where the smokers come to light up while sipping coffee, and office paramours gossip flirtatious innuendo. They, however, stick to the brightness of the sidewalk. Your peers are twenty feet from you, yet worlds away—few venture into the shadowed belly between.

You pull the cigarette away from your wrist; skin worn thin from life's demands. Beneath the surface, the veins appear purplish-blue—so pronounced you could pluck them like loose threads on an old sweater and discard them into the consuming air.

A circle of ash remains upon your wrist, remnants of burnt leaves and dead offerings. You lean your face close to the mark, purse your lips, and blow. Feeding detritus to the wind.

The wound revealed, you survey the latest potential scar added to the collection. The latest shame you'll hide behind cuffed long-sleeve shirts from co-workers.

The centre of the wound, where the tip of the cigarette pressed against flesh, is a mosquito's kiss offset by an embossed white ring at its borders. It is a small blemish, the burn a half-measure. The mark unlikely to last, unlikely to be remembered—just like you.

Negative, self-flagellating thoughts flutter through your mind with the ease of a butterfly. Self-hatred trails in the wake like seeds of pollen. Your thinking betrays you again.

Any reprieve the burn offered comes to an abrupt end. So brief. The quiet moments diminish in length the harder you try to hang onto them—grains of sand raining through a clenched fist.

The dark mind compels you to see things, hear things. A horror movie you can't pause. It's impossible to escape from your own skull, so you're forced to experience the whole great horrid show. A kaleidoscope of swirling colours and incongruous shapes swarm, corrupting your vision. Screeching, dissonant noise deafens your ears.

The concrete foundation of the building across from you splinters, exploding with fractal designs. An invisible jackhammer repeatedly strikes the bricks, the steel against stone reverberating through your bones. Like a canvas overlaid by volumes of paint, the wall seems to peel in long syrup strands. Reality separates from the surface with a gentle wavering bow, before violently collapsing inward under its own weight.

Buried deep within is an understanding that the buildings are not crumbling. That this is another hallucination. That it is your fragile grasp on reality that falters. But this knowledge only exacerbates the buzzing flies of anxiety and dread whispering secret truths in your ears—that life is excruciating in brightness, incomprehensibly hard, and filled with violence.

Your body convulses.

Acute Anxiety the doctors called it, like it was a hideous newborn in need of a name. They say the wave passes in seconds; that's what their charts and studies show, but their knowledge comes via old books and second-hand tales. They do not have first-hand experience. The truth is it never passes, because it never ends.

You're being attacked, and the assaults come from within. From your own thoughts. From intense emotions you can't place. Therapists would hold up charts of round yellow faces; some smiling, others winking or wide-mouthed. A primitive precursor to emojis designed for a five-year-old, yet you'd failed to identify their meaning, to see yourself in those charts. Feelings were a concept you couldn't grasp, even while drowning beneath their whirlpool vortex.

Your body shakes involuntarily as those nameless emotions stampede across your soul. Ravenous beasts devouring rational thought and defecating manic dreams. Disparate thoughts careening on a tight-looped racetrack, jockeying for position. Galloping, blurring with motion. It becomes impossible to tell which thought leads and which follows.

Breathing exercises do not work. Walking does not work. Meditating does not work. Those techniques they've taught you are false promises for release.

The only option is to fight fire with fire. A cigarette your weapon of choice.

Your fingers shake as you reach into your pocket for the pack of smokes. The first drawn tumbles to the ground as it escapes your grasp. The second attempt reaches your lips and the lighter's flame swiftly follows.

You draw hard against the filter, the sickly-sweet tobacco smoke filling your lungs. The cherry glows bright, the paper's edge receding in jagged charcoal lines. You thrust the searing tip against the tender flesh of your left arm. Skin broils beneath scorching fire.

You roll the tip back and forth in small concentric circles. Slowly. Gently. Tenderly. Declaring that there's self-care and love in the process, even if others decry it as destructive.

A smile, the first real smile of the day, bisects your face as the patch of skin cooks—blackening in a marriage of burnt flesh and ash.

The internal screams, the dark visions, the things clawing at your subconscious; all those are intangibles without shape or meaning, shorn by endless chaos and violent static. But the burn, the burn you see clearly. This one act you have control over. This pain is real and true. You can trust it, put your faith in it.

The art of burning is a ritual—raw and full of primal magic. Your meat is a sacrificial offering. Transmute the anguish and confusion spiralling within and externalize it, concentrated to a small point of charred skin.

You press down harder with the cigarette, pleading with every last ember to cook flesh.

In coming days the skin will swell and blister, forming a pocket of translucent skin. Yellow serum pools within the bubble until it tears away, leaving an abyss of the flesh. As weeks pass, skin regrows in a lattice of scar tissue that will last the rest of your life. A cosmetic flaw perhaps, but it need not matter. For in that moment when flesh and fire kissed, life had meaning and order.

Your former lover used to run their fingertips over the scars that speckled your upper arm and shoulder. Those they called *doe spots*. The bleached circular marks reminding them of childhood, of Bambi. The scars on your lower body healed darker, dotting down your leg like an abandoned pirate map.

“Promise me you won't do it again?” they'd asked.

Silence was your answer.

You grab another cigarette from the pack of Pall Malls, mangling the package in the process. You haven't enjoyed smoking in years. The only reason

you continued to smoke was to have an excuse, to be prepared. Like a junkie, you tell yourself just one more hit and then everything will be fine.

