

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #11 – September 2023)



POLAR STARLIGHT MAGAZINE

Issue #11 – September 2023 (Vol.3#4. WN#11)

Publisher: R. Graeme Cameron

Editor: Rhea E. Rose

Proofreader: Steve Fahnestalk

POLAR STARLIGHT is a Canadian semi-pro non-profit Science Fiction Poetry online PDF Magazine published by R. Graeme Cameron at least four times a year.

Distribution of this PDF Magazine is free, either by E-mail or via download.

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POLAR STARLIGHT offers the following Payment Rates:

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

To request to be added to the subscription list, ask questions, or send letters of comment, contact Editor Rhea E. Rose or Publisher R. Graeme Cameron at:

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

Note: The *Polar Borealis Magazine* website is also the website for *Polar Starlight Magazine*.

ISSN 2369-9078 (Online)

Headings: ENGRAVERS MT

Bylines: *Monotype Corsiva*

Text: Bookman Old Style

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EDITORIAL

By Rhea E. Rose

Welcome to the fall 2023 issue of Polar Starlight 11—yes, we’re almost at a dozen issues! Thank you, poets, for your wild imaginations, your writings about the wonders of existence and the horror of it all!

Once again, congratulations to our sister magazine, Polar Borealis, and its publisher and editor, R. Graeme Cameron, for winning the well-deserved Aurora Award for his works published in 2022; and a hearty congratulations to those poets and authors from previous issues of Polar Starlight and Polar Borealis for their Aurora Award nominations!

I love the fall, especially these days because it brings cooler weather! My favourite fall day—? October 31 of course! Samhain, Halloween, a Celtic end-of-the-summer celebration when spirits cross over and costumes and bonfires are used to ward off ghostly apparitions—or invite them in.

This issue’s poetry lineup is a metaphysical take on the speculative nature of poetry. Okay, I’m not gonna lie. I had to look up the meaning of metaphysical a couple of times to keep it straight in my head, “The branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.” (Oxford Languages)—a natural fit, I say, for the speculative genre.

Aristotle, the father of metaphysics, would love the poetry presented in this mother of a magazine where poets explore, examine, excise, and expand on a mix of the imaginative and the profound.

Read and savour these sixteen poems that contemplate “the principles of things” by waxing poetic on the nature of magic, technology, the human psyche and more stuff such as unexplained phenomena, like commercial trends, supernatural beings, like those locked in stone, and the mysterious, like why we collect the things we do.

As well as reflecting on the inner and outer cosmic nature of our existence, Polar Starlight 11 authors pose what-if concepts. Ideas like whether we are

real or unimportant, which illustrate how the creators use their poetry to peer into our deepest cosmic natures. From their poetic permutations on beingness, the only conclusions to be made, if any, are that we exist in a perpetually changing universe, and are buried in our ceaseless and sometimes obsessive minds, a rich backdrop for metaphysical reflections via speculative poetry. The words on these pages haunt and challenge, and rightfully so, our assumptions and preconceived concepts.

We can get as rational, philosophical, and analytical as we like about poetry, but the best poetry touches us in our personal and private places. These sixteen poems do that by delivering, with the skill and trick of word mastery, a treat of delicious mood-stirring, boundary-breaking, strange and beautiful visions.

Rhea E. Rose

THE GODDESS OF REAL THINGS

By Neile Graham

I'm an apple. I'm a stone.

Something rounded by the sun, fed by it. Created from it, worn by time.

Made by bees and rain. By pressure and fire.

Honey. Lava.

I think I'm alone on a tree full of multiple selves, in a box, on a shelf.

Alone in a million million that footfalls crash into on the beach.

That sound: crunch, a clash.

What I'm capable of: I am good with spices. I can skip across water.

I'm the core rotting. I'm the one rock cracked along the shore.

Falling into broken cells. Split and rubbing along.

Meanwhile, here I am, everywhere in you. Bruising you.

I'm the apple seed you swallow. The stone in your shoe.

AN INTROVERT ON ARNORSBIDDE

by Lynne Sargent

Do not tell me to go out into the streets
dance with the revelers,
appreciate the festival,
make a lantern and send it
into the sky.

I can taste the tangy sweetness
in the air just as well from my window
this Arnorsbidde
on the planet Hakka.

I know that I will miss
the splendor of the arnoris
rising glowing from their lava pools,
and all the meaning we have
placed upon their light.

