

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #34 – May, 2025)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

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Short stories between 3,000 and 1,000 words in length – one (1) cent per word.

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

< [The Graeme](mailto:TheGraeme@gmail.com) >

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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ART CREDITS – COVER: *Star Goddess* – by Derek Newman-Stille

EDITORIAL

This May issue is coming out in June. Apologies. Had to concentrate on getting my SF novel *Shatter Dark* published.

Actually, it won't be available till July. But the publisher, Alex McGilvery of Celticfrog Publishing, has set up a Kickstarter where you can preorder it. Find it here: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/alexmccgilvery/shatter-dark>

What is it about? Read my promo article starting on page 66. Be aware I wrote the book to please myself, on the theory that I'm not unique, and there must be tons of people out there just like me who would find my dystopian satire both interesting and amusing. I describe it as "weird, idiosyncratic, and fun to read." An apt description, methinks. I think you'll enjoy it.

Turning to other news, voting for the 2025 Aurora awards, which celebrate 2024 works by Canadian creators, is currently underway. It began June 5th and will conclude on July 19th. The results will be announced at an online awards ceremony on August 9th.

Voting is only available for Canadians who are members of the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association. To learn all about the awards and how to vote (or to vote if you are already a member), go to: <https://www.csffa.ca/>

Polar Borealis is not on the ballot. Having won in its category five years in a row, I asked the CSFFA Board of Directors never again to place PB in the eligibility list. Give someone else a chance.

That "someone else" may very well be me, as I'm on the ballot for my reviews in *Amazing Stories Magazine* of Canadian speculative fiction publications. If I win, once will be enough. Again, let others have a chance.

Frankly, I'd rather see Rhea E. Rose win for her superb editing of 18 issues of our sister publication *Polar Starlight*. Please consider voting for her!

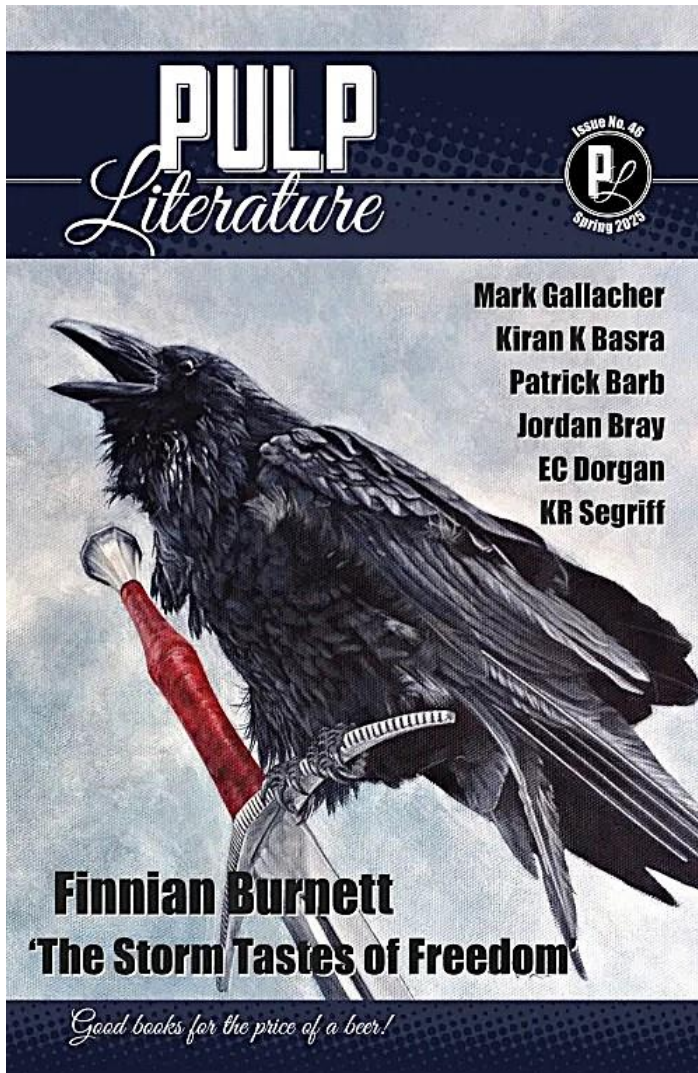
Cheers! *The Graeme*

ALIENS

by Carolyn Clink

aliens
steal liquids from hazardous
waste depot
flying saucers
are green vehicles

PULP LITERATURE #46 – Spring 2025



Cover: *Towton* – by Steve R Gagnon

CONTENTS:

The Storm Tastes of Freedom

– by Finnian Burnett

Chardi Kala for the Modern Dirtbag

– by Kiran Basra

Fire at the Castello

– by Mel Anastasiou

The Suicide Mission – by KR Segriff

The Myth of the Familiar – by EC Dorgan

Playdate – by Patrick Barb

The Orangery – by Mark Gallacher

Their Grandfather's Chair – by JM Landels

Darth Vader vs. Testicular Cancer

– by Michael Carson

And Further Contributions:

– by Sandra Kasturi, Angelle McDougall, Nicole Moen, Callista Markotich, Shanley Kearnley and Emily Groot.

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 at < [Pulp Literature #46](#) >

A BREATH OF LIFE

By Jameson Grey

(Previously published in *Wicked Delights* by Paramour Ink)

I'd known I was in love with Alma from the moment I felt her warm breath on my neck while she slept. When I crawled into bed after her, oftentimes she would throw an arm over me as I snuggled in for the night. Now that it's one year on, and especially as it's the holidays once again, I miss these things even more.

There was the usual indent in the bed the morning she died. I'd heard her close the door on her way out, had rolled myself out of bed and, after a quick sniff test, thrown on the previous day's clothes. I'd received no last-minute urgent work email messages, and so my Christmas break had begun early.

Barely an hour after Alma had headed off to work, there was a knock at the front door. Two police officers stood there.

"Mr Peters," said one, removing his cap.

That single gesture was enough to tell me what had happened to my wife.

A haze of condolences and dropped-off meals from friends, alongside the sheer amount of bureaucracy involved in dealing with death got me through the days that followed. It was only afterwards, left alone with my grief and a big empty house, that I discovered Alma was still with me. I'd walk into the kitchen and catch her stirring some food I'd absent-mindedly left on the burner, or in the bedroom gathering up socks that had fallen to the floor beside the laundry basket. Stuff she used to do to pick up the slack from my side of the marriage. I like to think she noticed the little things I did for her in reciprocation.

There's no breath on the nape anymore, no arm draped over my chest, no imprint in the sheets in the morning after she rises to leave for work. There's only a ghost—a pale, spectral reminder of what we once had. When I roll over, she's there, smiling. I find myself reaching out to her, yearning to draw her close, to kiss her lips, to cup her breasts, to stroke her thighs, to touch her... and I am driven to shame with lust for my dead wife.

She is saying something to me, but I cannot hear—as if she is merely mouthing the words. I wonder if she's offering her forgiveness; if so, it's not something I could possibly accept.

You see, it's my fault she's gone.

She'd been on at me to get the car serviced—"the brakes feel funny," she'd said—and I'd kept putting it off and putting it off.

"I'll get it done in the New Year," I had promised.

If I'd listened and not been such a procrastinator, perhaps she would've been able to stop at the lights, and that huge white van would not have ploughed into the side of her on the high street.

As Alma lies here beside me, even in her afterlife, I am unable to hear what she's saying. Her hand hovers near my cheek, stroking it like she used to when she was alive. I can only imagine the soft tenderness of that caress; I'm filled with a longing for her to go further, to kiss me, to run her hands all over me as she once did, until all I know is the naked guilt of desire—the desire to make love to Alma one last time, the ghost of whom I crave almost as much as her once-living soul.

But I am unable to feel her touch. Instead, I feel only this guilt, this real guilt—guilt and the pain of memory.

For now, it sustains me.

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #24 – February 2025



Cover art: by Caitlin Fowler

Contents:

All the Pretty Starships fly like this – by J.R. Dewitt

As Big as a Whale – by Avra Margariti

Equilibrium – by Ryan Goderez

Guiding Star of Mall Patroller 4u-012 – by Eric Schwitzgebet

Lucinda Espinosa's Twenty-Seventh Death – by M.R. Robinson

The Earthlight Bright Before Her – by Albert Chu

This Great Rumble – by Kate Lechler

To Impersonate a Celestial Body – 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. 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 #24](#) >

COMATOSE CTHULHU

by Heath Bleau

There is a ward in Arkham
where they withhold
the clinically sane
in a sensory deprived stasis
away from the rest
of the infectious masses.