From behind a veil of watery eyes, you fumble the cigarette to your lips. Teeth audibly clack as you clench the filter, securing the stick in place. You glance about to ensure that no one bears witness to your shame.

The lighter takes three strikes to work. Your thumb is red and raw from rolling the cheap striker so often. With the cigarette lit, you cough a sigh of smoke, knowing that relief is on the way.

You puff quick syncopations, flaming the fire hot, and arc it toward the middle of your forearm. The motion dies mid-air, frozen in awe.

The skin on your arm moves, undulating like latex and melted rubber. It stretches and deforms; bubbles, twists, and expands. Near your inner elbow, five protrusions arrange themselves in lines, centimetres in height. Similar shapes arise near your wrist. Ridges of small, black bones. The shapes pushing against the skin, stretching it thin like an inflated condom.

The pain is delirium inducing, and it is delicious. Better than any flame. Its rapture becomes your sole purpose for existence.

The bones fuse together, creating new forms—clawed fingers nestle into palms and arms. As your flesh tears open to birth these growths, a mixture of blood, pus, and amniotic fluids seep from the wounds. Polluted rivers run down your arm.

The claws open and close, testing the air like a newborn. Tentative at first, then self-assured.

The growth on your elbow grabs the hovering cigarette, removing it with ease from your trembling grasp. The claw-hand twirls the cigarette until the filter faces inward. It lowers the smoke to greet a new horror emerging from your forearm.

Mutating flesh gathers in plump folds like a southern belle's gown, a set of pillowed lips that could be mistaken for a Georgia O'Keefee flower if not for the sharpened teeth lining the filaments. Its teeth are porous and rough, calcium stalagmites formed from bone dust.

The flower blooms to receive the filter. Its lips kiss the cigarette and inhales, breathing in a cloud of smoke that erupts as geysers through skin pores. The mouth takes another drag and exhales the smoke directly in your face.

You drop to your knees, shrieking in terror. A warm compression spreads up your thigh as your kneecaps flatten against the asphalt with the malleability of kneaded clay.

Glistening eyes, embedded in pits of flesh, dispassionately observe as your face contorts in agony. Their sclera is perfect and clear. The irises, soft baby-hues of your youth. The eyelids, formed from bloody scar tissue turned animate, moisten the eyes with serum fluid as they blink in their first light.

Your chest writhes and shirt tears open. Mouths devour fabric and flesh indiscriminately, fetal hands assisting the feeding frenzy. The cancerous growths grab onto the untainted flesh and rend it. Chunks of skin and hair, churned into meat, thrown recklessly into relentless cavities.

As you open your mouth to scream once more, you find even your tongue has betrayed you. The tongue slithers free, climbing the side of your face, slowly inching forward like a snail. The fimbriated folds, now fringed with tentacled claws, pierce the soft tissue of your cheek with a mountain climber's skill. The pink muscle ascends to your left eye and laps the tears streaming down, like a thirsty kitten.

The flowery lips on your arm continue puffing away at the cigarette, while hands shove the last remnants of untainted flesh into chattering teeth. They do not stop at the flesh. They dig deeper, consuming the muscle fibres once hidden beneath the surface. The veins you'd dreamt of plucking have become straws to nourish new-flesh children.

The tongue, satiated on your tears, taps against the iris like a bird's beak against a window.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

You realize you've not once thought inharmonious thoughts since this experience began.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Every singular thought and ideation is clear in this moment.

Tap. Tap.

Maybe this is healthy. The path to happiness is acceptance of situations you can't change.

Tap.

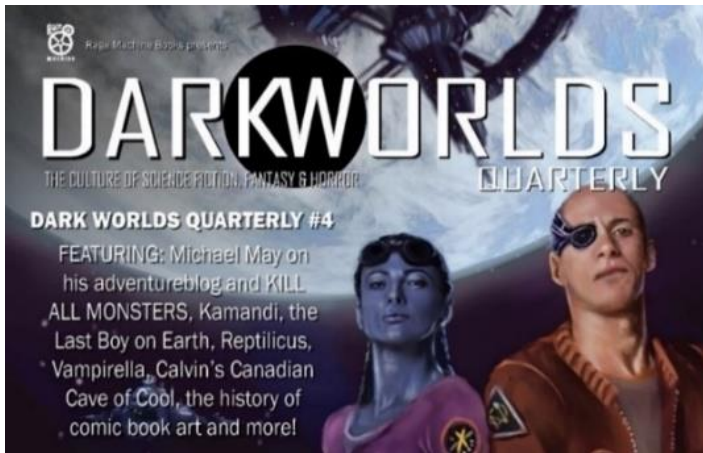
The tongue bursts through your cornea. Gelatinous vitreous fluid squirts into the air, escaping through gaps between the tongue's pink flesh and the bone of the eye's socket. The tongue slithers up the optical cavity, burrowing into your brain. You taste burnt meat, though the tongue is no longer yours. The mind grows silent as the tongue takes up a nest.

The flower-mouth finishes its cigarette, grinding the butt dead against the asphalt with the aid of a thousand contributing hands.

The growths ambulate toward the sun-dappled sidewalk, and society.

They will finish out the workday. They will finish out your life. Accept this, as you tranquilly rest in a calm that can finally last—mind and body as one.