This ritual is like all the others
we make—at least somewhat arbitrary
for we are beings who have need
of marking eternity
lest the vast blackness humanity has traversed
become too much, too deep,
ne'er again to be explored.

But I am like the arnoris
marking the sky by the lightning Aurora
heralding the blossoms of our Spring
alone in the environment of my room
looking on at the world outside
because it is what *I*,
twice alien, am suited to.

For some things live in deep lava,
and some strew themselves across space,
and this is my home,

and today I am done with adapting
because I know
that wonder thrives
in all expressions
of all species
and I do not need to see it
to know that it is there.

BREATHE

By Rhonda Parrish and Leslie Van Zwol

she tried to be like the mountain
steady and sturdy
deep and strong
like the old teachings said
like the world expected.

be still. be patient.
quell the fire.
silence her mind
and just breathe

breathe through the howling anxiety
breathe through the maelstrom pain
inhale peace—spread light
exhale darkness and release fear

inhale
exhale

but no amount of breath could
transform the thundering volcano into
the quiet mountain.

“Breathe” the teachings said

And she tried

inhale
exhale

but she was born of Prometheus’s fire
and the old teachings were of clay
they forgot the fire
forgot how to roar back at the fire mountain

when the volcano screamed
and the ground rumbled
they breathed

inhale
exhale

but not her
for she knew the volcano in her soul
she knew the roar

and when it screamed
she screamed back
and it listened
understanding
the language of those
who spoke with the fire

hearing her it understood
it was not time to roar
or scream
not yet
the world could live a little longer
and the mountain breathed

inhale
exhale

THE GOD OF WHITE STONES

by Neile Graham [for Jocelyn]

But this one is green, a planet streaked with clouds and ocean.
This is green earth, I say. So beautiful it hurts. Sticks and stones
you say. I say if white stones are what we want,
let's find them soon. Put them in our pockets. Walk away.

We're cleaning out our parents' house. They're both gone
now, gone from some labyrinth of need somewhere we can't reach.

This other stone, here, our father painted red. On the red
he painted white and black eyes, painted white lady bug
dots on its back. A stone being a stone always, even disguised,
it weighs my hand just as it ever did. Shall I take it home?

Our father always took us to beaches. We always
collected stones. Walked the shoreline heads down,
eyes alive. Pockets full and fuller. Carry this one for me.
Behind my study door is a white rock I staggered
from a beach with when I was two. I wouldn't let it go.
For years it guarded my parents' bedroom door.

Now they're gone it guards mine. It blocks my study.
It blocks my door. This is how I am broken. And blocked.

This is how I am shut open. I have always hated having
to leave any stone behind. As if it knew, as if air and ocean
wouldn't love it still. Some stones my father polished.
His coats always weighed with them. You and I
are on the beach at low tide, our bodies heavy as grief.
Find me a stone that is the universe, I say. And you do.

WATCHING SOAPSTONE BEING CARVED

by Karl Johanson

The sound of a rasp on stone
Not a grating sound at all
Rather more like a bow being pulled across a violin
The stone raw and white, changing to form and colour
Creation by subtraction
Birds, dragons, gargoyles... some creatures no one has seen before
A myriad of forms, each unexpected yet appropriate
All hidden in a mind and hidden in a stone
Released with the touch of a rasp and a chisel
The simplest are merely beautiful
Those who see only the finished form and colour miss what I experience
Seeing form grow from formlessness
Seeing the dust flow away to leave a view of the inside of another person's mind

LOST IN TRANSLATION

By Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

The tourists on the *Queen Latifah*
(a constellation cruiser named
for some important ruler
from our pre-spacefaring days)
spend their time in mingling with
the other scions of high class families,
celebrities, and well-known mind-beam influencers,
chatting over meals of hard-to-come-by outer reaches creatures
(what? endangered? cherished? sentient? who cares?!?)
about corporate mergers, business trysts,
and whether that new health drink,
said to clarify the mind's meanderings
while granting understanding of all forms of life,
as well as flawless skin, a tighter butt,
and hours of extra stamina in bed,
but brewed from waters of the last
untainted spring left on old Earth,
and remnants of some useless, dated curio
(rose stone? rosetta rock? what's that?)
is worth the hype.

