

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #31 – July/August 2024)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

Issue #31 – July/August 2024 (Vol. 8#4. WN#31)

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< [The Graeme](#) >

All contributors are paid before publication. Anyone interested in submitting a story, poem, or artwork, and wants to check out rates and submission guidelines, or anyone interested in downloading current and/or back issues, please go to:

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS #31

- 03) – EDITORIAL – R. Graeme Cameron
- 04) – HIDING – (Poem) by Greg Fewer
- 05) – THE ONLY GAME THAT COUNTS – by Chris Clemens
- 06) – CLEANSING – (Poem) by Lee F. Patrick
- 07) – TRANSHUMAN – by Ash Thorngrove
- 09) – WHEN THE THRALLS ARE THIRSTY – (Poem) by Jim Smith
- 10) – TIDAL LIFE – by Frances Skene
- 13) – THE MINDWORM IS SPREADING – (Poem) by Mahaila Smith
- 14) – THE DREAM SHIP – by Jean-Louis Trudel
- 18) – THE POETRY OF MATH IS DEAD – (Poem) by Irena Nikolova
- 20) – BLUE SPHERES AND GOLDEN-WINGED SPACESHIPS – (Poem)
– by Rebecca Franklyn
- 21) – ACTS OF GOD IN THE 22ND CENTURY – by Bryce Paradis
- 24) – THE GODS OF PRODUCTION – (Poem) by Neile Graham
- 25) – WAISTLAND – by Celeste A. Peters
- 30) – CHEESE BALL – (Poem) by Douglas Shimizu
- 32) – QUESTIONS – by Desiree Ferdinandi
- 39) – GOD IS DEAD - NIETZSCHE – (Poem) – by Patricia Evans
- 40) – THE LAST BREATH OF SUMMER – by Jameson Grey
- 46) – ENVY THE EARTHWALKERS – (Poem) – by Sharon Lax
- 50) – SPRING-HEELED JACK – by Xiang Jian
- 57) – ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
- 64) – IN MEMORIAM: FRANCES SKENE – by R. Graeme Cameron
- ART CREDITS** – COVER: *Blast off!* – by M.D. Jackson

EDITORIAL

Polar Borealis has won Auroras five years in a row (my 7th overall). Of course I am deliriously happy. I am grateful to all who voted!

However, the purpose of the Auroras is to celebrate the diversity of Canadian talent in as inclusive a manner as possible. Five is a good, solid number. It's time to make room for others, especially the new talent coming along.

Therefore, I state for the record that I am requesting CSFFA to no longer consider Polar Borealis for nomination or ballot status from this date forward.

Not that I am averse to winning further Aurora awards for other things.

For example, I was informed that both Polar Borealis and my reviews for *Amazing* had been nominated this year, but a new rule allowed only one item per category per nominee, so I chose Polar Borealis in lieu of my reviews for *Amazing Stories*.

Were I to be nominated for my reviews next year I'd be more than pleased if they found their way onto the final ballot. But were I to win, I think winning once would be enough. The following year I'd want to make room for others.

And, of course, one day I'd like to win an Aurora for the fantastical super-duper masterpiece of a novel I've been working on. A longshot, I admit, but then we writers are noted for our dreams (or delusions). It would be a one-time nomination anyway, so no danger of hogging the limelight.

Main thing is for Polar Borealis to stop hogging the limelight.

However, please bear in mind that all the future contributors to Polar Borealis will be eligible for nominations in the short story, cover/illustration art, and poetry professional categories. I'd like to see hordes of them nominated, with as many winners as possible.

As for the fate of Polar Borealis, I am having too much fun being its editor and publisher to ever give up. I will carry on as long as I am able.

Further good news; when I was at the *When Words Collide Writers Festival* (16-18 August) in Calgary, I met Alex McGilvery of Celtic Frog Publishing. He likes what I do with Polar Borealis and was curious to find out if I write fiction. I described my work-in-progress in my usual excruciatingly long info dump manner and to my surprise, instead of saying "That's interesting," and walking off like most people do, he cheerfully replied "Sounds good. Let me publish it." Again, I be deliriously happy.

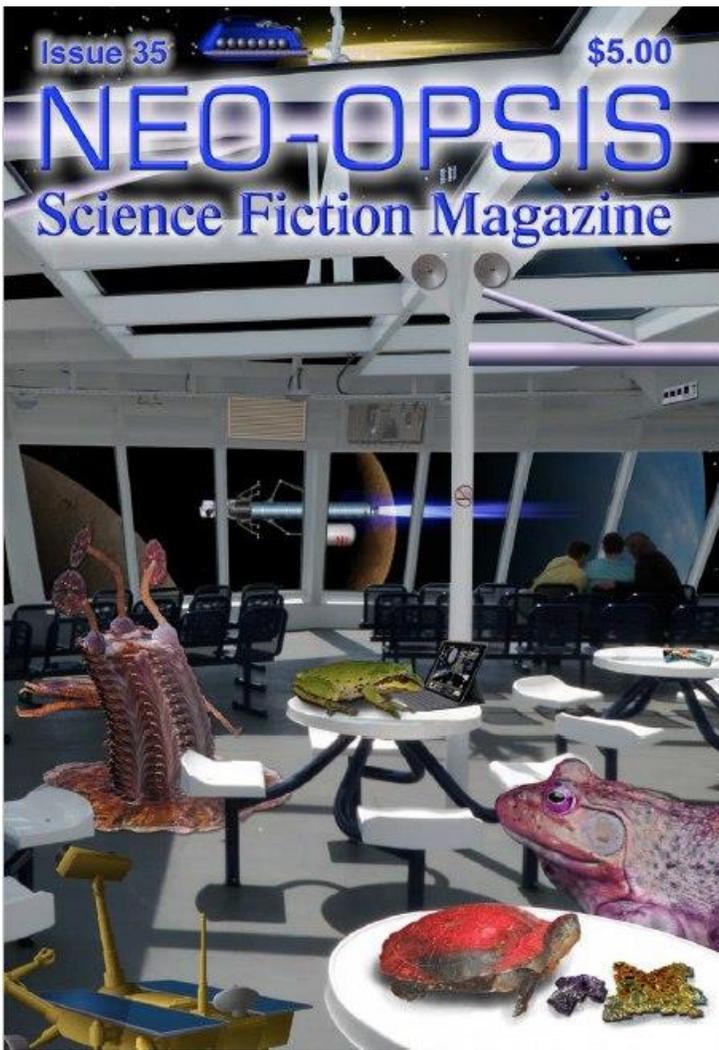
Cheers! The Graeme

HIDING

by Greg Fewer

seeking refuge
Sam hides in a bookstore
so many comics!
but his joy soon ends
undead teens moan from inside

NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #35 is published out of Victoria, BC, Canada.



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

The first issue of Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine was printed October 10, 2003.

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

COVER: *Observation Deck* – by Karl Johanson

CONTENTS:

A Rock and a Hard Place – by K.Z. Richards

Ransom and the Open Window

– by Robert Runté

The Game Designers

– (excerpt) by Karl Johanson

Ganymede – by Annette McFarland

Once I was a Grain of Sand

– by Stephanie Ann Johanson

The Blank White Page

– by Stephanie Ann Johanson

Cliches and Genres

– by Stephanie Ann Johanson

Reviews of movies, games, and TV shows, plus news about Awards, Science discoveries,

SF stuff, letters of comment, and *A Walk Through the Periodic Table*. Find here: < [Neo-opsis Magazine](#) >

THE ONLY GAME THAT COUNTS

By Chris Clemens

It started one morning: points awarded! On our screens! Points earned for a flawless cartwheel, for hugging seven strangers in a row. Mysterious criteria were rabidly discussed online, but everyone collected points—suddenly redeemable for rent, food, water.

Sara Kim petted a wild raccoon and hit a million points total; anonymous donors made her a yacht-class billionaire.

Now the world's gone crazy because all the easy points are gone. A hundred days of setting schools on fire. Launching dogs out of catapults. Someone kidnapped Sara, thinking her score might transfer.

Nobody's earned anything in weeks. What else can we do?

POLAR STARLIGHT #15 – June 2024

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #15 – June 2024)



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: *Splash* – by Jenni Merrifield

The 15th issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Carolyn Clink, J.D. Dresner, Greg Fewer, Guy Immega, Geoffrey Hart, Neile Graham, Derek Newman-Stille, Rhonda Parrish, Frances Skene, Mahaila Smith, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Leigh Therriault, Mark Thomas, and Lisa Timpf.

Available for free download:

< [Polar Starlight #15](#) >

CLEANSING

by Lee. F. Patrick

They called, so I came.
They cried, so I dried their tears.
They calmed, so I could bring back joy.

Death and violence shattered the night.
Flashing lights shone through the neighbourhood.
Days that followed were full of pain.

Black suits and dresses filled the church.
Bouquets of flowers flow over the coffin.
Days that followed were full of why.

Evidence erased from the physical.
Sorrow exists in many hearts.
Days full of light were shadowed by grief.

Potion bubbles above a candle.
Herbs broken into the cauldron.
Days of fear and sorrow were swept away.

Rue dipped within to scatter the potion.
Survivors depend on the magic within.
Days of numbness can finally end.

Music fills the dwellings with life.
Soap bubbles float and bring joy.
Days to come the witch watches the healing.

They called, so I came.
They cried, so I dried their tears.
They calmed, so I could bring back joy

TRANSHUMAN

by Ash Thorngrove

Metal glinted in the lamp's focused light. He worked the tiny screwdriver in his left hand methodically as he tuned the tension of his right forearm and tweaked the wiring between it and his external tech. He was up too late again, but after hours was the only time available to work on himself.

The cybernetics...

They tingled.

Whether cybernetics were supposed to tingle or not was up for debate. Most other techies he spoke to said it shouldn't happen, but it always had in his own arm, so he figured people just reacted differently based on their individual constitutions. Only a few customers ever mentioned the sensation. In his own experience it usually went away on its own, or faded into the background of his ongoing pain, but for a few days it was always there when his thoughts stopped and he had time to notice.

It made him question whether installing cybernetics was really a good idea, whether people weren't losing some part of their humanity by using them unnecessarily. The number of decked-out callous jackasses he knew seemed to speak to that—but then, some decked-out people he knew were the sweetest people alive.

Was it all in the natural temperament of the individual? Or something with the cybernetics themselves and how they were installed?

Sometimes he had empathy issues after installing a new piece of tech, but he used those feelings to aid the healing process. A necessity, as it was clear to him that anyone in pain was more likely to cause suffering to others, something to be avoided.

He wondered whether knowing this made him more human or less.

A noise cut through his focus. He realised he had left the heater on in the other room for far longer than he had meant to.

The heater roared from its place on the wall. From his workshop doorway he could see every corner of the larger room, from the washroom on his left to the entrance to the kitchen on the right and the small white crib beside the couch in-between.

His baby brother seemed to be sleeping more happily than he had in ages. He smiled and crossed his arms as he leant on the doorpost to watch the boy breathe. He figured he would leave the heater on for another twenty minutes.

After all, he could probably scrape together the dogma to pay for it. Dogma was hard to come by, but he would make it work.

He took himself back to his desk. The tiny screwdriver in his left hand again, idly he wondered how many hours, how much dogma he had put into his cybernetics, how many sacrifices he had made to insert them in order to provide for his little brother. It had all begun as a hobby, sure, with his interest in technology starting at a young age with taking apart his family's toaster and getting yelled at for breaking it, but over the years it had developed into something more than tinkering. Now he worked on himself, worked on other people in the black market, sold materials, made new ones...

When his parents died, it was all he knew how to do.

He flexed his right hand and felt how much looser the muscles were now. How long had it been since he was able to massage his hand to relieve the tension there?

He shook his head. The wires were still exposed, so he figured he might as well check over the rest of his arm's tech.

He had never pictured himself being responsible for a baby, but he was determined to make sure his hands worked well enough to scrape by for his brother's sake. He knew the tingling would soon abate and relief would follow.



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](#)

WHEN THE THRALLS ARE THIRSTY

by Jim Smith

The alleywogs of Venus have no ambition, if you want a species boost
You'd be better off on Mars, a flask full
Of lithium up to the mark that says equilibrium, but I'm in the mood for
My own planet, but underwater, me dubbed one huge hex when
Labour first got leery of overtime paid solely in flesh.
Those were not easy times.
There were no markets.
You can never see your own nebula.
Facts had to be put in my head, yet if I dug far enough
Species lay one upon the other like
Blankets of stars.

Do you enjoy reading Polar Borealis?

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #1 - January/February 2010)



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](#) >

SF CANADA, founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. If you are a Canadian Speculative Fiction writer/editor/publisher who meets the minimum requirements, you can join and benefit from the knowledge of more than 100 experienced professionals through asking questions and initiating discussions on SF Canada's private list serve.

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

TIDAL LIFE

by Frances Skene

“When will she wake up?” The voice sounds familiar.
Someone answers her. I don’t quite hear what he says; I can’t see them.

“Here we are, May.” Aunt Sally parks her old yellow Austin.
I jump out and run across the street. We’ve been here before.

On the other side, a shadowed path leads to a small bridge over a burbling creek. From there, we walk up a slight hill and onto a dirt road.

The road winds between mobile homes and small fields. I stop to pick and eat some blackberries, careful to avoid the thorns. I wave at a horse behind a low wooden fence.

Three dogs as big as me come near. I take a step back.

Aunt Sally laughs and pats the closest one. “It’s all right, dear. These dogs are friendly. Part Newfie, I think.”

The dogs just sniff us, and I finally relax. One of them follows as we walk to the end of the road, and then stops and stares as we climb down some rocks to an expanse of sand and mud.

“We’re lucky that the tide is extra low this morning,” Aunt Sally says. She sits on a rock and takes off her shoes and socks.

I sit beside her and do the same, and roll up my jeans. I love these, with the red plaid lining.

We walk onto the tidal flats.

Aunt Sally yanks at the brim of her straw hat. “Getting warm.”

Two, no, three grayish-blue long-legged birds land at the ocean’s edge to our left and wade in.

“Auntie, those are herons, right?”

“Great blue herons, May. Probably born this spring, judging by their size.”

One heron stabs into the water, its head almost disappearing, and comes up with a small fish that struggles as the heron swallows it in several gulps.

“May...” My aunt points, and I turn around. A bald eagle is flying in a circle near the headland that we left.

The herons jump into the air in an ungainly fashion and fly toward the open ocean.

Three herons, escaping one smaller eagle? “Aunt Sally, why...”

“Bald eagles raid their nests, dear. I guess these youngsters haven’t forgotten.”

The eagle keeps flying in its circle.

“We’ll let you know when there’s any change in your grandmother’s condition.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

I turn around, looking up. *Where are the voices coming from?*

“May, what are you looking at?”

I’m not crazy. I’m not. “Crows,” I say finally, and point at a small flock flying above us.

“Big ones. ‘American Crows,’ to be exact.” Aunt Sally smiles at me, and I smile back as we continue walking.

I love trips with Aunt Sally, especially since they get me away from the sadness at home, ever since Mom got that telegram. My father’s warship going down. I don’t wanna think about that too much. Maybe he’s just lost, rescued by a fishing boat or something.