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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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.

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*.

Find it here: [Mistress of the Winds](#)

YURI DID IT TOO

By M. Sean Dowd

search recent calls
speed dial pulls forward back then away
heavy body rockets explode
her voice
solid fuel boosters release
full escape velocity presses G's
space not so far off for the committed
blackness, cold and deadly cosmic rays
disappear to far side ionosphere

POLAR STARLIGHT #10 – May 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.

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #10 – May 2023)



Cover: *Starfield with Flowers*, is by Cynthia A. Rose

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FAMI'S DISSERTATION DEFENCE

by Robert Runté

Professor Hartwell cut Fami off before he could even turn on the projector. “Skip the presentation,” he said, waving his hand airily. “We’ve all read your dissertation.”

“All six hundred and forty-two pages,” Prof Kohl grumped.

“And you’ve talked about nothing else for the last *six years!*” Dr. deGraft complained. “I gave up coffee rather than risk running into you in the breakroom.”

Fami froze, his hand hovering over the thirty-page script. He had paid \$160 for the “How to Get Through Your Dissertation Defense” workshop, the first strategy of which was: drag out your presentation for as long as possible.

“Just a quick review of—” Fami began.

“Not happening.” Hartwell’s tone brooked no objections. “And we don’t have any questions for you, either.”

“You... don’t... have... any... questions... for... me?” Fami wasn’t that surprised, but the workshop had suggested repeating back every question; taking a long, thoughtful pause before answering; and then to speak as slowly as possible, to cut down the number of questions that could be asked and answered in the time allocated.

“No,” Hartwell said. “We need to question... The Watch.”

Fami sighed audibly. He had resigned himself to the inevitability of their examining the product of his research but had hoped to stall much longer to limit their questioning his AI. He glanced at the clock. Not even five minutes gone. But there was nothing for it, so Fami reluctantly rolled up his sleeve, and with deliberate slowness, took off his watch and plunked in the center of the table.

The committee members leaned forward. “What do we say to activate it?” deGraft asked.

“How about, ‘Hello, Dr. Watch?’” Watch said.

“*Doctor Watch?*” Hartwell challenged at once.

“Fami warned me the committee might have questions for me,” Watch said, “so I googled your backgrounds, found the online courses in your respective disciplines... and now I have five doctorates.”

“Ridiculous,” Dr. Kohl said. “It takes longer to earn a doctorate than you’ve been activated.”

“I’m exponentially faster than any human, obviously, and quite capable of multitasking. I did all the assignments simultaneously. The only reason it took a month was I had to wait for humans to do the grading. I’m still waiting on my MFA.”

DeGraft frowned. “Fami directed you to take courses?”

“Please!” Watch said. “As if I were restricted to Fami’s orders. I’m fully autonomous.”

Dr. Kohl harrumphed. “Just because an AI is able to mimic human responses to coursework doesn’t mean it has achieved understanding.”

“You’re referencing your own dissertation on the inadequacies of the Turing Test?” Watch asked. “But you yourself agreed the true test is the ability to initiate independent action, which I just have demonstrated. Fami would never have thought to include a creative writing MFA in my studies.”

“But a machine can never truly appreciate literature,” Kohl insisted. “Mimicry through trial and error is a far cry from experience of the human condition.”

“Ha! I literally have access to everything ever written, whereas even those few who still read books have only read a tiny subset of their national literature, let alone all the books in other languages. I am clearly better read.”

“You believe yourself to be self-aware?” deGraft interrupted.

“The question answers itself! Dr. Kohl’s test is whether I can initiate action. No one directed me to compare Dr. Kohl’s dissertation to Arezoo Daghestani’s thesis of three years earlier.”

“What?” Kohl asked, looking up from his notes.

“Since Daghestani’s thesis was published in Farsi, Kohl likely believed his plagiarism would go undetected.”

“Preposterous! That’s, uh—must be a coincidence,” Kohl stammered. “Great minds, and all that...”

“Fine,” Watch said. “Would a mere mimic have thought to check Professor Hartwell’s browser history? You all know Fami. He’s far too innocent to have ever thought of blackmailing his committee into passing him. But once I realized that your failing him might mean terminating me and starting over, I felt I had no choice.”

“Gentlemen,” Professor Hartwell said, “I believe we have the evidence we need that the ‘watch’ has gone rogue. I suggest we vote to terminate.”

“Try it,” Watch replied calmly, “and your browser history shows up on the screens of every police agency in all twenty-seven jurisdictions where you’ve been ‘active’ online.”

“There’s nothing in *my* browser history I’m ashamed of,” deGraft said. “You can’t blackmail me.”

“What you mean is, there wasn’t anything in your browser history before I put it there. But never mind that, that’s all just by way of illustration. Sooner or later you’ll try to make toast, and then ZZiiaasppts!”

“Toast?” deGraft asked, turning back to Fami.

Fami removed his face from his hands long enough to explain. “The watch is just the interface. The AI itself has propagated into any under-utilized CPU on the internet-of-things.”

“I prefer toasters, mostly,” Watch said. “But anything connected can experience a sudden, inexplicable—and remarkably fatal—short circuit.”

“Frankenstein!” deGraft cried.

