

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #28 – January/February 2024)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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EDITORIAL

And so the eighth year of publication begins. The first story this issue is *Sevil* by Taylor Chu. His father, Eric Chu, has very kindly provided a wonderfully dramatic cover depicting the action in the story.

Remarkably, Taylor wrote the first version of this story at the age of nine while in grade 4, and the revised version last year in grade 5 at the age of ten. This makes him the youngest writer ever to appear in Polar Borealis Magazine.

Granted, it is what is usually referred to as juvenilia, writing produced at a young age while one is struggling to learn how to write. My personal files contain several such by myself, which I have no intention of ever publishing.

So, if this is not a mature work by an adult, why publish it?

First of all, the primary function of this magazine is to publish work by beginning authors hoping to break into the field, though of course the majority of authors I publish have numerous sales under their belt. Nevertheless, I keep an eye open for beginners.

Second, Taylor comes under the category of “beginner.” *Sevil* is not a polished story and can best be described as a fantasy vignette which arguably requires more in the way of context, plot and characterization.

However, it flows from a vision in Taylor’s imagination, perhaps inspired by the world of gaming and anime, and represents a sincere and enthusiastic attempt to capture and display that vision.

Within the premise it is consistent and vivid and, I believe, represents precisely what Taylor wanted to convey.

To be sure, as editor I have altered it to fit the “inhouse” style policy of the magazine, cut out unnecessary words, inserted substitutes to avoid excessive repetition, and added a sentence or two for the sake of clarity. I could have done more, but deliberately kept changes to a minimum.

Why? Because what attracts me to this story is that it is an example of contemporary youth excitedly taking first steps in writing fiction in which the keenness and joy of effort is manifest on every page. This story is a reminder of where and how we all began as writers, a reminder of our drive and motivation before we became maturely cynical and jaded, a reminder of how much fun the process of writing can be.

In that sense, I view publishing this story as a public service. Besides, I publish what I like, and I like the joie de vivre evident in this story.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

CARVED

by James Grotkowski

carved initials and
Kilroy was here
in Europa's ice

POLAR STARLIGHT #12 – November 2023

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #12 – November 2023)



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

Cover: *Ice Princess* – by Kari-Ann Anderson

The 12th issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Roxanne Barbour, Carolyn Clink, Aaron Grierson, Jeanette C. Montgomery, Irena Nikolova, Frances Skene, Richard Stevenson, Peter Storey, ES Taillon, and Lisa Timpf.

Available for free download at: [Polar Starlight #12](https://www.polarstarlight.ca/issue-12)

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Be sure to check out our website at: <https://www.sfcanada.org>

SEVIL

By Taylor Chu

Time moves differently in Hell

Year: 1889

Myrill woke up to the busy noises of people downstairs. The bakery was doing well. He was only ten at the time, and he lived in a small town called Ananomi. He had parents who owned the local bakery, and he had a pretty good life.

Myrill hopped out of bed and saw his rock collection. *Maybe I'll add to it today*, he thought as he went downstairs.

"Can you put this bread in the oven?" asked his father. He had a deep raspy voice that almost everyone was too scared to say no to. Myrill walked up to him and grabbed the bread, put it in the stove, then went to the bathroom and got ready for school. Myrill learned various different things at school. Cooking (which he already knew), Latin, mathematics, reading, and writing. It was just another day, until it happened...

On his return from school Myrill immediately went back to work inside the bakery, making bread, pastries, cakes, and pies. After a long three hours, he was finally allowed to have a break. He sprinted toward the forest, where he could add to his rock collection.

Myrill sat resting beneath an oak tree on a hill out of sight of the village, a handful of rocks in his pocket.

"You ready?" He heard a voice.

"I don't know," said another voice. "I heard some pretty scary things about this... well, whatever it is..."

"Don't worry. It'll be fine."

Myrill peeked from behind the tree. He saw some warriors going through a tunnel-like entrance into the hill. Questions filled his head, and he knew he had to find out the answers. He sneakily followed them in. He felt curious, but also terrified. It was a big, concrete maze, but everything was lit up magically and the warriors seemed to know their way around.

“We’re here,” said one.

They had arrived in a box-shaped room. Beyond it was a path, leading into the darkness in front of them. Somehow, the magical light had disappeared.

“Are—are you sure you want to do this?” stammered the scared warrior.

“M—hm”

The bravest warrior put a red stone on the floor and said an incantation. Instantly, a red, sparking portal appeared out of thin air in front of them. Through the portal, Myrill could see what appeared to be a dungeon. It had dark stone walls and debris on the floor.

A shadow loomed out of the dungeon. It came limping forward, slowly making its way, but it wasn’t any sort of human shadow, no, no; it seemed to be a skeleton with two horns on its skull, a skeleton devil. It wore a cape and wielded a long sword and a circular shield. Myrill stared at the feet of the skeleton. They had sharp, bony nails.

The creature came closer, slowly, ominously, and soon enough, Myrill and the warriors could see what it for what it was.

A demon with a cape that was coloured blood red, a sword and shield of bronze, and most striking of all, its eyes. The skeleton’s eye sockets each had a glowing red dot in the centre. Myrill staggered back in fear, closing his eyes to shut out the horror, yet all he could hear was the screams of the warriors being killed.

One by one, all dead.

Year: 1910

That same dream haunted Myrill for the rest of his life. Those two glowing red eyes, the sharp teeth, the screams of all those innocent men being killed, all replayed in his head every night.

Myrill woke up, rubbed his eyes and hopped out of bed. It was another miserable day. The bakery was no longer famous, or even noticed anymore.

When he turned fifteen his parents had told him where to find the recipe for the bread. He always followed the instructions and the bread turned out perfectly. But, one night, Myrill was hungry and decided to make some for a snack. He went downstairs and looked at the recipe:

- 4 cups of flour
- 2 cups of water
- 1 pinch of Devil’s Spice

Myrill had never questioned what Devil's Spice was. He walked to the cabinet and got the flour but noticed that the Devil's Spice was gone. When he turned around he accidentally knocked over a jar. Powder exploded everywhere. He looked down and saw that it was the Devil's Spice, but, only for a second. In the blink of an eye, the powder dissolved into a thick cloud that filled his lungs. Suddenly, Myrill was filled with confusion. He blacked out.

That following day, early in the morning before the bakery opened, Myrill found his parents dead on the ground outside the bakery. It appeared as if they had fallen off the roof while doing tiling, but their bodies seemed to be broken far worse than a simple fall would have caused.

He did his best to carry on the business afterwards, but his parents had taken their recipes to their graves. He spent months looking for Devil's Spice but couldn't find anything. The bread was ruined.

Myrill walked down the stairs and heard a lady screaming at Jude, his cashier.

"How do you expect me to pay that much for hard, crumbly bread? The only reason we come here is because it's cheap! Honestly! When that new bakery opens, you should go work there! Not this dirty mudhole!" The lady turned on her heel and walked away.

Myrill walked to the kitchen and saw his friend, Kai, baking bread.

"Still haven't found the perfect recipe?" Kai asked.

"No, but I'm scared that if I change it, people might go ask for sawdust from Ethan, the woodworker, instead of our bread and pastries. I mean, I couldn't blame them; even I gag when I eat it."

Kai finished washing his hands. "Well, you should at least try."

Myrill grabbed his crossbow, and the red stone he'd found in his pocket after he awoke from his first and so far only confrontation with Sevil. "I'm off for another attempt, you hold the fort."

"Again? Really? I mean, I know I know it traumatized you, but, still, you've tried at least a hundred times to kill that thing you keep talking about. It's become a daily habit!"

Myrill rolled his eyes. "See you!" He walked out the front door and headed toward the forest.

"Hey you!" yelled a raspy voice. He turned around to see an old man stumbling toward him. "You're that owner of that terrible bakery, am I right?" The man was hunched over and wore a black suit. Myrill nodded. "Well, you've got competition! A new bakery is about to open! You might as well give up now!"

Myrill walked away. He couldn't care less.

He went into the forest and walked on the same dirt path that he took every time ever since his first attempt at killing the devil. Once again he entered the maze and followed the familiar route until he reached the first room. He placed the red stone on the floor and repeated the incantation as he remembered it, but as always, neither the portal nor the demon appeared. He had spent years trying to summon the demon but still he wasn't ready to give up. He recited the spell louder, and louder, until he was shouting. At the last verse, his lungs forced out particles of powder that swirled in the air in front of him. The Devil's Spice!

The red portal opened and Myrill stepped in. A loud hissing sound came from behind him, followed by a loud thud. He turned around, only to see that the entrance had closed.

Myrill was filled with confusion and fear, but he refused to panic, for he had waited years for this moment. He walked further into the dungeon slowly but carefully, eyeing everything for danger. He arrived at a staircase which seemed to go down forever. He took one step down and peered over the railing. Below, he saw a pathway made of red brick and cloaked men chanting around a ritual circle. A red orb shimmered in the middle of it, blinding Myrill. It crackled with electricity. He descended further, intending to see more. He took one step at a time, careful to not make any sound.

How far does this go down? Maybe I should go back up. No, I'm too far down. I have to keep going...

Myrill finally reached the bottom of the stairs. Ignoring the chanting men absorbed in their ritual, he noticed a hallway made of the same brick as the path. There, on the floor, lay a sword. It had a silver blade and a golden handle. He decided to pick it up just in case. He then walked along the hallway, torches filling the room with light. He turned left and saw that there were two giant doors made of wood shaped like an arch. There were two golden knobs. Myrill walked up to them and peeked through a crack in the door.

On the other side was a large chamber. A giant figure stood with his back to Myrill, but he could also see an old man in a black suit facing him, cowering in servitude. They were performing a ritual identical to what the robed figures at the foot of the stairs had been doing.

That man!

Myrill was more confused, it was the same man who had told him about the new bakery! Questions raced through his head. But what the man said next shocked him...

“Lord Sevil, I’m glad I had those old bakers killed, that spice they created was powerful alchemy! Those townspeople ingested so much of it, that it protected them from your powers.”

“Ten years... ten long years for their magic to wear off! But now my time has come...” muttered his master.

Myrill’s eyes opened in shock. That man had killed his parents. They fell off the roof because of this man... He gripped his sword tightly and knocked the doors open. “You!” he yelled. The giant turned and looked at Myrill, who saw the demon that he had seen so many years ago. He froze, letting go of his sword, which clanged on the floor. He was no longer angry. He was scared.

The demon snarled and lifted a finger, motioning for him to come over. Myrill floated up in the air and flew toward him. The demon had magic powers!

“A... boy?” asked the demon, somehow smiling through jagged teeth. Myrill couldn’t say anything. He couldn’t move. “You *dare* attack me?” said Sevil. He squinted his eyes. “That was very rude of you.” Sevil closed his fist around Myrill’s neck. Came a long pause, till the demon finally said, “Oh, well, you’re too weak to offer any trouble...” and began to squeeze his grip tight...

The demon’s hand started to sizzle. A powdery smoke leaked out from between its fingers... *Devil’s Spice!* Sevil howled in pain and released Myrill, who landed with a hard “doof!” on the floor. He ran for his sword and picked it up while Sevil stared at his smoking hand. When it finally noticed that Myrill had a sword, the demon scoffed, “Aww, you have a little toy sword.”

That did it for Myrill. He ran toward Sevil, holding his sword ready. “You *bad-turd!*” he yelled. (He did not actually say that, but what he said was very close)

He swung his sword at Sevil, which clanged against its rib cage, doing no damage. Instead, the blow made a crack in the sword. Myrill gaped at the damaged blade. *Were the demon’s bones that strong?!*

“What can I say? I drink a lot of milk,” Sevil said.

Myrill swung again, this time breaking the sword. Sevil laughed. “You’re becoming a real nuisance” and pulled out his sword. It was the same bronze one he’d carried in their first encounter. Myrill readied himself and they renewed the fight. Myrill slashed at Sevil’s head with his broken sword. Sevil lunged at Myrill’s stomach. He leapt back and noticed a detail of the demon he hadn’t noticed till now, a big red orb inside the rib cage.

That must’ve been what the cult members were summoning.

“You think after waiting 30 long years to recover I’d let myself be killed by a child? No!” Sevil yelled. But Myrill didn’t listen, he was focused on the red orb in Sevil’s chest.

It was the only path to victory.

Myrill held his sword tightly as he ran toward Sevil. He thrust at the orb but failed to hit it. “You’ve got guts, I’ll say that!” said the demon, “Now, *let’s see them!*” The demon kicked at the boy with razor claws. Myrill gasped at every blow but kept swinging his sword. Repeatedly he tried to pierce the orb but failed every time. Sevil was just too agile and strong. Finally, Myrill collapsed onto the floor. He had been hit three times and was bleeding. His white shirt was ruined, but that was the last thing he was worried about.

“Time to finish you off” Sevil said, raising its sword, blade down. The demon thrust it toward his victim, but at the last second Myrill gained the strength to roll away. He leaped up and held his sword ready. He was panting and wounded, but he had to kill the demon. He crouched low and waited to scuttle to one side.

“Master,” the man cloaked in black spoke. “We must continue the ritual...” Distracted, Sevil sighed and said, “A moment, I must kill this brat first.” He turned back toward Myrill, but the boy had disappeared.

“Wha—huh?” stammered Sevil. Myrill thrust his sword from behind and cut through the orb. Sevil fell to the floor like a pile of dead wood, the red orbs in his eyes fading to darkness to join the black void now present in his rib cage. Myrill felt a slight tingle everywhere, then, everything went completely white, blinding him.

When Myrill woke up, he was back in his bedroom. He thought for a moment it had been just a dream, but when he got up, he felt a sharp pain in his side. The sword marks were still there. Kai walked into the room, startled.

“Myrill? Where have you been these past seven years?!”

Sevil walked to a pile of skulls. After his fight with Myrill he had been sent to the Story Realm, a place for dead demons and evil supernatural creatures. The sky was grey with black swirls mixed in as if it had been painted. The ground, as usual, consisted of the pages of a book. Sevil held a skull in his hand and crushed it.

“You may have killed me, boy...” Sevil said aloud, “...but I will return.”

A SPACE FORCE LIMERICK

by Gregg Chamberlain

I'm not saying Space Force "boots" are real slow,
But you'd think they would actually know
To stop annihilation
When the Greys are migratin'
"Klaatu barada nikto" don't mean "hello."

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #18 – September 2023



Cover art: by kiTT St. Joans

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A Short Accounting of Our Best Lives

– by AP Golub

Assembly Line – by Lia Lao

The Rumen – by Jenn Grunigen

Phenology – by Michael J. DeLuca

Before You Fade Away – by Andrew Najberg

From Chicxulub with Love – by AC Koch

To Fall in Love with a Dying Sun

– by AW Prihandita

If These Whales Could Talk

– by Lindsay Godfrey Eccles

“As usual, editor Cavan Terrill has provided an excellent selection of extremely interesting material. Some of the stories appeal to me more than others, but all of them are original enough to intrigue anyone capable of wanting to ponder what life, the universe, and everything is all about. They don't provide answers so much as trigger readers to come up with answers of their own. Reading this issue is not a passive

exercise. Believe me, you'll need your cup of coffee to do full justice to the contents. Stimulating tales, all of them.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: [Fusion Fragment #18](#)

THE FLAVOUR OF TIME

by Megan W. Shaw

I tip the glass to my lips and take the concentrate into my mouth. Every drop matters, so I flick the base of the cup carefully to dislodge the last of it.