Aunt Sally and I continue on, toward a wharf in the distance, its wooden base crouched on the exposed flats.

A few minutes later, we come to a tide pool, sunlight bouncing off orange and red sea stars below the surface.

I dip my hand into the pool. Minnows brush against my fingers.

Splash. Cold wetness on my feet. “Auntie...”

“Looks like the tide is turning.” Aunt Sally turns toward the white sand beach a ways to the right, and I follow, jumping over rivulets of water.

For a while, we walk in silence. Several crows still fly above us.

We come to... *Oh.* At our feet, another heron lies very still in a tangle of seaweed.

It’s kinda muddy, and its eyes stare into nothing. Small crabs are crawling over it.

“Auntie, has it died?” My heart thumps hard in my chest.

“Yes, May.” She crouches and hugs me. “I’m sorry, dear.”

I shiver, and hug her back.

Finally, I stand up and wipe tears and snot off my face with the back of my hand. We continue toward the shore.

Shriek... A train whistle, and a passenger train chugs into view.

Waving from a window is a kid about my age, and I wave back. For a moment, I want to ride with him to the next town on the coast.

More passenger cars follow, ending with a caboose, and the train disappears behind some trees.

Aunt Sally has reached the shore and I hurry to catch up, splashing through deepening puddles.

I sit on the sand and struggle to pull socks and shoes over damp feet.

I stand up. “Can we go for fish and chips again?”

“Yes, we can.” My aunt holds out her hand, and I take it.

“Grandma!” The girl’s voice. “Grandma!” Sounds like she’s weeping. There is pressure on one cheek, as though someone is kissing me.

We head for the train tracks and step over them.

Across the street, a small group of sailors is walking on the sidewalk. One of them drops behind the others to look in the window of a store.

I can’t see his face but the way he moves...

I run to the nearest crosswalk.

Across the street, the sailor turns away from the window. Now I can see his face.

Yes. “Dad!” I yell.

“May!” My father stands on the other side, his arms held out.

Aunt Sally has caught up and we step onto the crosswalk.

The train whistle still sounds, shrill and unbroken.



The Gear Crew – by Jack Mackenzie.

I find this a satisfying and entertaining “old-fashioned” novel. It’s loads of fun to read. A feel-good way to explore the best of the past without getting ensnared in the faults of the past. It is a throwback to the “ancient” sense-of-wonder thrill which inspired early generations of fans to a lifelong addiction to science fiction. You, too, can go back in time and rediscover the joy of your first exposure to the genre. Go ahead. Have fun. You’ll like it. – *RG Cameron, Amazing Stories*

< [The Gear Crew](#) >

THE MINDWORM IS SPREADING

By Mahaila Smith

The sun tries to touch the soil, burning through tarmac
and asphalt to reach cold earth underneath.

The roads crack and sink.
Sparrow wings sit discarded in ditches.

I do not need to consume continually,
it is more a craving turned habit.

It feels almost real,
if I pretend to hate you.

This is a mindworm I have had since birth.
I take what is given to me,

from my maternal line, resentment of
nanites evolving within us, twisting around our upper vertebrae.

I move in a diurnal mass of workers turned consumers.
I have no obligation to the people I see most often.

I rush to work to keep my mind distracted
and my hands in perpetual motion.

I assemble megafaunal robotic beetles
and hope they can revitalize the surrounding desert.

A Quote from Hugo Gernsback – October 1926

“We should not, therefore, become too impatient if occasionally we encounter a seemingly impossible prediction or an improbable plot. It is beyond our powers to foresee what reaction this may produce in some one, and what tremendous consequences it may have in the future.”

THE DREAM SHIP

by Jean-Louis Trudel

When Gordon climbs out of the hold, it's a weight off his shoulders. Not just because he's closer to the spin axis of the ship's circular habitat. With his shift over, he can head back to his cabin. And Lucia. He wants to hug her for what could be the last time.

The hallway is empty. His shoulders slump with relief. Nobody is waiting for him. His reprieve is short-lived as a familiar voice intones the first line of an ancient chorus.

"Heart of oak are our ships, heart of oak are our men."

It's poor old Meier, staggering out of the hold. He's already a couple of drinks ahead of the rest of the crew and more than willing to let the whole ship know it.

"As the captain will find out!" Meier adds, his voice ringing.

Gordon tries shushing him, before escorting him to his cabin. With any kind of luck, Meier will crash and forget about the plan.

The man is certainly drunk enough. He clings to the doorway and then clings to Gordon.

"We used to sail the seven seas. Why did we stop?"

"You're dreaming. This is much better, and if the skipper listens to reason..."

"Yessshhh, Gordie, I'll be there."

Damn! Perhaps Meier will fail to wake up in time.

Gordon is still a proud space hand. Knowing their ship cruises the void is an exhilarating thought after a tiring day's work, though it's no longer enough.

The air inside the cold metal hull is stale and their cabins tiny. Sometimes, just like Meier, Gordon dreams of a different ship, sails flapping and beams creaking as the vessel submits to the wind and crashes through the waves of a wine-dark sea. He pounds a wooden deck. From the ship's side, a taste of brine on his lips, he stares out at the ceaseless motion of the ocean's empty expanse.

Room to breathe. No fellow ship, no islands, and no witnesses... Just the crackling blue sky and the railing clutched by his hands.

Their own ship is dreary by comparison. Beyond the bulkheads and shielding, the endless vacuum of space is relieved only by the ghostly stream of the solar wind, a pinch of dust from powdered comets, and unfiltered

sunshine. There is no beach waiting for them and nowhere to hide if things go awry. A spaceship shuttling between planets remains entirely visible from millions of kilometres away.

Mutinies were easier at sea.

“We’ll do it the hard way,” he whispers, sitting down on his side of the bunk.

“What’s that?” Lucia asks, half-asleep.

“It’s been a long, hard day,” he corrects himself.

A spaceship is quieter than a sailing vessel. The distant purr of the engines thrusting out a diffuse plume of plasma is hardly noticeable, drowned by the snores in neighbouring cabins. Still, the man struggles to rest. Is he risking everything he loves?

He reaches out to touch Lucia, but he is afraid of awakening her, and making her suspicious. He is tempted to cancel.

After all, they’re in space and Gordon hasn’t exhausted the sheer wonder of it. Every few weeks, their good ship reaches a new port of call. Venus and its floating cities, Mars and its deep warrens sheltered from radiation, Vesta and Ceres, Callisto, Titan, the Moon’s South Polar pleasure domes...

Everywhere they go, they pick up supplies and raw materials in exchange for their newly made goods. The ship’s captain promises just-in-time manufacturing and delivery to the desired destination. At unbeatable prices.

Afterwards, there’s time for gaping at the godly face of Jupiter, venturing into Martian caves deep below its shield volcanoes, racing Venusian balloons in the planet’s fastest winds... And then it starts all over again.

This time, though, things will be different. While piecing together freshly-printed parts for hours on end, Gordon has mustered rebels.

He rises again, past midnight.

The sensors inside the habitat are disabled, thanks to one of their own.

The other workers are waiting outside the captain’s quarters, even Meier. Their skipper is never around when they finish work, so they never see him. This time, he will hear their demands. And they will call for a vote.

“Ring us in, Gordon.”

He’s the leader, the old space dog. Young Beruk looks at him hopefully. Harsimrat smiles grimly, only half-convinced they’re doing the right thing. The others look glum, yet determined. The words sung by Meier ring in Gordon’s ears, and he recalls another line.

“Come, cheer up, my lads.”

Meier perks up. The others shrug, but there is magic in that old march.

Spines stiffened, they crowd around the captain's door.

Knocking proves fruitless. Banging louder doesn't awaken the skipper.

Inside Gordon, old memories stir. He didn't always work on an assembly line, deep inside a torchship. There was a time when...

The ID plate beside the door recognizes the card Gordon found deep inside a forgotten vest pocket. As the door cracks open, daylight filters through. And the smell of hot sand. Gordon muscles his way through, almost hoping to see the ship beached on some tropical island, the sea stretching away under a merciless sun...

But he finds neither the captain's quarters nor a tranquil lagoon, the sound of faraway breakers reaching through the palm trees.

When he stumbles out into the street, he slams the door with manic speed. As if a part of him expected this. Leaning against the door, he shouts an order to the men behind it. "Wait!"

The buildings lining the street are familiar. Walls of extruded concrete, bare and grey, from when climate change marched the desert to the city's edge.

A ghost appears, floating above the cracked pavement. When Gordon looks around, the ghost remains in his field of view, arms crossed. A younger version of himself.

"If you're seeing this, you're going to remember why you hired to work an assembly line in a tramp spaceship."

The heat is stifling and the Sun's glare almost Venusian. Gordon blinks.

"All part of the deal," he mutters.

"Yes. I didn't want just another factory job. In this scenario, the pay would be insulting, the job crappy, the surroundings shitty, the bosses a pain in the ass... but I'd be on a spaceship! Going somewhere. With unbeatable stopovers. I'd see the planets and I'd believe I was there, with a bit of electrochemical help. Did that work out?"

Gordon grunts his assent. He remembers floating above Earth, his breath echoing inside a well-worn but still sturdy spacesuit. It had felt real. Even though he kept dreaming of another kind of ship, sailing warmer seas. One implanted myth bolstering the other.

"If you're seeing this, you may have grown unhappy with the deal. Or you exited accidentally. Soon, a drone will show up to check. So, what do you want?"

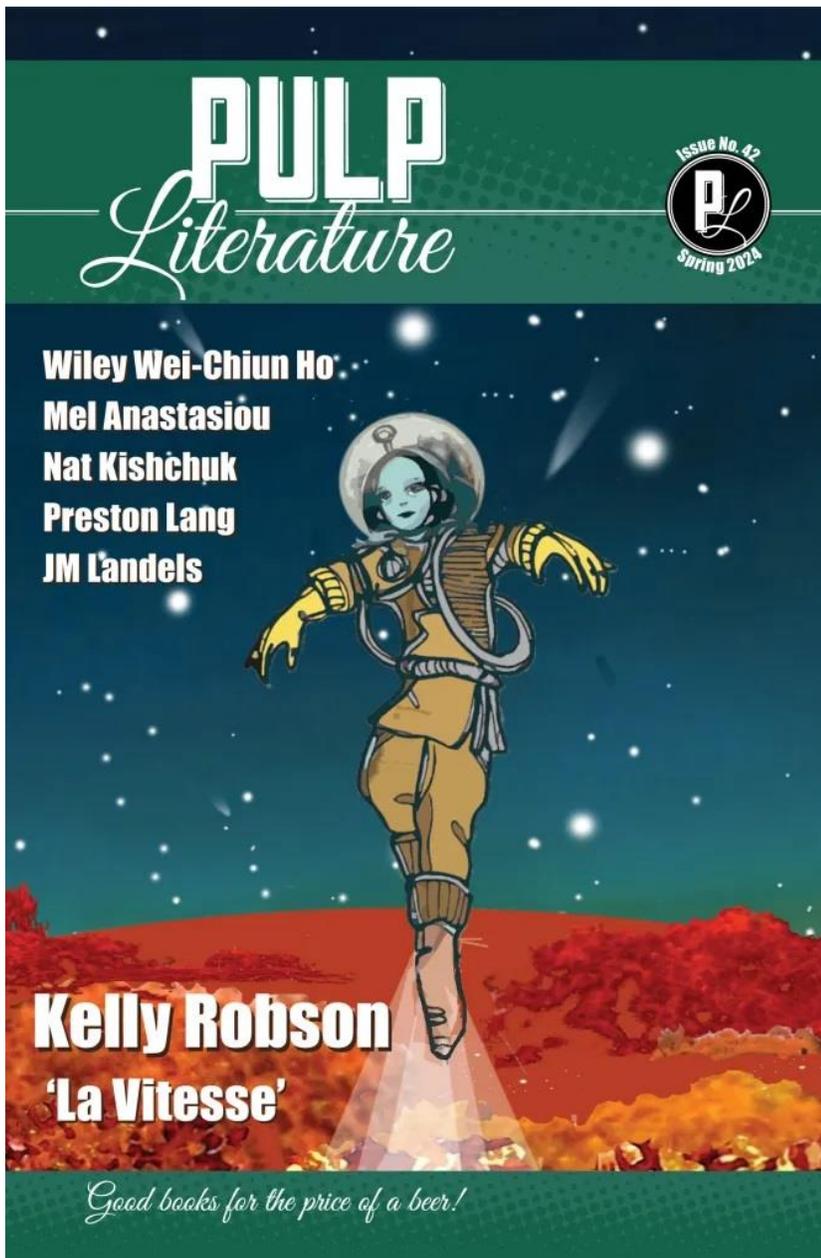
Gordon's memory, artificially dimmed but not entirely blocked, is now reminding him of the reality he left behind. It is true he could leave with Lucia. His fellow workers too. Wanting to argue with the captain is a sign.

But to travel among the stars no more?

He's already thinking up a likely story when he turns back to the door separating him from his fellow conspirators.

"See you never," he mutters for the ghost behind him. "'Tis to glory we steer."

PULP LITERATURE #42 Spring 2024



Cover: *Red Planet Raygunne and the Answer to Everything*
– by Mel Anastasiou

CONTENTS:

La Vitesse – by Kelly Robson
Feature interview with Kelly Robson
Most of your Stuff is Worthless
– by Leanne Boschman
The Dahlia Truth
– by Pattie Palmer-Baker
Kid Gloves – by Marri Champié
Take my Hand: Story – Part 1: Off to Never-Never Land – by Mel Anastasiou
Octavier – by Nat Kishchuk
The Newtonbrook Ninja
– by Preston Lang
Masquerade – by Wiley Wei-Chiun Ho
The Ice Road – by Trish Gauntlett
Neverender – by Krista May June
Flehman Grimace – by EC Dorgan
Watercolours – by EC Dorgan
High Reward – by Gabriel Craven and Mikayla Fawcett
The Shepherdess Epiphany
– by J.M. Landels

Pulp Literature is a truly modern magazine, fully cognisant of the profound maturing of pulp genres over the past century.

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it here: < [Pulp Literature #42](#) >

THE POETRY OF MATH IS DEAD

by Irena Nikolova

the poetry of math is dead:
a corpse tucked in a coffin.
mummified, twisted, tortured,
a coffin full of numbers
dead and dying
with drooping heads.

wilting flowers
falling, faltering,
fluid, undead,
uninvited and unknown.

who wants math anyway?
this terra incognita,
dark and darkened,
dreary like a rainy night.

falling rain washes
away the soil and flowers,
buries the symmetry
of numbers and fractals
in our landscapes.