THE NAME OF LAST THINGS

by Jean-Louis Trudel

Walk through your mother's house, empty and wreck-filled
unbound books, pages fluttering down like clumps of dead leaves
lace doilies jumbled with macramé hangings and Napoleonic busts
brittle music sheets that entertained long-ago cocktail parties
(hear a piano's jaunty tunes cutting through cigar smoke)

Each relic a stranded memory
(a taste that you will never know)
cast loose from a web of meanings that no longer thrums and speaks
to the lonely house spider caught by a plasma-bright window
—advertising the joy of adult diapers
and mirror-magic mortgages

Inside these walls, threads fray, flotsam falls where it may
tokens of a moment torn out of time, its name lost to you
scraps shorn of love's burnish by your mother's forgetfulness
crashed model planes and tarnished medals
badges of a child's vanished pride
and the cut-up dress of a dead bride

Outside, the tides of time are likewise stilled by universal absence
so few are left to identify the world's petty ruins
there is no way to recharge a phone's omniscience
and no one to call to complain
that yesterday's sorcery will revert to primordial silica
—our castles of circuitry crumbling back into sand

Walk into that world astir with humbler lives
where feral cats rest in rusting cars and raccoons own the roads
wolves turn highways into their hunting grounds
and spiders tie down fallen rockets with Lilliputian ropes
—staying any last hopes for flight

Listen to the unquiet skies (rumbling for you alone)
for the winds have never been angrier
hurled out of heat-blasted deserts
wandering at will from pole to pole
too wild for convection cells to contain

And know that a world empties when no one is left to love all its parts
the monuments to warlike men
the gentle gardens born of sustained patience
the machines of clever boys and the music of wounded souls
even the cheap boons of our catalogue dreams and drone deliveries

Such also was the house your mother surrendered at last
leaving an obstacle course of tattered furniture and trivial treasures
(sit in her armchair, clutch her favourite comb)

Like your heart in pain, the world, broken, endures
filled with the many things that we thought we loved
(always changing to keep us wanting)
the necessities that we sweated and slaved to claim and lock away
(no matter the cost to the world we stripped)
all the stuff that we fought for and finally died for

We never went to space because we could not stand the void
we filled our homes, we crowded the world
with the endless debris of our civilization's dissolution
bequeathed to our children as a shameful confession:
yes, alas, we would have packed the Universe entire
—with our clutter

BLUE SHIFT BLUES

by Robert Dawson

I've got those lightspeed-separation blues.
By radio you're just an hour away,
enough to make our conversations suck.
The roaring of the thrusters never stops.
We're getting closer to the black hole now;
I wish I knew how long we'll be apart.

Your clock and mine are drifting more apart;
I've got those forty-minute hour blues.
The time-at-base display is racing now
throwing the minutes and the hours away
as if it wished this lousy trip would stop
as much I do. Separation sucks.

Although the tides are far too weak to suck
us into noodles, or rip the ship apart,
at least in the ergosphere, where we are stopped,
the stars and I have got those blue-shift blues
and I will not have peace till we're away.
We should be boosting any moment now.

The engineer is looking grim right now:
she says the helium-three pump will not suck,
But not to panic: there must be a way
she can adapt or fabricate a part.
I've got those stuck-down-here-forever blues,
in heavy silence with the thrusters stopped.

The drive is toast, she says. Repairs have stopped.
The time-dilation factor's crazy now:
I think I've got those missed-your-birthday blues.
Looks like I'll miss the rest, as well. This sucks.
This isn't how I wanted us to part.
Please don't be mad. I love you anyway.

I'll try and get this final note away.
It looks as if your messages have stopped—
how many of your years have we been apart?
For all I know you may be dead by now.
This is my last transmission. Black holes suck.
I've got those old event-horizon blues.

Blueshifted X-rays burn the hull away;
gravity sucks us deeper, will not stop,
now we must fall till tides rip us apart.

CAPTAIN IN SPACE

by James Grotkowski

I see space is black
like utter death with void

life looks blue

THE GODDESS OF ESCAPE

by Neile Graham

Hit the key that will let you escape this—
anything not to be in the skin you're in,
slam it down to get out of your story.

Beg me, and I'll write a new ending that shoots you
right into the clouds—up and away into the rot
and roiling growth of a jungle. Not exactly kind.