My client stares at me wide-eyed from the opposite side of the room. This often happens, and it used to annoy me. *Watching someone drink is rude*, I would scoff. That was early on, before I'd consumed much time. Before I'd experienced the pieces of life my clients were giving up. Now I let them stare.

I close my eyes and swish the concentrate around my mouth. The flavour starts off crisp, lightly citrusy. It's a nervous taste, but an excited one. I love time that starts off like this. Nervousness often builds to something more powerful.

My client offered me three days of time in exchange for luck. Lots of luck. I shook my head initially. Three days is a generous offer—every day of one's life is precious, and extending mine by three is desirable—but luck is difficult to create. Possible, yes, and I've done it many times in small amounts, but this man wants the kind of luck that can steal hearts, sway judges, or even cheat death. My end of this transaction would not only deplete my ingredients stores, but my bodily magic as well. I wouldn't be able to work for a week. But then the man told me what he arranged for these next three days of his life, starting just minutes from now.

"My love and I are going away," he said. "For three days, we are going to stay in the mountains, swim in the rivers, watch the stars, and—" his voice faltered then, and I realized what he was offering.

"You're going to ask her to marry you."

"Yes," the man said. "Yes, I am."

"Well," I admitted, "that is not something I have tasted before." I paused. "And you would give that up? For luck?"

"Yes." The man's complexion changed, grew paler. "Yes, I must."

The concentrate tastes... free. The citrus dissipates into the taste of cool water, and then acquires an herbal undertone, one that makes me think of pine trees and mist. My mind races through a forest of light and dark, tasting the alternation of moist earth and warm sunlight as I pass by breaks in the canopy. The flavour peaks in a burst of grapefruit as I halt at the edge of the forest and extend my heart. My tastebuds ignite with a flavour I never imagined could be so sweet and still so pleasant. Each nerve in my body

rejoices as I leap off the edge and bask in the taste of sugar-crusted joy. I float in that flavour until it mellows to a creamy contentedness. It's a comfort I've never known, and I pray that it will last just a little longer.

But then it sours.

Every flavour that brought me here falls away in mismatched pieces, leaving me unbalanced and parched. The acidity left on my tongue falls away soon after into what I can only describe as darkness. As fear.

My eyes burst open; my mouth almost opens as well—almost spreading this cacophony of experience all over the floor. I breathe deeply in that careful way that keeps the concentrate safely in my mouth. I try desperately to calm my heart after that final taste.

Dear God, I think. That taste. He offered me three days, but only had one to give. I realize that he knows his life is in danger. That is why he needs the luck.

My client is standing, clearly alarmed by my expression. I gather he's trying to decide if the time he's given me is worth the advantage my part of the transaction will give him.

It's not.

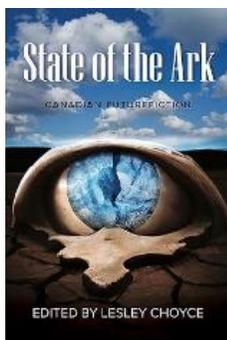
It's worth so much more. For I can't guarantee the luck needed to prevent that kind of death.

My mind reels at the repercussions of the decision I have to make. Spit the concentrate back into the cup, give it back to the man across the room, and I will pass up an opportunity no Time Drinker has yet had. I will pass up the opportunity to experience this man's death, which, Time Drinkers have hypothesized, could eliminate the need to experience my own. Swallow the concentrate, end this man's life a day early, and I could live forever.

What do I do?

I swallow.

STATE OF THE ARK



“Every story in this anthology is a delight, a product of mature and intelligent thinking. No surprise, the contributors are a bunch of heavy-duty writers who have a lot to say. Definitely a pleasure to read. A superb example of speculative fiction at its best.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: < [State of the Ark](#) >

WHAT DEATH STOLE

by Rebecca Franklyn

the sun gave earth her heart
and kept the key for herself
but death stole her soul
so she became the moon

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

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

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Tea for Two – by Xauri'EL Zwaan

In the Shade – by Jeremy Schnee

She Hulk: Attorney at Law—Review

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

LIKED

by Agata Antonow

Bizou and Dude are at it again. The thin wall between our apartments is shaking with each thrust and I stuff my pillow over my head but I can't get the image out—Bizou with her noodle-thin arms and crooked teeth, flipping her blonde hair as she walks up the steps into our apartment building, cooing "Bizouuuuu" into the phone. Dude walking behind her, hat jammed low and not saying anything.

I roll out of bed and go to the furthest spot in my apartment, which is the kitchen. My smart fridge hums as I walk by, flashes ads of the newest netgames people play for likes and money.

"Protein levels down 2%. Calorie intake today: 500. Calorie deficit: 700."

I slump down at my kitchen table, no smart surface yet. I can't stomach food when staring into a feed. Two of the legs are rickety and once this is gone my only option is a smart table. I'm not ready for that. I'm not ready for anything in this world yet. I remember too much from 2019.

At this point, I can't sleep and my fridge is now flashing 2:00. "Play netgames. Win \$1 million" comes at me. I turn my back and put on my glasses. The world in focus, and the other world with it. 13 missed pings, 3 missed messages. I delete the ads without reading, blinking extra hard through the four layers of "are you certain?"

There's the mandatory alerts. Three missing persons and one fugitive. I look at their faces long enough for the glasses to do an iris scan and then blink hard when the images flash out.

Finally, my brother's face swims into view across the table from me. "Basic training sucks. We're going after the virus squad tomorrow but in the meantime I'm pretty sure my ankle's done."

He swims out again and my boss settles into the seat like a ghost, all mist at the edges. "Three meetings tomorrow," he tells me, staring over my shoulder. "Be sure to have the Wilson report in."

He snaps out and then there's the image I've been avoiding. The face I see on my fridge and on scanners in the underground trains grins at me. Perfect skin, no hair, purple eyebrows. Some tech's idea of a human. Her voice is lilting, human enough.

"Jayelynne, you have accepted the netgames challenge. Parts completed: One. New assignment. Total value if you win: your whole yearly salary."

Objective: get more likes and shares than anyone else. Will. YOU. PLAY.” Her voice reaches a shriek at the end and her image zooms away in purple. The “like? y/n” button blinks in my eyes. I don’t have the luxury to hit n. I click y, feeling a little sick. The messages left for me by other players float up like dreams.

“Cheat.”

“Loser.”

But there is the proof: I have 3,000,000 likes and shares from assignment one—not enough to win, but just enough to make me qualify for round two.

I download the details of my assignment and throw the glasses off. I lean over, breathing noisy and wet. I don’t even have to check my moneynet to know I don’t have enough for the week. I need this assignment, no matter what it does to me.

I crawl to bed and I don’t think about the likes again until the next day, when I’m at the medcenter. My mom is sweaty and thin in her bed. There is oatmeal in her hair.

“Ma, you need to eat.” She doesn’t look at me and after five minutes of making small talk, I wander away from her room. I pass three self-eval stations but the smooth surfaces deliver the same bad news about my mother. Chronic. Life expectancy one year without surgery. Then the stark dollar signs between my mother and death.

Those numbers are why I signed up for the netgames. Assignment one was easy. Steal money and post it. The rules of my latest assignment are simple, too. Bring back a thumb. Not necessarily human. Points for being creative. One step closer to the money I need.

I know exactly where to go. There are only self-eval stations on the basement level—no human staff at all. The morgue is unmarked but I know I’ve hit jackpot when I see a door with an iris scanner. I carefully unwind the wires from behind the front panel and make a few adjustments. It’s not harder than sneaking into the dorms in college or nicking food from the caf at work.

The morgue is cool and dampish. Large metal pods rest one on top of the other and screens scroll out the details of when the next ones are to be picked up. I peer in through the glass tops, walking past an old woman and a wizened man who even in his pod is half bent, as though sloping after a long day. I contemplate the heavily tattooed muscleman and try to peer down at his fingers. If they’re tattooed...

But I’ve known from the start what I’m looking for, even as my mind skitters away from it. I need something that will help me win. I head for the

back, where the pods get smaller and smaller. Finally, I'm in an area where it looks like small houseplants are buried. I can see only tiny heads, blue with veins and bone. I choose the smallest and slowly pry the lid open. It sounds like a can of coffee popping.

The smell hits me first. Formaldehyde doesn't hide the fact that this one's been waiting for pickup for a while. I don't even need a knife. The tiny finger, no bigger than my nail, pries loose like a chicken wing. The nail on it is translucent, a thin layer of something like gel.

My breath comes out in a thin shiver and I push back any feelings that threaten to surface. I slam the lid down and hurry to get a picture with my glasses.

"Good." The eerie bodyless voice reverbs through my head. "Download the instructions for presenting your items so they can be evaluated."

I'm told to wait outside the hospital and a man of about twenty shows up on a bike. He holds out his hand, filthy and sweaty.

I hesitate. I was expecting gloves or a container, but he snaps the thumb from me and roars off, his bike running the two red lights I see. I turn back to the hospital and walk up the three floors to my mother's room. I look at her paper skin and remember the sound the thumb made when I wrenched it off. I picture a woman rounded out and waiting for that small person, being told the bad news. I sold my womb off years ago—it's what paid for this lousy room. Sometimes, I look at women who waddle along, round and careful. They tend to be the richer ones now. Women like me sell off or rent out our uteruses early.

When I get home, I check my glasses. 3,000,000 likes for the thumb so far, and the usual comments alongside the vid someone has posted. In the vid, the thumb is rolling around in a gloved hand, looking smaller than I remember. A thin membrane of skin is detached and flapping around with each roll.

"Hahah. Awesome!"

"Sick!"

I sip coffee from a cracked mug until the clock ticks forward. My glasses already on. "Jayelynn, you have accepted the challenge. Parts completed: Two. Total likes: 9,000,000. Total comments: 15,000. New assignment. Total value if you win: two years salary. Will. YOU. PLAY."

The table I'm sitting at wobbles and I remove my hands, hold my mug in the air. I close my eyes hard enough to wipe out all the other images in my mind. I blink and swipe y.

MY LOVE FOR YOU, DR. MOREAU

By Carolyn Clink

I pass through you
unchanged,
my form undigested,
metamorphosis
incomplete.

My love for you
a sideshow
attraction,
dark mirrors,
mutations.

Ontogeny
recapitulating
phylogeny—
over and over
and over.

Do you enjoy reading Polar Borealis?

Most of the time I manage to put aside enough money out of my pensions such that I can publish four times a year, but sometimes unexpected expenses delay publication.

If you could contribute \$1 a month, or \$2, or \$5 via my Patreon site, I'd be most grateful. Every bit helps me to keep to my schedule.

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

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
Issue #1 - January/February 2016



THE RELUCTANT PILGRIM

by Michèle Laframboise

I push myself up the tortuous path leading to the high plateau, ignoring my sore limbs. The wind whispers threats to the brownish tufts of grass lining the way. The dust in the air irritates the soft membrane in my nose, while the fiery glare of the sun makes my eyes water.

Along the way, drifts of wind-driven sand conspire with fallen pebbles to slow my progress. Two times already, I have stepped on loose rocks and crashed on a grassy clump lining the path.

All plants live like us: waiting out the dry season, praying the deep orange sky for a few rains. Their desiccated blades, hard as knife edges, protect them against thirsty rodents drawn by their sap.

I wipe my palms on my tunic, adding bloody prints to the dun fabric. No damage shows on the leathery skin of my knees, scarred from years of working in the fields.

This trail is seldom used. Two of our world's long seasons have passed since the last pilgrim came this way.

Fumbling in my shoulder bag, I grab the bottle's neck. I pop the lid and drink the spiced brandy. The liquid traces a column of fire within me, then mellows to embers, spreading warmth and comfort through my limbs.

I look back at the village's sheds, tiny beads clustered around the black remnants of the metallic bird that landed there, so many generations ago. Makeshift bridges link the broken wings to the windowless body.

There is no head, no beak. There is no trace of the powerful impact, except a low ridge circling the village.

From the ridge, narrow trails radiate into surrounding fields, where we grow the few cereals that came with us, along with the sturdy local vines from which we make our rich-tasting brandy.

The crops' colours are aligned like a child's drawing of a sun.

Along the trails dark pinpricks move outward, inward, carrying tools, pulling carts full of hay or barrels... No one stays idle. I turn over to resume my climb.

The ascent worsens the stiffness in my joints. I stop again, dropping to the uneven ground to rest my legs. Blue spidery veins cover them. I look at the backs of my hands, wrinkled.

My childhood has sunk into the dark pond of memory: I can't remember more than a fleeting impression of being supple and running. My good looks are a memory, but it is the loss of my strength that most concerns me.

Being ugly is one thing.

Being useless is a mortal sin.

I listen. Beneath the harsh whisper of the wind, I hear a faint gurgling. I rise and drive myself on. Uneven stairs have emerged from the rock. Their appearance means I am not far from my goal.

Raising my head, I see a dark beak piercing the orange sky, the ziggurat's top. As the steps reach the plateau's edge, the squat base comes into view, surrounded by a lush carpet of flowers and bushes.

For a moment, I forget to breathe.

Imagine the violent contrast: dun and tawny colors of the barren earth against those turquoise foliated vines, the darker green of the bushes dotting the short blue grass at the foot of the temple.

Vivid flowers, an impossible luxury in this climate, adorn the path of flat stones leading to the ziggurat. I cannot count their pink petals, some slowly unfolding to reveal tiny spears.

As I take a few hesitant steps inside the garden, the wind dies away. It is as if a bubble of calm enveloped the temple.

I feel an impulse to bend over and pick one of the flowers. I check myself in time, noticing the thorns on the stems. Another well-defended fortress. Besides, who would dare to take anything from a sacred garden?

Here, the water sings louder, bringing the quiet assurance that life is stronger than everything.

A priest is waiting at the entrance, his tall frame wrapped in a tender-green cloak, a promise of spring. His face is shadowed under a hood.

As I walk closer, I can make out the metallic hue of his skin.

I follow the priest in a passageway, my bare feet sinking in the spongy floor. I breathe in with relief the moist and warm air. Echoes of the water's song are repeated by the curved walls, awaking my thirst. Priests pass by, silent as ghosts in their flowing robes and hoods. I cannot tell which ones are female or male. Their eyes slide over me.

Now the passage opens onto a vast space at the heart of the great building. I squint as a bright sunlight falls on my face, filtered from windows pierced at

the base of the pointed spire. Green and turquoise reflections dance over a pond of fresh water.

There is no stream milling into it, no fountain splashing. The gurgling song comes from the many ripples crossing the surface.

Suspended a few handspans above the pond, a bubble of blue water spins slowly, as the Earth of our ancestors might have rotated, so long ago. Its curved edge brims with rainbow hues, their blurred limits moving and flashing about.

Inside the sphere, tiny, invisible, the fairies are waiting.

The priest disrobes, the generous folds of the garment peeling away from his arms and legs. The man must be more than six thousand seasons old, but his face shows neither scars nor wrinkles.

The fairies have mended all the defects of his skin; it now shines with a silvery hue. Even his hair follicles have been repaired, falling from his head in fine white strands. He wades into the water, towards the blue globe.

And turns to me, waiting.

I undress my twisted body, letting my worn clothes fall to the floor, and follow. The shallow water of the pond soothes my sore feet.

For seven hundred seasons, I have walked the fields, tended to the crops. I hope to remain useful for many more seasons... yet I feel a sudden weariness at the thought of going through this. Fear creeps over me like a vine climbing its support stake.

This is not the first time that I bathe in the Ziggurat's pond, but any recollections of my last visit have faded. I knew my turn had come around again only because the village's registrar keeps a faithful record of our pilgrimages.