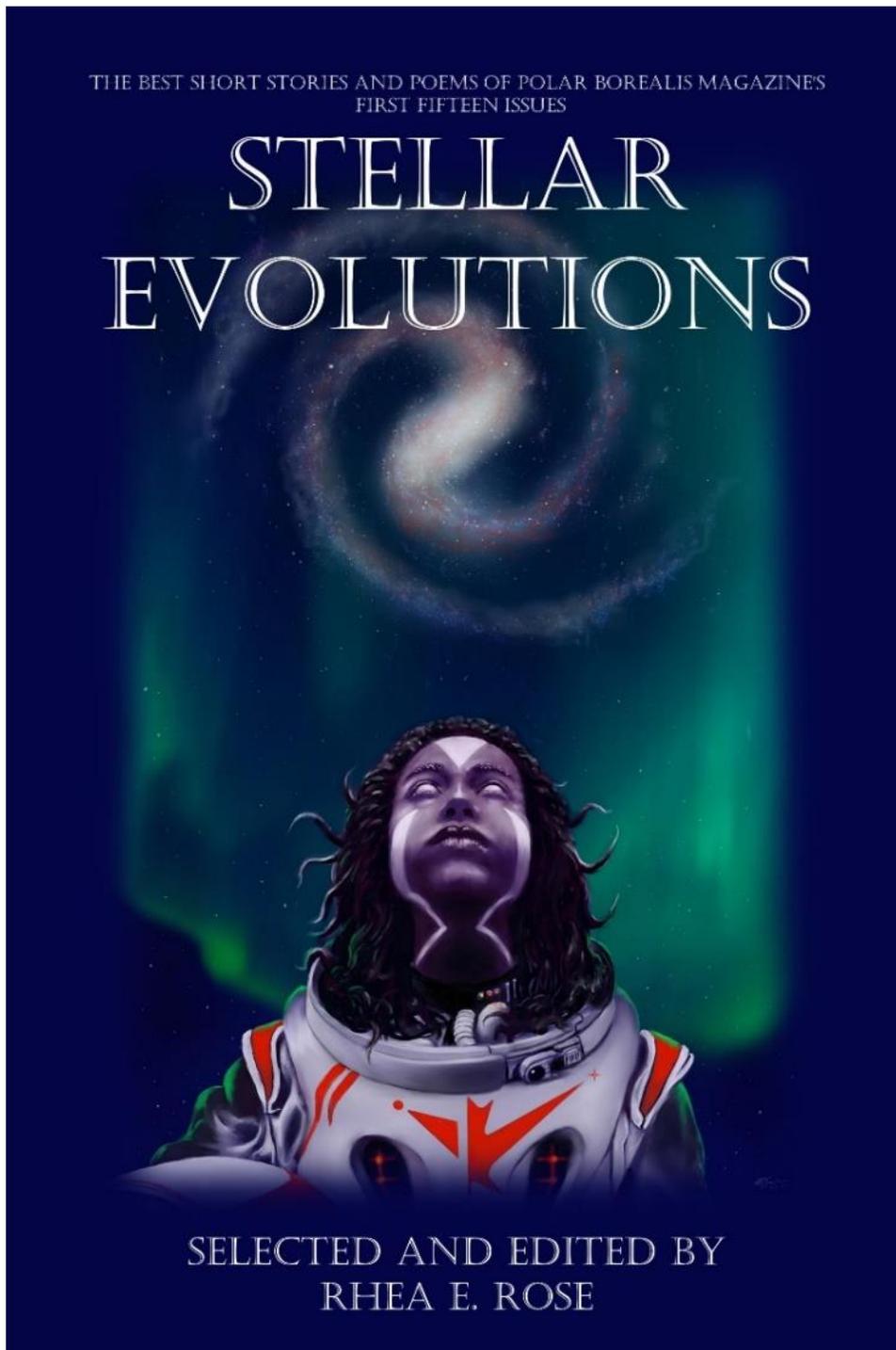


Stowaway's Luck and Other Stories – by Peter J. Foote

This collection is delightful to read. Peter's take on each subject is so innovative as to constitute a breath of fresh air. This collection is proof that SF&F isn't on its last legs yet. Peter is a master at storytelling, excellent at offering glimpses of emotional conflicts relevant to the problems of the here and now. Flirting with universal truths, I dare say. Entertaining *and* profound. Who could ask for better? Highly recommended. – *RG Cameron, Amazing Stories*

Find it at: < [Stowaway's Luck](#) >

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



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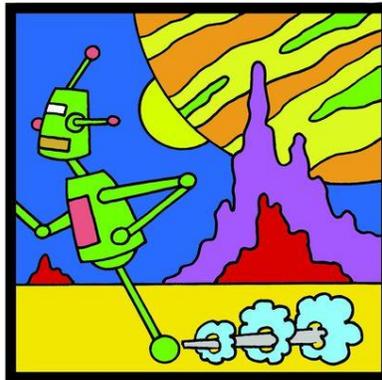
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BLUE SPHERES AND GOLDEN-WINGED SPACESHIPS

By Rebecca Franklyn

dreams of
blue spheres and
golden-winged spaceships
meld as shooting stars
earthbound
after sunset

THE REALLY SILLY SCIENCE FICTION



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ACTS OF GOD IN THE 22ND CENTURY

by Bryce Paradis

No, no, no! This isn't happening!

Abhorrent darkness erupts behind the splintered glass of Cassie's living room television, obliterating tens of millions of pixels per second. She throws her hands up into pitchforks around her head as she screams, "Sidekick!"

A calm, disembodied voice soothes from a ceiling speaker, "Yes, Cassandra, how may I help you?"

Desperate tears plummet down Cassie's cheeks. "Is my Phantom Quest insured?"

"Your Phantom Quest television was automatically added to your condominium insurance policy upon arrival. Your policy includes protection against fire, water damage, power surges, theft, cybercrime..."

"What about gravitational anomalies?" Drywall fragments, coffee table knick-knacks, and throw pillows have landed in a heap on the living room floor. It's *not fair* that an anomaly this large happened in the middle of her living room. If it had happened outside, where she had been standing on her balcony, ninety stories up... well... she would have grabbed the railing, or something. Everything would have been fine.

"Unfortunately, your insurance policy does not cover losses incurred by force majeure events, more commonly referred to as Acts of God."

"It's not an Act of God, it's a gravitational anomaly! They happen all the fucking time!"

The voice chirps cheerfully, "I'm sorry, I cannot comply with statements issued in coarse language!"

Cassie grinds her molars savagely. "Can we at least consult a solicibot?"

"What is your budget limit?"

Cassie needs to fix this. She waited over nine months for her Phantom Quest to ship from Korea. It's more than a television. It's a paper-thin, 16K, quantum-dot monument to her intelligence and good taste. "Eight hundred dollars." If there is *any* justice in this world, her Phantom Quest will be insured. There's *no way*...

"I have consulted a Trust and Diamond solicibot using your preferred budget of eight hundred dollars. Gravitational anomalies are considered force majeure events, with over four hundred percent cases."

Rage winds Cassie's foot and she punts her pile of living room detritus with all her might. Her racoon teacup skitters across the floor and shatters against a baseboard. Her happy face, sequin throw pillow arcs lazily over the dining room table and *flumps* against the balcony glass. She *could* finish watching the season finale of *My Space Date* on her phone, but she doesn't *want to*, which means she isn't going to find out whether Mohammed and Jessica hooked up in zero-G, which is a *problem* because Cassie spent eighty hours writing briefing notes this week and she is *burnt, the fuck, out*. Her niece's birthday party is in three hours, and if she can't get something to go *her way* before then, then she's going to grind her teeth into dust when Steve starts talking to her about the health benefits of drinking distilled water. She hasn't done *anything* to deserve this, which is why she's *so, fucking, angry*. Nothing ever works the way it's supposed to!

Teak floorboards shudder underfoot. Empty wine bottles clatter and crash in the kitchen. Car alarms panic ninety stories down.

This stupid, broken planet. "Sidekick, was that an earthquake or an anomaly?"

The ad-supported voice chirps, "Are you still shaving with razorblades in the twenty-second century? Did you know that..."

Cassie shrieks, "Skip!"

"A gravitational anomaly has been observed at street level."

"Did it damage the parking garage?"

"No, your car is fine."

"Good." It must have been huge, to shake the whole building. Anomalies aren't *supposed to be* that large.

A fragment of shattered teacup lifts off the floor and rattles back down. Cassie reaches into her pocket and searches for the app to play *My Space Date* on her phone. She *could* tell her sister that she's sick. She could skip the party, and then...

Cassie is yanked across the room as the tower across the street explodes.

She stumbles out onto her balcony to *see* and instinctively hunkers down when she feels a gentle tug that *should not be there*. She holds up her phone as ribbons of twinkling glass peel away from the tower's blue-gray façade and arc skyward. The building is *screaming*. There are *people in there*. Cars and tents and dogs are *rising up* from the street below, ricocheting off the sides of the narrow glass canyon. Cassie can't bear to think of the moment when the dogs will fall back down.

Her anus clenches against the shock of sudden weightlessness. She tries to push her feet back into the concrete, but all that does is launch her up. Adrenaline whips through her body as she grabs the railing, smashing her phone against the steel. The shattered screen spins out over the abyss. *Fuck me, this is bad!* She contorts, grabs her balcony door, and flings her buoyant body back inside, where she lands softly on the roof and rolls over the sharp jab of a sprinkler head. Her Phantom Quest is alive again. In the patches where the upside-down picture has returned, she can see skyscrapers in Manhattan toppling. She can see reporters in China struggling to stand upright on solid ground.

The soothing voice speaks directly into Cassie's ear, "New data from persistent gravitational anomalies across the globe indicates a common angulation toward celestial body Gaia BHA1."

Steel girders groan as drywall tears and glass snaps. "What the fuck is Gaia BHA1?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot comply with..."

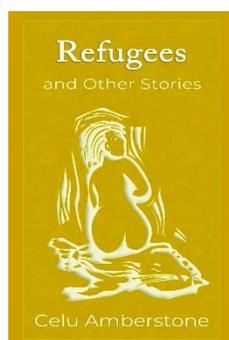
"No, I'm sorry! What is celestial body Gaia BHA1?"

"Gaia BHA1 is Earth's nearest known black hole, approximately seventy light years distant. It was first observed by the Gaia space observatory in twenty thirty-one."

Cassie wheezes as her weight doubles and doubles again, crushing her into the ceiling. An avalanche of cars crashes up past her window. "What did we do? What the hell did we do to that black hole?"

"No specific action was taken regarding Gaia BHA1. It was merely observed..."

The voice screeches a final, electronic death noise. The ceiling peels away and Cassie plummets into the silence of the sky.



Refugees and other stories - by Celu Amberstone

If there is a theme running through this collection, it is unexpected takes on relations between mortals and supernaturals, relations which Celu explores in new and profound ways. She has the knack of inserting subtle complexity into interactions where the reader might normally expect good vs. evil simplicity. The result is refreshingly original. – *RG Cameron, Amazing Stories*

Check it out at: < [Refugees and Other Stories](#) >

THE GODS OF PRODUCTION

By Neile Graham

We souls worked and despaired. Despised,
disregarded, we toiled in the night—engines
aching and ancient, corroded and crumbling,

until we ground down like gears whose adjustment
was never quite right, grating, grinding,
until we were just the nubs of hope. Jagged

and broken. That's when we let go. Uncontrolled,
uncaring, we walked the margins of our factories.
Pushing and prodding the decaying, the degenerate

walls of our fortress. But we couldn't let hope go
because that's what we'd been ground down to.
If we were going to let hope go, it would have to be

ourselves we let go of. So we did. And for a while
the cold burned us to cinders, to willowy ash. But we
still were. Insistent, persisting. So that's it. That's

the wonder we live in day by day by day and more.
This is the mystery the gods won't tell you. The mythic
history of what is more. What it means to be broken

is to be ourselves. We can step away, steal away—
but only this far and no farther. Here we have
the very engines of light: ourselves and each other.

Submission windows opening soon!

Both Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight will be open to poetry submissions in September.

Polar Borealis will be open to short story submissions in October.

For details see <http://polarborealis.ca/>

WAISTLAND

by Celeste A. Peters

It was mid-afternoon when I succumbed. Sitting at my kitchen desktop computer, I'd been surfing the Net for a magical combination of scrumptious meals and minimal exercise that might shrink me into the wasp-waisted garb that my bestie insisted I wear to her wedding.

And there it was, flashing on screen: "Lose 20 Pounds in 7 Days!" I clicked the link with gusto and... A horizontal line of flame danced against a black background, gyrating to a lively fiddle reel. It twisted and arched like a snake afire then curlicued into the letters H-E-L-L O.

Partially chewed brownie tumbled from my mouth.

Had I clicked on the wrong link? No. I was positive I hadn't. This must be one heck of a novel approach to dieting, I chuckled to myself.

On screen, the flickering letters faded in unison as a crimson "Welcome to the Cyber Reaper's Website" replaced them. My dream of shedding twenty pounds in a single week melted faster than the bits of chocolate stuck between my teeth.

It must be a gag site launched for the upcoming Halloween weekend, I thought. Big whoop. But unwilling to relinquish all hope, I read the smaller text beneath the welcome message.

"By coming here, you have provided me with your email address. Many good thanks."

I flinched at the preposterous claim and antiquated English. It had to be some kind of joke.

"I assure you, this is no joke," stated the Reaper's next sentence on screen.

The chair's front legs came free of the floor as I rocked back. *Mind reading?* I took a breath—*Just a lucky guess, creep*—and leaned in close over the keyboard. *Who are you?* Could the website's URL provide a hint?

A balloon message popped up, "Gazing upon yon URL shall do you no good. Keep reading."

My heart somersaulted. *How on Earth?* This gag was turning sick. Back on screen a sentence automatically scrolled into view.

"Your eye movements are being tracked."

My right hand shot out to cover the computer's web cam. On the screen below, a newly scrolled sentence read, "You best refrain from such behavior."

I clicked my browser's back navigation button, several times. The web page scrolled, "Navigation is disabled. I control your browser."

"You've got to be kidding!" I scrutinized the expanse of screen. *Duh! All I need to do is close the bloody browser!* I clicked the little "x" in the upper right-hand corner. Nothing happened. I typed in the magic combo of keys to force browser shutdown. Again, nothing. The screen simply scrolled. "You cannot leave this site."

"Oh, yeah?" I jabbed the computer's off button.

"Attempting to shut your machine off shall do you no good."

I bent down, grinned, and grabbed the plug—sending my entire arm into pain prickled spasms that only let up once I willed my hand to relax its grip.

"Do not struggle," advised new text. "Keep reading. Control shall be returned to you once you have finished reading the complete content of this website."

"Okay, already! Let's just get this over!" I put my cursor on the scroll bar, intent on shortcutting to the bottom of the site, but the bar wouldn't budge. A few moments later, the screen leisurely scrolled to: "The True Danger of Fad Diets."

Hell's bells! What have I got myself into? Now the damn guy's going to lecture me?

"It is time you faced the truth. People who indulge in fad diets are greedy. They would achieve a grand result without the requisite work. And to what end? The loss of numerous pounds to improve one's looks. Pure vanity! And pride! Do you honestly think anyone cares about your appearance? Or do you envy another's good looks? And how did you become overweight in the first place? By overeating and sitting on your rump in front of a computer all day. That is how. By committing five of the seven cardinal sins."

My hands lifted from the keyboard. *Whoa! This guy has more back issues than Scientific American!* Maybe reading his blather was all the creep wanted. I decided to finish the job, just so I could get off his site and report the bastard.

The next paragraph of text scrolled into sight. "And furthermore, these errors you have made are FATAL. Not only will you die soon, you are going to Hell when you do."