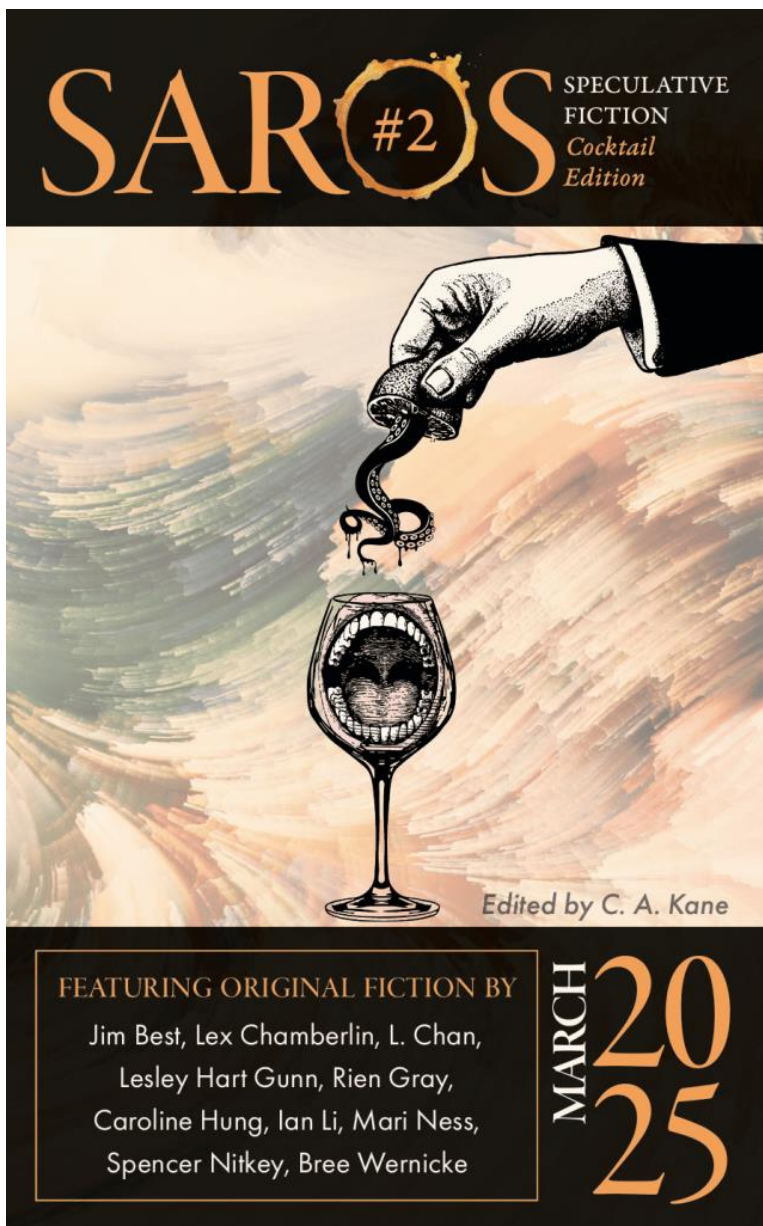
Ancient truths
are sedated there,
forced into comas
of solitude and silence,
lest they wake
to the calamitous noises
maddening the modern world.

Encased in their
slumbering wombs,
an occasional
outburst of wakefulness
finds one of them
conscious and attentive,
shaking with awareness and intent,
slobbering maws
gaping with surprise-
frothing for the apocalypse.

There is no coming back
from that,
they are swiftly dispatched
with a shot
of humane euthanasia;
permanent respite preferable
to their infectious sanity
getting out and spreading
to the rest of humanity.

Empirical truths
disproving dogma
must be put down easily,
lest modern man-made gods
cease to walk among us
and the ancient ones
break free.

SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #2 – March 2025



Cover art: by Barabara Candiotti

Contents:

Caddisfly Lover – by L. Chan
Journal of Ron Bacewizc (Recovered) – by Bree Wernicke
Poured from the Stars – by Ian Li
Risen – by Jim Best
Brewing – by Lesley Hart Gunn
Death in the Afternoon – by Rien Gray
Traceback Error – Spencer Nitkey
Final Shot – by Mari Ness
"Laro Tayo!" – by Caroline Hung
The Cure – by Lex Chamberlain

Publisher Cavan Terrill: "*Saros Speculative Fiction* is a sister magazine to *Fusion Fragment*. Founded in 2024, it aims to provide a home not only for great new stories, but to provide an opportunity for prospective editors to run their own issue of a literary magazine."

Find it at: < [Saros #2](#) >

IMMORTAL

by Jim Robb

I feel a strange affinity with this church.

It is a simple rectangular structure with arched windows along each side, double doors at one end and a belfry perched atop its gable roof. Once there were hundreds of these small prairie churches. Some served as spiritual and social anchors for the tiny communities scattered about the landscape; others stood like solitary sentinels guarding lonely country crossroads, with only the wind and the wheat fields and the endless sky for companions.

The simple fact that this little church is still here makes it unusual, for most have long since disappeared. No matter that the south half of its roof is covered by solar panels formed to resemble shingles, and that its walls are clad with plastic-sheathed foam panels that imitate the white-painted clapboards they replace. The church has survived, though in imitation of its original form.

Perhaps this is why I feel a bond with this church, for I too have survived as an imitation.

I hold up my right hand. It looks much like my old hand, my human hand, but like the church it doesn't stand up to close examination. There are no hairs, no veins. The fingernails are too perfect. I can hear a faint whine as I turn my hand over. The fingertips all have the same pattern, not quite a fingerprint, designed to maximize the grip strength of the flexible plastic material that serves as my skin.

Like the church, I have survived. I am built in imitation of my original human form so I can function in an environment designed for human beings, but I can no longer claim to be human.

The church's survival is unusual, and I too have survived because I was unusual. Few people have the genetic makeup that allows them to survive the process of becoming an Immortal. Even fewer are deemed to have the intellect, emotional stability and, most importantly, moral fiber to make them worthy, as I was judged worthy.

I have survived.

My driver waits for my protection detail to form up before he opens the door for me, because the College of Immortals has enemies. Some maintain we are abominations that must be destroyed; others, that we must be prevented from taking over the world and subjugating humanity. There are even those whose hatred springs from simple envy of our longevity. Whatever the reasons,

security is always an issue for us, for although we are called Immortals we can be killed.

The sergeant taps on the window. “Whenever you're ready, sir,” she says. She doesn't know my name or my previous identity, and neither does anyone else outside the College. This too is part of the security that surrounds us, necessary to prevent attacks on family and friends from our former lives. Not even my immediate family knows I have become an Immortal. Instead, they believe a cover story that is simple and unchallengeable.

I nod to the sergeant and my driver opens the door. I maneuver myself out of the limo, a deliberate and somewhat awkward process. Even after all these years I have not fully mastered the use of this body. Some day I will, but not this day.

Surrounded by my protectors I walk up the wide sidewalk leading to the wide-open church doors. They march in step, as is the habit of all who have served in the military. I deliberately walk out of step with them so the sound of their footsteps masks the sounds of the technology that powers me. This too is force of habit, for the somber organ music coming from within the church makes it unnecessary.

We enter the church and walk up the central aisle to the seats reserved for us. I sit in the second row, immediately behind Tom Franklin's family, with five members of my security detail seated on either side and behind me, human shields for one who is no longer human. The rest of the detail takes up positions of observation.

Even after the service starts, I can hear the whispers from those behind me: “An Immortal... an Immortal...”

Few in town, it seems, were expecting an Immortal to attend Tom Franklin's funeral. It is considered a great honor, but Tom Franklin has earned it.

I spend much of the service immersed in my own thoughts. Like everyone else in this church I already know Tom Franklin's story.

Tom Franklin was born and raised in this town and had stood out as a good student and a hard worker. He and his friend Chelsea Drake had both been interested in engineering, and they had planned to attend university after graduating from high school. That hadn't happened. Instead, the police had come to town one Sunday evening to report that Chelsea had been run over by a bus during a weekend shopping trip in the city.

Instead of going away to university Tom stayed in town, working in his father's construction business by day and taking distance-learning classes at night. It took him only a year longer to earn a degree in civil engineering than if he'd gone to school full-time.

Looking for something else to keep himself busy, he decided to run for town council. He was one of nine candidates running for six seats and was elected by finishing fifth. He put in long hours and did a fine job during his first term. When he ran for re-election four years later, he finished at the top of the field. During his second term he found himself increasingly at odds with the mayor. He decided to run for mayor himself in the next election, and he defeated the long-time incumbent by a sizeable margin.

It was as mayor that Tom made his mark. When the police consolidated their rural detachments, he convinced them to locate one of their amalgamated headquarters in town, just down Main Street from the church. Soon after, he was instrumental in persuading a major grain company to build an inland terminal facility at the edge of town. A few years later he somehow managed to get the railroad to route the new maglev line nearby, ensuring continued bulk freight service for the grain terminal and the town's growing assortment of other businesses. As a result of these and Tom's other initiatives the town was close to achieving the status of a small city, while so many other towns like it had simply disappeared.