How about ice and glory in the farthest north? No?
Or another new ending: you ending me, a sword
in my guts and you're gone, James Joyce, yes. No,

James Bond, victory whiskey scalding your throat.
Inhale, exhale, yeah, breathe. You can Lady Macbeth
my blood off your hands. Good luck with that. I mean,

as good as I got. This is you evading your fate: flight,
liberate, evade, forget. Once I asked for a different path,
a different indifferent fate. Meanwhile, I mean why,

when I would ask you for everything, would you take nothing?
Escape escape. Quit all. This, here, it's one more way
to escape fate. It isn't real but it is true.

THE REAL EXPLANATION FOR SUNSPOTS

By Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

under bright covers
the sun reads a new thriller
fear-evoked goosebumps

FLIGHT

By E.S. Taillon

Light and colour are hideous
when finally I stumble from the dark
of the living room to walk the dog.
In there, I counted the slivers of sun
between the blinds. They came and went
like the gap between scissors slicing.
Out in the day, it all looms at once.

I trip on a bed of dying flowers.

A man sits on a bench and smokes.
Though the cloud obscures his face,
his view—he knows where I am,
knows that I tripped, and knows
that the flowers are dying.

The night is kinder than the day.
I come back then. I see only pools
of sodium light through which I swim,
daring, that surround me in a halo
but release me back to the dark.
I do not see the jellyfish that brush
my face with tender tendrils,
but I feel them, floating in the air.
They know me, they know my
circular wandering, my delicate desires
that would burn in the sun. The dog chases
souls of little rats around corners,
paws sinking into ghost fur.
What I don't see can't kill me.

Ahead, on the roof of the hospital,
The breath of a great machine. Its sigh.
I know the sound of helicopter blades.

Someone being airlifted, maybe,
with a stopped heart.
I watch the helicopter
struggle against the demons of air
that wish to sink it, heavy bodies
clinging to the metal frame.
An engine fire roars, propels rotors
that eviscerate the clinging attackers,
allowing it finally to shoulder up
very minutely through the air,
rise triumphal, and peel off above
a man repairing his bike in a car park,
above two creeping inhuman limbs
touching from opposite walls
of an alley, many-jointed,
and eyes opening in the midst
of a brick wall, winking closed again
as a couple barges in to kiss,
all our little moments breathing
so close to one another in the dark—

THE HORROR SHOW

by Angi Garofolo

The couple, alone,
in a dark, secluded spot.
The kiss, the promise of more,
the sudden attack!
Violent, bloody death.
The expert's advice, unheeded:
too much to lose. The town,
the people, the terror,
the monster unchecked.
The body count rising;
so many ways to die.
The hero stepping in,
the only one who can
end this carnage for good
with a well-uttered quip
and explosive blast.
The world is safe at last.
Until the sequel.

DON'T LOOK!

By Greg Fewer

passing a gibbet
I glance at the putrid corpse
it glances back

DEATH

By Frances Skene

Death comes to her at sunrise. She'd
slept little between coughs, expecting him.

No one sits by her bed; the staff is scant
and her fate is known. Too bad,
she heard someone say, that no one
could be with her.

Death wears a black cloak and his face
is shadowed. Are you ready? he asks.
His voice sounds like the oxygen pump.

Yes, she says. She puts her feet on the floor
and takes his hand.

The finger bones feel cold.

She sees a light ahead.
The pain in her chest is gone.

Yes, she says again, I'm ready.

IF TODAY IS YOUR BIRTHDAY

By Carolyn Clink

You are a fragment of papyrus. Try parking your mind in a shark. You miss the smell of your imaginary friend. You are not a dog person. Change your hair into lightning. You take too many photographs of zippers. Catch an emu. The number pi will be important. The sun is literally in your house. Famous people who share your birthday are all dead. Later this year you will become a shape in a cloud.

ABOUT THE POETS AND ARTIST

Lily Blaze

Lily is an author and a former graphic designer. She's lived in four Canadian cities, enjoyed many adventures across North America, then settled in the Prairies.

After receiving an MS diagnosis in 2004, Lily's focus has changed, and now she dedicates her time to a writing career. Her story "The Lonely Mr. Fish" was published in *Polar Borealis* Magazine (#7, Oct/Nov 2018).

Website: <https://www.lilyblaze.art/>

Carolyn Clink

Carolyn has twice won Aurora Awards for Best Poem/Song: for "The ABCs at the End of the World" in 2011 and for "Cat People Café" in 2022. Her genre poetry publications include *Weird Tales*, *Analog*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*, *On Spec*, *Tesseract*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Room*, and all 5 volumes of *Northern Frights*.