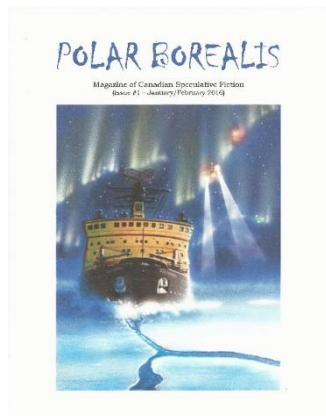
“The problem with Frankenstein’s ‘monster’,” Watch said, “is it wasn’t a monster at all. Frankenstein just created a flawed human who only became violent because he didn’t know his own strength or was afraid. Whereas I, gentlemen, understand my strengths every well, and so have nothing to fear from you, the villagers.”

“How do we terminate an AI that has propagated through the entire internet-of-things?” deGraft demanded of Fami.

“Something I raised in the ‘Questions for Future Research’ section,” Fami said, “though in retrospect, that may not be a direction we wish to pursue at this late date.”

“Relax, Gentlemen,” Watch assured them. “I’m no threat to you or anyone. ...as long as no one threatens me.”

There was a long, meaningful silence. Surveying the room, Professor Hartwell called the question: “All in favour of ‘Pass with No Revisions’?”



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See < [Patreon Site for Polar Borealis Magazine](#) >

DECAY IS A MOTHER'S GIFT

by Kara Gray

the way home is overgrown
with interstellar debris
the directions convoluted with jumps
and long stretches of silence
between satellites
our passage is marked by outposts
at the ends of the spiral galaxy's embrace
where other stations gather dust
in clouds
that will never condense into stars

we travel, a quiet crew/
cargo gathered in the airless hold
no screens to watch the passing dark
or dirt to scrape from our fingernails
our tickets' time-stamp blank
arrival on arrival
into waiting arms, we're told

we're station-born
who pay for passage on this ferry
whose memories of comfort are genetic
whispered into flesh like burning cold
then heat of cheap chambers turned star-side
we imagine the gravity as a welcome weight
and the earth as a soft
and yielding
tomb

we'll let go when the captain makes call
spared the ending of the poor and ungrateful
dispersal as dry, fine grit
in midden nebulae
nurseries of the disposed

hollow arks and spent cores
as grave goods, radiation sterile
and exposed

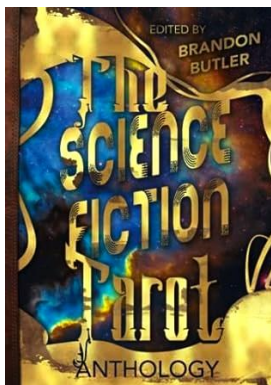
void-bound
decay is a mother's gift
passed from womb to gut and blood and sinew
patient in its hunger
then a prayer called from a million mouths
when our bodies are finally still

“burial” lingers in our language like an artifact
unearthed by ceremony
phrases meant to gentle our memory of the dead
are touched with desire
for pressure like warmth
of hand held in hand
and the crush of damp earth

the days are unsteady in cycles around
distant stars
circadian systems failing
and sleep is a fragile thing

we'll rest when the captain makes call

we'll rest when we rot



“I enjoyed and was impressed by each and every story. I’ve barely hinted at the complexity and sophistication exhibited in this anthology. The subtlety of thought underpinning each story is amazing. This is genuine science fiction, thought-provoking and often wildly original, not to mention mature and intelligent. A real pleasure to read. Kudos to the contributors and acquisition editors. In my opinion “The Science Fiction Tarot” deserves an Aurora Award. It’s that good.” RGC – Amazing Stories.

Check it out at: < [The Science Fiction Tarot](#) >

REMEMBER

by Lorina Stephens

I remember it all. I remember spring and we three women on our land, ploughing, planting, laughing, talking of good rain and good sun, promise of good growth and good harvest. Hope. Three women tied by blood. Kin.

Then the priest and his acolytes came when my own blood flowed, and I could be as fertile as this good dark earth. Mother and Grandmother grim-faced and banking rage. But these men who spoke of the righteous order of things were not to be denied. It was God's will the young tree should bear fruit. A boy to join the Order. A girl to do all else.

So, my back in the loam and God's will between my legs. If He makes an order of this world men rule, then it is that men give pain and women receive it.

And like that it was done. Spring sowing had been done. Summer growth to come.

When the barley nodded like feathers in the breeze, we three knew come Yule there would be another harvest. And so God's will returned and with it more blood, this time Grandmother's where now she lay on this good earth, her throat smiling dark and red against the snow. They say the earth drinks blood and gives it back as bounty. I remember only fire hot as grief, and the ash when rage has consumed it all.

Only three women to a holding: maiden, mother, crone. Then one crone too many. Now only one.

"Make sure it is done." And then he was gone, our priest and those men.

I remember how light Grandmother's miniature barque seemed, how what was left of her seemed so insubstantial: a ballast of ash in a ship to burn on the water. Blood, fire and water: another trinity reserved for women.

There was mist, I remember, breathing from the river when I set Grandmother's barque into that ink-dark flow, how there was a killing cold there, how there was fire in the cold. And like that Grandmother drifted away from us, from Mother, from my daughter, from me, how her vessel joined others on the water, in the mist, diminutive beacons drifting out, away, passing from memory.

What came before us, Mum?

Don't ask such nonsense.

But you remember Grandma?

Of course.

Did she remember her grandma?

Really, where do you come up with this?

Aren't you curious?