Okay. That's taking things too far, Mister.

Jerking back from my desk, I glimpsed the systems icons displayed in the lower right corner of the computer screen. *Hallelujah!* 3:00 PM. It was time to pick the kids up from school. Goodness knows, I needed a break from this whacko, self-styled Reaper.

As I stood to leave, the fiddle music's volume increased just enough to bring my attention back to the scrolling screen. I leaned over and read: "Your computer's IP address has divulged where you live. I now know the vehicle license plate number registered in your name."

My license number flashed on screen.

"Should you decide to walk away at this point, an anonymous call shall be made to the authorities reporting a hit and run accident involving your vehicle. I can supply credible witnesses. You shall not proceed far."

"Shit!" I froze in confusion, but not for long.

The fiddle music ramped up, distorting as it blared from my computer's cheap speakers. I called out for help then remembered the neighbors were all at work. Even if someone was home, they wouldn't be able to hear me over the screeching fiddle strings.

I grabbed my purse from under the desk and retrieved my cell phone. Texting was the obvious solution. Or it would have been, if only I'd remembered to charge the phone. "Damn it!" I had to do something or I'd be stone deaf within minutes.

There couldn't be that much text left to read, could there?

I plopped back down in my chair, resolved to reach the end of the hateful text at warp speed. The music volume obligingly dropped, as the website scrolled to: "Notice how eager you are to read this next paragraph?"

Like I had any choice?

"Subliminal messages on the screen have hypnotized you to, among other things, read with more zeal."

A guffaw stuck halfway up my throat. I screamed in glee at my on-screen nemesis. "Got you! I can't be hypnotized. Weight loss therapists have tried, Mister. Hypnosis never works on me!" Giddy, I plowed along, determined to speed read to the end then zip over to Rosedale Elementary and collect my sons.

The next paragraph began, "The perils of Hell..." I mimicked plunging a finger down my throat as I read the Reaper's summarized (thank goodness) version of Dante's *Inferno*.

An essay on "The Nature of Eternity" followed; nine screen lengths of small-font text. With each paragraph that scrolled into view, I winced. School had already let out. I had to get moving.

At last, I reached what was clearly the concluding remark because it began, "A final note."

Thank God!

“You are now fully hypnotized. Within the next fifteen minutes, you shall do something ill advised. Something as egregious as the sins you have committed. Something fatal. I shall see you soon.”

A tag line at the bottom of the site briefly boasted “Over One Billion Reaped”, then the site closed itself.

Real cute, you wacko.

Unfazed by The Reaper's powerless threat, I punched the computer's “Off” button, ran out the door, and jumped in my car. “Damn!” I cursed, releasing the parking brake and backing out of the garage without so much as a glance in my rear-view mirror. *I should have left a half hour ago. Little Ronnie must be in tears by now. And who knows what that imp Jeremy's up to.*

I never made it as far as the school.

It was only by chance that I spied their identical red jackets out the corner of my eye. My impatient twin six-year-olds had already struck out for home and were heading down a side street, veering off toward a part of town unsafe even for adults.

I pulled to the curb, jumped out, and hugged each of them, noting a good twenty minutes had passed and I was still very much alive. Through tears and kisses, I silently swore I'd make certain the Cyber Reaper bastard would get his due.

It was mid-evening by the time I plunked down on the family room sofa and turned on my laptop—not my desktop. It would be heading to the tech shop first thing in the morning. I wanted to email friends and family about my bizarre encounter with the Cyber Reaper and get their advice on how to report him to Internet and criminal authorities.

As I entered the laptop's password, my cell phone charging on the side table rang. Its display showed the number for my sister Cheryl, but it was her husband on the other end, voice trembling between sobs.

“What's happened, Gary?”

“I'm not sure,” he said. “I mean, I don't understand...”

“Understand what?”

“Cheryl's dead.”

“Dead?” I froze, fighting to grasp an impossibility.

Sounding equally bewildered on his end of the phone, Gary said, “The police think... They think she committed suicide.”

“Suicide?” That didn’t make sense. Cheryl was the optimist, the sunshine and silver linings sister.

Gary was too wrecked to fill in details. As soon as our conversation ended, the phone rang again and kept ringing for the remainder of the evening. Each call reported a relative or friend who had just met a sudden, tragic ending, my soon-to-be-wed best friend, Denise, among them.

By 1:30 a.m., drained of energy, eyes raw from crying, I laid a hand on my laptop to fold it shut before retreating to the solace of a soft bed. The screen lit up displaying my email inbox: three more suicide reports as well as a just-arrived message from someone named Geri Parmer, subject line “Plan B.”

Exhausted and numb, I opened this final missive on automatic pilot. Its content came right to the point: “When you did not appear in Hell within the appointed time, I enacted Plan B. One third of your email contacts immediately received a recommendation from you to visit my website.”

I couldn’t breathe. My hands quivered above the keyboard as I read further.

“A bountiful harvest of souls has resulted. Thank you greatly and welcome to the special version of Hell I’ve reserved for sinners who cannot be hypnotized.

“P.S. Should you decide to report me, I shall unleash the same email upon the remainder of your contacts.”

Too stunned and tired to think or move, I sat staring at the wall the rest of the night.

Two days later, the funerals began and continued, back-to-back, for five days.

That night, haggard and worn, I removed my funeral attire one last time and glanced at my reflection in the mirror behind the bedroom door. There was something different about my appearance. I followed a hunch, trudged into the bathroom, and stepped on the scales, a daily ritual I hadn’t bothered to indulge in for the past week.

Noting my weight, I wept.

As advertised, I’d lost 20 pounds.

CHEESE BALL

by Douglas Shimizu

I hate mazes.

Puzzles.

No way, laber, labra, labyrinths?

(I can't even spell them).

Give me a clear path. No corners to hide behind.

Safe. Smooth. Steady.

No surprises.

What headache am I in now?

A mystery box in space,

Arrives out of nowhere.

Go, investigate.

Sure. Love to. Not.

Panels of light line hallways.

Long corridors without doors,

Leading to a hidden corner.

Another path nowhere.

"Have you got my position?

No signposts to see.

Not making progress.

Control, can you hear me?"

Nothing.

That's it. Abort.

I'm calling it.

Need to get out.

Easy, right?

All right turns coming in,

Should be all left going out.

So... why is that

Another right behind me?

What had been 10 meters,
Is now twenty.

What had taken five minutes,
Now takes 2.

This isn't the way I came,
But I have no other way to go.
Moving in circles would be easier
If I had some landmarks to show.

The only parallel I can draw
Is between my predicament
And that of a lab rat.
Is that what this is? A search for some cosmic cheese?

I wonder if there are other varmints in this cage with me.
Hmmm, do rodents ever work together to escape?
Naw, I think they just kill each other.

Well, forget that plan.

What is the goal?
Is this a test? One I can pass?

Keep going. What's ahead?
Find the door. Where's the exit?
No point in stopping while I can still move.
I haven't been beaten yet.

Game not over.



The New Empire – by Alison McBain

Alison McBain reveals how genuinely monstrous slavery was, is, and will, be. The book is a wake-up call loud and strident by virtue of her excellent characterization of Jiangxi. You will accept and believe what he perceives, and through him, the greater problem threatening us all. Remarkable book. – *RG Cameron, Amazing Stories*

Find it at: < [The New Empire](#) >

QUESTIONS

by Desiree Ferdinandi

“Tell me again.”

They were on the E&N Trail, a paved walking path that runs north/south between the train tracks and the highway, but as usual Sara walked on the grass and weeds beside it, as close to the tracks as possible. This was how they walked every day, Mel clutching her tiny hand, Sara’s twig-thin arm stretched out, her body leaning at a rigid angle toward the tracks. It was August, and the sun had parched the ground so that the crabgrass and thorns scratched angrily at their ankles. Sara lunged and managed to touch a foot to a wooden crosstie before Mel pulled her back. Sara absently swung her arm towards the rails before turning her head up to her mother.

“Tell me,” She demanded.

“All right,” Mel said. The memory still made her queasy and she stifled the urge to squeeze Sara to her. She forced a smile. “You were a tiny baby, the size of a butternut squash. We were at the train station in Vancouver, and you were lying in the car seat on a bench. It was very crowded, people were moving in all directions. A man asked for directions, and I stood up to point to where he needed to go. When I turned around you were gone. Your car seat and everything. Vanished. I screamed and yelled and cried. The police came, people came from all over to help search for you. There were announcements on the internet, posters everywhere.”

“But no one could find me?”

“No one could find you. Not even a clue.”

“And then...”

“And then, after seven whole days, you reappeared. You and your car seat were inside the train station on exactly the same bench where I’d lost you. Even though the doors were locked. You were perfectly fine, as if nothing had happened.”

“It was magic.”

Mel’s stomach clenched, and she wished again that Sara didn’t enjoy this story so much. Painful sunlight glared and reflected up at Mel from the shiny steel rails, and she squinted her eyes.

“Yes. It was like magic.”

As Sara grew, she became increasingly insistent on visiting the tracks. The rare time her mother said no brought on a torrential rage that was shocking. “Well, what’s the harm,” thought Mel, and the train tracks became part of their daily routine. On school days they left home an hour earlier than necessary to visit the tracks. After school they went back. Sara sat on the edge of the rail, laid her hands on the cold metal, and leaned forward, her forehead almost touching the pebbled ballast between the cross-ties. She could sit like that for hours, gazing down the tracks from ground level, waiting, listening. In the wintertime she would clear snow from the rails. In the spring she gathered branches of scotch broom and Himalayan blackberry into bouquets and laid them beside the tracks. Beautiful yellow and white flowers, offerings to a nonexistent train.

“They’re for the passengers,” explained Sara.

“Sara, you know the passenger train hasn’t run in years.”

Sara was perplexed for a moment, unprepared for the notion that there were important things her mother didn’t know. “The train still runs for me,” she muttered, eyeing the tracks and thinking.

One morning, when Sara was seven, Mel told her they couldn’t visit the tracks because it was too stormy outdoors. The winds had reached 70 km an hour, rain was hitting the living room windows like pellets shot from cannons, and waves of wind howled through the fences and trees outside. Sara reacted to her mother’s words with an intensity that matched the weather.

“We *have* to go. We *have* to.”

“Sara we’ll go tomorrow when—”

“NO! Now!”

Sara grabbed her coat from a hook and flung the door open. Wind pushed rain and debris into the laundry room with the force of demons. Mel shoved the door closed.

“Sara, please we’ll—”

The child kicked the washing machine. She punched her fists at the door that Mel held firmly shut, scratched at her mother’s hand that gripped the door knob.

“We *have* to go. Pleeeeease...”

Mel took a deep breath and closed her eyes to the torrent of will. She exhaled slowly. Well, really what was the harm? Other parents struggled to get their children to spend time outside.

“Okay, all right...”

They headed out into the storm. Mel tried to use an umbrella but the wind promptly turned it inside out. By the time they arrived at the tracks water was running down their faces. Their coats were waterlogged, and wet jeans clung to their legs, but Sara didn't seem to notice. She knelt at the edge of the rail and spread her hands on the cold, hard metal, and the two of them watched as water pooled between her tiny fingers.

After a few minutes Sara stood and moved to the centre of a crosstie facing south, stretching her arms to the sky, leaning backwards into the wind to keep her balance. Then she jumped to the next crosstie, and the next, shouting into the roar of the wind with each leap, “One. One, TWO. One, two, THREE. One two THREE...” Shrubs beside them strained southward as the wind pushed and roared. Was the wind getting stronger? Rain stung Mel's face and ran down her neck into her coat. She raised an arm to shield her eyes.

“Sara, please let's—”

Suddenly Sara leaped to the side of the tracks, arms raised again, and she screeched with joy. Mel watched as her daughter turned slowly towards the tracks as if watching something pass. The air seemed to shift around her, push her hair and coat northwards, like the wind that follows semi trucks on a highway. It lasted for several minutes, Mel feeling the storm wind pushing her one way, Sara laughing as air from something unseen pushed her in the opposite direction. Then it was over, and Sara's hair and coat relaxed to the natural forces of gravity and storm.

She ran to Mel and hugged her. “Did you see it? It was *huge!*”

Mel wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter's shoulders and squeezed her eyes shut. “You have such a strong imagination, my love, but you are going to be cold at school with such wet clothes.”

Sara had often dreamed of the train in her sleep, but that night she dreamed she was inside it. She sat on a red cushioned seat beside the aisle. The fabric was threadbare from use and rough to the touch. There was a smell of old wood and dried leaves. The car was filled with similar seats, all facing the same way, every row empty. It was an old wooden décor, wood panels on the walls and carved frames around the windows.

Beside her on the bench, near the window, sat a plump woman with tangled, grey hair and a face like a shrivelled apple. The woman sat staring forward. Swathes of mismatched clothes covered her round torso, and gangling arms hung at her sides, so long that her elbows touched the seat. The woman

turned her head towards Sara and smiled, and Sara could see her teeth were made of stone.

The woman plunged a claw into a leather bag beside her. “She could pull out anything at all,” Sara thought, and shivered. The woman carefully removed three plump slugs and arranged them in a triangle using her thick nails to poke the sides into straight lines. Next, she took out short branches of scotch broom and foxglove, plucking the blooms and dropping them inside the triangle. Next she sprinkled a pinch of salt. When she was done, the woman looked directly at Sara, her grey eyes piercing under bushy eyebrows. The woman blew out a long, gaseous breath. The smell of rot filled Sara’s nostrils and seemed to wrap around her, and she breathed it in gladly. When Sara woke the next morning, she considered her next steps.

That day, her teacher told the class that triangles were the strongest structure with which to build, and Sara’s heart sang. Yes, I already know! Triangles! Three sides, three angles, strong base no matter how you turn it. She brought chalk to the tracks and drew triangles on the crossties, over and over again.

Sara’s teachers at school consistently reported to her mother that she was doing well. She was always alert, observing. She seemed to absorb information as soon as she heard it. She asked questions no one thought to ask, but—and here the teachers always paused—her questions were unnerving; they disrupted the class. There were outbursts. One day the students were reading about the expansion of the Canadian railway system, and Sara suddenly threw her book to the floor. “Just tell me if the ghost trains connect colonies. Is that what they’re for? All of them? Do they go to Europe? Are the passengers dead?” Sara had to spend recess at the office.

Mel laughed it off; such was the price of a gifted mind, she said, before gritting her teeth.

Sitting on a rail one afternoon, Sara carefully read a book of European fairy tales. She couldn’t find anything about trains, but the stories still connected her to something that she couldn’t quite name, the same way as her ghost train did. Still, the tales raised new questions. Did the fairy godmother *persuade* the pumpkin to be a carriage or was it *forced*? Did the apple in Snow White still believe it was an apple? What puts a new idea into fruit? Blood? Water?

During silent reading at school, Sara walked over to Miss Grady’s desk and asked her if boiling foxglove blossoms would create an adequate drug to put a

person to sleep, or was something else required? Miss Grady stared for a moment, then told her to go sit down, making a mental note to call Sara's mother again.