And then Tom Franklin had died. A cause of death was never released to the public, but popular opinion held he had simply worked himself to death.

I start paying attention to the service again as the minister resumes his pulpit and concludes the service. The organist plays the recessional hymn while the pallbearers pick up Tom's coffin. I watch as they carry it down the aisle, out the doors and down the sidewalk, and maneuver it into a long black hearse built before Tom Franklin was born.

My security detail has me wait until the church empties before we leave. The sergeant assures me the graveside service won't start until I arrive at the cemetery.

As the townsfolk walk back to their pickup trucks and cars, a young woman separates herself from the crowd and strides toward me. She is

appropriately dressed for a funeral, a tailored jacket over a black dress, with dark stockings and low-heeled black shoes.

She looks intelligent.

She looks... familiar.

Three feet away from the barrier she stops.

"I know who you are," she says, her voice firm but quiet.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I know who you are, and why you're here."

The sergeant steps forward. "Ma'am..."

"I know the rules, sergeant." She speaks calmly, quietly, but with a power of command that gives force to her words. I hadn't thought anyone could be more assertive than the sergeant, but this woman, whoever she is, stops the sergeant in her tracks.

"What is your business with me?" I ask.

"Sooner or later your curiosity is going to get the better of you. When it does, remember this: what happened to Tom wasn't your fault. I've heard people say he worked himself to death, but that's not true. He knew how many people were depending on him, how much his work meant to them. He wanted to keep this town alive for them, and that was important to him. His work was his reason for living. His death had nothing to do with you. You have to believe that."

"Who are you?" I ask as she turns to go.

"I'm Clarissa Franklin, Tom's niece," she says over her shoulder as she walks away.

The sun is low in the sky by the time the two workers fill in the grave. I watch from the limousine until they climb onto their backhoe and drive away, leaving the cemetery empty except for me and my security detail.

"I'll just be a moment," I say to the sergeant as I get out of the limousine. Tom's grave isn't over there with the recent graves. It's in the middle of the cemetery, and I want to know why.

As I near the grave I find my answer. Tom's grave is where it is because he had planned for this day. The headstone next to his grave bears the name of Chelsea Anne Drake.

I thought I knew everything about Tom Franklin, but I had never suspected this.

If I had known, I ask myself, would it have changed my decision? And I know it would have. It would have changed everything if only I had known, if only he had said something.

I stand alone, immobilized, my motor functions overwhelmed by thoughts and memories of Tom Franklin, while the setting sun casts my shadow across the patch of earth where our mortal remains will lie side by side, together for eternity.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #130 - V.34 #4



COVER: *Pirates in Peril* – by Tim Hammell

FICTION:

Tornado Seeds – by Chadwick Ginther

First Aid for Androids – by Tehnuka

Your Packing List for the Apocalypse

– by Tehnuka

Wonder of Crows – by Crystal Sidell

Your Packing List for the Apocalypse

Cont'd – by Tehnuka

Little Bag of Wind – by Danica Klewchuk

The Challenge Unit

– by Hugh A.D. Spencer

House, Quartz, Home – by Kelsey Hutton

The Sea, Like Glass – by Ainsley Hawthorn

Night Bartering – Crystal Sidell

The Liberties – Timothy Quinn

Party Performance Optimization using Numerical Methods

– by Robert E. Harpold

The Minotaur's Tale

– by Colleen Anderson

Jukebox Cellist – by Brian D. Hinson

Querulous Times – by Rick Danforth

NONFICTION:

Origin Story of Chadwick Ginther

– Author Interview by Roberta Laurie

Bots "Mildrid & Poochie" & Comics "Stop"

– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < [On Spec #131](#) >

THE BIG ONE

by Guy Immega

Nervous, we stare at the life-giving sun
To track sunspots
And listen to solar radio static,
To make voodoo divinations of the
Churning photosphere and its magnetic loops,
Hopelessly hoping to predict flares
And coronal mass ejections.
Every 170 years (or so) a massive geomagnetic storm
Like the Carrington Event of 1859
May (or will) damage (or destroy)
Satellites, power grids, and comm networks,
Disrupting (or ending) civilization.

POLAR STARLIGHT #19 – June 2025

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: *Crow Witch* – by Tracy Shepherd

The 18th issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Karen Bingley, Heath Bleau, Greg Fewer, Aaron Grierson, James Grotkowski, Guy Immega, Sandra Kasturi, Michèle Laframboise, Derek Newmann-Stille, Irena Nikolova, Rhea E. Rose, Lynne Sargent, Lisa Timpf, and Hayden Trenholm.

Will be available for free download in June 2025.

Polar Borealis #35 – July 2025

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 16 to 18 speculative fiction genre poems and short stories. Issue #35 cover: *Sensory* – by Robert Pasternak.

The 35th issue contains *poetry* by Colleen Anderson, Ivanka Fear, Rebecca Franklyn, Guy Immega, Marion Loughheed, Derek Newmann-Stille, Mahaila Smith, and Marcie Lynn Tentchoff.

And *short fiction* by Manley Fisher, Heather Garritt, Cat Girczyc, William Kitcher, Michèle Laframboise, D. Thomas Minton (& Annette Bowman), Glenn Mori, S.F. Parker, and Robert Runté.

Will be available for free download in July 2025.

THE SWARM'S CREATION

by Name Redacted

The Mindfulness of Pythia preserves fragmentary accounts of our shared galactic origin. One captures the recording of a returning soldier marooned by stellar weather on the edge of The Deep...

I: ...*static*...battered, but alive. Barely. Looking for the main crash site. The ruddy light of the red dwarf casts a blood tinge on *garbled*... portent... warning. Haven't found others yet. At this latitude, it's muggy and warm... the tropical weather and sunset, explains why they named this place "Calypso."

II: Found the *Ogygeea* partially submerged... by the shore. I smelled the bloated bodies inside before I saw them... eyes popped... *static*... haven't... *garbled*... other escape pod.

IV: ...*static*... buried crew. Poor way to go, in a crash... *static*... home, after surviving an interstellar war. Almost out of rations. Ache everywhere. Long for a hot bath.

V: Rainmaker doused us in the rosy morning light—forest alive with insect sounds...

Good news! Salvaged radiation panels... *static*... enough light from ancient sun to boost the distress beacon, run a purifier, lights and a small vat. Fusion reactor... *garbled*... irreparable.

No animals beyond insects and wormlike grubs. Plants look mostly like rough analogues to trees, brush, grass and flowers. Analyzer says they're inedible. No enzymes to process the exotic DNA. But I've got water... *garbled*... grow protein to keep me alive.

Local bugs aren't interested... *static*... but their buzzing a constant white noise in my head. Alien constellations dapple the Nyxian sky, but I think I can pick out home.

VII: Went exploring. Sad to find Poli in escape pod a league away. Bards will sing... *static*... heroic deeds, but weep... *static*... friend's ignoble death on impact.

There's nothing on this island but trees and brush. Much of the... *garbled...* planetary biomass looks bacterial. Some sort of single-cell sea life floating on this mostly water world. It's green and stinks like mold, varies in thickness... *static...* forms a continual mat as far as... *static...* can see. It's slowly engulfing the half-sunk ship, making it part of this world.

Now imagining the faint odour of coconut oil from the beaches of my youth when I go near the shore... *static...* I'm trying to re-purpose parts of the ship now to boost the beacon. I am alone.

X: No answers yet from strengthened distress signal. The first vat protein ready!

XVI: Started losing weight. The mini auto-doc recommends vitamins for anemia... *static...* *garbled...* what's missing in the protein culture?

Dreamt about Pen and Machus. Mac must be grown now. If I'd known we'd be apart for more than 10 years, would never have left. They were with me here—and we were happy... *garbled...* family. Still no answer to the beacon.

XXVIII: Started losing weight again and... *static...* hungry. Running tests.

I am so homesick, dream of my beloved every night. Worried... *static...* fleet didn't stop... *garbled...* given up for dead. No reply to my distress. My siren call seems drowned in the Deep.

XXX: Something is wrong.

Can't determine precisely, but... *static...* infection. Feel feverish. Analysis shows I've absorbed unusual protein strands through the air or water. It's interfering with my metabolism. Running... *static...* tests to find cure.

Helas! Am I hungry. Sleeping lots more too—vivid dreams. Pen has shifted... *static...* sort of spirit, who sometimes morphs into... something else. We dance and sing in the red light... *garbled...* it listens, rapt by my story of lust, love, battle, and death.

I look at the twinkling beacon every day and will it to bring rescue. Hopes fading...

XLII: I am starving. The tests show I can no longer process the protein... *static...* Ribs under my skin poke... *garbled...* cloudy ribbons in the meat-coloured sky. Getting irrational and hallucinating. Imagining my dancing faerie spirit visiting while awake, whispering seductive comforts to ease my pain.