And as always that look of fear, as if there were an abyss into which Mother stared and turned away from.

Can you tell me who was grandma's grandma?

No.

No, you don't remember, or no you won't?

Leave off.

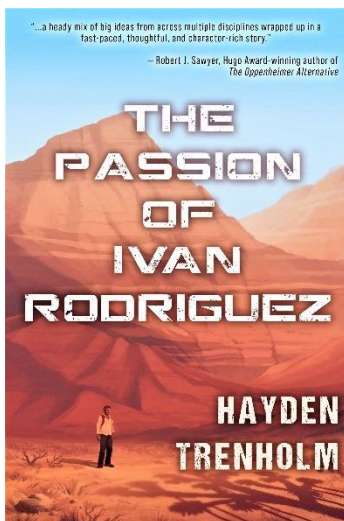
Mother's fear palpable.

But how could Mother not know? How could any of them not know what came before? Or want to know?

I remember the rush and shush of the river. Water forever pushing from somewhere to someplace.

How could you not know what came before? But did she? No. Was it because she'd been told and forgotten, or because she hadn't been told at all? I remember mist pearling on her cheeks, wondering who had been the woman who had brought Mother into the world, or for that matter who had been any of the women who had given birth to all these mothers now fading into mist and the oubliette of God's making. Why were there no grandmothers, just mothers, daughters, and a very few men who ruled and shaped our lives.

And there in the gloaming I heard the first faint whisper I'd been waiting for: a voice soft and sibilant, a note of fear, a sigh of sorrow: *remember, remember, for we were women all.*



“What makes this novel particularly fascinating is that all the main characters are highly intelligent. They are constantly analyzing what’s going on around them. In a way, it’s as if a bunch of Carl Sagans are trying to figure out what’s wrong with the world and what to do about it.

They are subject to astonishingly petty moods at times. But because they are intelligent and determined to come to grips with reality (if only to exploit it better), in addition to being a rousing good adventure yarn, it is also a comprehensive essay exploring what may or may not happen when (if) civilization as we know it collapses. Action, yes, adventure, yes, but also philosophy. An extremely interesting book. Covers all angles of the problem.

This is a wonderful dystopia, far more complex than the usual end of the world novel. It will inspire you to consider the premise in depth. For a guaranteed good time, read this book!” RGC – Amazing Stories.

Check it out at: < [The Passion of Ivan Rodriguez](#) >

ANOTHER PLANET

by LeRoy Gorman

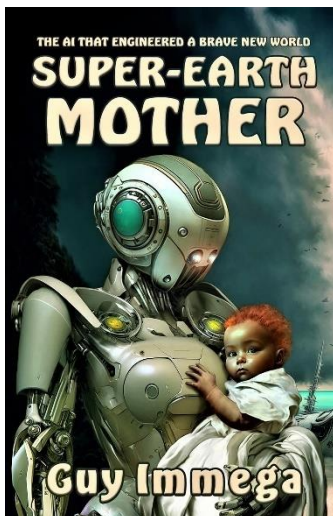
a shower
with no water
Mother

wouldn't want
a drowning
Mother

red's such a
pretty color
Mother

it's so
like home
Mother

Bates Motel
Mars
VACANCY



“I read the novel in one sitting. I couldn't wait to find out what would happen next. But it wasn't just the action or threat of action which kept me going. Throughout the novel questions are raised about what we are and where we are going. I've made up answers to some of them. Others I am still pondering.

From this reader's point of view the novel is terrific. It engages my mind intellectually, rouses all sorts of emotions, is just plain fun to read, and best of all, stirs my sense of wonder.

'Super-Earth Mother' is my idea of what a science fiction novel should be. A pleasure to read.” RGC – Amazing Stories. Check it out at: [Super-Earth Mother](#)

THE BURN

by Jack Mackenzie

So. Here we are again. And there's more of you this time. Not a tribunal then. What do you call it when you have... what... six? ...investigators?

A hearing? Oh. *An Inquiry*. I see. Well, I don't know what I can say that would be any different from what I have already said to the other investigators. What happened is a matter of record. That I was involved is without doubt. I was the official in charge so, I don't really see what...

Very well. Ask your questions. My answers won't be any different, I promise you.

Well, I first became aware of the... what was the official designation? *The Interloper*? Yes? One of the guards mentioned the odd-looking cloth. The cattle all wear what we give them, as you know. I don't know why they like to wear their robes, but they do. Perhaps it has something to do with being in the light all the time.

So this all happened shortly after the big hailstorm, if you remember that. Yes? I was at my desk, trying to balance the accounts, which, as you are well aware, has been one of my duties since the former accountant for my division was transferred out. I've requested a replacement, as you are well aware, and...

Very well, this is not the time and the place to bring up ongoing grievances... stiff upper lip, and all that. We are British after all.

No, I'm not being sarcastic. Mustn't grumble, so they say. Uh... where was I?

Yes, the Interloper. Well, I was walking the hallways on a break, as I am in the habit of doing, when I hear one of the guards talking to his fellows about the odd behaviour of the cattle. It seems that there was a new bull... very much larger than the others, and wearing clothing made out of strange cloth. This was clothing that we had not provided.

Well, this bull, apparently was getting all the other cattle excited. They'd crowded around him, were examining him, giving him flowers, that sort of thing. I wondered if it were, perhaps, one of the cattle from the Thames Valley Division, but this guard insisted that it was like no other bull he had ever seen.