When Sara was eleven, she looked up from a pile of leaves she had layered on the centre of the crossties. She turned her back to her mother, and as discreetly as she could manage, pushed a blackberry thorn into her thumb. She managed to squeeze out three drops of blood onto the leaves before her mother noticed what she was doing. As Mel dragged her home, Sara puzzled over why nothing had happened. She needed more information.

That night she dreamed again that she was in the train. The old woman stretched a long arm toward her and took her hand, turning it palm up. Gently she traced a triangle on Sara's palm with her knobby claw. Cut here. Not too deep. Sara smiled up at her gratefully.

At thirteen she began to sneak out at night to visit the tracks under the moon, at least once per week. She had realized that the train sometimes ran at night, and she paced along the steel rails as raccoons and rats skirted through bushes beside her. She had become better at seeing the train, but as beautiful as it was, it was always ghostly, transparent. She could faintly hear the whistle, see the steam billowing out in huge puffs towards the sky. Some nights it was louder than others, and there were nights when she could swear it was calling for her, but it never stopped.

She began finding items on the tracks at her favourite spot. A camas flower, a clump of Oregon grapes. One day she found a book about invasive plant species in British Columbia.

At seventeen, Mel received a phone call from the RCMP. There had been an incident at the train tracks involving her daughter, could Mel come down to the tracks or should they take Sara to the police station. Fifteen minutes later Mel was at Sara's spot along the tracks. Sara was sitting cross-legged, surrounded by police officers. She slumped guiltily with her elbows on her knees, her open hands covered with blood. On the rail beside her were the entrails of something so torn apart that Mel couldn't identify its species.

"It was roadkill from the highway. I swear!" cried Sara as soon as she saw her mother. "I just needed to try—"

"Get in the car."

That evening was the worst of Sara's life. No more going to the train tracks. Her mother should have stopped this nonsense a long time ago. No more craziness. She was grounded, she needed to change, do better, be better. After

hours of yelling and crying and heartache, Sara retreated to her room and crawled out of her window for the last time. This was it, she had to make the train stop.

At the edge of the rails she called to the ghost train with everything she had learned. She cut sprigs of the yarrow and sedum around her to show the train where she was. She cut thorny blackberry branches to show that she meant business. She cut triangles in her hands to commit. She skipped and danced from crosstie to crosstie, drawing triangles in the air with her hands and reaching out with her soul. Come here, come *here*, come get me.

In the distance, Sara heard the now familiar call of the steam train. The steel rails began to vibrate. Sara stepped off the tracks, just far enough away that it couldn't run her over, and continued her dance, reaching and pleading for the train to stop. The black, metallic machine howled and exhaled clouds of steam from its valves as it rumbled towards her, but it was creeping at a slower pace this time. It rattled past her slowly, the pistons on its driving wheels decelerating. A few windowed passenger cars inched past her, and at last train stopped, releasing a final puff of steam with a sigh. A door opened at the top of a three black metal steps.

Sara bounded up the steps and turned into the car. It was exactly as she had dreamed, red fabric seats, wooden panelling. As always, the old woman sat in the far corner, waiting, her spindly arms folded on her lap. Sara felt a surge of love and ran to the back row. She sat on the aisle seat sideways so she could face her teacher directly, breathing in the sweet smell of decaying forest.

The woman chuckled heartily, then raised a claw to gently cup Sara's cheek.

"I have missed you," the woman said.

Outside, the world began to tremble. The earth was shifting. Reaching her senses outward, Sara could feel houses and trees swaying back and forth as the ground rippled.

"It's an earthquake," whispered Sara as she felt entire pine trees bend. She found she was not so much scared as intrigued. "We learned about subduction in school." She looked at the old woman, who was peering closely at her. It felt so easy to talk to this creature who would never be afraid.

"There is tension that builds in the tectonic plates just west of the Island," continued Sara, although her science class now felt a lifetime away. "One plate

is sliding beneath another; it wants to move deeper under the Island, but there is resistance. So, the plate pushes and bends until it finally buckles.”

“Or, put another way,” said the woman conversationally, “the earth beneath us has to adjust when power connects above it.”

Sara smiled warmly. It was a relief to know that everything would finally be explained. “What exactly is this train?” she said finally. “Is it yours?”

“Mine? No. It was created by humans over a hundred years ago. The company folded, but you see you cannot uncreate something that is created, only transform it. You’ll know what I mean soon enough.”

“I have so many questions,” Sara blurted out. Her voice was low and hoarse with intensity. “Scotch broom, yarrow... can they merge with entrails to form... something? I tried and it fell apart, but I felt so sure... And rainwater... does it change hearts?”

The woman straightened, grinning. Her grey teeth poked from between her thin lips and her eyes squinted merrily, making the lines around her eyes bloom into deep wrinkles. “Your first question is all about binding; you have to seal it with an agreement. I’ll teach you how. The second... we have a lot to talk about,” she said. Then she sighed contentedly and leaned back in her seat, relishing the moment, feeling the vibrations of the train on her back as they pushed forward through the landscape that was collapsing around them.

It had all been worth it. Feasting on Sara after finding her at the train station had been a memorable pleasure. Young flesh was tasty with a sprinkling of herbs and green onion. The birthing had been painful, of course, and she had assumed that once it was done she would be glad to toss the babe back into the train station. But giving Sara away, so small and newly formed, back to the weepy humans who would have no idea of the power they were raising, that had been more difficult than the woman had anticipated. She had never especially liked children, so noisy and greedy, but Sara felt different. “I suppose all mothers feel that way about their young,” she mused. Then came all the watching, waiting, hoping that Sara would find her way. Such is parenting; you have to take a step back and let the children puzzle things out, make mistakes, blunder and experiment as they look for their path in the world. Yet you also have to give them clues and be ready when they come back to you. Tricky. Fortunately, the children of hags were like the salmon of this world, instinctively scraping and pushing their way upstream to go home.

“Tuck in,” she said cheerfully. “We have a ways to go yet. We are picking up your sister.”

GOD IS DEAD - NIETZSCHE

by Patricia Evans

But—what if Nietzsche were wrong
what if I were still alive
watching
hiding in a nebular cloud,
only my eyes showing
like one of those crocodiles
a favourite creation of mine
spying on you
always the same with you humans
seeking control over your lives
like I'm not in charge

In the past
when you were in trouble
you listened to me
no hubris then
“Gilgamesh (or was it Noah)
build me an ark
I will give you exact dimensions
if you follow them to the letter
you and your world will be saved”
God is dead

now
you stumble around
fawning over false gods
Mammon
rap singers
internet influencers
anyone will do
except me

you've lost your way
glaciers melting
species on the edge of extinction
the atmosphere is dying
and so are you
there's just disagreement on exactly when

and you pretend you don't miss me

THE LAST BREATH OF SUMMER

By Jameson Grey

(Previously published in *Chlorophobia* by Ghost Orchard Press)

The beach was full of summer tourists: bright young things sunbathing, Mums and Dads playing beach boules and other games with their kids, surfers hoping for the next big wave.

No one noticed the man sweltering from head to toe in protective gear. He was standing in a cordoned-off rock pool at the end of the beach furthest from the café-and-little-shop combination that is the mainstay of any self-respecting summer hotspot.

Deller was there to observe. His cover, while he waited, was that he was merely engaged in marine biology research. If asked, Deller was to say he was wearing a protective suit so as not to contaminate the pond life when collecting specimens. It seemed a flimsy tale, but as yet Deller had not had to test its veracity on any inquisitive beachgoer. Good job really, he thought—for one, the specimen case was empty.

Deller gazed at the blue Atlantic. A lone surfer was trying to catch a ride on the tame waves. Part of him wanted to call the surfer in.

“Not your remit, Deller. Observe and report,” Jacks, his boss, had told him. Indeed, the visor was fitted with a camera, microphone and earpiece to record his observations. “Nothing like a bit of first-hand qualitative data to supplement the tech,” Jacks added.

“Will the suit do its job?” Deller queried.

“We believe so. Of course, there are no guarantees... but that’s why you’re being paid so handsomely.”

“If I survive...”

“If you don’t, your gambling debts and bar tab will be taken care of.”

“Thanks, Jacks, that’s very reassuring,” he’d replied with more than a hint of sarcasm.

The surfer *was* coming in, but as Deller looked to the horizon beyond, he didn’t think the rider was going to make it back to the beach in time. Not that the beach will offer much respite, Deller thought; nevertheless, he willed the surfer to paddle a little faster.

“Whatya doin’, mister?”

“Huh?” Deller said, startled out of his reverie.

A boy had ventured over to the rock pools and was standing, somewhat dutifully, behind the cordon Deller had set up earlier.

“Just some research, kid. You shouldn’t be over here.”

“I know, I *can* read, I *am* eight.”

Deller fought an undertow of panic in his guts. “Just looking at the rock pools here.”

“Can I help?”

“I’m afraid not, my boss even made me wear this protective suit.” Deller hated lying to the boy, but he wanted him away. He didn’t want to see what happened *that* close up.

“Why?”

“He doesn’t want me contaminating anything.”

“What’s con-tam-in-aging?”

“Messing things up.”

“Oh, can I watch then?”

“Best not.”

A voice called out. “Danny, we’re going, come on.”

“That’s my Dad; I’d better go.” Danny sounded disappointed. “OK; bye now.” And with that he ran off.

“Bye.” Deller watched the boy reach his parent, saw them have a brief conversation, noticed the father looking over at him. Probably wondering what I said to him, Deller thought. Can’t blame him for that.

Dad seemed satisfied with Danny’s answer, and they turned away, heading towards the café and the car park. Danny twisted and offered a wave. Deller reciprocated the gesture and watched as the boy ran off ahead of his dad. Hope you make it, kid.

Deller returned his attention to the sea, scanning for the surfer. He was still paddling in—but now he was being chased, not by waves but a rolling sea mist.

“That’s my cue,” Deller muttered to himself. He glanced over at the beach to check whether anyone was looking at him, but the nearest couple was sunbathing and, beyond that, families remained engrossed in their games. Others *had* noticed the mist rolling in and were pointing out to sea. It seemed the surfer was waving to them as they did so, and the onlookers waved back, but Deller didn’t think he was larking.

Behind and above him on the cliffs, nests of gulls and kittiwakes began to clamour. They know something’s awry, Deller thought. The baleful moan of a

foghorn called out, and Deller wondered if someone was up at the old lighthouse or if it were automated these days. He hoped it was the latter.

The sound rang out only the once, but Deller took it as confirmation he should act and pulled the visor over his head, quickly fastening the clasps to the neck of his suit. He checked there were no gaps around the visor's seal, turned to face the sea, and pressed a switch on the side of the helmet to activate the built-in communications device.

"OK, Jacks, it's coming—let's hope this suit of yours holds up, eh?"

"Message received, Deller. We have visual too, but as the mist rolls in, tell us what you see. Your eyes are much better than any camera, no matter what the techies tell us."

Panic did not set in immediately. A sea mist on a hot summer's day, whilst unusual, is not uncommon, and the first screams were not given the attention they merited.

"Perhaps they're thinking they're shrieks of delight?" Deller commented.

"I don't think so, somehow," Jacks replied.

"I've moved a little closer, but I'm going to hang back. It could be dangerous once people start to lose it. I've got the binoculars; I'm going to take a look." Deller raised them to his eyes and focussed on the far end of the beach—the end near the café. He could see where those initial screams had come from. A man was running blindly away from the mist, clutching his face, blood seeping through his fingers. The man's arms were turning red too.

Somehow the man kept running, stumbling, tripping over a young couple who'd sat up from their sunbathing. He fell face first into the sand and started writhing. Although he was a few hundred yards away, Deller heard the man's agonised cries. One of the sunbathers looked on in horror, then she, too, screamed and tried to stand up.

Behind her, the mist rolled thickly over the beach, and suddenly she and her partner were gone, swallowed up in the fog. Shortly afterwards, the still-writhing man also disappeared.

The family playing their game of boules had stopped and were running for the beach café, perhaps hoping it would offer some sort of safety. They were still some distance from it when the dad, who'd been carrying one of his kids, fell; before he could get up, the mist enveloped them.

Others were fleeing too.

Deller swung the binoculars from left to right, scanning for Danny, the young boy he'd spoken to earlier. He and his dad were tracking the sea wall at the back of the beach, trying to stay far away from the thick fog as it glided

diagonally across the sand. They reached the stone steps that led up to the café as the mist rolled in front of them, and Deller was unable to confirm whether they'd made it in time.

"What's happening, Deller?"

"Chaos, panic, what do you think?"

"And the mist?"

"It's burning them—like it did on those islands in South-East Asia. Like it's some sort of acid mist. I'm going to walk into it now. People are far enough away from me—it should be safe."

"My word, you're cold, Deller."

"That's why you wanted me to do this, isn't it?"

Not waiting for a response, Deller set off. The mist had rolled over at least two-thirds of the beach now. Deller could see no one. He lowered the binoculars—they were useless now.

"Okay, it can't be more than 50 yards," he reported. "I'm going to be walking into it soon. Wish me luck."

"Roger that."

Deller stopped walking as the mist enveloped him. It was thick, like cotton wool hanging in the air—he could barely see his hand through the visor. The beach was dense with silence. No people, no birds, not even the sea.

Deller spoke to break the eeriness: "It looks as though the suit's holding up. I can't see shit, but I'm going to try to keep walking." He paused. "You can see something through the camera lens, right? Was it this bad in Mindanao?"

"No, Deller, I don't think so. And yes, we can see, all right."

Although there was no bearing point from which to judge, Deller thought he'd walked far enough along the beach to be near the man he'd seen perish first. He slowed, looking down at the same time. Even at a snail's pace, the lack of visibility was such that he tripped over the body when he found it. Well, what was left of it.

Deller forced himself to crouch beside the remains. "Are you seeing this?"

"We are."

"It's like it's melted his flesh and muscle clean away. Even his bone looks worn. Jesus, what is this stuff?" Deller turned to his right and saw the young couple, similarly wasted away. They'd been holding hands when they perished.

"I tell you what, I'm glad I'm wearing this suit."

"I bet you are, Deller. Our met pictures are showing that the mist is just about over you now. Is it starting to clear?"

Deller stood up. It did indeed look like it was thinning out a little. “Affirmative. I think I’m starting to see through it. Is it dissipating rapidly inland?”

“We’re monitoring that—will come back to you shortly.”

The mist continued to clear as it drifted inland, but as Deller surveyed the beach, he wished it wouldn’t. All around were bodies burned away to bone and rag. He saw the corpses—one big, one small—of the dad who’d been holding his daughter. Even in skeletal form, they appeared to be clinging to each other. It reminded Deller of the petrified remains at Pompeii—loved ones eternally captured in their final, terrible, embraces.

He walked over to the stone steps that led off the beach and up to the café. Had Danny and his Dad reached safety? At the top of the steps, the worst was confirmed: another pair of corpses—one big, one small.

“Geez, Jacks, seriously, what is it? Did some new chemical weapon leak?” There was no response. “Jacks?”

“Apologies, Deller, we’re a little distracted here. The mist’s not dissipating; it’s continuing to roll inland, heading our way, in fact.” Jacks sounded more distant than the five miles Deller knew him to be. “But... to answer your question, no we don’t think it’s a leaked weapon, at least not one anyone is owning up to. Even if it were, would it really travel like this?”