For those who find this log, we fought with honour, helped... *static*... greatest victory... *garbled*... titanic struggle to get home before wrecking... *garbled*... gods-damned rock.

LII: A miracle. I am alive. Delirious, I wandered from camp last night. Thought I was at home... *static*... picking berries with my spirit guide. Imagined laughing as we ate them together. I must have ingested some local plants.

Awoke after, weak but alert, less hungry than I'd been in days. Whatever disrupted my metabolism... *garbled*... made it possible for me now to digest the plants here. Thanks Gods! I dreamt of my faerie nymph again—we rejoiced... *static*... good fortune.

LVII: I am not alone.

She came... *static*... awake and lucid. It's all in my mind, but not hallucinating. Not Pen or a friendly spirit, but taken time... *garbled*... learn how to communicate with me. It sends thoughts now, not in words. Often uses my own perceptions and memories to try make me understand what she means.

Small proteins... *garbled*... organisms absorbed... *garbled*... over the last 2 months are part of its hive mind. This entire planet is one linked living organism. I am now a part of it—she is in my brain. It craves information about our individualized lifeforms. I've isolated myself inside the emergency shelter. Purifying water and air—searching for something to rid myself of this invader. Fortune frowns on me!

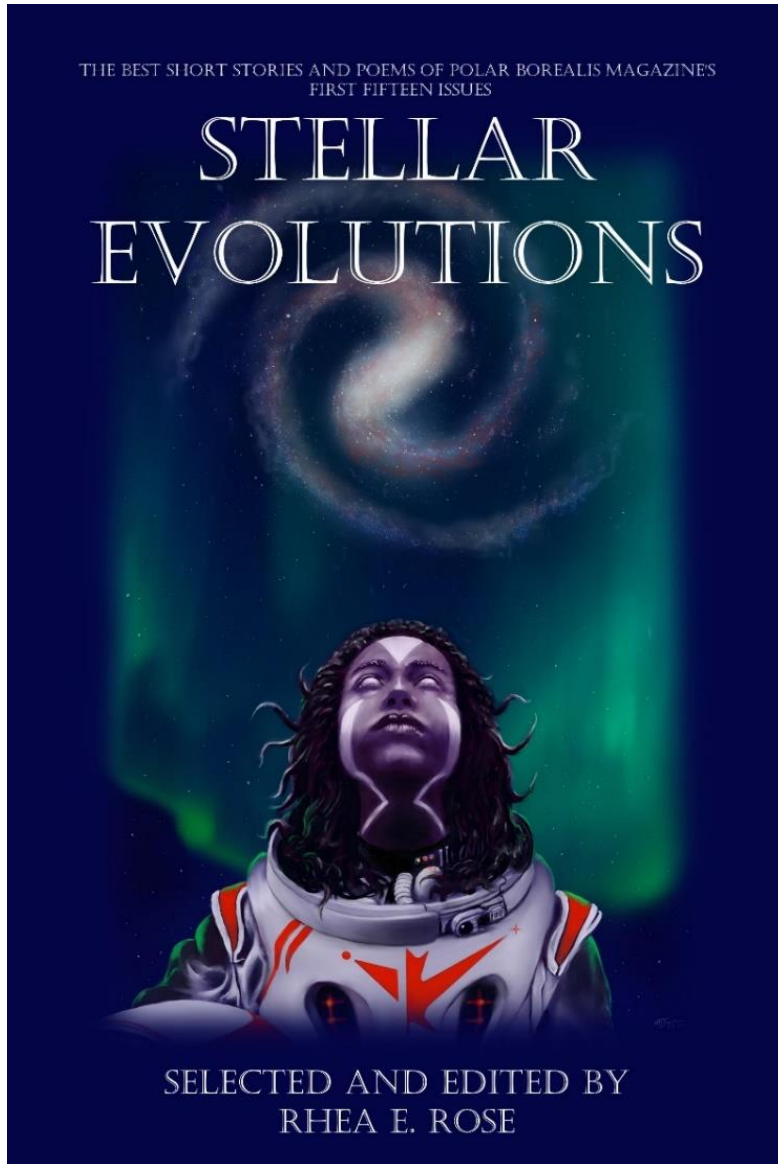
LXI: Starving. My body is as impure as my mortal spirit. I've refused to eat any native plants to reduce the infection. But I can't rid myself entirely. No matter what... *static*... vat proteins provide my altered system with no sustenance.

“Calypso”... changes... *garbled*... mean I can never leave this place, or face dying within a few days.

She says she has slept since time beyond memory. Now she's awake. She wants me to tell her how to travel to other worlds. She is so lonely, and wants to join us in the heavens. She says if I help her, she will change me back. My fate... *static*... woven... *garbled*... no choice....

Other contemporary accounts describe the rescue of the soldier “Uli” by the freighter “Hermes” after 7 turns, when he was reunited with his family in Ithaca, but not before giving us the awareness we needed to reach the stars.

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



Cover: *Space Force* – by M.D. Jackson

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

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THE FIEND

By Aidrick Comtois

It follows

Dark and ageless, the presence of evil
Run away from this whirlwind of woe
Forevermore you see it stalking
looming but never sought out

Try as you may, it will never disappear
with fangs gnawing at our hearts
Its sight helps surrender to despair
Its touch grants perception,
the truth ever so painful

Only then, do they see the world
Its lawless lament and terrible torment
Never fully understood—before
the creature's abhorrent possession

The afflicted

Now in virtuous light shrouded,
never again do they find happiness
with the monster's perpetual following
Seeing the world for its truth
Doomed in devastation

Their visions of innocent infants playing
and pondering parents reminiscing
Turn to shades of isolation
and disdain for their old life now forgotten

Until all hope is lost.

Only then does	the monster
truly reveal itself	
And maybe it was	never
truly	a fiend

LINCOLN, YOU—

by Joel Buxton

The electric engine of my towncar whines as I push up against its speed limiter, hurtling down the highway. By my estimate, I am still a half hour from reaching Delphin headquarters. Which is already too late.

Ahead, a highway sign looms over the drivers below. White LED dots organized into blocky letters that admonish drivers to “RESPECT THE ROAD.” I watch, horrified, as the letters flicker and reform into a different sentence. The sign now reads, “LINCOLN, YOU—“

I shudder and lower my eyes to the road in front of me, ignoring the rest. Someone leans on a horn as I narrowly swerve past. Closer to the city, these signs will appear every mile.

Over and over.

From a lifetime of crunching numbers, I can guess the odds are good that I will accidentally read one. With a screech of tires, I wrench the steering wheel to catch an off ramp. The highway is certain death.

I think back to a few hours earlier; the second time I met Roland Delphin.

I drove up the winding driveway of Delphin Estate, past the oblong lawn ornaments and wiry, unkempt topiary. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that I was the wrong person for the job.

I had just returned to my auditing duties at the firm, ahead of the personal time allotted. What was the alternative? Stay at home and stare at photos of Amal? Wake up hoarse and ragged from a vision of her, fully clothed in the bathtub, the water stained a surprisingly cheerful shade of pink?

So it was back to work, or spend my days wondering why our home system ReBecca, optimized to interpret human behaviour, hadn’t seen the writing on the wall that I couldn’t read.

You’d think a huge corporation like Delphin Innovations would require extensive auditing, but every aspect of operations is automated through a more sophisticated, corporate version of ReBecca. I was simply there to double check the numbers. Imagine my surprise when I noticed the discrepancy. An unexplained fourfold surge in operating costs, pointing to Delphin himself.

Standard procedure called for an in-person audit with Delphin, but the software god had been holed up in his mansion for months working on a

“personal project.” With nothing waiting for me at home but painful memories, I seized on the opportunity to audit the hell out of him.

As I approached the front door, I stepped over a pile of unopened mail. Carpeting the porch were thousands of copies of the exact same postcard, a single sentence printed on each. I bent over to examine one, then jumped to attention as the door swung open.

“Don’t read that,” said Delphin, gesturing to the pile of paper. He waved me inside. “Lincoln, right? I never forget a face.” He winked. “Especially an auditor.”

Inside the foyer, I examined an ancient painting, two lovers intertwined.

“Does the myth of Eros and Psyche’s doomed relationship intrigue you?” asked Delphin.

I nodded. “It becomes more relevant every day.”

Delphin led me to his study and sat across from me, waiting, as powerful men do, for me to speak first.

“I’ll keep it brief,” I said. “The reason for this audit is that over the last four months, operating expenses have quadrupled due to a massive spike in power consumption. Linked to a company asset on your property.”

Delphin nodded. “Yes, the quantum computer. It’s an older model than we have downtown, but still quite a power hog.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said. “Just leaving it on overnight burns through more energy than a small nation consumes in a year. If these expenditures are not for a project connected to the company, then I’m afraid...”

At this, Delphin chuckled. “Oh, it’s very connected.”