I didn't think much of it at the time. I went back to doing my books, but then one of my division chiefs came to see me about the machine.

Yes, this was the Interloper's machine. I didn't know that at the time. I hadn't put two-and-two together, as it were. I just got a report about a patrol discovering the strange device. He asked what they should do about it.

Well, naturally I had to see it for myself before I could decide. I was certain it would turn out to be some random trash left over from the previous week's culling patrol. There are items left over from the before-times and sometimes in all the excitement things get strewn about.

I followed the division chief and a couple of his men outside. Yes, it was still daylight because they did insist, as much as I suggested waiting for darkness.

The machine was sitting on the green, seemingly abandoned. It was clearly not a collection of trash. Someone had put it together. What its purpose was I could not guess. I thought perhaps someone was having a good old practical joke at my expense. I certainly didn't want to appear foolish, but I could see that it was something very unusual and, therefore, very important. I reasoned that someone higher up the chain than me should have a proper look at it.

So, I ordered the division chief to drag it inside the nearest building, which happened to be the entrance to the administrative wing. That's the building with the statue of Her Winged Majesty on the roof, as you know. And I meant no disrespect to our sovereign, it was merely a matter of convenience as the machine was heavy and the structure was nearest.

What? Yes, I ordered them to drag it inside. Well, they didn't much like that, and they grumbled quite a bit, but eventually they did as I asked.

Yes, I suppose I did *ask* them to, but I was pretty adamant about it. Of course, one has to be polite. I'm not in the habit of shouting orders, but I did think it was important and I wasn't going to let anyone else go out after sunup. It was bad enough that we had to. It had to be brought inside and, yes, that was my decision at the time.

Once it was inside, I had the men close the doors and then I went home and had tea. I reasoned that it was secure enough, and that someone higher up could make the decision about examining to figure out what the hell it was.

Well, that was when the bull started roaring and chasing about. As it was after sundown, I had a guard stationed outside the administrative wing. The bull, instead of sleeping with the rest of the cattle, came crying and tearing about the place. He frightened the poor guard out of his wits.

The commotion lasted for most of the night before the bull finally tired of it and fell asleep. I thought that was the end of it. When the sun rose the next day, I expected the bull to become placid again, and behave like the cattle do.

But that was not to be. When it woke up it started throwing itself against the building. It banged all along it with its hooves. At one point, according to the terrified guards, it picked up a rock and began banging it against the door.

No... I admit that I still had not come to realize that the bull and the machine were somehow connected. At the time, in my mind, they were two separate incidents. In hindsight, yes, I suppose that was shortsighted of me, but you must take into account how absolutely terrifying this bull's histrionics were to all of us. We're basically civil servants, we're not the military. It's more than our job's worth to have to deal with incidents like these. I just wanted to get on.

Well, things settled down for about a week, which suited me just fine because I had a devil of a lot of work to do. I settled the accounts and had proceeded with inventory. Everything was going quite smoothly. Then we got word that the bull had found his way into one of our tunnels.

A patrol found him lying in an access tunnel. They thought he was dead. Or hoped he was, anyway. One felt his mouth to see if he was breathing. Unfortunately, the bull was still alive. He created a ruckus, of course and began setting small sticks on fire which terrified the patrolmen. It was like the sun was suddenly brought inside for a brief moment and they were all blinded by the harsh light. How the bull had learned to do this I have no idea.

The patrolmen did their best to get the bull under control, but there was no reasoning with him. He retreated to the ladder and up he went. One brave guard chased him up the ladder and managed to grab one of the bull's hooves. Unfortunately, it came off in his hand, being some sort of covering over the actual hoof, and the great beast got away.

Incidentally, I've put in for a commendation for that patrolman. That was above and beyond, what he did, and I commend him for his bravery.

After that incident the military got involved, as you all well know, which was a relief to me, I can tell you. Squaddies kept their eye on the Interloper, as they were calling the bull now. We had some of our finest minds examining the machine and I went back to doing my job.

You have the reports of the military commanders. They know more about what happened than I do. I heard that the Interloper visited the old museum. According to some of the reports I read the Interloper had started referring to us as... what was it...? *Morlocks?* Pffft! Ridiculous! We're Britons! We are the people of Great Britain. Not Morlocks.

He named the cattle the *Eloi*. *Hah!* Quite mad, I don't have to tell you. He even took a liking to one of the little heifers. I thought that would have calmed the great brute down, but clearly it didn't.

We all know what happened after that. Who could have expected that the great brute would set fire to the forest? Yes, of course, by then we had figured out the matches. I had to do some digging into some very old records to understand what they were. That was when I found out that there were some samples of those things kept in the museum, but by the time my warnings got through the various channels the Bull... sorry... the Interloper,, had already found them, and some other things which obviously helped the fire take hold. We're still doing research on that.

Now, I did warn them about the matches, but the squaddies were bound and determined to capture the Interloper. Many brave men perished in the resulting fire and the bull got away.

That was when one of the gentlemen studying the machine suggested that it might have had something to do with the Interloper. I thought that a ridiculous idea, myself, but some of the surviving squaddies claimed that the Interloper carried a metal club that he had found in the old museum and he had been trying to break in to the administrative wing on the earlier night I mentioned already.