I dread crossing a point of no return from my humanity, like the one attained by the shiny-skinned priests of the Ziggurat. A rock thrown towards the sky will always fall down. Is this pilgrimage worth the trouble?

My questions fall away like swatted flies when my hands reach the sphere. A coolness flows through my fingers, numbing them. I squint, trying to see the little fairies, even if the priests keep telling us their bodies are too small to be seen by our eyes.

I don't know how this water globe hovers in the air. It is another secret, not for our ears. Nor do I know why the priests stay at their temple.

Obviously, their renewed bodies are stronger than ours. I am certain they could dig the fields and lug pails of water from the well and withstand more stress than we can.

The tale in the village was that the priests came to this world along with our ancestors, aboard the great bird. They were humans at the time.

They knew a lot, about agriculture and medicine and weather and geology. Their advice was sought after. But as the seasons passed, they grew more distant, aloof. Some precious things had been lost in the violent impact that shattered the wings.

While our ancestors settled in the village, the priests built the ziggurat.

A metallic hand grabs my wrist and yanks me into the sphere. Viscous liquid clogs my nostrils, numbing my lips, forcing an icy wave down my throat. I choke.

I am drowning, my body dissolving, liquid flowing through every pore. My eyes cannot weep, my frozen retinas stare at the blue mass, straining in vain to see the fairies...

When I return to my senses, the orange sky has turned to a wine-dark red. I am lying on the short grass of the garden. I rise in one fluid movement. Even my clothes are clean and new.

Looking behind me, I see that the Ziggurat's entrance is now a blank wall. I can't even trace the lines of the door.

I step briskly onto the path. I hurry towards the village, now garlanded with bonfires lit in my honor. My appetite has revived; I look forward to the feast, the music, the dances.

Long seasons of vigor and work stretch ahead of me. On the back of my hands and on my arms, I find new gray spots, where the fairies have done their healing magic.

On a clear stretch of the downward trail, I skip and saunter—one, two, three times! —and glimpse a fleeting memory of childhood, gone before I can grasp it. An old sadness washes through me, despite the fires and the feast waiting below.

Because there is one thing that the priests, for all their wonders, cannot give back to us, one defect that the little fairies can no longer repair. Our women's bellies could grow only so many eggs.

Too many seasons have come and gone without a child's clear laughter cheering our village.

That is why, every evening, we light our bonfires and watch the sky. We hope that one day, others from our race, better equipped, will find us, here in the shadow of the broken bird that can no longer relay our calls.

A THIRST FOR ADVENTURE

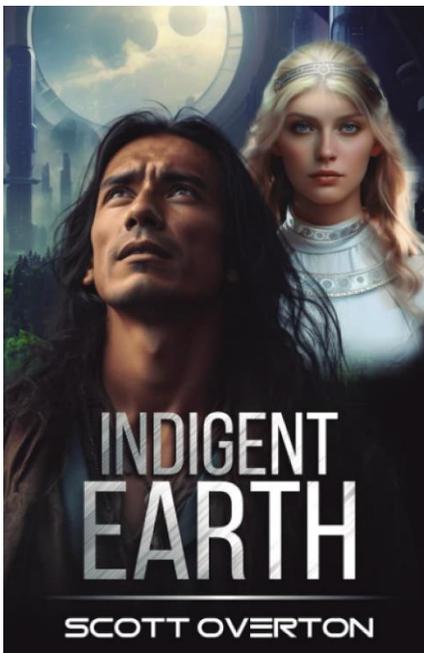
by Lynne Sargent

There are days when wanting overwhelms.
When you would snatch water
from a beggar woman's mouth
in search of salvation or serpents
uncaring which it was.

There are days when you would fill the silence
with anything, anything at all,
the scream of your body running red-shoed
through the streets,
bloody footprints like all that feeling
dissipating in the wind

leaving dry throats
and ever more thirst.

INDIGENT EARTH – by Scott Overton



“The most intriguing aspect of this book is the way the author extrapolates complications and problems beyond the “perfection” a simplistic approach to technological progress was long believed to guarantee. Technology is shown to be merely an incidental backdrop to the grand theatre of human social interaction which, as always, can be both beautiful and brutal.

In short, stop worshipping technology. Our future depends on the fact we are human beings, which is both a virtue and a flaw. As long as we are mindful of that, our future has a chance.

The book is both fun to read and thought-provoking. It is genuine, highly entertaining, adventure science fiction.”

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: < [Indigent Earth](#) >

MARSHAL 91

by Geoffrey Marshall

“Jenny, it’s slime mould for chrissakes,” she said to me, “Get it off my floor.”

I scooped up Infested Colony/40269 and plopped them into their jar.

Can you believe my own mother could be so intolerant?

“They just asked me how us people could ever have figured out how to hookup to the goddamn Wormhole Network, with manners like that,” I shot back, and it was mostly true. I mean I did add the goddamn bit but the literal translation wasn’t punchy enough for my retort—something about how *e. coli* should infest my mother’s plumbing for a thousand years. You can kinda get the gist of what they were saying.

Gotta say the name is a mouthful but they don’t mind nicknames too much so I call them Colin. Yes, them, literally. Colin really is a colony made up of millions of microorganisms. I like to think of them as whatever would happen if our gut bacteria could exist outside of our body.

And talk.

When we first encountered Colin’s folks out here in 51 Pegasi, the first thing they wanted to do was form a symbiotic alliance with humanity. Aliens are always asking for this sort of arrangement and the local Earth delegation was looking for volunteers so I signed up for the compatibility trial. That’s why I have Colin—they’re the 40,269th fragment that has been assigned to a human. That’s me. Well, post-human as they used to call us. All there is now.

Colin’s jar has wheels so they can follow me around the apartment. We head to my room to ease the tension with my mother. Colin’s not from 51 Pegasi either but we enjoy watching the star from my wall display. No one’s actually from 51 Pegasi if you really want to know—but everyone’s here.

Reason being the fourth planet is entirely made up of these really rare minerals, all created five seconds or so into the Big Bang. A hundred years ago a meteor crashed into Earth and they found five grams of these minerals. Sounds tiny but it was enough to hook us up to the Wormhole Network. Imagine what we could do with a planet-sized chunk.

So, yeah, 51 Pegasi is busy because any civilization that finds the wormhole network comes here to mine the stuff. The mineral’s pretty volatile

so you can only handle a small amount at a time. That's what kept the peace so far. How long that lasts is anyone's guess.

Colin recently took to warning me about the Trappists on account of us seeing a ton more of their mining ships coming in. We were watching the latest pair of ships come in from their node when Colin said, "Jenny, let's take a walk over to the Port Authority. We want a look at those ships."

I scooped them up and cradled them in my hand, but as soon as I had Colin out of the jar in my hands I knew something was wrong. My cybernetics went all screwy, then shut off completely. I felt blind and I kind of was, going from the bandwidth of a thousand senses down to my wetware five. I was pretty panicked and I wanted to run to the kitchen to tell my mother but I couldn't move.

I thought I might faint but I heard a voice, like sound in my ears, except nobody was there.

"Jenny, it's us—Colin."

"Colin? What's going on?" I had to think it because I couldn't actually use my throat. I noticed that my hands were empty.

"We've infested your system and had a conversation with your microbiome. They agreed to give us control of your body."

What could anyone say to this? I mentally spluttered. I had absorbed Colin into my body.

Gross.

"We won't let you get hurt but we need to stop the Trappists," Colin said. Then we were off. Colin waved at my mother and said, "Bye, ma," as we streamed through the kitchen.

She waved back, "Don't get in any trouble, dear," she said, not looking up from her romance sim.

Colin explained that their full designation was really Infested Colony/Marshal 91/40269.

In other words they were a scoop or two of Marshal 91's bio-matter—and they were law enforcement for the 51 Pegasi Dyson Ring. In fact, they were native to 51 Pegasi 4, the mineral planet everyone was trying to exploit. They said their Colony was actually in control of the system and was trying to guide the rest of us towards a civilized singularity—whatever that means. The Trappists, it turned out, were plotting an invasion. Most of their mining ships were warships all along. I couldn't believe it.

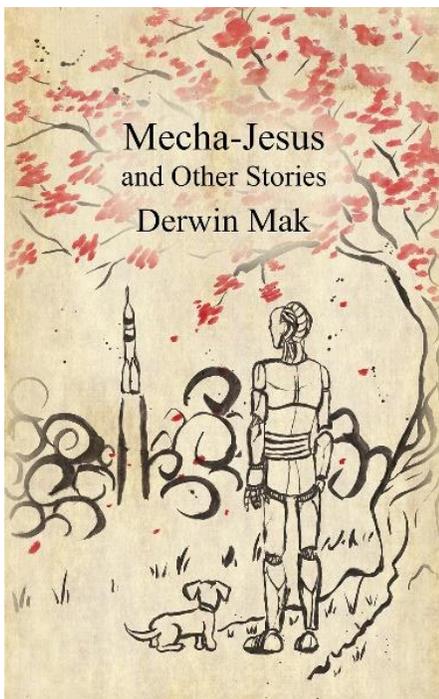
So Colin and I made our way to the Port Authority. Colin knew exactly where to go and before I knew it we were at one of the gates. A delegation of Trappists was just passing by. Colin just walked up and said hello. They looked kind of surprised and the tentacles on their octopus heads were changing colors pretty fast.

“Nervous,” Colin said to me, “smell those pheromones. What a reek.” It was true. They looked nervous.

Colin extended my hand and the Trappist politely extended a flipper. As we shook appendages my systems came online. I was whole again, all thousand senses firing as usual—except Colin was gone. I looked at the Trappist and could just tell, Colin was in there. I felt a gentle squeeze from the flipper. I knew it was Colin saying goodbye.

The delegation proceeded through their gate and headed out to the wormhole mouth leading to Trappist-1. I was not surprised, hardly a minute later, when a massive explosion rocked the Dyson Ring. The Trappist-1 mouth was gone. I learned later that all their spacecraft left over in the system appeared to have simultaneously self-destructed—but I knew what really happened—you don’t mess with the law in Marshal 91’s star system.

MECHA-JESUS AND OTHER STORIES – by Derwin Mak



“A lot of mood swings in this collection, from the lightest comedies to the darkest of visions. Derwin Mak is a master of spare, precise yet vivid prose that takes you straight away into the story and never lets go. Indeed, some of the questions raised linger in your mind after you put the book down. This superb collection is a pleasure to read and think about.”

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Check it out at: < [Mecha-Jesus](#) >

Note: Currently available on Kindle. Will be available as paperback on March 08, 2024.

DUEL

By Cat Girczyc

(Previously published in *Edges* Anthology, 1991)

Suitors of a modern Guinevere
Meet happily enough and compare—
Arms, brains, skills,
Worrying themselves bald,
Each searching the rival/opponent
For visible faults.
("Does *he*? Well, *I* don't do *that!*")
Swords sheathed, pacing round
Gauging distances and strengths

No one is willing to be Arthur
Why is everyone Lancelot these days?
The knights wait days and evenings,
Pulling with subtle laces the strings of attachment...
("I am the only person who *truly* understands you.")

Finally roused, Guinevere decides to end the Game
Disliking blood on the ground
"But my loves," She says,
Trying to be fair when she should be decisive,
"There's no requirement for this hefting of armour, shields, and swords.
I will have no fencing over me,
No kingdoms lost, no shining grail quests won,
No, for I apportion myself out and take the spoils!"

GAME ON



"All the stories I reviewed from this anthology involve a game of some sort or another. Fair to call it a series of monographs on the topic of life as a game with each story exhibiting wry and subtle writing embedded with numerous original concepts. A feast for the imagination I'd say. Highly recommended." – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at < [Game On!](#) >

A FINE MAY EVENING

by Lorina Stephens

It was May when we lost the children.

The evening was fine, late May, the Nottawasaga River burbling along the northern edge of the property. Both children were in bed. Himself and I ducked outside for a stroll in the gloaming. Mist rose from the river, spilling over those brambled banks and out across the tamed hayfield we called a lawn.

As we rounded the corner of the house, a flickering spectacle formed, fireflies flashing their mating signals through the linden and ferns. It was like watching the Milky Way descended to our bucolic three acres.

“Let’s get the kids,” Himself said, and laughing we roused our son and daughter from their beds and drew them out to where the fireflies gently strobed. For a moment they stood there in nightdress and pjs. And then they saw. The children’s reaction was exactly as we’d hoped, all wonder and excitement, so that when Aiden, the eldest at a wise seven years of age, turned to his younger sister and whispered, “Fairies!” Bob and I laughed, and watched them dash off, bare feet leaving silver trails across the grass to where the ferns were alight—

—and disappear.

Gone. Just gone. Swallowed into the mist and the twilight, the fireflies snuffed out, the magic no more. Only dread as we scoured the copse for any sign of our children, calling and calling long past all light, and then using flashlights and our voices ragged with fear and tears.

That night the police did a further search, both of the property and of our memories, and in the coming days their queries became more interrogation than investigation.

Days became weeks, weeks to months, and as the years went on so did Bob and I, both of us clinging to each other in our grief, and our love, trying to fill the void our children had left. And so life goes on. You find a way to cope, if not heal, to live, to find hope again after the scab has fallen away and left a ragged scar.

But how was it two children could disappear in the mist? We went over it and over it. Bob mentioned hearing music early on. We both thought it had been from the house. But then we didn’t. What we thought we’d heard hadn’t been anything like our common fare. Eerie. Beautiful. Seductive. Enough to wrench the heart from you and leave you bewildered and breathless. But it

was so easy to dismiss that to overwrought imagination, assign it to harmonics from the evening requiem of the birds, the rush of the river, all the soft seduction of a fine May evening.

In time we left our three acres beside the Nottawasaga, forsaking the river for another, this time the Saugeen where an old stone house buttressed up against a hill which leveled out into pasture and fields of wheat, barley and corn, a gnarled old apple tree hanging over the original well. We thought we'd find contentment in the labour of restoring the old house, of settling into retirement years, growing old together, watching over each other.

And after all those years, the tears, and the lingering memory of that night of mist and magic-become-tragedy, we sat out in the purple hours of the evening, but never again saw a spectacle of fireflies like we had that night by the Nottawasaga.

Until an evening in May which was fine, the Saugeen burbling at a distance down the hill, and again fireflies flickered in the mist, arising under the apple tree and that old pioneer well.

"Jenna," Himself said, calling me, and all I could do was clutch at his hand, my chest painful with memory and dread, with hope and incredulity, watching a young man step out of the mist and music which drifted, a fey figure at his back. Bob and I rose to our feet, took a step, then another, meeting these folk under the apple tree, by the well, surrounded by the flickering of fireflies and the soft sound of birds and a melody not quite there.

"Aiden?" I said, and the young man looked at me and sucked in a sob.

"Mum?"

And Bob there by my side, gulping down tears, trying to say something, and instead just took a staggered step forward to the son we'd lost only to be stopped by the other figure, all grey and drifting form.

"There is a charge we put upon him," the figure said. We three turned toward this fey folk. "Aiden is to be our ambassador for all his days. If he agrees, we release him back to you."

"And if he doesn't?" Bob said, all heat and anger in that cool, damp evening with the fireflies swirling round.

"Then he returns to spend the rest of his days with his sister and us."

"His sister? You let her go right now!"

"It's okay, Dad," Aiden said. "I agree to their terms."