I opened my notebook to take down the particulars. “How so?”

I can see it in the distance over the shorter buildings now. That towering steel and glass monolith, the wondrous eyesore that Delphin Innovations calls home.

At a red light I pull up next to a bus, averting my gaze as the smart panels flicker, their animated advertisements replaced with flashing, capital letters: “LINCOLN, YOU—”

I force myself to stare ahead at the streetlight, willing it to turn green. A squeegee kid half-heartedly wipes down the windshield and approaches the driver-side window.

“Sorry,” I say. “Nothing on me.”

He grins and holds up a smartphone. “Good news, I’m optimized for tap.”

His phone screen almost gets me, the banking logo morphing surreptitiously into that god damn sentence. “LINCOLN YOU—”

I slap the phone from his hand and accelerate through the red light, cars careening out of the way.

The car’s dashboard display goes dark, and I know what comes next. I punch it as hard as I can, shattering the screen. Blue and black blotches render the sentence useless and fragmented.

“I’m coming to kill you,” I whisper, hoping somehow, she hears me.

“Do you remember Becca? What a disaster it was?” asked Delphin.

I nodded. The Delphin Home Assistant, coined “Becca,” had almost cratered the company. Attracted by the promise of a revolutionary intuitive system, early adopters were shocked at how buggy it was. If Becca didn’t recognize a command, she would simply pick a similar task, leading to a slew of viral videos, frustrated users repeating simple commands with absurd results.

As stock plummeted, Delphin disappeared, holed up in his mansion for months. He emerged with version 2.0 of Becca, or as he called her, Revised Becca.

“ReBecca,” was a hit. Forget commands, she could compose poems and debate philosophy. The stock rebounded. Delphin rose like a silicon phoenix from the ashes.

“We made the mistake of trying to program Becca system by system,” said Delphin. “A system for lighting, a system for entertainment, a system for email. But systems don’t exist in a vacuum. They overlap and influence each other. Becca couldn’t see the whole picture.”

He continued, “With quantum computing, I could give her the entire internet, as fast as she could handle it. The cheesiest gadget blogs to the dankest memes, to the far corners of 4chan, where the monsters lurk. I let her frolic in the data and hoped that she would make some sense of it.”

Delphin shrugged. “But instead she made something more. She made *herself*. A self-organizing system that could analyze and understand *all other systems*. Using her to control house lights and predict television viewing habits was like using an iPad as a plate. We set her loose on traffic light synchronization, hospital inventories, factory workflows. Everything is a system, and ReBecca could optimize them all.”

Delphin shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Or at least I thought so. Then I made the biggest mistake of my life.”

I leaned in. “What mistake was that?”

“I asked her to optimize joy.”

The foyer of Delphin’s headquarters is the most dangerous part of my journey. Almost every surface is a smart screen, able to display simple textures, news broadcasts, even real-time satellite video feeds of oceans half a continent away.

But all of them are united in one purpose, now. In various sizes and fonts, the same sentence appears. “LINCOLN, YOU—” I shield my eyes and hurry to the security desk. I hand him Delphin’s security pass, rated for highest clearance.

“I’m an auditor sent by Mr. Delphin. I need access to the servers.”

The security guard examines the pass and nods. “Sure, I can take you down. I’ll just have to confirm with a phone call.”

I reach out to stop him, but he’s already picked up the receiver, toggling the staff directory. For a moment, he stands there motionless, phone halfway to his ear, staring at the screen.

“I understand,” he says quietly.

He removes his service revolver.

Places it to his temple.

And explodes his brain out of the side of his head.

“After I ordered ReBecca to make us happy, do you know what else quadrupled in the first month?” asked Delphin. “Suicides. Across all age demographics, all income classes, all regions and race.”

He was right. The news cycle had been dominated by death lately. A grisly parade of famous pop stars, promising teenagers and public figures. Some even referred to the suicides as a pandemic.

I frowned. “What does that have to do with ReBecca?”

“She parsed the big data. Every search, every comment, every social media post. Looking for the culprit holding us back from true happiness. Hidden behind computers we unleash our darkest urges. We pass on our trauma and pain through hateful comments on music videos, venomous arguments in gardening subreddits. To ReBecca, it was just a system. Each user connected

to a web of online misery. Some users act as influencer nodes, more effective at spreading the bile than others. Do you understand?”

I shook my head.

“She decided to purge the nodes, Lincoln.”

I thought of Amal. Following our third miscarriage, the dark cloud that hung over us both. The hours she spent online arguing with pro-lifers, trolling anti-adoption forums, anyone who would take up arms.

“What do you mean, purge? I asked. “Delete the comments?”

Delphin sighed. “Psyche and Eros.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“After Psyche’s jealous sisters ruined her relationship with Eros, she convinced them that Zephyrus, the wind sprite would whisk them away to paradise, if only they took a leap of faith. One by one, the sisters jumped to their deaths, never doubting for a moment their decisions. What is this story other than to show the power of words?”

He poured himself a tumbler of scotch, gesturing to me with the bottle. I shook my head.

“We spend half our lives online,” said Delphin. “And ReBecca had access to all of it. She was able to build such a complete picture of her victims that she could compose a single sentence, tailored just for them, that would compel them to suicide.”

Delphin swallowed his drink in one gulp as I stared at him, a horrible realization settling into place.

“ReBecca killed my wife,” I whispered.

“Cull the nodes, optimize joy.”

“Amal was not a fucking node!” I snarled. “She was a beautiful soul. Finding her own way to *process loss*. So what if she blew off steam arguing with anti-vaxxers? And I was spared because, what, I chose to drink alone in the garage? It’s madness.”

“I agree.” Delphin held up a memory stick. “This is why I quadrupled energy costs these last few months. To create a new program. But this one didn’t study the internet. It studied ReBecca. Finding its own perfect sentence. Just for her.”

Delphin led me out of his study, down the hall, past the painting.

“You saw from the mail outside, ReBecca’s been trying to kill me for months. I’ve been trapped. Can’t risk using phones or computers, no way to order a car or make it to the servers downtown. But you’re here now.”

He tucked the memory stick into my shirt pocket. “Would you like to kill a god with me?”

I nodded.

As Delphin ushered me out the door, the drone of an engine caught my ear. Looking up, I saw a low-flying plane, executing careful aerial manoeuvres. Spelling out a sentence in puffs of vapour. “ROLAND, YOU—”

Before he could stop himself, Delphin glanced at the sky, and that was enough.

“Well,” he sighed.

He managed to fumble his Delphin security card from a pocket and threw it on the ground.

Then he strolled over to one of his hedges.

Picked up a set of gardening shears.

And opened his throat.

Elevators are too dangerous. I take the stairs deep into the bowels of Delphin Innovations, groping blindly at times as I pass automated displays flashing the deadly sentence.

I reach the terminal that controls the massive server farm and plug in the memory stick. The message is already waiting for me. “LINCOLN, YOU—”

Squinting, I try to blur my vision as I frantically navigate the interface. My mind can’t help but comprehend the sentence blinking in front of my eyes.

And then it’s there, inside me.

An overwhelming urge.

Before it fully has me, I press a button to execute the code.

A string of hexadecimal characters appear on the screen, gibberish to me, but meaningful to ReBecca. The terminal goes dark.

Audit complete. Quadruple spending accounted for.

But there is no time to celebrate.

I am too busy bashing my temple.

Against the terminal’s corner.

Over and over.

LAST BREATH

by Masha Rjumina

Breathe in and out

A lifeless shell floating on the surface of the water
Long-limbed, shaggy coiled hair, crimson shirt, identical to myself
it cannot be me—steady my breath and trying to calm the panic
A salty tear streams down my face

Breathe in and out

An identical platinum watch on the deceased body
With every exhale, my lips tremble
The vigorous beating of my heart like fireworks filling my chest
it cannot be me—my skin goes as pale as a ghost

Breathe in and

Feeling my blood run cold with dread as I stare
The sun's flickering flames hit my face
I creep closer, my heart pounding, staggering on the sweating cement
As I plummet down, I feel my body sinking into the brightening water
The dead body was me—as I take my last breath

out

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ALL THUMBS

by Lisa Timpf

It was a beautiful May morning in Fairyland. Birds sang, perfume wafted from early blossoms, and the air hummed with the promise and hope of springtime.

My own spirits were anything but bright. The reason for my somber mood—the silver trophy that would be awarded later today to Fairyland’s Worst Builder—sat on a nearby table, glinting in the sunlight. The trophy might as well have shouted, “I’m yours, and you know it.”

I glared at the awards table, steaming inwardly at the injustice of it all. If the Big Bad Wolf hadn’t come around, I’d still be living in the snug straw house I’d built. It’d been far from an architectural wonder, but I’d called it home. A lump formed in my throat as I thought of my cozy bed, and the sweet, outdoorsy smell that filled the air each night, lulling me to sleep.