“No, I guess not, but something needs to be done. Summer’s almost over, mist and fog’s going to get a lot more prevalent come autumn.” Deller considered for a moment. “Are people being warned of the immediate danger? You won’t be able to hush this one up.”

There was a slight pause before Jacks responded: “We’re more concerned about preserving ourselves at the moment.” Deller heard furious activity from what he knew to be the back of the surveillance van. “We’re going offline for a little while. We’re going to try to drive away from it.”

“What should I do?”

“My advice, old friend... keep your suit on.”

Deller thought he heard a screech of tires, a thud, what sounded like the beginning of a scream, then radio silence.

“Jacks?” No answer. “Jacks, are you there? JACKS!”

That silence didn’t sound good.

Deller sat on the top step, lost in thought. Perhaps the mist augured doom? Was whatever caused it the hubristic mistake that marked the beginning of the end? He smiled bitterly. Perhaps the planet had had enough

of our toxic behaviour, and this is its way of saying, “That’s it, thank you, bye-bye!”

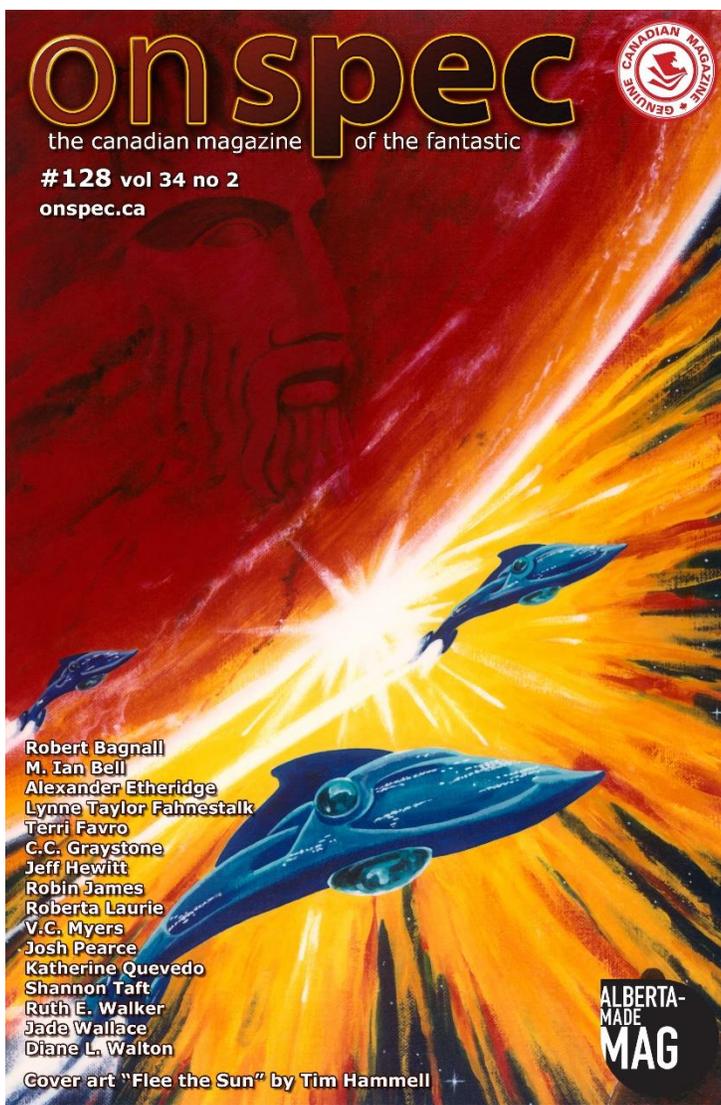
He tried one last time to raise Jacks on the radio.

Still no response.

“If you’re listening, Jacks, there’s time for one more observation.”

Taking a final look at the scene of devastation on the beach, Deller slowly began to unclasp the clips on his visor, readying himself for the last breath of summer.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #128 - V.34 #2



COVER: *Flee the Sun* – by Tim Hammell

FICTION:

When It Comes to the Dog – by M. Ian Bell

In Defence of Plant Life – by Katherine Quevedo

Cryptid Corpse Flower Constellation Superblooms in Space – by V.C. Meyers

Into the Blue – by Jeff Hewitt

Smorg – by Terri Favro

Moonlight Sea – by Ruth E. Walker

At the Sexbot Park – by Josh Pierce

There is No Sequel to Me – by C.C. Graystone

Work Creep – by Jade Wallace

Accept All Cookies – Robin James

Dead Drop – Shannon Taft

Knights of the Spherical Table – Robert Bagnall

Earthfall – Alexander Etheridge

NON-FICTION:

Tim Hammell: “Timagination” – Artist Interview by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk & Steve Fahnestalk

Ruth E. Walker: “Drawn to Questions”

– Author Interview by Roberta Laurie

Bot: “Minion Muppet Bot” & Comic “Space Scout Cookies” – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < <https://onspec.ca/current-issue/> >

ENVY THE EARTHWALKERS

By Sharon Lax

1. *Beneath Seljalandsfoss*

the slap rush mist the frosted veil
lying low or as brush
as fragrance moves to sharp
sweet alpine willow

whisper light between hare-foot sedge
nature's perfumed porticoes
in watered prisms birthing fæðing
from molten lava rock clefts
those who once treasured volcano's rising

rupture the breath
sculpting this gyre
as Snæfellsjökull rose to extinction
tidal songs through shadows
concessions to roots pulled long ago

tears that travelled the ancient incense hollow
terrestrials who with antlers and a sure foot
trampled grasses more moving
than the bluest berry

pilgrims over velvet green
to Hekla's stratovolcano in vibration-ready
in belly in feet
in toes and paws
over sodden undergrowth

over riverbeds and glacial waters

who met Eyjafjallajökull's azure at *Fróði's* Grotti mill
where Skjold Odin's son crushed stone into salt
here on thieving journeys Viking Mýsing spilled

salt satiating appetites alchemized into Kvasir's blood

swelling seas with brine and rhyme
not fin nor flight but desire nursed by those
who marveled or were startled
sang or were sung into breathing

beneath waterfalls ancients sang this land who
carved from trees their ships leaving lumber husks
and skulls cradled in layers of volcanic rock
as glass stung in iced-blue death

those who emptied these ice waters of walruses
fish-teeth tusks too beautiful for leaving
de-feathered the great auks
de-fleshed splintered bones

beneath the rush ancestral spine
who shed scales at Stóra-Hver
beside Torfajökull's heat springs
tasting rain's sulfuric blessings

tears to tell when wings nested in basalt
erupted in black and white over sea
puffins mirrored in silver lunar face
grasping rocky cliffs reptilian

if fallen then celestial and we
chip of moon fur skin carapace
we whose maps were written by worms
with setae to taste soil

scales for locomotion or pachydermia offerings
with trunk to bathe spackled skin in pewter stories
cast in sediment as ancestral paths were given or
read by sky-born dancers who plunged to Earth

then...

slithered through whittled waste
washed ashore then along bruised tundra
eclipsing rivers more grounded than skies

2. *Thereafter*

perception
sjá
in the eye tunglið

amber *what is*
the rest star choir

against seawall
arctic night translucence
dissolves into dreaming
from silver-grey marble in veiled night
water songs illuminate sapphire fountains

what would it mean to envy
the Earthwalkers
the crawlers
the ones who hop and those who dance

to seek their paws and hooves
their toes and scales

what to read
from afar
in their terrestrial prints

to find love in the anniversary of flight
absence preserved in invention

from moon's perspective to ask of claw
the slithering sliding asunder
the thunder of the underfoot

spreading earth
through crackled skin

biting dust
too sweet for wing or fin

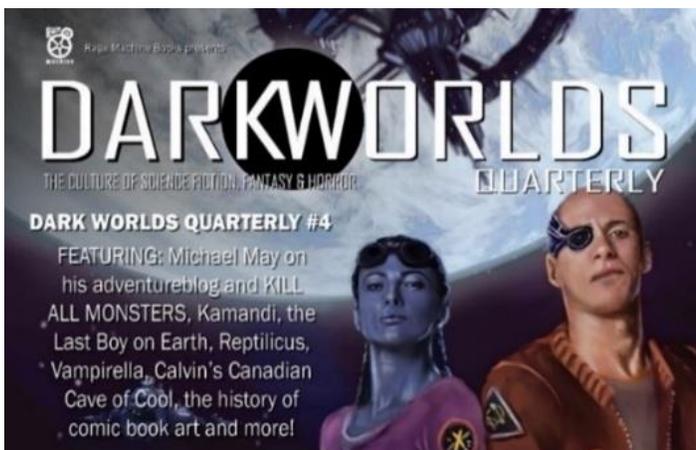
to want of spilling rippling
along memory's muscled back

birthing crater-bone in foetal sac
to envy those who walk
those who run

to crave their sight their breath
their tenacious slip-slide step

vestigial taste or laboured rain
to question what this is
what for
the pain of leaving water

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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

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- Invisibility in the Pulp: 1931-1932

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SPRING-HEELED JACK

By Xiang Jian

Lucy Scales had heard many tales of London, but none more awful than those of Spring-heeled Jack.

“Some say it’s a demon, or the devil himself, that comes to maidens in the shape of a tall, thin gent. He’s got claws in place of hands, eyes a-glow like brimstones, and a mouth spitting hellfire. And if you act contrary and skip on your chores,” Lucy’s mother told her, “You’ll see old Spring-heeled Jack at night through your window, leering at ye.”

Thirteen-year-old Lucy dutifully did her washings, cookings and scrubblings, but still many a night she’d keep awake, watching the window for signs of his lurking.

The man they called Spring-heeled Jack—if a man it was—had been the terror of London these recent years, stealing upon servant girls returning home by way of darkened streets. In most of the reports, the figure had appeared standing still on the bend of a road. When the hapless girl approached, he’d move suddenly to pin her down, proceeding then to lick her face and rip at her clothes with cold claws. Some of the girls died of fright, and others, out of their minds with terror, never fully recovered their senses.

The best look anyone ever got of Jack was a girl named Jane Alsop, back in ’38, who answered a knock on her father’s door one night and heard a man’s voice on the other side.

“I’m a constable. A man is injured here in the lane. Come quick and bring a light.”

Obligingly, the girl fetched a candle, opened the door, and saw a tall man in a cloak whose head was tucked under a policeman’s varnished top hat. An awful smell of sulphur and rot lingered about him. When she put the candle close to his face, he threw off his cloak, revealing a body of tight-fitting oilskin full of black sludge as that from the Thames. His face, lifted now from underneath the hat, was hideously deformed. Tongues of fire leapt from his eyes.

She screamed. He threw himself upon her, peeling her bodice and flesh with metal claws while spitting blue flame in her face.

Thankfully, her screams attracted the attention of a night-soil man and a real constable nearby who rushed to her aid. The night-soil man flung his shovel at the assailant’s head; the constable shot at him, but like a phantom,

the black, oily figure seemed not at all fazed. When he finally turned and fled, it was with quick, light steps, unhampered by injury. The men kept in pursuit until they came upon a wall, when the demon—for a demon it must have been—scaled it with ease and leapt from the top of the wall to an even higher rooftop as though there were powerful springs to his feet, the kind that would have propelled him to the moon.

Miss Alsop recovered her wits enough to give a description of her attacker. Her face, neck and bosom, horribly scarred, would never let her forget.

“And that is why you musn’t ever open the door for a man when you be home by your lonesome,” Lucy’s mother warned her.

At the time she said it, it was unnecessary a warning, for Lucy was rarely alone. Their cottage, which had only a tiny parlour and a kitchen, housed a family of seven, every person’s cough, sneeze and fart clearly heard by everyone else. Then Lucy’s father, gamekeeper for the nearby manor died, and Lucy’s brothers headed into the city looking for work. One found his way to a brewery in Southwark; the second, a coach factory in Long Acre; the third got a job in the shipyards, and the last was assigned to the construction of Euston Station. The boys returned home on Sundays with harrowing tales of backbreaking labour and long, toiling hours, sometimes from four in the morning to six in the evening. While wolfing down the food their sister had prepared for them, they described all the wonders and terrors of the city.

There were factories of iron and fire, where men stood waist-deep and almost naked in huge vats, mixing malts. There was the handling of untreated leather, still bloody and stinking, that needed to be cleaned, coated, and eventually embossed over elegant carriages. There were monstrous ships at the crowded docks and Scottish engineers who spoke in incomprehensible dialects. There was the first railway terminus, with its splendid portico and great hall where people from all walks of life gathered, waiting for the beast of steel and smoke that would carry them to faraway places at unthinkable speeds.

Lucy listened, wide-eyed, to their tales. She was properly horrified at the mention of filth, sweat and blood, of women who walked the streets with their hair down (though she knew her brothers did not always avoid them as they claimed), and of other dangers lurking in the innumerable mews and alleys.

“So it’s a mighty comfort to be back home on the week-end,” said one brother, Sam, between slurps and chews. “And by God, what tasty stew this is, Lucy! Fit for the Highland Mary, and they’ve the best grub in London for under a shilling!”

The Highland Mary was a famous pub down by the dockyards, owned by a widow named Mary McGovern, who was also the head cook.

“I’d heard the other day,” Sam continued, “that Mrs. McGovern’s looking for some hands. Well, Lucy, how’s a job sound? I’ll put in a word, if you’d like.”

A job in London, and under a woman who held her own establishment! Lucy had never thought either thing possible. Couldn’t she learn to become a proper cook at the Highland Mary and use this job as a stepping-stone to something greater? Senior cooks at the best hotels earned up to 50 pounds a year, and there was the chance, slim though it was, that she could save up enough to buy her own business...

“Not while I breathe, you won’t!” Mrs. Scales exclaimed. “Work in a public house? You’d soon be big in the belly with some sailor’s seed. Or worse, slashed to bits by that Spring-heeled Jack. Wouldn’t you rather stay on home where it’d be safe? And serve in the manor house when you be old enough?”

“I’d earn more working in the city than serving in the manor house,” Lucy pointed out.

“But the perquisites at the manor...”

“Perquisites won’t let me save up for a business of me own,” Lucy said. “And besides, Clapham isn’t safe as you think, Mum. Spring-heeled Jack cut up Miss Alsop right over on Lavender Hill, have you forgotten? He may come here, too!”

“Oh, you and yer barmy fancies, child!” Mrs. Scales threw up her hands. “Ungrateful milksop! I pray Spring-heeled Jack does come stalking tonight and take ye to hell, so you’d be plaguing me no more!”

By this time, Lucy was fourteen and a child no longer, and she had begun to doubt if Spring-heeled Jack was indeed a demon. Surely the perpetrator could have been some fellow in a mask, wearing tipped gloves. But what then to make of the mouth that spit fire, the imperviousness against attacks, and most of all, the inhuman speed and marvellous leaps? Secretly, (and quite perversely, she knew), Lucy wished Spring-heeled Jack was real. He was everything awesome and awful at once—an uncontainable, brutal power racing towards the impossible, tearing down old values of propriety while crushing the helpless to feed its own insatiable need. So many nights she’d dreamt of clashing steel and fiery eyes, which sent her startling awake, hot and perspiring.