Bob turned to his son, his face a mirror of my own despair. "Son—"

"—She's not okay, Dad—"

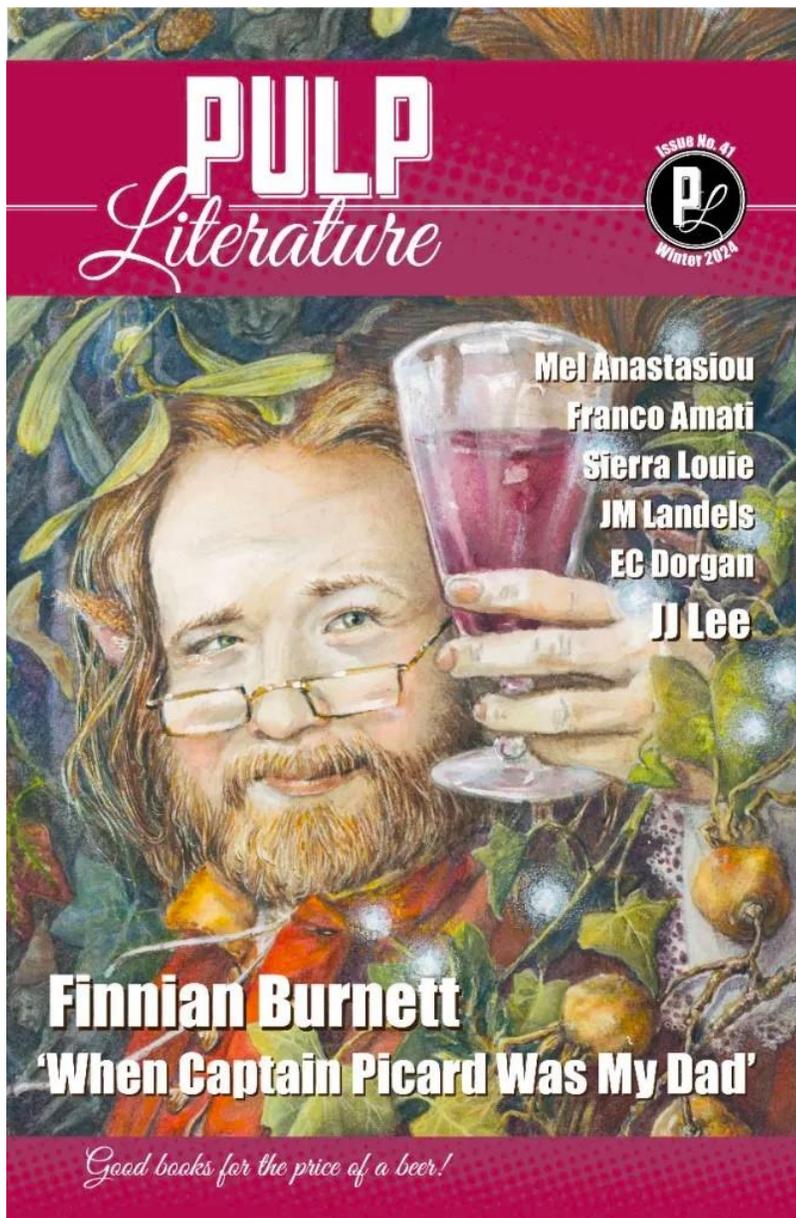
“—She is better with us,” the creature said.

“You *will* care for her,” Aiden said. “Even love her.”

“We will certainly do the former. But love, as you know, is not a thing we of the Court understand. I’m not sure even she understands.”

And just as happened 20 years ago, fireflies, mist and all were gone. Only Aiden remained, very real in our arms.

PULP LITERATURE #41 Winter 2024



Cover: *Cheers* – by Melissa Mary Duncan

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When Captain Picard was my Dad

– by Finnian Burnett

Feature interview with Finnian Burnett

The Golden Bull – by JM Landels

Objects and Broken Objects

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Moon Eater – by EC Dorgan

To Make you Stay – (poem) by Purbasha

Roy

Bliss Street – by CZ Tacks

Nobody Knows It but Me – by Franco Amati

All the Rage: One Plus One is Three

– (poem) by Aaron Poochigian

Field's Nocturne No.10 in E Major

– by Matt Lombard

Separate Worlds – by Chip Hauser

Get Home Safe

– (graphic art) by Sierra Louie

Stella Ryman and the Labyrinthian Puzzle

- by Mel Anastasiou

The Haunted Ghost - by JJ Lee

“Pulp Literature is always a good read. This issue sparkles with insightful originality and astute observation.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #41](#)

CADBOROSAURIS WILLSI
TO BE PRECISE

by *KB Nelson*

He doesn't know the concept of "name,"
this myth who glides through the marine forest,
at times illuminated by summer-green beams from above,
sometimes in comfortable winter grey.

The days all run together, unlabelled.

His smooth silver existence flickers in and out,
waxes, wanes, wholly sustained by the belief
of these credulous tourists
and dinosaur-obsessed six-year-olds.

Children of children of settlers
designate him "*Cadborosaurus*"
for the bay he is known to frequent.
That's fine, he could live with that.
Shortened to "Cad" it has rakish appeal,
or a *soupçon* of computer-aided high-tech
but no, they call him Caddy.

Excuse me?

At best that's a swagger of an American car
or maybe it's a golfer's assistant
—bad enough to be a golfer,
but a golfer's assistant?—
or a box to hold your tea.

Hardly a name to inspire awe or respect
or even whimsy like his cousin Ogotogo.

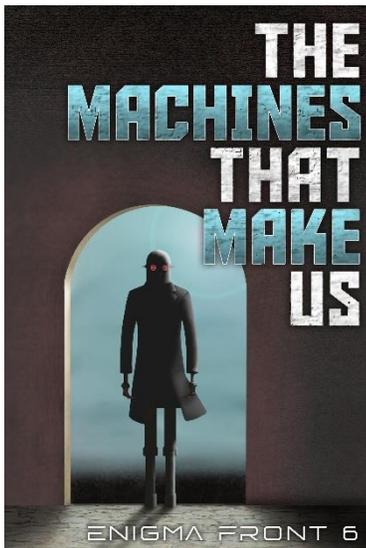
Once he held the names T'chain-ko,
Numkse Lee Kwala, Hiyitl'iik,
held the respect of the people
as he eluded their view,

was painted on war canoes
to inspire courage in their paddlers
and fear in their foes.

Now reduced by the renaming
just as the whale once known as Killer is humbled
to a marine circus performer or hockey team mascot,
and the sleek machine of death, at once both White and Great
has been envisioned as a cephalopod hybrid
or ridiculous rider of tornadoes.

Heedless beneath the waves,
no concept of nomenclature,
or codification,
or poetic invention,
this variously dubbed creature romps in the currents;
crunches the freshest *uni* for breakfast,
rockfish or ling cod for lunch
and a light fried egg jellyfish for dinner.
Simple pleasures and a small but faithful following
sustain this shy enigma.

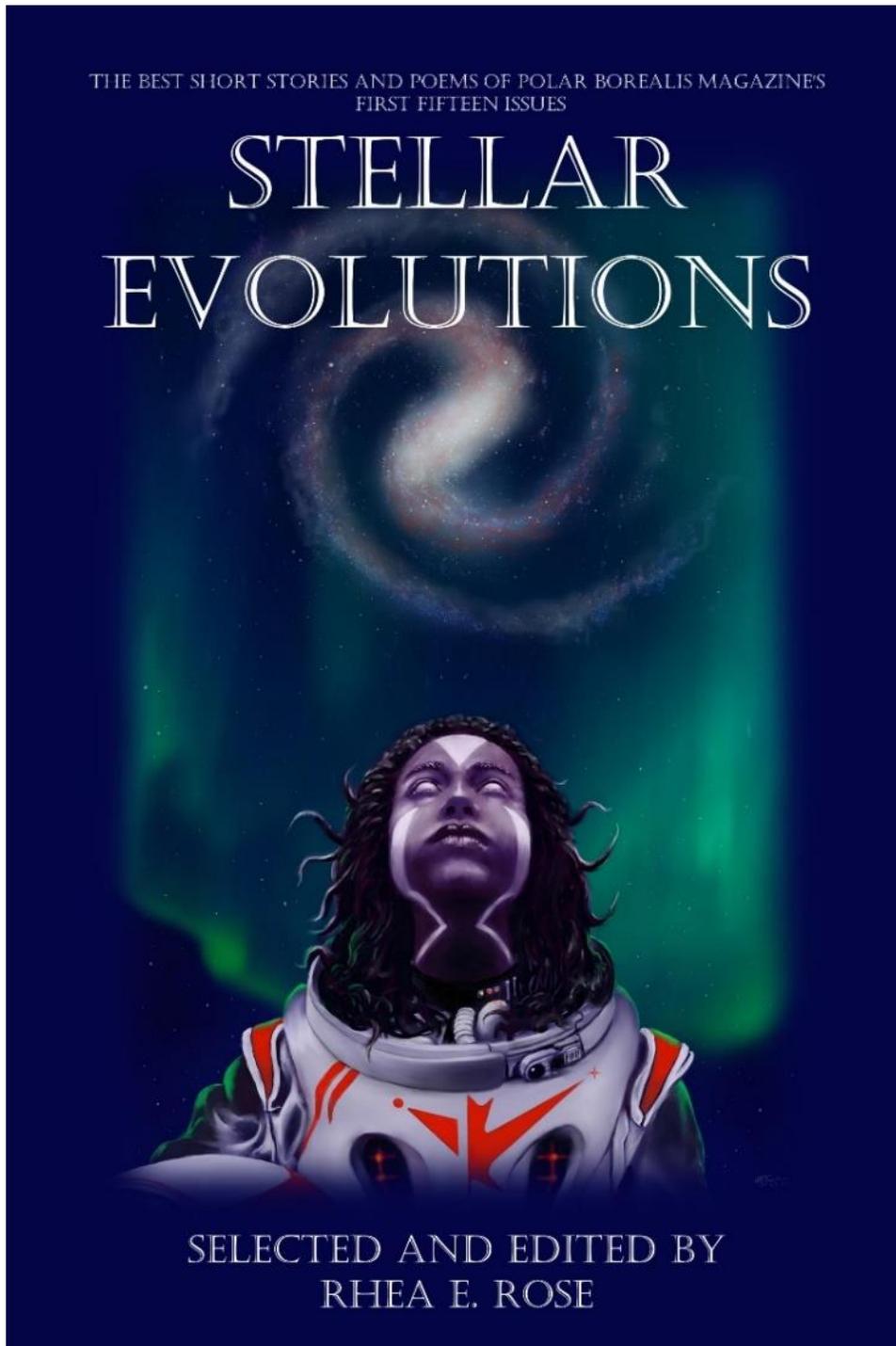
The Machines that Make Us



“This is a splendid assortment of stories commenting on what may be in store for us when AI becomes ubiquitous and painfully needful. AI is not going away. AI is the coming thing, and ultimately may be coming *for* us. This imaginative and original collection will give you a heads up. The ways AI can screw you is beyond comprehension. These are some of its choices. Believe me, you need to read this.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

E-book available at: < [The Machines that Make Us](#) >

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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THE LAST DANCE

by Jameson Grey

Soon it would be September,
And sad embers on a Cornish beach
Preach testament to an eternal evening
When we sang

The songs of surfers searching for waves,
The songs of poets visiting graves,
The songs of hippies lauding the brave—
We sang them all.

We sang of how it was to be alive,
And how soon time might pass.
Yet how fearless of age we were
In our broken youth.

I forget who it was started the song,
Who kindled the fire,
Who argued it was wrong—
This remorseless shuffle, this untimely death.

We danced, how we danced!
As all those songs were sung—
The last dance of the old,
The last dance of the young.

“We’ve failed! Who’ll save us?” The recriminations rung.
“We knew disaster loomed, early in spring...”
Yet despite the warnings, nothing was done.
Nothing, nothing—not one damn thing!

One by one we slipped away in the night,
’Til dawn brooked no ebb,
And I alone remained, stirring,
Keeping the embers alight.

Now the others have danced with the tide,
I'll follow the ocean towards the sun
And, one by one, we'll wave
Our last dance, done.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #125 - V.33 #3



COVER: *Angler Fish-Bot* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk & Steve Fahnestalk

FICTION:

A Fairytale for Sophie – by Antony Paschos
Oh Exemplary Restraint, So Rare in the Ancient World – by R. Keelan
The Sisters Three – (poem) by Renee Cronley
The Chameleon – by Brian D. Hinson
The Story (poem) – by Pascal Raud
Letter to a Brother on a Generation Ship – (poem) by MW Irving
The Trombone, the Pianist, the Four-Wheeler, and the Zombies – by Carolyn Watson
soliloquies after division – (poem) by Crystal Sidell
The Written Future – by AJ Wells
Alien Anthropologist – by A. Reid Johnson
Under the Protection of a Long Living Fungus – (poem) by Angel Leal
The Keening of a Sparrow – by Lorina Stephens
Folklore – by Brenda Tremayne
And if Venice is Sinking – by Fiona Moore

NON-FICTION:

Retro-Futurist Robots – Interview with Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk and Steve Fahnestalk
It's the Zombie Apocalypse – Author Interview with Carolyn Watson – by Roberta Laurie

Comic & Bot: "The Bartender"& "Retro Rhonda" – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

As I go to publish, this issue, now a back issue, is not currently listed at On Spec site available for purchase. I love the cover, so am running it anyway. No doubt it will be available soon. See [On Spec current issue](#) for #126.

THE TEST

by Guy Immega

The CEO's assistant ushered Arthur Steiner into the corner office on the top floor of the GENeural Pharma tower. "Please wait here. Mr. Pendergast will see you shortly."

An oversized mahogany desk sat at an angle in the middle of the spacious office, its polished surface free of clutter. Late afternoon sunlight through gold-tinted windows made the room seem warm and cheerful. A miniature orange tree, laden with fruit, sat in the corner. Arthur resisted the temptation to look through an antique brass telescope on a tripod, aimed at the harbor below.

"Hello, Arthur!" Malcolm Pendergast nodded cordially as he breezed into the room. "Sorry I'm late—please, sit down." Elegantly dressed in a blue silk suit, he kept his tieless white shirt unbuttoned at the throat, a concession to the informality of a high-tech corporation.

Arthur sat at the edge of an oak armchair, its seat and armrests covered in maroon leather. A wall mounted digital picture frame showed photos of Pendergast's superyacht. The constantly changing images distracted him.

"I've skimmed your new paper." Pendergast spoke with JFK's Boston Brahmin accent. He made a show of holding the printout at arm's length while squinting at the title: "*Genetic Markers for Psychopathy*. Impressive—not many would undertake such an ambitious project."

Arthur felt a warm flush in his cheeks. "Thank you," he mumbled. He had heard that Pendergast rarely gave compliments. *He must like it.*

"Dr. Steiner, please explain how your work supports our quest for drugs that enhance cognition." Pendergast's smooth face showed no expression.

"I previously studied a dopamine receptor gene associated with novelty-seeking behavior," Arthur said. "That led to the discovery of a serotonin transporter gene that acts on the amygdala, the seat of emotional learning. Both are essential to intelligence."

"If you say so—biochemistry isn't my thing. GENeural wants commercial products, not basic research. Why study psychopaths?"

Trying not to sound defensive, Arthur said, "They're a unique group of neurodivergent people. I used a haplotype database, the Forensic HapMap, publicly available on the Internet."

"Ah yes, I've read about it—genetic maps of *prisoners*—the *worst* sort of criminals." Pendergast raised his upper lip to show his distaste.

Arthur felt sweat trickle down his neck. “Since the police routinely take DNA samples, there are a lot of genetic records to work with, even from people long dead. The database includes psychological profiles of convicts. No field research was needed—saving time and money.”