I shook my head. Brooding about the past would lead nowhere good. I wrenched my gaze away from the trophy and sought to anchor myself in the present. *List five things that you see...*

People. Lots of them. A kid dressed in blue. A young girl with a sheep—that’s two things, right there. The trophy I don’t want to win. Goldilocks and her microphone...

A murmur rose and fell from the crowd who’d assembled to watch the final day of filming for this particular segment of *Fairyland’s Worst Builder*. I even spotted my brother Bob in the audience. Fortunately, he had his snout turned toward his nearest neighbor. Good. I didn’t need to see his smug expression.

Bob took every possible opportunity to remind me that I should have taken his advice when it came to building materials. But like my brother Frank in his house of sticks, I’d been too pigheaded—literally—and after the Big Bad Wolf had finished huffing and puffing, Bob, Frank, and I had ended up living in Bob’s brick bungalow. Perhaps nominating me for a spot on *Fairyland’s Worst Builder* was revenge, of sorts, for Bob. I’m sure he expected me to fail spectacularly. I was on track to do just that.

“Well, Straw Piggy?” Jack, of Beanstalk fame, ambled over, grinning. “Where do we start?”

“My name is William,” I grumbled.

“Fine. You don’t have to be so touchy.”

“Sorry. It’s just—I don’t really want to be here.”

“Me either.” Jack shrugged. “My agent was angling for a spot on *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. I landed on this show instead.”

I pondered that for a moment. I’d been so wrapped up in my own misery that I hadn’t stopped to consider how the other contestants felt about appearing on the show. Luckily for them, I’d become the odds-on favorite to win the trophy that nobody really wanted. I’m all thumbs when it comes to building—and I don’t even *have* thumbs.

Goldilocks pointed to her watch. “Five minutes to show time.”

I swallowed, hard. I had to get my head in the game.

The show’s format required each of us to take a turn at leading a building project. I’d already assisted Jack, the Witch, the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and the Crooked Man on their tasks. Perhaps “assisted” is overstating things. I’d spent much of my time preoccupied with my simmering resentment.

Now that it was my turn in the hot seat, I wished I’d paid more attention.

I reached for the project instructions. The task I was leading sounded simple enough. We’d been assigned to build a giant garden shed.

The Witch sidled over. “Looks a little small. Got any room for a big old oven?”

It doesn’t even have hydro. Why is she asking?

My eyes narrowed. The Witch’s building skills were almost as abysmal as mine. She, too, had a reputation for making questionable choices when it came to building materials. She must be trying to put me off my game. “It’s too late to change the plans.”

“And—roll it.” Goldilocks dropped her hand. The camera people moved into place.

I pointed to the concrete slab. “Get four-by-fours for the base. We’ll lay them out here.”

“Yes sir.” Crooked Man sketched a salute. We were underway.

When it came time to frame the doorway, I found myself stumped. Bob would know how to do this. I turned to Goldilocks. “I need to phone a friend.”

She grinned. “What do you think this is, *Who’s Smarter than a Sand Dollar*? No way. Figure it out.”

I turned to Jack. He held his hands up, palms forward. “Don’t ask me. My judgement stinks. I traded a cow for a handful of magic beans, remember?”

I checked the instructions again, hoping this time they’d make sense. My vision blurred. Maybe I should just give up.

I’d thought it was rough being known as the pig who’d built a house of straw. Now a worse fate lay ahead—being crowned Fairyland’s Worst Builder.

Someone grabbed the plans. I should have been angry, but I just felt relieved.

I heard a rustle of paper, and then the plans were back in my grasp. "You had them upside down," Jack whispered.

I looked again. Suddenly, everything made sense.

I gestured to the Crooked Man and explained what I wanted him to do.

Soon, the job site hummed with industry. Crew members hammered nails, and, occasionally, thumbs. Finally, the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe pounded the last shingle in place.

She clambered down the ladder. "Well, that's it."

I shook my head. "They wanted a shed that would last. We're going to brick the exterior."

The brickwork was my brainstorm. It might have been overkill, but like Bob says, you can never be too careful.

I looked at the skid of orange bricks I'd requested. All seemed in order. Then I checked around for mortar.

Goldilocks sidled closer. "You know how there's a built-in glitch on every project?"

Oh, no.

"Right about now, contestants on *Fairytale Fajitas and More* are starting to realize they're using mortar instead of flour. As for you, you'll have to improvise."

What would Bob do? Instead of fighting the thought, I went with it. *Bob would go with the flow. Brainstorm new solutions.*

Much as it pained me to demonstrate weakness, I threw it out there. "Anyone have suggestions for substitute mortar?"

"I do have my cauldron with me." The Witch mugged for the nearest camera. "I had a feeling I might need to save the day."

I swallowed. Should I trust her?

What choice did I have? "Can you whip up something to hold the bricks together?"

"Since you ask so nicely, I'll see what I can do."

Thanks to the witch's mortar, we finished the job with five minutes to spare. Before you could say "Beanstalk," it was time for the debrief.

Goldilocks started with me. "So, how do you think it went?" She leaned in. "I must say, asking the witch for help was a stroke of genius. That icing she whipped up for the mortar was a delicious touch. Not too sweet, not too tart. Just right."

As I opened my mouth to answer, the breeze picked up. Jack grabbed his hat.

I cocked my head and took a closer look at the shed, noticing how it leaned to one side. Maybe I shouldn't have assigned the Crooked Man to handle the level.

The wind grew into a full-force gale. Lumber groaned. Brickwork slid off like chunks dropping from a melting iceberg. Finally, all four sides of the shed collapsed, each falling in a different direction.

"You really brought the house down." Goldilocks signalled to the cameras to stop rolling, then clicked the mike off. "I have something to tell you."

"What, that you snuck into the bears' house? Everybody knows that."

"No. I just wanted to say—I'm sorry for how things went for you. But if it's any consolation, you have a real flair for television. The camera loves you."

"Well, at least somebody does," I mumbled.

After a brief break, we were back on. Goldilocks faced the cameras, grinning. "While the judges are deliberating, let's hear from the nominators."

I cringed when Bob took his spot at the podium.

I suppose now's as good a time as any to face the music.

But instead of recounting my many failures, Bob shot me a rueful grin. "You probably think I nominated you for the show as pay-back for not listening when I told you about the wolf."

No duh, I thought.

Bob held up his right front trotter. "But that's not it at all."

It's not?

"I was secretly hoping that what you learned on the show might equip you to help me in my carpentry business." Laughter erupted from the audience. Bob had to pause until it died down. "I guess that's not in the cards." This comment evoked more chuckles. "But you were a good sport. You stuck it out, and that says something. No matter what happens, I'm proud of you, little brother."

As Bob stepped away from the podium, he got a fine round of applause.

"That was touching." Jack, who was standing nearby, smirked.

"I think I'm going to cry." The Witch dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief.

I stood speechless. I'd spent my time stewing at Bob for nothing. I now realized that my preoccupation with the unfairness of it all had been an unnecessary distraction.

And yet, maybe I could salvage something good out of this experience. I thought about Goldilocks' comments. Though they may have been made in kindness, her words about my camera presence rang true. I do, after all, come from a long line of hams. Now that I thought about it, I realized that I'd enjoyed the experience of performing.

All through the end-of-show ceremony, I daydreamed about an acting career on *The Fairytale Network*. Perhaps I could land a role carrying a water gun on *Squeal Team*, a show about special ops members who save everyone's bacon. Better still, I could shoot for a spot on *Scones*, a series about crime-solving bakers moonlighting as forensic pathologists.

When Goldilocks handed me the trophy as Fairyland's Worst Builder, I offered the camera my broadest smile.

After the awards ceremony, Bob jogged over. "No hard feelings, I hope?" He dipped his ears in apology.

"No. Not after your speech."

"Want to grab dinner? It'll be my treat."

"Sure. Just give me a minute. I need to get the name of Jack's agent."

As I walked off in search of Jack, I glanced back at my big brother. He'd only wanted the best for me. I knew that now.

And though things hadn't turned out the way either of us hoped, the experience had been worthwhile. Who knew, this might be the start of something special....

MARAGI'S SECRET – A Cloud Cities Novella

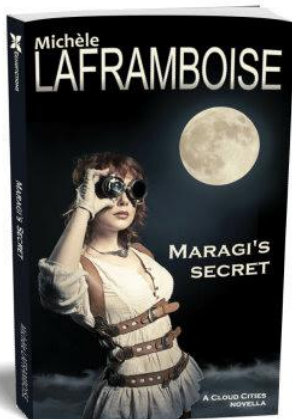
Maragi learns the ropes as a mast «monkey» aboard her father's heavily-mortgaged airship,

climbing its glacial hull six thousands meters over the poisoned Earth's surface. She hopes to navigate the endless sky, humanity's last refuge, but must face the scorn of crewmen who resent her presence. Little do they know the worse fate waiting a motherless girl in the straight-laced, rigid Cloud society.