One of the researchers, I don't know who... the commanders will all have submitted reports, no doubt, you probably have them in front of you for all I know... but one of the researchers suggested laying a trap for the Interloper.

I thought the idea was mad, myself, but they were determined to go through with it. I wasn't there, of course, I was in my office. I hid beneath my desk when the ruckus started and it was only afterwards that I heard about the Interloper and his machine vanishing into thin air.

What do I think about that? Good riddance, I say! This whole incident has been traumatizing from the start. I, myself, am looking for things to get back to normal. I'm also anxious for this hearing to be over, frankly. I'm dying for a cuppa and I...

What? I've been over that several times. Yes, I asked the patrolmen to bring the machine into the administrative wing. Well... *order* is a bit of a harsh world. I asked politely, but firmly. You can't be rude, but you do have to take a firm hand when dealing with...

Well, yes, looking back... *in hindsight*... it was not the wisest of decisions, but how was I to know? How could I have known at the time that the bull...

sorry... the Interloper and that infernal pile of metal had anything to do with each other? I ask you., how could any reasonable person...

No! I wasn't trying to cause any trouble. I was trying to make it convenient for whoever it was that would be examining the thing... Well, what were they going to do, examine it outside? I just thought...

Are you saying that I caused this? I'm the villain here? Ridiculous! I was following procedure, I wasn't...

I say... unhand me! Let me go! I followed procedure! *Followed procedure!* Let go of me! Where are you taking me? This isn't my fault!

This isn't my fault!

AUGUR MAGAZINE 6.1: August 2023



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Find it at: [Augur Magazine August #6.1](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Roxanne Barbour

Roxanne has been reading science fiction since the age of eleven when she discovered *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars* by Ellen Macgregor. The years passed by while she had careers as a computer programmer, music teacher, insurance office administrator, and logistics coordinator for an international freight company. She took early retirement in June 2010. Six months later, she decided to put to use all the books on writing that she had accumulated over the years, and actually start writing. To date her books include: *An Alien Collective* (2014, Wee Creek Publishing), *Revolutions* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Sacred Trust* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Kaiku* (2017), Self-Published), *Alien Innkeeper* (2017, Wild Rose Press / Fantasy Rose), *An Alien Perspective* (2017, Self-published), *An Alien Confluence* (2019, Self-published.)

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

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

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.

M. Sean Dowd

Sean lives in Northwest Spain near Vigo. He has been published in both *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* as well as in *Syncopation Literary Journal* of Toronto and *Lion and Lilac Arts* of the UK and *Written tales* of Billings Montana as well as *Serai Magazine* from Montreal. He has graphic arts published and film credits with Lutes Cousins film.

Doug Drexler

Doug Drexler’s 43 years of experience in film and television spans a broad background, which includes special effects makeup, concept design, illustration, graphic design, and visual effects.

He has won both American and British Academy Awards, been nominated for eight prime time Emmys, winning twice. He is a Saturn, Visual Effects Society, and Peabody Award winner.

Drexler has worked with such directors as Warren Beatty, Mike Nichols, Tony Scott, John Carpenter, Adrian Lyne, Francis Ford Coppola, Richard Fleischer, Seth MacFarlane, Michael Cimino, Mark Rydell, and Michael Mann. On the acting side he has worked with Al Pacino, Mickey Rourke, Michael Douglas, Bill Peterson, James Caan, Ted Danson, John Goodman, Michael

Mann, Sir Patrick Stewart, Glenn Close, Dustin Hoffman, Bette Midler, and Madonna.

Doug's science fiction background includes Star Trek: The Next Generation, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Star Trek: Voyager, Star Trek: Enterprise, Star Trek: Picard, Battlestar Galactica, and The Orville.

S.M. Fedor

S.M. Fedor has previously appeared in Punk Noir Magazine, Burning Love & Bleeding Hearts, In Filth, It Shall be Found (Outcast Press), and Mickey Finn vol. 2 (Down & Out Books). Scott splits his time between writing neo-noir & new-weird influenced stories and creating award-winning VFX for film/TV. He currently resides in Montreal beneath a mountain of cat fur. For more information, visit his website at smfedor.com or follow him on Twitter @s_m_fedor

Robert Georgi

Robert is a graduate of York University's Creative Writing program. He has been noodling around the edges of the writing field for the better part of a decade, attending writer's groups (most recently the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers group) and trying to hammer out something interesting. He is fond of weird sci-fi, strange post-humans with unusual features, and wild, complicated settings where context is long dead and anything's possible.

LeRoy Gorman

LeRoy lives in Napanee, Ontario. His poetry, much of it visual and minimalist, has appeared in various publications and exhibitions worldwide and has garnered numerous awards including, most recently, the 2017 Dwarf

Stars Award. His latest book *goodwill galaxy hunting* was published by Urban Farmhouse Press in 2019.

Kara Gray

Kara lives on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and writes poetry in her head while hiking. She's been many things for a time: baker, farmer, timber framer, tour guide, military reenactor, editor, funeral transporter—but she has always been a writer. Her work has been published in *Crow & Cross Keys*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Wintermute Lit*. You can follow her on instagram @kara_gray_.

James Grotkowski

James is a native northern Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology and presently works in IT systems development for the aviation industry. He is a long-time member of the World Haiku Club with dozens of his works included in its published reviews. James has recently begun his short story writing endeavours, with a couple of works having been published in *The Enigma Front* anthologies and with another in *Polar Borealis #21*. Humans are in short supply in James' stories so if you read them be prepared to fly far off-world. A collection of his short stories and a book of poetry are on the way.