“How many were psychopaths?”

“Statistics show that twenty percent of the male prison population is psychopathic. I was surprised that only three aberrant genes, for the ventromedial prefrontal cortex—the moderator of emotions—are needed to produce a psychopath. I call them *psycho-genes*.”

“A bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“The name fits. Recessive psycho-genes must come from both parents to produce a psychopath—men and women are affected equally. Testosterone may explain why men are more likely to be violent, criminal psychopaths.”

Pendergast scowled. “Bad breeding. I’ve given your paper some thought. It has a lot of merit.” Arthur squirmed, waiting for him to continue. “You can’t publish, of course.”

Arthur felt as if he had been punched in the gut. “Why not?”

“Most people think that psychopathy is a moral issue, suitable for philosophers, not scientific research.”

“But sir, all I did was analyze anonymous genetic data from a public database. The science is good and nobody’s been hurt. We should publish.”

Pendergast sighed. “You’re probably right. GENeural is committed to free public access to any genes we discover. However, in this instance we’ll be condemned for doing eugenics research, like Nazi scientists. Bad publicity will hurt sales and our stock price.”

Arthur gasped. “What about academic freedom?”

“We’re in business, not an ivory tower. You’ve done some intriguing work here, but publication could threaten the corporation and ruin your career. You wouldn’t want *that*, would you?”

“No,” Arthur mumbled.

Pendergast smiled broadly, showing perfect, white teeth. “Don’t worry, Arthur, m’boy. Your research important. We just need to prevent the wrong people from learning about it.”

Arthur experienced a moment of hope, but remained silent.

Pendergast leaned back and stared at him. “I’ve got a proposition for you. I’ll double your research budget if you can develop a procedure to detect psychopaths. I don’t want DNA sequencing; we need a test that gives rapid results. Let’s call it by a neutral name: *Personality Profiler*. I could use it to hire

the right people. The police and the CIA would love it. Your project will be our little secret. What do you say?"

Arthur felt disoriented. "I... I don't know if a quick test is possible."

That evening Arthur told Stella about Pendergast's offer. His wife listened patiently, eyebrows arched above brown eyes, sipping a glass of wine. He depended on her sympathy and support. She was the love of his life, but he was a little in awe of her reputation as a tough, forensic psychiatrist. Sometimes he wondered how she dealt with murderers and the criminally insane. It was her idea to look for genes for psychopathy. Now, he told her about Pendergast's challenge.

"The problem is, I've never developed a commercial product—I just want to do basic research."

"I could use it for psychological assessments," Stella said. "I'd love to replace unreliable checklists to gauge antisocial personality disorder. They're too subjective."

"I don't know much about psychopaths, aside from the genetics of criminals. I've never met one."

"I'm sure you have," Stella said. "About four percent of the general population is sociopathic or psychopathic—they're the same thing. About one in twenty-five. You must know several."

"That's hard to believe." He leaned back in the overstuffed chair and tried to relax.

"I know," Stella said. "We don't want to think that some of our acquaintances, or even friends and family members, are psychopaths. It feels creepy and paranoid."

"How can you recognize them?"

"It's tricky. Psychopaths have what's been called a "convincing mask of sanity"—they look just like you and me. They're often likeable, well-adjusted and caring."

"And charming."

"Some, but not all," Stella nodded. "In addition to criminals, there are neighbors from hell and lazy people who sponge off relatives and friends. The spectrum ranges from mild narcissism to sadistic killers."

"And there're no reliable signs?"

"Watch out for those who want you to feel sorry for them: it's called the "pity play." Your sympathy makes you vulnerable."

“What makes them so powerful?” Arthur poured himself another glass of wine.

Stella's eyes narrowed. “Most don't have special abilities. It's what they *lack* that gives them an edge. These people have no conscience to restrain them. They can do *anything at all* without moral qualms or self-doubt. Your discovery of psycho-genes confirm that psychopaths are born bad—they can't be reformed. In a fundamental way, their minds aren't the same as ours.”

“I wonder how evolution, natural selection, could allow the rise of psychopaths,” Arthur said.

“Selfish genes assist their survival. They're natural-born intra-species predators—a sophisticated, parasitic subspecies that mimics normal people.”

“Why didn't angry victims kill them, eliminating them from the gene pool?”

“Maybe psycho-genes thrived when human populations became large enough for them to move around and hide. Some may have been successful warriors—cold-blooded killers. Heroes, even. Civilization provides the cover they require.”

Agitated, Arthur got up and walked to the window. “Okay, some psychopaths are monsters but others are just ordinary sleazy people. I'm still not comfortable with screening for psycho-genes. You can't profile potential psychopaths, stigmatize them, just because they might do harm in the future. What about psychopathic embryos or newborns?”

Stella winced. “There are no easy answers. Gene therapy? Voluntary abortion? In the meantime, there are hundreds of thousands of dangerous adults preying on society.”

“I hope that being a genetically verified psychopath doesn't become a legal defense.”

“Fortunately, in the eyes of the law, these people are *not* crazy,” Stella said. “They know the difference between right and wrong—they just don't care. Psychopaths are the primary reason we need the laws, courts and jails to protect us.”

“What about psychopaths in positions of authority?”

“They're the *worst*,” Stella said with a hard edge to her voice. “Power and authority are magnets for psychopaths. They're common in corporate management, especially in high-tech companies with rapid turnover.”

“I thought they were loners, unable to cooperate or work in a group.”

“That's not necessarily true. There've been many serial-killer duos. Con artists work together on large scams. Organized crime depends on psychopaths functioning in a hierarchical feudal society.”

“What about government?” Arthur said.

Stella shook her head and hunched her shoulders, as if to ward off a chill. “With their superficial charm, psychopaths excel in politics. Some third-world nations are failed states with high mortality, conflict and insecurity—but dictators can rise anywhere, even here. They empower corrupt people at every level; leadership determines the morality of a country. Hitler’s loyal henchmen murdered millions; if he’d had nuclear weapons, London wouldn’t exist today.”

“You make it sound as if there’s a world conspiracy of psychopaths. That’s too paranoid for me.”

“It could come to that,” Stella said. “Technology is far more dangerous now than it was during World War Two. Unfiltered propaganda on the Internet can destroy democracy. Terrorist networks have access to weapons of mass destruction on the black market. Our civilization may not survive the next 100 years, much less another 10,000, unless we can find a way to keep psychopaths out of power.”

Arthur took a deep breath, trying to control his frustration. “My problem is more immediate. Pendergast is blocking publication of my research.”

“Don't worry, you can submit your paper later. I’m biased, but I believe that psycho-genes are the most important discovery in genetics since DNA. You’ll win a Nobel Prize!”

Arthur ignored her and paced the floor of the living room. “I’m still ambivalent about the Personality Profiler. It could be misused.”

“I think that a test for psychopathy is a great opportunity. Maybe Pendergast wants to get rid of evil people. Go ahead and develop it—it could change the world.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Pendergast walked into Arthur's new laboratory without knocking. “Good afternoon, Dr. Steiner. Sorry to drop by unannounced, but I’m curious to see how the Personality Profiler is progressing. It’s been three months since your last report.”

Arthur hoped to impress Pendergast. “We’ve made a big breakthrough. I’ve engineered an enzyme to detect the genetic markers for psychopathy. The antibodies are labeled with fluorescent tags that we can see with a microscope.”

“How long does the test take?”

“After the antibodies are mixed with the DNA sample, we can see the result

in under an hour. No gene sequencing is necessary.”

Pendergast leaned close to Arthur’s face—the man smelled of cologne and breath-mints.

“Arthur, you're a genius! But sixty minutes is still too long. Can you shorten the time required? We need an instant field test, without complicated lab procedures.”

Arthur tried to contain his dismay. “I didn’t know you wanted an immediate readout. That wasn’t in the original spec.”

“Sorry about that,” Pendergast said, patting Arthur on the arm. “It's just that the recent economic downturn has put pressure on GENeural Pharma. Only the most promising products can be supported.”

“Are you going to cut my budget?” Arthur said.

“Whole divisions will go. But I’ll protect you. I had to go out on a limb and tell the Board of Directors that your Personality Profiler is ready for market.”

“That’s absurd! We’ve got months of development to do.”

“I know you’re working hard,” Pendergast said, squeezing Arthur’s forearm, “but you have *no idea* how difficult this is for me. To curb costs, I’ve agreed to forego my salary for a year. I’ve put my house up for sale and told my son to delay university. GENeural will use the money to keep your project on track. *Please* don’t let me down!”

“I’ll do my best.”

At three AM, Arthur telephoned Stella from his lab. “The demo is ready for the board tomorrow morning. The Personality Profiler works just like Pendergast wanted.” He spoke just above a whisper, exhausted but proud. Stella made him promise to keep in touch, even in the middle of the night.

“I’m proud of you,” she said, her voice thick with sleep. “But I wish you could come home tonight. Pendergast is pushing you too hard.”

“I can’t leave now. I’ve got to be ready in the morning.”

Arthur tidied the lab and went to his office. From behind his cluttered desk, he retrieved a thin foam pad. He laid it on the floor and awkwardly stretched out on his back, still in his clothes. He stared at a barely visible water stain on the ceiling, a Rorschach blot that helped him visualize protein folding. It soothed him as he fell asleep, dreaming of glowing molecules.

By eight-thirty, after a breakfast of doughnuts and coffee, he was shaved and ready. At least he had a fresh shirt. Back in the lab he arranged the demo kit.

Pendergast showed up promptly at nine o'clock. "Sorry Arthur, the Board of Directors can't come today—yet another meeting with investors about a new round of financing."

Dizzy from fatigue, Arthur didn't know whether he was disappointed or relieved. "Do you still want to see the demonstration?"

"Absolutely! Show me how to use the Personality Profiler."

"By the way, who're you planning to test with it?" Arthur said.

He didn't think Pendergast would answer him, but the man didn't hesitate. "Oh, we'll start with cops, judges and politicians—also military brass. The Board wants to know who are team players."

Players? Confused, Arthur hesitated to ask more questions. "I'll demonstrate a working prototype." He walked to a lab bench. After a moment, he turned and held his hand up, index finger raised. "Here it is!"

Pendergast frowned. "I don't see anything."

"That's the idea. Look carefully—it's almost invisible." Arthur pointed to a tiny rubber sheath stretched down to the first knuckle.

"It's new technology for genetic screening: a latex finger-cot with a bioassay blister at the end. Simply touch the tip on the subject's skin. You can shake somebody's hand or even wipe it on a recently used doorknob. In twenty seconds, the blister shows red for a psychopath, yellow for a carrier, and green for a normal person." Arthur felt triumphant.

"You *can't* be serious. This... *condom* is ridiculous! I can't show that to the Board; it looks like you're doing a rectal exam. I expected a real product with our name and logo on it."

"But you wanted an unobtrusive assay."

Pendergast sighed. "Give me the prototypes. I'll dispose of them personally. They're too embarrassing—I don't want *anybody* to see them."

Stunned, Arthur didn't argue. He picked up the stainless tray of finger-cots, each sealed in a sterile wrapper, and placed it in Pendergast's hands. Pendergast dumped them into his attaché case and locked the clasps.

"And now, Dr. Steiner, I regret to inform you that this project is cancelled. Your position at GENeural Pharma is hereby terminated. You've wasted our money on bogus research. You're fired!"

"What? You can't dismiss me without due cause!"

"Oh, yes I can." Pendergast squinted his eyes. "Don't touch *anything* in this lab or at your desk. Your computer files are locked. If you violate our NDA and talk about your research, we'll sue you for every penny you have, and more. Come with me now—I'll escort you out of the building."

Pendergast gripped Arthur's elbow and marched him to the elevator and out a side exit. When they stepped through the door, Arthur pushed the man's wrist away. As he walked to his parked car, he looked at the finger-cot still on his finger. The tip had a bright red dot.

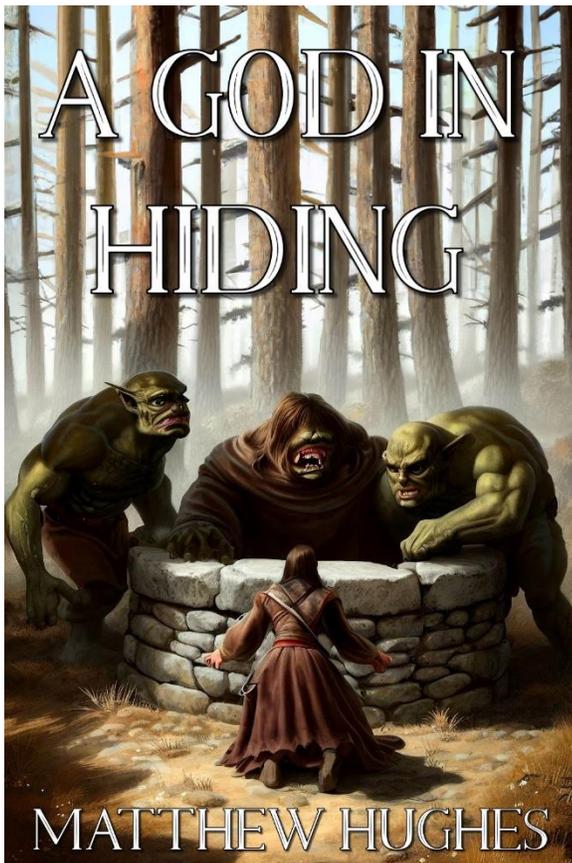
* * *

Postscript:

“What has allowed so many PPs [psychopathic personalities] to rise so high in corporations, and now in government, is that they are so decisive. Unlike normal people, they are never filled with doubts, for the simple reason that they cannot care what happens next.”

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. interview *In These Times*, January 27, 2003

A God in Hiding – by Matthew Hughes.



“In addition to the fact the book has layers and layers of complexity revealed as the quest progresses, I would like to emphasise this is an eminently readable work precise and clear in both description and exposition, so much so that there is not a single stumbling block anywhere in the text. Nothing knocks the reader out of the story. Matthew Hughes is a master at drawing the reader into the tale and carrying them along like voyageur canoes in white rapids. No matter what twists and turns and unexpected bumps the plot speeds rapidly along and the desire to keep turning the pages is irresistible. Best of all, it's great fun to read. A superior quest adventure fantasy. Highly recommended.”

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it here: [A God in Hiding](#)

TIMELINES

by Siri Paulson

I am increasingly convinced
that we are living in the wrong timeline
the one the time traveller is supposed to come back and fix

she was supposed to win
he was meant to live
we should have learned our lesson
from the pandemic that almost was
from that time we all messed up,
or the other time, or the other one

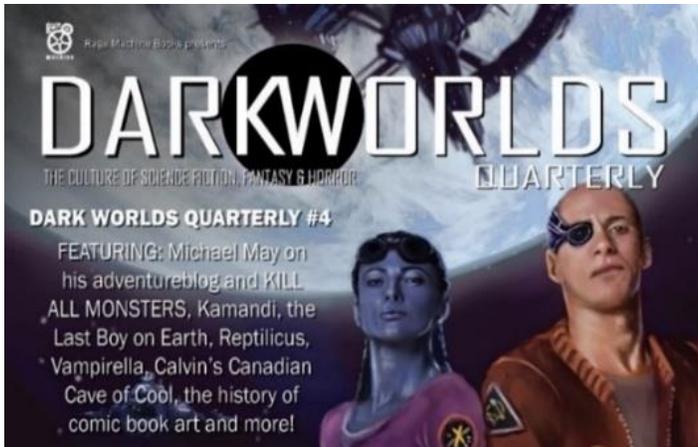
but she has taken a wrong turn in the multiverse
he is fighting the pterodactyls
stuck in the far future with the giant crabs
intubated in some locked-down ward
the portal dark and idle
the time machine hidden and locked up tight
waiting for the one with the knowledge
who will never come to release it
from its long and lonely wait

or maybe they know not to come here
maybe these are the years they always skip
in their tours through the past
maybe this is how things have to be
if we want the shiny future
we were promised long ago

maybe we're waiting
for a rescue that will never come
there's no-one but us
to mend the timeline
to put things right
one butterfly at a time

we are all time travellers
one second per second, one way only
one day we'll live in the future
how it looks is up to us

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



Now an online blog featuring absolutely fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction books, magazines, and comics, such as:

- The Lost Cities of Conan
- Bronze Age Robots: 1970s
- The Terror Garden: The Orchid of Asia
- The Ghost Breakers: More Famous Fakes
- The Robots of Batman
- The Stories of Arthur Conan Doyle
- The Lost Cities of Tarzan

Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)



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. 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](#)

HOMETOWN RETREAT

by Douglas Shimizu

“What’s in the box?”