A few days later came a full moon, and Mrs. Scales fell ill with a chill. After taking a spot of black drop, she drifted into a heavy doze. Lucy made a fire in the kitchen and slowly tended it with a poker, pushing and raking the wood

until it burned with a small but steady flame. Hearing nothing but the fire's soft crackle and the hoarse rise and fall of her mother's breaths, Lucy wondered at the quietness of it all. Whatever happened to the constant noise, cries and fits of laughter? So much had changed, and so many had moved on from this cottage at the edge of the woods, where the occasional game still roamed the undisturbed dark. Now for the first time, she was, essentially, alone.

A knock on the front door broke the silence. A man's voice followed.

"I'm a constable. A man was found injured in the Common. He says he's one of your brothers. Come quick and bring a light."

Lucy's immediate urge was to fly and offer aid. Then she stopped short. It was a Tuesday night, and her brothers had no reason to leave the city unless something extraordinary had happened. She stood in the dark parlour and asked, "What name did the man give you? What did he look like?"

There came no answer.

Lucy crept to the mullioned window and peeked without. No one was there, and nothing stirred aside from some tussocks flattened by a gust of wind. Perhaps the man had gone.

At that moment came a great barrage of beating upon the door.

Lucy jumped back and cried out. Her mother, somehow, remained sound asleep, even while the whole cottage shook.

"What d'you want?" Lucy gathered her wits and shouted over the pounding. "My brothers will be back soon, and they'll give ye a fine thrashing if you've a mind to cause trouble."

The knocks stopped, and then the voice spoke again in the exact same cadence as before.

"I'm a constable. A man was found injured in the Common. He says he's one of your brothers. Come quick and bring a light."

All the hair on Lucy's skin rose and prickled. Was this a dream? She pinched herself hard and felt an unmistakable sting. Remembering that the cottage door could not withstand much force, she hurried to the kitchen and retrieved the fire iron, wrapped a towel round the end for grip, and stood in the middle of the parlour, ready to swing the iron if the intruder stormed in.

Then she smelled something curious—smoke and sulphur, as though twenty muskets had been fired at once, soundlessly.

Could it be him?

Consequences be damned. She needed to see.

With the fire iron clutched hard in one hand, Lucy unlatched the door and threw it open.

Spring-heeled Jack. It was him it was him.

A lean, towering figure with an inhuman face; jagged bits of metal poked from his rotting flesh. His eyes, gaping at her, were two blazing pits, fathomless and fiery red, churning like forges and buffeting her face with pungent coal gas and scorching smoke. He stood draped in a long dark cloak, and with a flourish of his arm, the figure threw it open, revealing a monstrously proportioned body underneath, covered in black, oily engine tar that shined silver in the moonlight and curdled with steam.

Lucy stood riveted in horror. In exultation.

Then she noticed the long metal claws at the end of his arm. He raised them on high, the blade-edges cut the moonbeams before slashing down at her and making the air sing.

She swung her iron to meet the blow.

It hit something solid, for she heard the clang of metal against metal and felt soreness in her arms. The attacker did not flinch. His claws, however, stopped in midair. Lucy faced him, gripping fast her weapon, ready to fight more, to engage.

He turned away.

Lucy blinked, incredulous, as she watched the tall black figure recede from her door. Beneath the trail of his cloak, the grass singed. Embers in the soil flared and dimmed; wisps of smoke curled up and disappeared into the black night.

“Wait!” Lucy cried, not knowing why.

The figure kept going its way, heedless of her call.

He was by now close to the edge of the clearing. He would leave her here, she realized, in the quiet wood, dreaming of steel and fire. Suddenly, the empty prospect proved too much for her, and without thinking, she dashed after him. She leapt—a powerful spring—and managed to lock the fire iron around his neck and attach herself to his body.

Everything burned, from the palm of her hand grasping the naked metal to the rest of her body in contact with his back. He was a furnace, a mass of burning coal, tar, and steel, but she held on.

The air around them thickened and smouldered. He stopped in his tracks, seeming surprised by her choice as he turned his head to observe her. His neck creaked like a rusty hinge. His flaming eyes blew hot in her face, making her tear up, but she stared back with her eyes pried open.

Something happened then, a spark and a whirring, a shift in the gears of the wind. He nodded—or so it looked to her—then slowly wheeled his face forward, his powerful arms drawn to his waist, and began to run.

Lucy had never ridden a train, but it occurred to her that this must be how it felt, like flying. The wind threw back her hair. Trees and rocks sped past in a blur. Kicked up leaves and twigs danced in the moonbeam, still for a fraction of a second, and then whipped back as though sucked into a funnel.

Just when Lucy thought she could go no faster, she began to truly fly.

In one leap, Spring-heeled Jack flew over a tree. His foot barely toed the highest branch, and it propelled him further upwards. Together they shot into the night sky, so high that Lucy felt she might reach up and touch the stars. The air was cold enough to burn, yet she breathed deep, letting the wind fill her up and scald her lungs. She was voiceless, like him, but her heart rumbled and roared.

Then through the clouds, she saw it, London, with all its infernal lights and smoke like a city from hell. She beheld the maze of streets and cramped, dilapidated tenements; the grand palaces and theatres painted white and gold; the rushing Thames, thick and black with filth; the expansive docks filled with ships of all sizes; the railway tracks bounding through the city and beyond, like the long claws of a beast whose power extended far across the earth.

Spring-heeled Jack landed softly on the spire of a church and pushed off again, each jump covering vast distances. Lucy witnessed more. She tasted coal gas and smelled the blood, rubbish and sulphur. She heard orchestral music, grinding wheels on pavements, the spits, sighs, and cries of a million people, and most of all, the crackle of furnaces and the revving of machines running into the new age. And so she flew on the back of Spring-heeled Jack, cutting through the smog, leaping over rooftops, towers, and the tallest masts, flying higher and higher.

In the morning, Lucy found herself walking the streets of Bermondsey. She had no memory of how she got there, but she didn't really care. Deep in the engine of her soul was the faint recollection, just a feeling, of something exuberant.

A portion of London, in the flesh, lay crisp and raw before her. Here was the rotten, briny smell of the Thames, the squawking of birds, the hollering of costermongers, and the creaks and groans of the great ships at the docks. Noise, labour, and life a-stirring. Lucy loved it all. She walked briskly, not

knowing to where exactly, until she saw the Highland Mary, a modest but clean-looking pub next to the cobblestoned, dung-splattered street.

It would be a hard life. She had no illusions about that, but she wanted it. A life in the city. She could make something of it in the long run. Go up, as they say, high as she could.

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #21 – June 2024



Cover art: by Abi Stevens

Contents:

Elizabeth Yu is a Universal Constant

– by Sydney Paige Guerrero

Elevation – by Endria Isa Richardson

An Offering of Algae

– by Uchechukwu Nwaka

In Real Time – by Avra Margariti

Bennamin Gorgeous

– by Bree Wernicke

Entrevista – by Lore Lopez

10 Signs you're addicted to Revisit

– by Joelle Killian

Remember Me as my Best Self

– by JL George

Crop Circles in the Carpet

– by Aster Loxley

Footprints like Craters

– by Yasmeen Amro

Editor Cavan Terrill has the knack of picking nothing but winners for his magazine. I prefer concept-based stories, but the core of most of these stories is character-based fiction exploring fundamental problems in a manner

both new and exciting. As always, I'm impressed. I consider Fusion Fragment a first-class magazine every serious fan of speculative fiction should make a habit of reading. It rewards the reader in so many ways. — *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: < [Fusion Fragment Current Issue](#) >

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Chris Clemens

Chris teaches courses about popular/digital culture in Toronto, where he lives with his wonderful family. His flash fiction can be found at *Invisible City Lit*, *Apex Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Patricia Evans

Patricia prefers to write horror and sci-fi short stories. She has been published in *The Yellow Booke*, *Culture Cult* and *The Horror Zine*. She has also been published in several on-line flash fiction horror sites, which have since closed down. She is not sure if this is related to the quality of her work but firmly believes in coincidence. She is a recovering lawyer who practiced family law for too many years, where she came across stories and events more shocking than anything she could put into her narratives. She lives in Vancouver, but eschews all the bright, fun, outdoor things the city is notorious for. Instead, she prefers to look for quiet, out-of-the-way coffee shops where she can sit undisturbed and think about her next dark story. She has never been and does not ever intend to be, a parent to a small four-legged animal.

Desiree Ferdinandi

Desiree lives, works, and plays on the unceded territories of the Snuneymuxw and Stz'uminus nations (Nanaimo), where she lives with her foster son and a variety of four legged minions of chaos. When she is not reading or writing fantasy stories she can be found teaching at elementary schools around town, partaking of D&D with local goblins, or pleading with her dog to bring back the shoe. Just bring it back, Rayleigh. This is Desiree's first published story.

Greg Fewer

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

Rebecca Franklyn

Rebecca writes from Vancouver, British Columbia. Her work has won *Writer's Digest* Short Story awards and is published in *Polar Borealis*, *Polar Starlight*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She writes across multiple genres and age categories. She can be found on Instagram [@onelifetowrite](https://www.instagram.com/onelifetowrite).

Neile Graham

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

Jameson Grey

Jameson is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has appeared in *Dark Recesses Press* magazine, *Dark Dispatch* and in anthologies from publishers such as

Ghost Orchid Press, Heads Dance Press and Black Hare Press. He can be found online at jameson-grey.com.

M.D. Jackson

M.D. has been an artist, designer and an illustrator for many years. His work has appeared in *Art Scene International Magazine*, *ImagineFX Magazine*, *A Fly in Amber*, *Abandoned Towers*, *Flashing Swords*, *Outer Reaches Magazine*, *Realms Magazine* and on the covers of various anthologies from Pulpwork Press and Rage Machine Books among others. He served as an assistant art director for *Amazing Stories Magazine* and provided them with a number of illustrations.

He works in a digital medium, mostly with Corel Painter but also with Photoshop. Happily, he is also handy with an ink pen and, of course, that old tested and true technology of the HB pencil and a scrap of paper.

Xiang Jian

Xiang is a Canadian author with a macabre interest in Victorian and Regency oddities. They have several short story publications under the Toronto independent publisher tDotSpec, and they are currently in the process of editing their first tome.

Sharon Lax

Sharon Lax lives and walks in Deux-Montagnes, Québec, the lands of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, Abenakai and Anishaabeg, home to the Kanien'kehá:ka. In 2020, her collection of short stories, *Shattered Fossils*, was published (Guernica Editions), and her poetry has been published in literary journals such as *Vallum* and *Dalhousie Review*.

Irena Nikolova

Irena began her life as a poet when she developed an obsession with the poetry of the English Romantics P. B. Shelley and J. Keats. This obsession brought her from Sofia, Bulgaria, to the continent of North America where she pursued her graduate studies in Romanticism at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois, and Western University in London, Ontario.

She has taught British Romantic poetry, Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction and other literature courses at the University of Sofia, Western University, and the University of Ottawa.

Irena is an active member of the Algonquin Square Table, a poetry circle created by A. F. Moritz at the University of Toronto. This poetry workshop has been chaired for many years by Carolyn Clink. She has also participated in the Poetry Fluency Salon of Margaret Christakos at U of T. She has worked with Molly Peacock, who has been a source of poetic inspiration, a mentor and a very insightful critic and editor of her poetry.

Irena has published a book on the poetry of P.B. Shelley and J. Keats entitled *Complementary Modes of Representation in Keats, Novalis and Shelley* (Peter Lang, 2001). She has also published articles on the poetry of W. Wordsworth (Sofia University Press, 1990), the drama of W.B. Yeats in *Drama and Criticism* (New York: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009) and the European Romantic Epic in *European Poetry* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002).

Irena's poems have appeared in *Polar Starlight*, *Poetry Pause* issued by the League of Canadian Poets, *Qwerty*, and the radio program *Accents: A Radio Show for Literature, Art and Culture* in Lexington, Kentucky.

Bryce Paradis

Bryce is a father, author, and competitive dodgeball player from Edmonton, Canada. He is attracted to stories where the characters, world, and

gods are just a little bit mad. His fantasy novel, *Stories from the Nation of Wisland*, can be found on Amazon. Links to past works can be found at bryceparadis.com.

Lee F. Patrick

Lee is a writer of science fiction and fantasy, and sometimes poet, living in Calgary. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee is particularly interested in the stories and poetry of Celtic tradition and history. Lee has four, soon to be five, novels published along with over thirty short works and poems. Look for the novels and some short fiction on Amazon and Kobo in both print and ebook.

Celeste A. Peters

Depending on the local likelihood of snowfall, Celeste can be found scribbling speculative fiction in either Calgary, Alberta, or Tucson, Arizona. Her fiction has appeared in *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*, the *Urban Greenman Anthology* (Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing), the *AMOK: Asian-Pacific Speculative Fiction anthology* (Solarwurm Press), and in all six *Enigma Front anthologies*. She was a two-time finalist in the Robyn Herrington Memorial Short Story Contest, received a Silver Honorable Mention in The Writers of the Future Contest, and is a long-time member of the Imaginative Fiction Writers' Association.

Celeste also translated for publication the cuneiform texts in the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the University of British Columbia's Special Collections, and the UBC Museum of Anthropology... but that's another story.

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*.

Frances Skene

See memoriam on page 64.

Jim Smith

Jim wanted to be a mathematician, had his first story published in 1972, then published a bunch of poetry books with various Canadian presses, some with spines and some without. One of them made it to the 2010 unofficial longlist for that year's Governor General's Award for Poetry. Jim only knew thanks to a whistleblower. To pay for things he went to law school really late and was a trial lawyer for twenty odd years. He wrote a sort of love letter to dear departed Judy Merrill in 2015 and performed it in the Toronto Fringe Festival. He retired in 2021 and insists on writing a childhood memoir, a legal memoir, oddish poetry, and the beginnings of several dozen SF stories.

Mahaila Smith

Mahaila (any pronouns) is a young femme writer, living and working on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ottawa, Ontario. They are one of the co-editors for *The Sprawl Mag*. They like learning theory and writing speculative poetry. Their debut chapbook, *Claw Machine*, was published by Anstruther Press in 2020. Their second chapbook, *Water-Kin*, was published by Metatron Press in 2024. Their novelette in verse, *Seed Beetle*, is forthcoming with Stelliform Press. You can find more of their work on their website: mahailasmith.ca

Ash Thorngrove

Ash is dreaming, or so xe thinks—the amount it takes over xyr life paints filters of what-could-be over everyday reality most days whether xe sees through it or lets xemself be fooled just a little bit by its glow. A story-lover from a young age, xe consumes all sorts of media, video games and music among them. Xyr stories usually end up with a speculative element to them whether they have strong genre plotlines or are more slice-of-life thanks to xyr love for speculative fiction in general.

Xyr crowning writing achievement so far has been placing Runner-Up in the #GOGxRazer Creative Contest with xyr story “For the Love of Catbots.” It wasn’t a literary contest by any means, but xe still feels bubbly-hearted that the developers judging the contest liked the story enough to place it.