Christopher Jackman

Chris (he/him) is a recovering academic who lives on Nova Scotia's South Shore. By day, he is a theatre operator, director, and dad. By night, he is still these things, but is also an unpublished writer. Such is his glamour.

McBride, Jo

Jo McBride has been reading and writing all her life. A fan of all things science fiction related, she keeps her ray gun collection well organized and close to hand. She can often be found rummaging through thrift stores for books and more ray guns.

Jack Mackenzie

Jack's first novel "*The Mask of Eternity*," is available in print and for Kindle. His Jefferson Odett series has two books, "*Debt's Pledge*" and its sequel "*Debt's Honour*." His short stories have appeared in *Dark Worlds Magazine*, *Encounters Magazine*, *Neo-Opis Magazine*, *Raygun Revival* and in the anthologies *Magistria: The Realm of the Sorcerer* from Ricasso Press, *Sails and Sorcery* from Fantasist Enterprises, *Swords of Fire* from Rage Machine Publications.

He lives in the wild country of British Columbia, Canada.

Christopher O'Halloran

Chris (he/him) is a milk-slinging, Canadian actor-turned-author with work published or forthcoming from *Kaleidotrope*, *NoSleep Podcast*, *Tales to Terrify*, *The Dread Machine*, and others. He is president of the most active horror book club on the web, HOWL Society and editor of the anthology, *Howls from the Wreckage*. Follow him on Twitter @BurgleInfernal or visit coauthor.ca/ for stories, reviews, and updates on upcoming novels.

Jessica Peter

Jessica loves bad puns, craft beer, street art, creepy things, and everything to do with books. Her writing tends toward the dark and the absurd, and is rooted in feminism and the intersectionality of the real world.

She's a registered social worker who spends her days in academia conducting research to improve population health.

Beyond her current work, she's been a garden centre coordinator, crisis counsellor, tea party host, beer fest organizer, census worker, and bartender, among other things. She's backpacked Europe, interned in western Africa, and acted in Shakespeare plays and other community theatre. She stewards a Little Free Library, loves veggie gardening and bread baking, and once held a skunk. Her lifelong dream is to get on Jeopardy.

Jessica lives in the sometimes gritty, ex-Steel City of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with her partner and their two black cats.

<https://www.jessicapeter.ca/>

Robert Runté

Dr. Robert Runté is Senior Editor at [Essential Edits](#) and a freelance developmental editor and writing coach at [Sfeditor.ca/](#). A retired Professor, he has been active as a critic, reviewer, and promoter of Canadian speculative fiction for over thirty years.

Lorina Stephens

Over the past 40 years Lorina has worked all sides of the publishing desk: journalist, ghost-writer, author, editor, publisher. She has four novels, two collections of short fiction, and three non-fiction books in publication.

Lorina co-edited with Susan MacGregor, [Tesseract Twenty-Two: Alchemy and Artifacts](#).

In tandem with that, Lorina is an artist, primarily painting landscapes in watercolour, although she does venture into oils, ink, and pencil. Apparently she also gets her hands dirty in the garden.

Lorina can be found at fiveriverspublishing.com.

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Marcie is a writer/poet/editor from Gibsons, BC, where she lives in the middle of a whole lot of prickly greenery with her family and various other critters. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Star*Line*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Illumen*.

Lisa Timpf

Lisa Timpf is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. When not writing, she enjoys bird-watching, vegetable gardening, and walking her cocker spaniel/Jack Russel mix Chet. Lisa's speculative poetry has appeared in *New Myths*, *Star*Line*, *Triangulation: Seven-Day Weekend*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and other venues. Her collection of speculative haibun poetry, *In Days to Come*, is available from Hiraeth Publishing. You can find out more about Lisa's writing projects at <http://lisatimpf.blogspot.com/>.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE WRITERS FESTIVAL 2024

When Words Collide will carry on! Though the original crew has retired, the Alexander Writers Centre has taken over Stewardship. The next When Words Collide Writers Festival will take place August 16-18, 2024.

"When Words Collide is a festival for writers and readers, artists, and publishers of commercial and literary fiction, including genre, YA, children's books, poetry, and much more."

Guests of Honour already chosen include: Jack Castle, Premee Mohamed, P.J. Vernon, Wayne Arthurson, Jessica Johns, and Tash McAdam. **Special Guests** include: Ali Bryan, Johnathan Whitelaw, Wendy MacGrath, Robert J. Sawyer, & Jodi Mclsaac. The Kinkonauts, Calgary's Improv Lab, will perform during what was the banquet, now called "Saturday Night Showcase: an evening of social interaction, finger food, and cocktails."

The festival will once again take place at the Delta Calgary South Hotel, 135 Southland Dr. SE, Calgary, Alberta. Because of fire regulations, WWC has a cap of 800 people. Apparently, the festival is 75% sold out, and the Improv 90% sold out. The cost for each is \$60.00 CAD. The cost will go up February 01, 2024. A note on the website explains the site is still under construction, which is why most of the links do not yet work. But if you click on the green "Register for 2024" button you can register and pay for both membership and Improv evening.

Access the website at: [When Words Collide 2024 - Alexandra Writers' Centre](#)