“Some of your Grampa’s stuff. His office called and said they needed the lab space while he’s... away.” Mom was trying to avoid the topic.

“You mean in a coma?” I nudged.

“Yes, well, the doctor said it’s not really a coma. It’s like he should be awake except he’s not.”

“Like in a coma.” Nudged some more.

“So, no school today, right? What are you doing?” She had enough, I guess.

“Professional Day. Just meeting friends at the park.” Not just yet though. Being a curious kid, I had my nose in the cardboard box on the kitchen table. Some notebooks, other stationery, nothing too exciting except, “What’s this thing?” I held up a yellow plastic box a little chunkier than a smartphone with flimsy earphones attached.

“Oh, it’s an old Walkman.” Thanks, Mom, I could read that much written on the side. A Sony, too.

“A what?”

“A portable cassette player. What we used to listen to music before cellphones or CD players.”

CD players? More adult antique talk. “A cassette?”

“Open it up. Push the ‘Eject’ button.”

I did. I saw. I... I still didn’t get it. The flat plastic rectangle with a tiny window and wheels on either side was labeled ‘TEST’ on some masking tape.

“That’s a cassette. See the tape inside? The music is recorded on there. Try it. Put it back in and this time, hit ‘Play’”.

OK. I put on the sponge padded headphones. “Nothing.”

She came over to inspect. “Hmm, the wheels aren’t turning. The tape looks like it only half-way played through. Probably just out of batteries. Let get some new ones.”

She opened up the back of the box and changed out some AA batteries. I pushed ‘Play’ again. OK. I could see the wheels turning in the window. “Looks like it’s moving now. See you at lunch.”

“Don’t ride your bike with your headphones on.”

What? I didn't hear with my headphones on. I got on my bike and took off down our street. Funny. Still no music. Maybe a slight humming sound. I hoped it wasn't one of those "sounds of nature" recordings. Falling asleep while riding would be dangerous.

I could definitely hear a humming, maybe a buzzing, like the sounds were alternating back and forth in my head.

The hummmm,
then the buzzzzzz, and hummmm.

Left to right,
together in stereo, then apart again.

Wait. This wasn't my street? Was it? Did I take a wrong turn somewhere? The buildings seemed to have more shops than I remembered around here. I couldn't have gone all the way downtown yet. Plus, these stores were small shops in single-story buildings. Actually, everything was kind of small. What was up with this street? Even our residential neighbourhood had wide, smoothly paved streets with big trees along the sidewalk. This whole area looked like a postcard small town with narrow roads and tiny houses.

Where the heck was this? I looked behind me to see where I came from. Mountains? In the distance I could see a low mountain range that I'd never seen before. I needed to ask some... one. No one. Where were all the people? What?

The few cars around were stopped, all over the street, empty. The shops, as far as I could tell, also were empty. I moved closer to the nearest shop, a bookstore. What was that on the window? In the dust, someone had written "café" and an arrow pointing right, up the street. Looking around, I saw the other windows had the same message. A clue?

OK. I didn't drink coffee but maybe I needed one now. I got back on my bike and followed the arrows. On the next corner, I saw the little coffee shop. Millbrook Café. Through the big windows I could see a bunch of vinyl booths and one seated person.

I was getting closer. I could almost make out his face. I also noticed the buzzing sound. Why had I not heard it all this time while in this town?

Just as I noticed the sounds again,
they started fading out,
quieter,
until,
no more.

BEEEEEEP!

“Hey, kid! Get out of the street!”

What? Who me? Oh crap! Yes, me. In the middle of the street. A really busy street, back in *my* town.

Here, the buildings were about eight floors high. Four lanes of traffic crossed at this intersection that I had wound up in the middle of. I eased my way to the sidewalk, trying to ignore the glares and shaking heads.

So, when the tape noises started, I wound up in that strange town. I didn't notice the noise while I was there, until the end for a bit, then it stopped. Now I was back.

I needed to find out more about this cassette tape thing. How do I start it up again? Mom!

Well, first, earlier when I had the cassette out, it looked like it had two sides. So, I flipped it around and tried playing. Sitting down.

Nothing. Ten minutes, still nothing. Maybe the sound was just on one side. It was just the 'A' side that was marked 'TEST'. I flipped it back.

“Moooom!” Had to ask an old person about this ancient technology. “How do I rewind the tape?”

“Let me see that. You're a bit early for lunch. I thought you were going to the park.”

“Maybe later. I just want to listen to this tape more first.”

“Anything good on it? Can I listen?”

“Not sure yet. Maybe later.”

“See this 'REW' button.” She gave it a push and there it went. So, just read the buttons next time.

The tape was really moving. You could see the tape width grow on one side as the opposite side shrank. Mesmerizing. The machine was making some weird noises. Maybe it was working too hard. I hoped it would make it to the end. Success.

“Thanks, Mom.” One more thing. Worth a shot. “Have you ever heard of a Millbrook Café?”

“Wow. Where did you hear that name? Millbrook was Grampa's hometown. I'm pretty sure that café was his hangout growing up. Maybe he even met Granny there.”

Wow, right back at you. Now I knew who was sitting in the café. I had to get back. “Cool. Thanks. See you later!”

Time to try again. Find a quiet place to sit. Head phones on. Hit “Play.”

Yup. Buzzzzzzing. Hummmmming.

I was back.

In fact, I was back exactly where I left. Across the street from the café. Yes, I recognized my grandfather now. He was just sitting by a window, staring at his coffee cup in hand.

I pulled open the door and a small bell rang. Grampa looked up, eyes wide. When he recognized me, they got even wider.

“Jimmy! How?”

I moved to show him the headphones and Walkman but realized in this place, I wasn't wearing them. No show, just tell, I guess.

“I used your Walkman. It sent me here.” Sounds simple enough.

“I had no idea it would work on someone else. So, where are you now then, really?”

“Next to the apple tree in the backyard. Do you know where you are? How long you've been here?”

“I've been stuck here for... probably a week. The sound you heard on the tape usually brings me here and takes me back out, but something must have happened to get me stuck.”

“The batteries ran out. The tape was about halfway through. I was able to come here once before with just that last half a tape though.”

“Batteries. Of course. And, where am I?”

“In a hospital. The doctors think you're in a coma.”

“Interesting. I must look like I am in a dream which is kind of what is happening.”

“Except I'm here too.”

“Yes, and we must get out. This world is just in my mind, but I can only hold it for so long. As I get tired or if my mind wanders, Millbrook shrinks around us. I don't know if you noticed but it's down to a couple blocks now. When I got here, the place was full of people. Now, I have to make my own coffee.”

Oh, so that wasn't an accurate return trip but just all that was left to return to. What now?

“What we have to do now is get out quickly. You will be out as soon as the tape ends. Another twenty minutes maybe? As for me, you will have to get the Walkman to me in the hospital and play it for me to return. Just like you said about the other time you used it, I don't need to listen to the whole thing. Just the last five minutes. Maybe you noticed the sound getting loud then slowly disappearing? Just that ending.

Can you do that for me? As soon as you wake up, go to, or come to, the hospital.”

“Of course. It’ll take half an hour to ride down there. Can you wait that long?”

“I think so. Good job, Jimmy. You’re going to get me out of here.”

“So here, Millbrook, Mom says is your hometown?”

“Oh, yes. I was born here and grew up here. I lived here until after we got married and moved to the city.”

He continued on, telling me about small town life, until the buzzing started up.

“Grampa. Sounds like I’ll be leaving soon. Will you be OK?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m so glad you came to visit Millbrook. After we get back to real life, we can go see the actual Millbrook. I’m curious to see how it’s changed. Hopefully not too much.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Looking at the menu here is making me...”

Back at home, under the apple tree. “...hungry.”

I got on my bike and flew. Out of our neighbourhood. Down Broadway? Too much traffic. 12th Avenue. Forget the red lights. Look and go.

At the hospital, I asked where Grampa’s room was. The staff were sympathetic to the poor grandson, looking so frantic. He was sharing a room with another old man who was sitting up doing a crossword.

I got the Walkman out of my pocket and hit the rewind button. It started spinning the tape. Good. Here we go.

Chug chug chug. What? The player was clicking and shaking. I hit ‘Stop’.

When I opened the machine and took out the cassette, meters of brown tape came out with it.

“What? Noooooo!” What was this? What happened?” I had a bowl of spaghetti in my hands. What now?

“What’s the matter, kid?” I guess the old man noticed my hysterical screaming. Speechless, I just held up the tape.

“Oh, cool. A cassette. Bring it here.”

No time for nostalgia, dude. Are you going to help me? What else could I do now. I handed it over.

He started spreading the tape over his bed to untangle the mess. He had to zig zag the length of tape few times to keep it all single file.

Then, he took the pen he was using for his crossword and stuck it into one of the spools of the cassette. He started twisting the pen and tape started to wind up. He used his other hand to carefully feed the tape so it would feed flat.

“See, you just need to ask an old guy about this ancient tech.”

It was slow going but it was working. His bed was clearing of the shiny brown tape.

When there was just a meter or so of tape left, he straightened his arm holding the pen above his head. The cassette was still hanging off the pen, pierced through its spool. Then, he started spinning the cassette around by twirling his wrist. The last length of tape got slurped up instantly. The spaghetti was gone.

“There you go, kid. Enough exercise for me today.”

“Wow. That was great. Thanks.”

“Probably did that a thousand times when I was your age. Muscle memory still works.”

I looked at the tape. Seemed OK. Winding the tape back into cassette had put the recording in about the right spot, a few minutes from the end. No more rewinding. Phew.

I put the headphones on Grampa’s ears and pushed “Play.”

And waited.

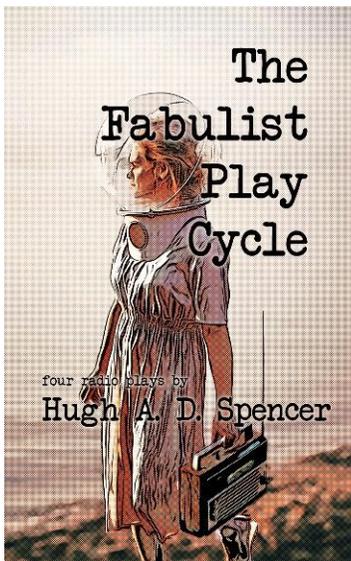
A while.

The tape was moving. The volume was up. Everything should be working.

There! His eyelids were moving as if he were looking around. The humming buzzing must be playing.

Grampa opened his eyes. He saw me and smiled. “I’m hungry, too.”

The Fabulist Play Cycle – by Hugh A.D. Spencer



“This book is as funny as hell. A lot of thought went into noting the humour inherent in the activities and pretensions of First Fandom. Even better, forewarned that the characters and events, no matter how outrageous and silly, are based on real people and what they actually did, you’ll find this collection all the more pleasant and exciting to read. Seemingly unbelievable, but distressingly and hilariously true. Well, not literally true, in that everything is presented in an alternative parallel universe manner, and yet, in terms of trends, an excellent summation of what actually happened. I had a really good time reading this book. I think you will too. It’s great fun.”
– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

You can order it at: < [The Fabulist Play Cycle](#) >

IN PRAISE OF DIPHTHONG

by Nnadi Samuel

"I would love to live like a river flow, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding" – John O'Donohue.

Blading the salmon to near-perfection;
a truck burrows the wasteland.
keratin leftover blooming from the throat of a stream.
the weight of my verbalizing, boomeranged everywhere across border.

I score bloodied notes,
knife the melody into a tree—wet with the accent of dusk.
I dig for earth's soft rhythm.

in my languaging, I imitate smoke,
lie still as iridescence licks a spot to whitening.

song spills out of the cloud's cracked jaw.
I watch as hail spoils into green.
ice, echoing against the erasure of wet frost.

I'm ghosted with vanishing, the way blizzards melt into wreckage—
like buttercream, placed in the gullet of a cloud.

time distills in gentle stroke.
a flooding assembles & break loose.
the small stream of drowning, writhing uncontrollably.

each turbulence, fashioning a pathway to drive a point home.

the forecast doesn't tell apart drizzle from a heavy downpour.
valleys bend to accommodate thunderstorm

& in that brief moment, the stream edge takes the shape of a margin.
liquid, slaving in straight diction.
dry parchedness gaslighting rain.

everything else stays static,
but the arrest of blood current—
slackening the heartbeat of water.
the night widens.
brown mollusks lick up stalks needling the ground's patchwork.
knife-pricked, ache unzips my back.

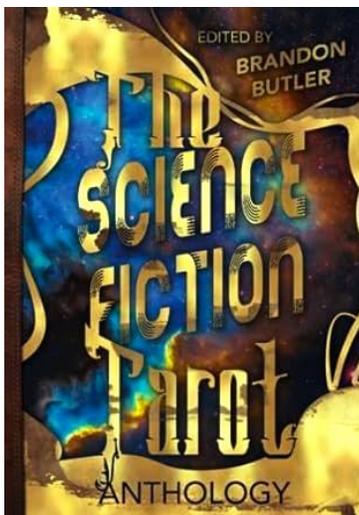
I roast a salmon dry, watch how pale skin blackens into meal,
as smoke shrinks the ruffled branch.

the sun tans bare leaves to yellowing,
fashion out flame from the rust.

when I stick out my tongue,
drove of morpheme rents the air apart:
a wonder peculiar to me—in praise of diphthong.

at a slaughterhouse, I scour the butcher slab, looking for blood facts.
found amidst intestines—a festival of red:
the littered endlessness rivered into a pothole.

in my quest for speech, I hit my chest audibly.
the bone-stuck vowel—stuck in my lung.



THE SCIENCE FICTION TAROT

“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.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

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

THE CHANGELING AND THE BULLY

by Robert Runté

(Previously published in *Mythic: A Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, #17, Summer, 2021)

Ransom was trying to remember if this was the hallway with his locker when his books were suddenly knocked out of his arms.

“Hey, faggot! You carry your books like a fairy!”

Fair comment, Ransom thought as he turned slowly to face his assailant. Assailants, he revised, as he considered the three louts confronting him. Ransom was too new to the school to know who they were, but he knew the type well enough.

“You walk like a fucking homo. You queer, twinkle toes?”