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books, and more than 100 short stories. He’s also published occasionally in English. Recent publications in English include the story “The Snows of Yesteryear” (in the Tor anthology *Carbide-Tipped Pens*, reprinted in *Loosed Upon the World* from Saga and *Imaginarium 4*, as well as in Italian translation, earning an Honourable Mention from Gardner Dozois), the story “The Call of the Freezing Souls” in *On Spec*, and the poem “The Night is not Dark” in the SFPA’s *Eye to the Telescope*.

IN MEMORIAM: FRANCES SKENE

DECEMBER 18, 1937 – JUNE 17, 2024

By R. Graeme Cameron

I knew Fran (Frances) Skene for nearly half a century. Highly intelligent, witty, and perceptive to the last of her days, she was a mainstay of fannish organizations and the introduction of non-patriarchal viewpoints into fandom in company with her friend Susan Wood, as well as a creative writer of considerable talent. To do justice to her life would take considerable research.

For this article, because I am pressed for time, I choose to focus on her early fannish days in order to convey the flavour of her personality and dedication. I'll then end with a summation of what I know about her writing career.

Writing in the BCSFA Newsletter #25 of June 1975, Fran detailed her introduction to the B.C. SF Association:

“I remember my first meeting, back in October 1973 when the club was getting on its feet. After being at the Bellingham conference in the summer my name got on a list and so I was informed of the meeting, but I didn't really know anyone and was feeling great trepidation when I arrived, alone, on a Saturday night, at a private home filled with strangers. I didn't even bring something to drink as I thought I might just scoot right out again. As it happened Chuck Davis (he of the books and the radio show) turned out to be the soul of affability as he greeted me at the door and then Dan Say and Michael Walsh zeroed in as they do to many new female attendees. It took, though, several months before I felt really at ease at a BCSFA meeting. One problem is the natural tendency for people to form cliques. Now I'm hoping we can all make BCSFA meetings more enjoyable. How about 'Have I talked to someone new tonight?' as something to ask yourself?”

I don't know where I put my copies of the first 7 issues of the Newsletter, but in issue #8 (Feb 1974) editor Mike Bailey comments: “Fran Skene, who works in the main branch of the Public library, says that more SF books are ripped off than any other genre.”

That same month Fran attended VCON 3, possibly her first VCON. The program book lists her as member #129. Fran later wrote: "The Vancouver bid [for Westercon 30] probably got its start when certain California fans approached Van fans at the Toronto Worldcon in '73. Then VCON 3, held February '74, was embarrassingly successful..."

The May 1974 meeting of BCSFA was held in Fran's home. The annual club election took place, and Fran was voted President of BCSFA by the 24 other members in attendance. At the September 1974 Club meeting at Fran's house an experimental debate was attempted for the first time. Fran suggested the topic "Religion, SF, and death." Moderated by Chuck Davis, the panel included Michael G. Coney, John Park, Susan Walsh and Ed Hutchings. It was judged by all those present to be a success.

In January 1975, in BCSFA Newsletter #20, Fran contributed a book review of "Paramind" by Jim Willer. She concluded "Willer won the Imperial Tobacco Centennial Award for Canadian writing with the manuscript of 'Paramind,' and, I think, rightly so. His ideas are original, his insights fresh, and his vision clear. I am reminded of Marshall McLuhan's statement that it is the artists who are able to look around and see the world as it really is. If Jim Willer had teamed up with, say, Robert Silverberg, who has similar interests and is a pro, we might have seen something really great."

Obviously growing keen, Fran signed up as member #5 for VCON 4 in February 1975. A Westercon 30 Bid Committee was definitely in existence by June, and I suspect Fran was already a member. By July the bid had been accepted and Fran was now the Chairperson for Westercon 30.

In the July club newsletter #26 Fran wrote: "The BCSFA has concerned itself very much with the bid, to the point that at first the bidding Committee consisted of the club executive... [who] may decide not to run for re-election in the spring because of the workload involved in planning for the con. In other words, the club and the con will no longer be so intimately associated."

Note that Fran was elected editor of the BCSFA newsletter in June 1975, beginning with issue #25. She remained editor, or "Information Officer," through to issue #37, after which Allyn Cadogan took over. During this time Fran scored three remarkable covers by Tim Hammell, two by Winifred (who I

think was Fran's daughter Sylvia, but my memory may be playing me false), and two by William Gibson, then a member of the club. He was a student of Susan Wood and both began interacting with BCSFA in 1974.

It was Bill Gibson who suggested the newsletter change its name to BCSFAzine (which it did with issue #34, Apr 76). As he put it in a letter to editor Fran: "I suggest we call it BCSFAzine, in the old fannish tradition of forcing people to roll phonetically-unlikely acronyms around in their mouths like so many marbles."

Gibson also contributed to the group stories being composed at almost every club meeting. You could always tell which paragraphs were his by the sheer quality of the writing. Take the opening paragraph from the February 76 meeting story "Stoned."

"The Clearing was circular, walled with dense green and roofed with clear, translucent blue. Beyond the tangled lianas and rotting boles of fallen date palms, the sea heaved rhythmically. Then, just beneath the swelling surface, the baroque iron prow of an exotic antique vessel was seen. Slicing with Victorian dignity through the limpid waters of the coastal shelf, it swung toward the beach. In the clearing, seven stone spheres rose smoothly from tangled beds of tropical humus."

Fran actively encouraged club members to indulge in this creative enterprise. At the same time, she wasn't afraid to censor anything she considered racist or excessively violent or mean. Consider this example, by an anonymous group story participant, of what she chose to censor.

"The Rev. Moon rolled over in his waterbed and opened another capsule of 'Arica Blue.' His gums bled constantly these days, but on the other hand, he could hardly see the mirror. He spread the blue powder in a thin trail across the blade of a Taiwanese screwdriver and plunged it into the little pink and white bunny rabbit causing a large amount of blood to hit the ceiling and to coruscate over his white robe."

To be fair, the meeting attendees were also determined party-goers and were usually quite inebriated by the time they got around to the group story exercise.

Fran wasn't afraid to censor letters of comment, either. In her reply to a missive from Taral Wayne describing OSFiC infighting she wrote: "I hope you didn't mind all the deletions before publication. I'm happy to hear from you but obviously some of your judgements shouldn't be printed here." Fran could be quite firm when she felt it necessary.

Of particular interest to the evolution of fandom is a comment by her in the BCSFA Newsletter #32 (Feb 76): "In Susan Wood's most recent 'letter substitute' (however she may some day soon turn out a genuine fanzine) she mentioned fantasizing about starting a woman's apa (amateur press association, in which each member writes a letter addressed to all, then all letters make up a zine) called 'Bread and Roses.' So far I haven't joined an apa, partly because I hate writing letters, but for something like this... I think that such a project would be very welcome provided that queen bee types were at a minimum, preferably zero." This sort of thinking was perhaps a precursor to what Susan Wood and Fran Skene accomplished at Westercon 30.

Skipping past VCON 5 in May of 1976, in which Fran was the programme book editor, we come to Westercon 30, held at UBC in July of 1977. Fran was the sole Chairperson. She fully supported that portion of the programming coordinated by Susan Wood which was titled "A Room of One's Own." It was described in the program book thusly:

"A Room of One's Own is intended as a gathering place and informal function space for all members of the convention interested in discussing questions of feminism, sexism, sex-role stereotyping and related concerns (and what we can do constructively to overcome stereotyping) within science fiction and fantasy literature and fandom. We hope that spontaneous discussions will occur, perhaps as people leave notices to organize rap groups around specific topics. We have set up a few specific pieces of programming. The idea is to have each resource person talk for 10 or 15 minutes, then have questions and a general discussion."

Given that the entire convention was devoted to single-track programming, "A room of One's Own" took up a considerable amount of the time available. The following were listed under the umbrella heading of A Room of One's Own:

"Denys Howard discusses his feminist anti-sexism fanzine **Women and Men.**"

“Chelsea Quinn Yarbro discusses **market conditions for women writers—what to expect and what to do about it.**”

“Kate Wilhelm discusses her recent work.”

“Susy McKee Charnas discusses her novels **Walk to the End of the World and Motherlines.**”

“SF and mystery writer Liz Lynn discusses her class on **Feminism and SF.**”

“**Alternatives to Patriarchy: an Exploration of Character and Culture in Science Fiction**—a panel moderated by Paul Novitski, with Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Terry Carr, Marta Randall, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Denys Howard.”

Fran was not only Chairperson for Westercon 30 but also the editor of all the progress reports prior to the convention, at which possibly the first con event she ever participated in was “Rubber Cement, Crepes, Long Distance Swimming and Other Fannish Staples, a two-hour fanzine workshop with well-known west coast faneds.”

For VCON 6 in 1978 she was Chairperson and also the programming director. She took part in the panel “Your First Time: Children’s Science Fiction and Fantasy,” alongside Susan Wood and Leslie Luttrell. This was recorded by Al Betz on reel-to-reel tape and is part of the BCSFA electronic audio archive currently in active negotiation for donation by WCSFA to the Simon Fraser University special collections. It was also recorded on Video tape as part of the visual record of the BCSFA Electronic Archive, the ultimate disposition of which is currently under review by two universities. Fran contributed greatly to the legacy of early VCONs. Well worth preserving.

I hope this brief glimpse of the activity of Fran amid the fannish ambience of the 1970s is a good introduction to the enthusiasm and dedication she brought to fandom her entire life.

Another glimpse of Fran’s contributions is provided by Garth Spencer’s heartfelt tribute to her in issue #41 of his perzine “The Obdurate Eye” (July 2024).

My friend Fran Skene died abruptly in the small hours of June 17, 2024. I am still trying to process this.

Fran was born in 1937 in Kelowna, BC. When I met Fran Skene, a fan in Vancouver, BC, she worked as a librarian at the Greater Vancouver Public Library. She graduated from the University of British Columbia with a Bachelor's in Library Science in 1970.

She was also one of the best-known fans in Vancouver, active in the local BC Science Fiction Association and the long-running general-interest VCON, and editor of her fanzine "Love Makes the World Go Awry" from 1979 to 1983.

Fran edited BCSFAzine from 1975 to 1976. In 2016 she participated in VCON as a member of the Puppetry Renaissance Troupe. She also chaired Rain Cinq in 1983, Westercon 30 in 1977, V-Con VI in 1978, V-Con 9 in 1981, Rain Finale in 1984, and VCON 14 in 1986. She was one of the leaders of the Vancouver in '84 Worldcon bid and was a founding member of BCAPA and VANAPA. She also edited two of the anthologies of the BCSFA writers' workshop, titled "Fictons." In 1987 she was nominated for an Aurora Award for fan achievement.

*Fran was a Guest of Honour at MileHiCon 10, held October 27-29, 1978 in Denver, CO; Westercon 35, held July 2-5, 1982 at the Phoenix Hilton, in Phoenix, AZ; and both Ad Astra 8 (Toronto) and Keycon 5 (Winnipeg) in 1988. Fran was also the 2019 Canadian Unity Fan Fund delegate, representing western Canada to the Can*Con/Canvention in Ottawa (October 18-20, 2019).*

In her retirement, Fran was active in writing circles. She was a member of the Brockton Writers Series (a bimonthly reading series based in Toronto) and contributed stories to the shared-world anthology Windship (2018), along with Lisa Smedman and Guy Immega. Up to 2024 she contributed poetry to Polar Borealis (R. Graeme Cameron ed.) and was active in the online BCSFA writers' workshop and the online Shut Up and Write writers' circle.

Fran is survived by her three children, Sylvia, James, and Dana.

Fran is the author of a poetry chapbook, *Seasons*, and two one-act stage plays that were locally produced. In addition to her poems and stories in *Polar Starlight* and *Polar Borealis*, she has been published in *Eye to the Telescope*, the magazine of SFPA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. Her poem, “Angels,” in *Polar Starlight* # 6, made it to the long list for the 2023 Rhysling Award.

I was lucky enough to acquire a copy of her shared novel “*Windship: The Crazy Plague*” and wrote a review of it for my “Clubhouse” column in *Amazing Stories* on Feb 11, 2022. Seven writers contributed to the work: Guy Immega, Martin Ivison, David Manning, Andrew Reid, Fran Skene, Lisa Smedman, and Peter Tupper. There were nine chapters in all: Fran was responsible for Chapter five.

The premise of the book? “Trade across the desert planet New Hope involves competition between steam-powered and wind-driven dune-creeping vessels. A ‘native’ economy is developing nicely, till a wave of insanity sweeps the colony.”

In my review I wrote: “Normally, individual participants in a workshop produce individual works to flog to publishers. In this case, seven authors collaborated on a book which, edited by Lisa Smedman, they then self-published. How the heck did they manage to do this? Certainly, they worked closely together. Just hammering out the basic premise and gradually filling in the details took a ferocious amount of give and take. But here’s the extraordinary thing; none of them wrote the book as such. It is an anthology consisting of ‘nine tightly integrated stories,’ each essentially a stand-alone, yet all contributing to the overall story arc. The authors were intimately familiar with the entire scope of the work, having helped create it, but were focused on the individual chapters assigned to them. I would argue this combines the best of both worlds, writing for yourself *and* writing in collaboration. True, writing to a shared world is a common theme for anthologies in recent decades. The superb ‘*Medea; Harlan’s World*,’ created and edited by Harlan Ellison, springs to mind. But ‘*Windship*’ depends on a *mutually-created* shared world, which adds strength and credibility to everyone’s contribution, in my opinion.” Also my opinion: a remarkable book well worth reading. You can order it here: [Windship: The Crazy Plague](#)

In the last years of her life, I was privileged to see Fran almost every week as a regular at the bi-weekly zoom meeting I hosted for SF Fen and the weekly zoom meeting I hosted for SF professional publishers, editors and writers. She always graced our get-togethers with her ready laughter and penetrating observations. She was sharp as a proverbial tack right to the end, always forward-looking and progressive in her outlook. And always writing, a good role model for beginning writers her entire life. Many, many people miss her.

Here is a list of the short stories and poems Fran contributed to Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight magazines:

Story – *All That Glitters* – PB #14 – April 2020

Story – *How Not to Die* – PB #17 – February 2021

Poem – *Walls* – PB #19 – September 2021

Poem – *Pipes* – PB #20 – December 2021

Poem – *Daughter of Spring* – PS #05 – March 2022

Poem – *Afterward: Iterations* – PB #21 – May 2022

Poem – *Love and Amoebas* – PS #06 – June 2022

Poem – *Angels* – PS #06 – June 2022

Poem – *Paths* – PB #22 – July 2022

Poem – *Winged Viper* – PS #08 – January 2023

Poem – *Tea and Aliens* – PS #09 – March 2023

Poem – *Moments* – PS #10 – May 2023

Poem – *Death* – PS #11 – July 2023

Poem – *New God* – PS #12 – January 2024

Poem – *Terminus* – PS #13 – February 2024

Story – *Necktie* – PB #29 – March 2024

Poem – *The Well* – PS #14 – April 2024

Poem – *Immortal* – PS #15 – June 2024

Poem – *Dandelions* – PS #15 – June 2024

Story – *Tidal Life* – PB #31 – July 2024

Poem – *The Bells* – PS #16 – August 2024