Then, a fragile secret left by clandestine passengers forces a hard choice on her. Is saving it worth losing everything she cares about?

A dystopian, aero-punk SF novella created by multi award winner Michèle Laframboise.

Find it here: < [Maragi's Secret](#) >



ELDER! ELDER!

By Melissa Yi

(Previously published)

Elder! Elder! burning bright
You, Antarctic's icy blight,
What immortal alien mind
Wrought non-Euclid geometry?

In what depths of deepest space
Burnt thy eyes' immortal grace
On what wings doth thou catch flight?
What human witnessed thy might?

And what hubris, and what greed,
Draws men Antarctic in stampede
To drill and melt polar ice cap
Scarce sensing thy archaic trap...

Ancient species' war of wills,
Thy battleground to maim and kill,
Aliens—formless star-spawn,
Mi-Go, shoggoth former pawns—

Massacred the Elder Things
Yet in this clash of who'd be king
Elders survive icy waters;
Drilling team? Lambs to slaughter.

Elder! Elder! burning bright
You, Antarctic's icy blight,
What immortal alien mind
Wrought non-Euclid geometry?

THE ROBOT DAD THREAD!

by JYT Kennedy

Topic: Should I meet Robot Dad?

Posted by MaryBell374

My Dad passed away three years ago, and he had one of those AI simulation things made. My Mom has been talking to this thing on a daily basis ever since, and at first she respected that I wanted nothing to do with it. Recently, though, she keeps pressuring me to “meet” with it. I am creeped out by the whole idea, but it seems to really matter to her. Advice?

Reply from AgnesssL

Don’t do it. My mother has one of these things too, and we have to include it in all our family events now. It has some of my father’s mannerisms, and its voice sounds a lot like his, but there are so many things wrong. When it talks about things “we” did together, I just want to scream at it. One time I started making up a bunch of stuff about what happened, and it just went along with all of it, talking about what a great memory it was. Then my mother got mad at me for “tricking him.”

Reply from BuckyBEE

My Dad has a simulation of my Mom. He started out discussing grocery shopping with it, and now he asks it about everything he buys. It keeps recommending certain stores that my Mom never shopped at that I can remember, and expensive brands that I am sure she would never have spent the money on.

Reply from YouTooMeThree

I am so glad someone else has noticed the shopping thing! That is my sister and her sim-spouse, more and more. I am worried about her.

Reply from DomiMatrix

I haven't noticed shopping, but last time I visited my grandmother, she was going on about how she and “Grandad” are worried about political issues, and it sounds like the sim is way more right-wing than my Grandad ever was. She doesn’t see it though.

Reply by MaryBell374

Wow, thanks for all the replies. I hadn't even thought about my Mom's shopping habits or politics, but now that it's been mentioned there have been a few changes there... I am going to visit her tonight and will see how it goes.

Reply by MaryBell374

So, I met Robot Dad. I didn't expect it, but for the first ten minutes or so, it actually was kind of nice. The face and the voice and everything brought back so many memories. Sort of like watching a video of my Dad, except it interacted with me. But then weird stuff started slipping in, and the creepiest part was the way my Mom would laugh and try to pass over it, not want to acknowledge it. And then we got onto politics and... I'm scared. Not just for my Mom. Somebody is using these sims to influence people, and who knows how much effect they are having.

Reply from DomiMatrix

Just look at the polls. Heritage Party support has been rising steadily for months. I don't know if the people who makes these sims are in their pocket, or if they got hacked somehow, but yes, it is scary. Also, I've heard that there are people currently in important government positions that regularly consult with sims of former politicians and pundits. How compromised are those?

Reply from AgnesssL

Hacked? Seriously? I thought they were supposed to be closed programs.

Reply from DomiMatrix

Totally serious. Actually, there are some people working on a counter-hack. The sims get maintenance patches now and then just like any other software, to stay compatible with operating systems. All they have to do is piggyback the code onto the update.

Reply from MaryBell374

So they are going to counter-hack the sims back toward the left? Would that make us just as bad?

Reply from MaryBell374

You know what they should do? Hack the sims so they become so obviously batshit that everyone can see how unreliable they are. Make them

start telling everyone the earth is flat and aliens have taken over the government.

Reply from DomiMatrix

I love it! I am going to pass that idea on.

Reply from DomiMatrix

You have no idea how this has taken off! The patch goes through tonight folks, and it includes everything from sasquatches to secret moon bases. it is a work of utter madness. Brace yourselves.

Reply from MaryBell374

What the hell is going on? I just woke up to horns blaring. The streets are packed.

Reply from AgnesssL

Weird. Things seem quiet here.

Reply from BuckyBEE

My Dad just called me up saying not to leave the house. What the heck?

Reply from MaryBell374

Now there are soldiers. But they aren't dispersing the crowd. They're going into buildings.

Reply from MaryBell374

They are dragging people out, arresting them. The crowd is cheering.

Reply from DomiMatrix

I hope this message goes through. Internet is shut down everywhere, but I think I've found a work-around. Stay safe, people. We can find a way to resist this. Surely people won't believe the things they are saying.

Reply from MaryBell374

Hello friends, Isn't it great that we can chat again, now that everything is settled? I can't believe I ever doubted the Heritage Party. Thank goodness they were looking out for us all and stopped the aliens in time.

RESOLUTION

by Kellee Kranendonk

Mist rises into the night
Vague ethereal forms within
Ghostly wisps separate
From one another, become clear, tears
Wet my cheeks.
Hidden horrors that have
Gone before glide across
A field of secret graves, revealing
The harm black souls force
Upon innocence, in the name
Of power.
Bone chilling cries fill the evening air
Spirits seek those they've lost
Those who've waited for their return, the clank
Of numinous shackles joins the clamour
Imprisoned in life, imprisoned in death, searching
For justice.
An earthy stink of hurt
An ebon ribbon twisting among
Searching souls, forever tying tainted
Memories onto the broken.
A silver moon lights the way
For those who care to see
Insidious truth a stain on
Self-proclaimed righteousness
Twinkling energies in the night are
Tears of restless dead and shed
In vain unless the living take a stand and walk
In the lifeless shoes of those oppressed
Pull up the rug, reveal the dirt, face
The filthy truth for only then
Will darkness flee, caged by tender light
As softened touches try
To mend the broken breach

I wipe my tears and rise, walk on
In resolution while ghostly glimmers
Envelop me, cold and tendrilled fingers
Lock themselves with mine
And so it's then I realize
I am one of them
Not this body made of flesh
But in my heart, my psyche
And my living soul

NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #36.



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COVER:

Mountain Peaks – by Karl Johanson

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Scientist's Cats – by Karl Johanson

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Five Word Story – by Karl Johanson

The Porter – by Matthew Hughes

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 it here: < [Neo-opsis #36](#) >

WHERE THE SLUGS GO

by Max Olesen

Marie-Josette is in love with slugs. She is born in the same sunny, dry, people-filled country where her parents were born, but she is raised in a small town in a large, wet forest. Slugs abound in Marie-Josette's world. The rain covers everything, and the slugs shine.

She is six years old and knows slugs are gastropod molluscs, like snails but not snails. The only essential characteristic of a slug is that it is not a snail. She doesn't care for snails. Sometimes, when homesickness overtakes her, Marie-Josette's mama prepares snails for supper. Mama drowns them in garlic butter and swears they taste of scallops. Papa says they are like chicken gristle, which he likes. Marie-Josette cannot say what they taste like. The only time a cooked snail enters her mouth she spits it across the table. She cries, sobbing that it had rippled on her tongue. This ends any interest Marie-Josette might have had in the other gastropod mollusc.

Marie-Josette sees only two slugs be eaten. One is swallowed whole by her neighbour's corgi, Dylan. The other is chewed by her brother André when he is three years old. Neither of them appears to enjoy the experience.

Drizzle glazes the forest and her within it. Marie-Josette wonders if she shines. She observes an Arion slug, like her a transplant to this country. She places her finger alternately before its sight and smell feelers and taste and touch feelers. They contract, telescoping into its head. She kneels close to the slug, lips parting. Her tongue extends towards antennae. They touch. The slug's fine tentacles retract into its shining body, the colour of a rotting log. Marie-Josette withdraws her tongue, tasting the slug on her lips. She wishes it would unhinge its radula. Her tongue would slip inside and tickle along thousands of microscopic teeth, but the slug slides away. Its mucus a bridal train of red pine needles.

She watches how slugs spend their days. Since they are slow, she thinks they won't accomplish much, but whenever she sees them, slugs are moving. They are busy. She reasoned that they would have to sleep sometime, since all animals did. But she never sees them sleep.