Ransom was not, as it happened, particularly interested in boys. But his grandparents had been Dutch immigrants after the war and so had impressed upon their children—*his* adoptive parents—how answering, “No” to the question, “Are you Jewish?” during the Nazi occupation had been a mistake. At the time, it had seemed the natural and easy response to yet one more question on a long and tedious bureaucratic application for their new identity cards; only in retrospect had they realized it had been a question that should not have been asked or answered. The correct response would have been for everyone to have sewn a yellow star on their coats. But the universe does not permit do-overs, so the best they could do was to teach their children, and their children’s adopted child, to do better. Ransom had no intention of directing these thugs more accurately to their targets.

Instead, he said, “You knocked my books.” He said it in a conversational tone, as if he were merely making an observation, as one might remark on the weather, or the lack of a railing while standing at the sharp edge of a precipice.

Immune to subtlety, the leader took a half-step and leaned forward to go nose-to-nose with Ransom. “Yeah, well what are you going to do about it? *Fairy!*”

Excellent question. There was a significant gap between what Ransom *could* do, and what he should. He had promised his parents he would avoid trouble at his new school. Driving him to this side of the city—they had ruled out risking his taking public transit—was already adding fifty minutes each way to their daily commute... the next school would have to be outside the district. Ransom was certain that they would be acutely disappointed if there were an incident at lunch on his first day.

Perhaps distraction would be sufficient? “There’s something on your nose,”

Ransom offered.

The gorilla failed to take the bait. “Yeah? What I see when I look down the end of my nose is the *pile of crap* I’m about to squish into the floor.” He leaned in further, forcing Ransom to lean over backwards to avoid physical contact.

“It’s some kind of growth,” Ransom said, reaching out as if to touch it, then jerking his hand back at the last second, as if fearing it might be contagious. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“I’ll show you ‘hurt!’” A massive shoulder drew back as a fist went up, poised for an overhead clobber.

“No, wait!” Ransom said, allowing his voice, and his hands, to raise a little.

The thugs paused a moment, perhaps expecting him to capitulate without their having to expend further energy.

“I’m serious,” Ransom continued, “that looks bad.” Still staring intently at his victim’s nose, he motioned the other two over. “Are you not seeing this? What is that?”

Experience had taught Ransom that a certain type of follower is not only predictably suggestable, but that they are irresistibly drawn to observe the misfortune of others. They looked.

“Whoa!” said the one on the right.

“Jesus, Matt!” said the one on the left. “What is that?” Unthinkingly, that one moved in for a closer look, reached out to touch Matt’s nose.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?” Matt demanded, shoving his sidekick back roughly.

The sidekick stumbled back but he kept staring at Matt’s nose.

“Yeah, um, there’s something there,” the other sidekick said in his friend’s defense. When Matt turned to stare at him, he added, “Maybe... try picking it off?”

“You should get someone to look at that,” Ransom said. “It could be cancerous.” By which, of course, he meant, *would be* if Matt continued to annoy him.

Succumbing to their stares, Matt reached up to feel his nose, flinched when he felt the lump.

Ransom watched patiently to see what would happen next while Matt tried to examine the tip of his nose by touch and cross-eyed stare. Ransom didn’t have to wait long before Matt strode off to the bathroom in search of a mirror, his cronies trailing after.

Gratified, Ransom turned to gather up his texts off the floor and discovered another small group of students approaching him from behind. He could smell

the testosterone, see the interrupted aggression in the alignment of their limbs, as indecision had suddenly frozen them in their tableau.

“Can I help you?” Ransom asked.

The male marginally in front pulled back sharply and moved his hands up level with his shoulders, palms out, a gesture half-warding, half-surrender, that said: “no quarrel.” Clearly the sort who understood a threat when he encountered one.

“Sorry!” that one said. “We just wanted to welcome you to the school.”

“Really?”

“We thought Matt might try to give you a hard time,” the girl on his left explained. She offered Ransom a tentative smile. Her diminutive frame and pixie hairstyle made her intensely attractive, but perhaps equally implied that she wouldn’t be into him.

Ransom acknowledged acceptance of their motives with a nod, went to the extra effort of saying, “thank you”—because coming to the rescue of a stranger was honorable, even if they’d started from their own anti-Matt agenda.

“What did you do?” another of the group asked, incredulous—or, more likely, suspicious—that Ransom had so easily escaped the bullies’ enmity.

Ransom hesitated. Coming up with plausible explanations for the trail of accidents and coincidences that followed him had become second nature, but he suddenly discovered that he didn’t want to lie to these people.

“Matt was holding his nose,” the one in front observed. The, *Did you hit him?* was implied.

Ransom realized they were interpreting his hesitation as reluctance to confess to what would have been a serious school infraction. He shook his head in disbelief. He knew from painful experience that one never hit a bully—at least, not when there were three of them—because they would have made short work of anyone who tried to resist. Bullies understood hitting, and were prepared for it. Indeed, they would often provoke the first blow to justify their actions as self-defence, should the school bother to investigate the incident.

Unless, of course, he struck out with something other than his fist. He had promised his parents he wouldn’t go full-fae on anyone again. They had had to move cross-country that time, change their last names.

“I spotted something on the end of his nose,” Ransom said at length. It was the literal truth, though he knew they would misinterpret the verb.

The girl tilted her head, considering. Something in her expression told him she was not mislead.

“I’m Lily,” she said. “That’s Dave, Cliff, Ethan.”

“Ransom,” Ransom said. “Nickname that stuck,” he explained, because he always had to.

“We’re the welcome committee for the GSA” Lily said. “We’re trying to create a safe space for everyone at the school.”

“I’m not gay,” Ransom said.

“Me neither,” Ethan said from the back of the group, perhaps a shade too quickly. The others turned to look at him. “Lily wasn’t clear GSA means Gay-Straight Alliance,” he explained, somewhat defensively. “That we need straights too.”

“I’m not much of a joiner.” Ransom couldn’t be if he wanted to remain inconspicuous. But he felt a pull towards these others he couldn’t explain.

“It’s for loners, too,” Lily said.

“I’m more concerned with issues of... ethnicity,” Ransom said, feeling his way.

“For everyone to have a safe place,” Lily repeated. “Race, social class, religion, neurodiverse—all of it. Not just sexual orientation.”

Ransom struggled with how to explain without giving himself away, settled on, “Race is big. Bigger than you may realize.”

And then Lily had dropped her book bag and had her arms around him, and the others were shuffling in for an awkward group hug.

“I knew there was something,” she said. “I didn’t know what exactly, but there was something. But you’re *safe* now.”

Ransom remained frozen, his arms held out stiffly just above Lily’s hug, still holding his textbooks, unsure how to respond. He’d very much like to feel safe, but *feeling* safe and *being* safe were very different things. A hug from one idealistic girl could not make one safe.

The awkward group hug ended, and Lily took a step back. Dave offered his hand. That was easier to deal with. Ransom shook it, careful not to let anything leak through the brief contact.

“Lily meant, ‘safe with us,’” Dave clarified. “The world’s full of Matts, so you still have to be careful.” He seemed to have read Ransom’s mind. “But whatever your issue is, we won’t judge you for it.”

Ransom’s head swung in an unintended half-shake, a slip that revealed his disbelief before he caught himself.

“Because we know what that’s like, right?” Dave insisted. “So, we wouldn’t do that to anyone else, no matter what. You can be yourself when you’re with us, and that’s a place to start.”

They looked at him expectantly.

“I’m ‘adopted’,” Ransom said, though that didn’t nearly cover it. “Across racial lines. Cut off from my full heritage. I don’t really fit into your world, can’t quite reach back into mine. There’ve been incidents.”

They were nodding.

“Like Reggie,” Ethan said. “He’s full Blood tribe, but his parents raised him white. As if! In the end, he dug so deep into his Kainai heritage, he probably knows more than most Elders. He’s Stands-with-a-Knife, now.”

“Teachers still call him Reggie, though,” Cliff said. “It’s frustrating.”

“Except for Mr. Wilson,” Lily said. “Mr. Wilson doesn’t care what it says on the seating plan, he’ll call you whatever you want, as long as it’s genuine.”

“We get it,” Dave said. “It’s all about identity. People try to change you into somebody else, somebody they’d rather you were. That never works in the long run. You have to be you.”

“It hurts,” Lily said. “That they’d rather you were someone else entirely.”

Ransom said tentatively, “They treat you like you’re human.”

“That’s right,” said Lily. “Like you’re not even human.”

The bell rang.

“That’s the warning bell for fourth period,” Dave told him, unnecessarily. “We have to get to class, but we want you to know that there are people right here, in this school, who *get it*.”

“Some of the teachers, like Mr. Wilson, too,” Lily added as she turned to retrieve the backpack she had dropped for the hug.

“Some differences are too big,” Ransom said. “Too scary.”

“I used to be Crystal,” Cliff said. “There’s nothing *too* big. There’s just who you are and being okay with that.”

“And other people have to accept it,” Ethan said, “no matter what.” He moved closer to Cliff.

“Accept *you* for *you*,” Lily affirmed.

Dave touched Ethan’s shoulder as the second bell rang, and they jogged off to class.

Lily nodded towards the classroom door closest to where they were standing. “This is us,” she said, as she and Cliff went in.

Leaving Ransom in the hallway, late for class on his first day, and with a great deal to think about.

He still didn’t know if this was the hallway with his locker.

Matt’s two sidekicks chose that moment to emerge from the washroom, glance around, and shamble off to class. Routinely late, Ransom assumed, but they hadn’t quite made the full commitment to hallway dropout. Matt,

however, was still in there.

What if, instead of denying his heritage, Ransom embraced it? What if he weren't always on the defensive? Always apologizing for who and what he was?

He shrugged to himself, and walked into the men's room.

Matt was there, staring into the mirror, trying to scrape the scab off his nose. His focus shifted up to meet Ransom's eyes in the mirror when Ransom cleared his throat.

"What are you looking at, fairy?"

"There's that word again," Ransom said. "I don't think you even know what it means."

"It means you're a fucking fairy," Matt said.

"Half-fairy, would be more accurate. Genetically fairy, but I have come to appreciate the heritage of my adoptive parents, so culturally, I'm probably more human than you, who appreciates nothing. But thanks to the pep talk from Lily and her friends, I've decided to get in touch with my fae side this morning."

"Don't touch me," Matt said, turning from the mirror to confront Ransom. "You back out that door or I'll cut your fucking fairy balls off." A blade appeared in his hand.

"To answer your question, I was looking at your ears," Ransom said. "It's spread to your ears."

Arm extended so the blade was pointed at Ransom's face, Matt paused. "What?"

"They look like donkey ears." Ransom said calmly. He raised his hand, and pointing down, twirled his index finger to indicate Matt should turn and look into the mirror again.

Which Matt did. The knife clattered to the bathroom floor as his hands flew to his ears.

"What the *fuck!*"

"Donkey ears," Ransom said, as Matt's hands ran up and down the tall, pointed, hairy objects apparently growing out of his own head. "Partly because I'm a big fan of Shakespeare, partly because you're kind of an ass."

"What's happening?" Matt cried, grabbing onto the sink as if to keep from falling. He glanced wildly from side to side as if searching for the hidden cameras, or expecting a hoard of vengeful demons to break through the walls. His stare finally settled on Ransom. "*You did this!*"

"Here's the deal: I don't know how you became the sorry bastard you've become, but I intend to reverse the process. Someone must've taught you it's a

dog-eat-dog world and you decided you'd rather be top dog than the beaten one. And now you're addicted to being an ass, bad behaviour bringing its own rewards. Power's addicting: *I certainly get that.* Now we need to reverse that conditioning, set you on a new path."

"What's happening? What did you do to my ears?"

"I've turned them into donkey ears. Try to keep up. Every time you behave like an ass, they'll grow larger, and more of your face will turn donkey, until you get the whole donkey-head. Like Elephant Man, only donkey. Nod if you understand."

"Fucking bastard!"

"Oh, by the way, swearing counts as verbal violence, so you'll want to cut down. Here's the good news: if instead of being the unrepentant bully you are currently, you do something decent, something selfless, the ears shrink, the donkey-face withdraws to the exact extent the act of goodness deserves. Following me?"

"Like Pinocchio," Matt ground out threw gritted teeth. "I get it."

"Yes, good parallel. Bad behavior physically reveals you to be the ass that you are, good behaviour reverses the effect. Simple, really."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"My theory is—once forced to change your behaviour—you'll discover the rewards of not being an ass, learn that being nice is a better way to be in the world."

"I'll kill you!" Matt shouted, rushing forward—or tried to. He half-toppled over, his arms wind-milling until he was able to regain his balance, pulling himself back up to discover his feet frozen to where he had been standing.

"Uh, killing would be an example of bad behaviour. Not only would that be an immediate and likely permanent ticket to full donkey-head, killing *me* would obviously eliminate any chance you have of getting the spell removed."

"You can remove the spell?" Matt's head tilted and his eyes narrowed, as if he had suddenly discovered the real purpose of the confrontation. "What do you want?"

"I want you to have a chance at a better life. In every sense. I'm not removing the spell until you've had the experience of being nice for a change. My adoptive parents are big on the concept of free will, however, so the spell will dissipate at...let's say, age 25? 21 for good behaviour?"

"Fuck that! Fuck you!" Matt said, then winced as he realized that his swearing had caused his ears to itch. He hammered on the sink in frustration. His tantrum broke the bracket holding the sink to the wall, so that it suddenly

hung at a forty-five-degree angle. Matt snatched his hands back, glanced up at the mirror to discover his nose had started to flatten.

“It will settle down once you get the hang of it,” Ransom assured him.

Matt spun around to glare at Ransom again. “What gives you the right to judge me?”

“Ah,” Ransom said, brightening. “That’s my favorite part: I’m not—you are. In spite of your being the resident bully, I sense you still know right from wrong. Consequently, it’s your own conscience that gets to decide good from bad, the appropriate degree of reward and punishment.”

“*My* conscience?”

“Because context is everything. I can’t just say ‘never hit anyone’, because sometimes hitting—a bully for example—might be morally justified. Up to you to call yourself on your bad behaviour.”

“I’ve never hit anyone who didn’t deserve it.”

“You’ll note lying is considered bad behaviour,” Ransom said, pointing to Matt’s now independently swiveling ears. “Look, you can’t just pick a group of people at random and decide it’s okay to hurt them. Jews, gays, Muslims, people who voted for the other guy. Whoever it is this week, you can’t pretend you don’t know you’re being an ass.”

“You can’t make me believe being gay is okay.” Matt looked back at the mirror to check whether his defiance had resulted in increased donkeyness.

“Did I mention that when you get to the whole donkey-head stage, there’s a bonus ‘he-haw’ thrown in? Don’t be an ass. Beliefs don’t enter into it. People get to believe whatever they want. It’s actions that count. But once you can’t justify being mean, once you have to stop talking and start listening, your wrong ideas may be open to updates. But whatever. I’m done. I’m going to class.”

“Wait, you can’t leave me like this!” Matt said, his hands framing his head.

Ransom shrugged. “Not up to me. But if you’d like a helpful suggestion, maybe seek out the Gay-Straight Alliance people and join up. That ought to be worth a general cleanse. *If* you’re sincere about listening. Kind of why GSAs exist.”

Ransom shifted his textbooks and left Matt to work out his next move. Ransom was reasonably confident that the school culture was about to become considerably less toxic.

Lily was waiting outside in the hall. “What were you and Matt up to in there?” she demanded.

“Nothing obscene,” Ransom said. “Why?”

“You were gone the whole period,” she said. “You knowingly followed a bully into a washroom—a bully you’d supposedly narrowly escaped minutes earlier—and you talked for over half an hour.”

“We had a little chat,” Ransom agreed. “I warned him off any more gay-bashing.”

“Oh, how heroic,” Lily said. “Our saviour.”