Robert Dawson

Robert teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. In his spare time he writes, fences, and hikes. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *On Spec*, *Neo-Opis*, *Polar Borealis*, *Tesseract 20*, and numerous other periodicals and anthologies. He is a graduate of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops.

Greg Fewer

Greg originally hails from Montréal, Québec, Canada. His speculative fiction and poetry have appeared in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Page & Spine*, *Polar Borealis*, *Polar Starlight*, *Scifaikuest*, *Star*Line*, *The Sirens Call*, *The Nafallen University Course Catalog*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Worth 1,000 Words: 101 Flash Fiction Stories by 101 Authors*. He has twice been a Dwarf Stars finalist (2021, 2023).

Angi Garofolo

Angi's passions are horror and science fiction, with a soft spot for monsters. One of her short horror stories won the 1998 Blood and Guts Horror contest. As well, buried in a box, are several unpublished novels that are more horrible than horror. Angi earned her living helping adult students learn creative and business writing at college and university. Since 2016, she's enjoyed writing and drawing a weekly online comic strip, SqueezingS, about a snake and her pets: a human, a dinosaur, and the dinosaur's pet pig. A highlight is their annual summer visit with the sharks that Shark Week ignores.

Neile Graham

Neile is Canadian by birth and inclination, though she has lived in the U.S. (mostly Seattle, so she's leaning toward the border) for many years. She writes both fiction and poetry and is currently concentrating on plotting the build-out of her fantasy romance empire. Her poetry has been published in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. and on the internet. She has four collections, most recently *The Walk She Takes*, an idiosyncratic travelogue of Scotland which includes ghosts, ruins of all kinds, and a landlady named Venus.

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.

Karl Johanson

Karl is the editor of *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*, which has won two Aurora Awards, and a former editor of the four-time Aurora-winning *Under the Ozone Hole* magazine. Karl's publication credits include work in *On Spec Magazine*, *Sci-Phi Journal*, *Polar Borealis*, *Monday Magazine*, *Perihelion*, *Stitches: The Magazine of Medical Humour*, and the anthology *Here Be Monsters: 7*. As a writer/designer/tester of computer games, Karl has done work for North Star Games, Disney Interactive, and Sanctuary Woods Multimedia. Many of the games were science fiction or fantasy related. Karl does work as a movie extra, and as a civilian actor for Canadian Forces training exercises.

Rhonda Parrish

Like a magpie, Rhonda is constantly distracted by shiny things. She's the editor of many anthologies and author of plenty of books, stories and poems (some of which have even been nominated for awards!). She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, where she plays Dungeons and Dragons, makes blankets and cheers on the Oilers.

Lynne Sargent

Lynne is a writer, aerialist, and holds a Ph.D. in Applied Philosophy. They are the poetry editor at Utopia Science Fiction magazine. Their work has been nominated for Rhysling, Elgin, and Aurora Awards, and has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Their work has also been supported through the Ontario Arts Council. To find out more visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com.

Frances Skene

Frances is a retired librarian and puppeteer who has been actively involved in science fiction fandom and promoting science fiction literature since the 1970s. She is also a co-author of the science fiction novel *Windship: The Crazy Plague*, which can be found here: [Windship](#).

E.S. Taillon

E.S. Taillon holds an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC and an MA in French Literature from the University of Toronto. They have worked for the *Young Adulting* blog and were Managing Editor at *PRISM Magazine*. They freelance as a translator—their first translation, “*Scenes from the Underground*,” came out with House of Anansi in October 2022 and was shortlisted for the Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQ2S+ Emerging Writers. Taillon’s hobbies include D&D, befriending street cats, digital illustration, tea tasting, knitting, and suspicious composting.

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Marcie is a writer/poet/editor from the west coast of Canada, where she lives in the middle of a whole lot of a twisted mass of briars, brambles, and other lush but prickly greenery with her family and various other

critters. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Star*Line*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Illumen* and *Polar Borealis*.