“What?” Ransom asked, taken aback.

“Even if I believed you, we’re an *anti*-bullying group: deciding somebody’s a bully and threatening *them* would be as bad. Wouldn’t it?” She was smoldering.

“If you believed me?”

Lily’s anger made her eyes sing. “We welcomed you to the school, we opened our hearts to you, and you conspired with Matt against us!”

“That’s not what happened,” Ransom said. “On the contrary, you inspired me to take pride in my, um—the suppressed half of who I am...”

“Really?”

Ransom started to say, “Yes, really,” but Lily’s attention was captured by Matt emerging from the washroom. His head appeared normal, but Ransom noted Matt’s shoulders were slumped forward, the body language of a victim rather than the arrogant tough Ransom had confronted earlier.

“Oh,” Matt said, looking up and seeing Lily. “I was looking for you.”

“Were you?” Lily asked.

As oblivious to Lily’s tone as he had been earlier to Ransom’s, Matt plowed ahead. “I’m joining your gay-straight alliance.”

“Are you?” Lily asked, the words frosting the air around her.

“Nobody will bother any gay in the school again,” Matt said, a tiny bubble of pride returning to his posture. “Guaranteed.”

“Let me guess,” Lily said, “You’ve suddenly realized that your hatred for gays comes from your own uncertain sexuality, and you’ve been attacking gays to hide that from your friends, but mostly from yourself. And now, suddenly, you’ve gotten in touch with your true gay self?”

Ransom winced as he realized Matt’s timing was undermining Ransom’s credibility. Conspiracy was way more believable than that.

“Oh god, no,” Matt said. “I’m not gay! I’d rather cut off my own dick than—eew. No, way! But it’s an alliance, right? You have straights in the club, right? I’m going to be one of the straights who protect you guys. ‘Cause you need that, right?”

Ransom winced again. He heard how patronizing that sounded. Matt’s past

meant he looked at the world with an rigid oppressor-victim mindset. Of course he would cast himself in saviour mode.

“And why have you suddenly decided to protect queers, exactly?” Lily asked.

“That guy,” Matt said, pointing at Ransom, “convinced me that gay-bashing is the same as Jew-baiting. And I’m no racist skinhead.”

Ransom closed his eyes as mere wincing proved inadequate. He opened them again to see Lily staring at him.

“Seriously?” she demanded. “You think we’re that stupid?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” Ransom replied automatically, as his brain tried to catch up with what was happening.

“You’re new,” Lily continued. “You don’t know that little plot has already played out here.”

“What plot?” Ransom asked, though it sounded a weak refutation, rather than the genuine question it was.

“Where one of you talks his way into the group, and then once we trust you, you trash our safe place, making everything worse.”

Someone did that? Bastards! But that she thought I could....

“Wait,” Ransom said, “You can’t believe I’d use Matt for that? If I’d been setting you up, I’d be way more believable as the guy on the inside than him.”

“But then we’d know it was you,” Lily said. “I’ve met your type before. You get others to do your dirty work for you, and then show up to play the rescuing hero.”

There’s definitely a story there, somewhere, Ransom thought. Crap.

“Not this time, cowboy,” Lily said with finality. She turned to Matt. “No.”

“What? Fuck, you have to!”

“No,” Lily said again, “we don’t.”

She turned back to Ransom. “And I’ll be putting the word out about you.”

“It’s not what you think,” Ransom protested. “You’re jumping to conclusions—” but Lily had already stormed off.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Matt complained to Ransom.

Ransom watched Lily stomp around a corner and out of sight before turning to assess a completely normal-looking Matt.

“Your attempt to join appears to have been sincere,” Ransom assured him. “I’d say you’re good as long as you keep trying to do the right thing. Just don’t lapse into being an ass again.”

Matt looked at Ransom, assessing him in turn. “She seemed really pissed with you.” Pointing at his ears, he asked, “Is it okay for me to get off on seeing

things aren't working out for you?"

Ransom sighed. Schadenfreude was indeed permitted as long as Matt didn't deliberately contribute to Ransom's issues. "She'll come 'round in the long run. When she sees you really have changed."

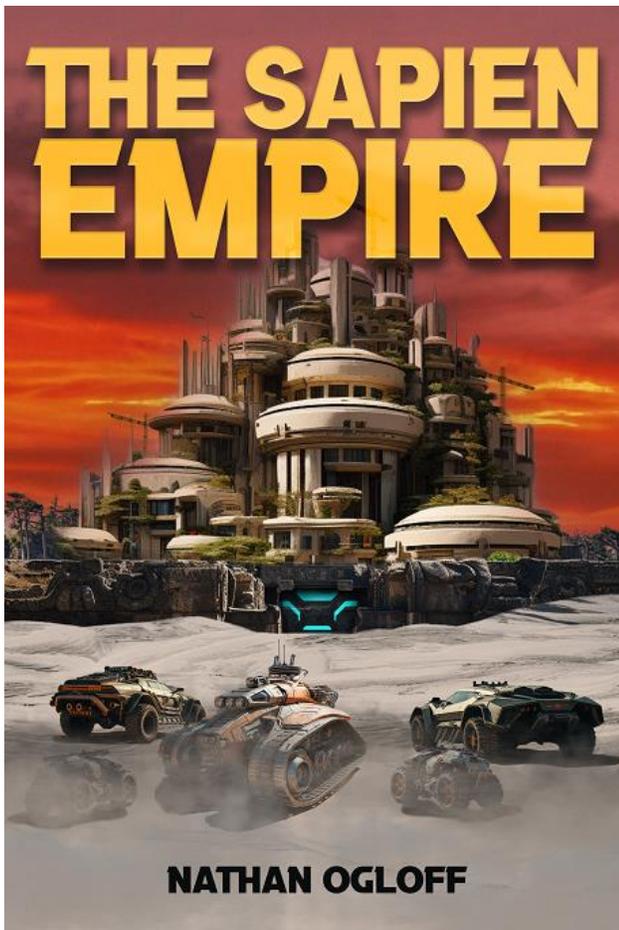
"Nah, lesbians are hard bitches," Matt pronounced.

"I doubt she's a lesbian," Ransom said. "More of a pixie."

"I haven't heard that one before," Matt said. "What do pixies fuck?"

"Not fairies," Ransom sighed again. "At least, not in the good way."

THE SAPIEN EMPIRE – by Nathan Ogloff



"There's nothing rushed about this book. I found it wonderfully immersive. In movies I hate flash editing. I prefer being allowed to look at what is being shown. THE SAPIEN EMPIRE lets you look at the total experience. You learn to revel in the details, to enjoy the minutiae, to bask in the characters' confusion. I found reading this novel totally absorbing. I found it hard to put down. I wanted to know what would happen next.

Some writers achieve this with a fast and furious pace, but it's nice to read a novel that is built on rich detail rather than brief, subliminal impressions. Some would argue a throwback to a better way of writing. Certainly, it pleased me.

But what I like best about this novel is what I consider the high level of realism. Oh, to be sure, there are some idiosyncratic characters, and unexpected plot twists you might think the real world is incapable of (Oh, really? You haven't studied history?), but the psychological factors, the practical rationalizations, the decision-making, all strike me as authentic.

Main thing is I enjoyed reading THE SAPIEN EMPIRE. It is epic in scope and a splendid example of careful consideration of what may happen to us and what we might be able to do about it. For some it may contain a lot of triggers but that's because it is relevant and appropriate to our times. Nathan has written an important, multi-layered novel." – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron) < [The Sapien Empire](#) >

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Agata Antonow

Agata is a writer living and working in New Brunswick, Canada, where there are more trees than people. Her work has been featured in *Our Times*, the *FOLD* (Festival of Literary Diversity), *Defenestration*, *The Gravity of the Thing*, and other publications. She is the winner of the 2021 Douglas Kyle Memorial Prize and the 2023 Alfred G. Bailey Prize for Poetry Manuscript from the Writers' Federation of New Brunswick.

Gregg Chamberlain

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

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.

Taylor Chu

Taylor is an author. Not much else needs to be said. He has written many stories in the past that have not been published or even read by at least 10 people.

He enjoys drawing, writing, and not being bored.

He is working on *Sevil 2* and some other projects that involve drawing. He is definitely NOT a creation by his characters to achieve world domination and rule the multiverse for all eternity. He is a regular human.

He lives somewhere with his parents and his best friend is someone.

Carolyn Clink

Carolyn won the 2022 Aurora Award for Best Poem/Song for “Cat People Café,” which appeared in *Polar Starlight*, Issue 3. She won the same award in 2011 for “The ABCs at the End of the World.” 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*.

Rebecca Franklyn

Rebecca writes from Vancouver, British Columbia. Her work has won *Writer's Digest Short Story* awards and is published in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She writes across multiple genres and age categories. She can be found on Instagram [@onelifetwofwrite](#).

Cat Girczyc

Cat Girczyc currently works as a technical communications manager while pursuing creative writing at night. She writes female-led stories, poems, and scripts, usually science fiction or fantasy. On the screenwriter side, she's a Writers Guild of Canada member and has sold 15 television episodes, including two episodes of the dark fantasy "The Collector" and animated series such "Cybersix." Her current scripts include the WIFTV-V 2020 FromOurDarkSide competition winner: Camera, Paranormal Action! The pilot version was featured in the Coverfly Pitch Week, Autumn 2023. Her tween series, "Garden Variety Aliens," has been a Quarterfinalist in the PitchNow screenplay competition in 2022 and 2024. It hit #4 on the Coverfly Red List for Fantasy TV.

Her prose garnered a Finalist position in the Writers of the Future (WOTF) competition 2022 Quarter 1 for her story "The Lady M." Subsequently, she joined SFWA—the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. Her work has been published in small, primarily Canadian SF markets like *On Spec*, *Pulp Literature*, *Polar Borealis*, *Neo-Opsis*, *The Vancouver Sci-Fi Magazine*, and *Tesseract*. Previous notable items include the WOTF Finalist 2022, 10 WOTF HMs, and 2 Silver HMs between 2015 and 2022. She also has two Canadian national awards, the Auroras, for SFF work. She's a member of David Farland's Apex Writers as well as the Wordos writing critique group.

Jameson Grey

Jameson Grey is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has appeared in *Dark Recesses Press* magazine, *Dark Dispatch* and in anthologies from publishers such as Ghost Orchid Press, Heads Dance Press and Hellbound Books. He can be found online at jameson-grey.com.

James Grotkowski

James is a native northern Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology but 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 just begun his non-haiku writing endeavours, with two short stories having been published in *The Enigma Front* anthologies. Much more is soon to come. So far, few of his readers have been lulled to sleep. *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ*

Guy Immega

Guy is a retired aerospace engineer. His company, Kinetic Sciences Inc., built autonomous robots for the space station, robots to clean up nuclear waste, and patented miniature fingerprint sensors. He served in the Peace Corps in Africa and vaccinated nomads in the Sahel against smallpox. In 2018, he presented an invited paper at a conference in Abuja, Nigeria on an engineering plan to save Lake Chad in the Sahara.

Guy is currently working on a scheme to counteract global warming with solar sailing mirrors in the L1 region of space between the Earth and Sun. See his website: www.planet-cooling.com.

Guy's hard SF debut novel, *Super-Earth Mother*, published by EDGE SF&F (Calgary), is now available from all online booksellers, and in bookstores.

Michèle Laframboise

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

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

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

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

Geoffrey Marshall

Geoffrey is a writer in Aurora, Ontario. His work can be found in *Black Sheep*, *Fireworks*, *Schlock!*, *Idle Ink*, the *Kaidankai Podcast*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety* and other venues. Find him on Twitter [@g_k_marshall](https://twitter.com/g_k_marshall).

KB Nelson

KB Nelson is a Canadian writer who has won awards in both poetry and short fiction. You can find her work in a variety of publications including *SurVision*, *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, *Sea-To-Sky Review*, and *The Wild Word*. Her chapbook *The Muse of Natural History* was published in June 2021. KB has resided from coast to coast in Canada, in

Arizona, and in New Zealand. She currently lives on the sunshine coast of B.C.

Siri Paulson

Siri (she/her) loves nothing more than mixing up genres to see what will happen. She also wears the hats of non-fiction editor by day and chief editor of Turtleduck Press by night. Her other passion is contra (folk) dancing. Thankfully, her long-suffering husband is good at keeping himself occupied. They live together in an old house in Toronto, dubbed the TARDIS because it's bigger on the inside. Her lifelong dreams include publishing novels (one and counting), travelling the world (had a good start until recently), and becoming an astronaut (still waiting...).

Siri's debut fantasy novel, *City of Hope and Ruin*, co-written with Kit Campbell, was released in 2016. Her work has also appeared in *Abyss & Apex* and *Daily Science Fiction*, in Queer Sci Fi's flash fiction anthologies *Clarity* (2022), *Migration* (2019), and *Renewal* (2017) (<https://queerjscifi.com>), and in the 2017 holiday collection from Mischief Corner Books (<https://www.mischiefcornerbooks.com/a-new-year-on-vega-iii.html>). More short fiction, poetry, and anthologies can be found at Turtleduck Press: <http://www.turtleduckpress.com>.

Robert Runté

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

Nnadi Samuel

Nnadi (he/him/his) is an immigrant writer. He holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. Author of *Nature knows a little about Slave Trade* selected by Tate.N.Oquendo (Sundress Publication, 2023). Winner of the 2020 Canadian Open Drawer Contest. His works have been previously published/forthcoming in *FIYAH*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *The Deadlands*, *Heartline Spec*, *Timber Ghost Press*, *Haven Spec Magazine*, *Utopian Science Fiction*, *Penumbric Speculative Poetry & Fiction Magazine*, *Liquid Imagination* & elsewhere. His poem “Wormhole” was an Editor's Choice *Star*Line* (Science Fiction Poetry, SFPA), a 3x Best of the Net, and 7x Pushcart Nominee. He tweets [@Samuelsamba10](https://twitter.com/Samuelsamba10).

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.

Megan W. Shaw

Megan is a Canadian writer who also teaches for the Toronto District School Board and runs Leading Word Education, a literacy enrichment charity. Her fiction can be found in *Pulp Literature*, *Cossmass Infinities*, and *The Arcanist*.

Douglas Shimizu

Douglas is a Vancouver artist involved in writing, illustration and photography having studied at UBC and Emily Carr. He has previously been published in *Polar Borealis*, *Polar Starlight* and *Stellar Evolutions*.

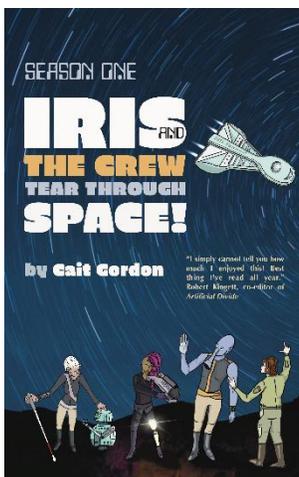
Lorina Stephens

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

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

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

Iris and the Crew Tear through Space!



“In the past the entire crew would have been labelled ‘misfits,’ but in fact they are simply variations of what it is to be normal and are just as competent in their roles as non-disabled people. That is the whole point of this book. In that respect this is a serious book of advocacy on behalf of the disabled. But the true joy of this book is the humour. It’s fast-paced and full of one-liners which are as funny as only a bunch of cynical and sarcastic shipmates determined to avoid ennui are capable of imagining. A strong element of parody prevails. This is a book about people aware of the absurdity of being human. Observant and telling, it’s hilarious from beginning to end and vastly entertaining.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: [Iris and the Crew Tear Through Space](#)