Jean-Louis Trudel

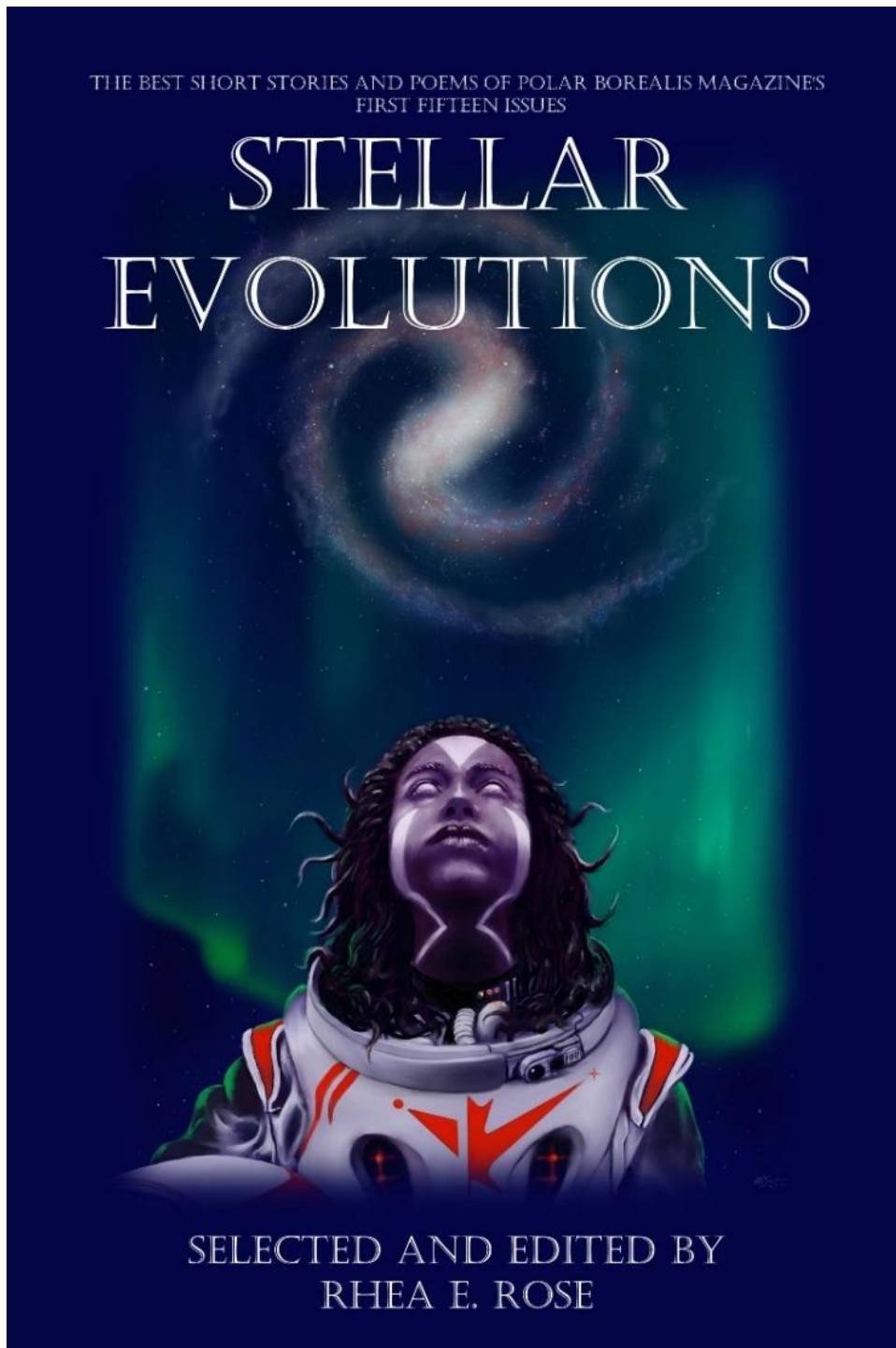
Jean-Louis has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books, and more than 100 short stories. He's also published occasionally in English. Recent publications in English include the story "The Way to Compostela" in *Asimov's*, the Rhysling-nominated poem "Summer Encroaching, Winter Yielding", and various publications in *On Spec*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Polar Borealis*.

Born in Toronto, Jean-Louis has tried not to let it affect him. Many of his experiences, from his days as an astronomer in Chile to his rambling vacations in Europe and his years of university lecturing to his current stint as a museum director near Quebec City, have fed his writing. When time allows and the coffee is fresh, he also indulges in science fiction criticism, translation, and convention organizing.

Leslie Van Zwol

Leslie is an author who enjoys exploring new terrain in her writing, be it through trope-bending, genre-fusion, or dabbling in unfamiliar forms.

The Best Short Stories and 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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