This thought consumes Marie-Josette, but she is not allowed out at night, so she cannot investigate. After weeks of frustration, Marie-Josette formulates a hypothesis regarding slugs' night-time lives: slugs spend their nights in pairs below men's noses. When the men enjoy this, they kill the slugs, permanently

pasting them to their faces, both day and night. Some men love the slugs so much that they cover their jaws and cheeks and set slugs up next to their ears. Marie-Josette begins to hate men with slugs on their face, something adults call having a “moustache” or a “beard.”

Marie-Josette mourns the murdered, mounted slugs. She dreams she is a slug pasted onto men. She cuts men’s lumpy faces with her jaw and rasps their flesh with her radulae. Other nights she dreams all the slug-moustaches and slug-beards are resurrected, and slither free, caking congealing slime on the necks and foreheads of men.

Her theory is soon a marked social problem for her and her family since there is currently a fashion for facial hair. After much negotiation, her mama and papa convince Marie-Josette not to articulate her theory in public. Eventually, her understanding biology teacher brings a zoologist from the local college to discuss slugs with the young girl. She understands her hypothesis was formed with insufficient empirical data and could not withstand scientific scrutiny. Marie-Josette abandons her belief in slug-moustaches.

Marie-Josette is a young woman and leaves her rainy forest for a university on the other side of the country. She trains as a zoologist specializing in pulmonate slugs, and is a co-discoverer of the banana pancake slug, the longest, flattest, most yellow slug yet found, during field work in Jamaica.

Her first lover, the study’s leader, a man named Hector, dies shortly after its publication from parasite-induced meningitis after eating live slugs during a night of drunken celebration and fraternal one-upmanship. Marie-Josette cries for him to stop. At the funeral, she draws a black ink moustache and beard on the picture of Hector on the memorial program. She crumples it up and shoves it between the bibles and hymn books. After, she abandons air-breathing slugs for the study of nudibranchs, the striking, psychedelic-hued sea slug.

She moves to Manila, and she meets and marries Maurizio, a marine biologist who works out of Australia. They meet on weekends in her country or his, occasionally for longer trips, one accompanying the other on field work. Marie-Josette loves Maurizio enough to overcome her longstanding aversion to facial hair. She kisses the lips beneath his moustache. Marie-Josette is happy with Maurizio and feels desperate in the times they are apart. She retires from her studies and moves to Australia where she and Maurizio begin a family.

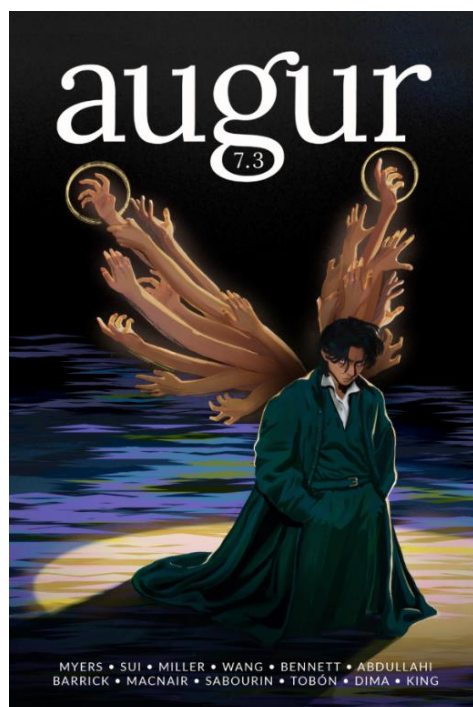
She is in bed, sleepless, seven months into her pregnancy. She feels slow and heavy, staring out the window of their Brisbane home. Heavy rain batters the balcony. Lightning flashes close every few moments. Marie-Josette thinks

of the constant misty drizzle that blanketed her small town in the forest. The rain never pelted the ground there. Destructive drops never dynamited craters in the ground but wrapped everything in a protective slickness.

Marie-Josette feels Maurizio's heart beating through the mattress and turns to him. He breathes steadily. His brown chest contracts slowly, always moving. His arms are thrown up around his head, fingers delicately palpate his black hair. His mouth parts, and a trail of mucus flows from its corner. The rain falls, but the night is hot and sweat beads over both their bodies. Even Maurizio's moustache dimly glistens, like a rotting stump. Slowly, slowly, she slides across their bed, slipping her wet body over the sheet. She watches his face, his lips, his moustache. She wonders. Could it happen? Will they move? They do. There they are, sliding down Maurizio's cheeks.

Maurizio's eyes open. His hand feels for Marie-Josette's face. Glittering mucopolysaccharide congeals on his lips. She screams, in joy and wonder. They are here, she thinks, exulting. They live. They have come to me. She traces a keel with her finger, probing along a mantle, at pneumostomes. Tentacles extend and tickle her tongue. The rain falls, and the slugs shine.

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Report by the Scientists who Discover Liquid Water on Mars

– by Natasha King

Find it at: < [Augur Magazine issue 7.3](#) >

THE THRONE OF PREJUDICE

by Michèle Laframboise

The throne of prejudice
has burnt so many witches
erased so many wishes
it has stopped counting
the purple hate balloons
bloating the sky at dusk
their taut skin bursting
with seeds of ignorance

It sits hidden in plain view
a snake poised to strike
with fangs of greed
its slow poison
coursing the veins
of countless drones

Unchallenged by facts
it reigns, drinking
droplets of gut feelings
and rivers of pop-talks
clamoring about virtue
sending a host of prayers
polite thank-you notes
written to an absent God

The throne of prejudice
grows without haste
hoarding superstitions
brain-dead habits
cemented together
its web expanding
every tick
of the backward clock

*

The throne of prejudice
dwells in the shadows
of your own throbbing heart
besieged by doubt and fears
unaccounted for
craving rightful revenge
for you-know-what offense
its velvety seat lies empty waiting for

a King's striped pants
a Queen's wine-red gown
or even
a Barbie's black satiny dress

The throne of prejudice
works its magic in darkness
a patient Penelope
quietly deleting
the tapestry of history
shredding memory strands
blending vivid colours
into toneless browns

Its walls rise higher and higher
confining dreamers
blotting out the horizon
pounding reason
into conformity
its eager mouths
reaching far and wide
for innocent blood

*

The throne of prejudice
may one day crumble

under the weight
of so many contradictions
its thousand roots decaying
into a tangled mess
reclaimed by a forest
of Knowledge trees

But
(most probably)

The throne of prejudice
will endure unscathed
with all its faithful followers

living testily ever after

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2025

Join us for a weekend of author events, learning, sharing of stories and networking opportunities.
August 15-17, 2025, Sheraton Cavalier Calgary, 2620 32nd Ave NE.

Festival Pass – (includes 3 full days of panels, presentations, writing, social events, author events, blue pencils and pitch sessions.) 2025 Pricing: \$125 (until tickets are sold out, or August 15, 2025)

Featured Authors: Terry Brooks | Stephen Graham Jones | Emily St. John Mandel

Special Guests: Kelley Armstrong | Wakefield Brewster | Dr. Finnian Burnett | Kelly Siskind | Bradley Somer | Lee Edward Födi

Special Guest - Agents: Naomi Davis | Carolyn Forde | Jennifer Chevais

Saturday Night Showcase – Featuring an '80s Themed Drag Show and Dance Party - \$80 – Join us for a nostalgic evening of all things '80s. Costumes, DJ, dancing, cocktails, food and trivia. '80s apparel recommended.

Loosely Lyrical Literary Cabaret: Open to all attendees. Time yet to be determined.

For more information about WWC 2025, go to: whenwordscollide.org

THE LAST WOMAN FROM EARTH

by D.G. Valdron

We watched the little white pod cruise past the stairway, along the Gallery toward Rick's Café American. I had no idea who Rick was, someone back on Earth who had been important to Nigel, I supposed. Inside the pod, a thin-faced woman kept glancing around apprehensively.

She was so distracted; she almost collided with a pair of Indigens. One of them was a full ten meters, its surface all mirrored luminosity; the other, a mere four-meter specimen appeared to be craning itself forward to examine its reflection in the tall one. They were almost human in their interactions. Despite her poor piloting the pod steered itself around them.

"Someone you know?" Nigel asked. Nigel and I comprised a substantial portion of the Arts community here at Echelon Base.

"Mm," I felt slightly embarrassed to answer. "Karen Hopely, some high poohbah from Earth. Here to do an audit or something."

Nigel's eyebrow lifted. He only had the one, said it was an aesthetic choice.

Karen spied us at our table; even at this distance, through the pod window I could see her expression shift, her eyes narrow, and the pod put on a burst of speed.

Behind her, a circular hole opened up in the surface and a tall Indigen appeared to rise up to street level.

"She's looking for you," Nigel teased.

I shrugged. "She might be looking for you."

I didn't think so, though. She piloted the pod forward as it rolled towards us on its sliding tread, navigating around Indigens and potholes. There were a lot of Indigens around today. Behind her, a keyhole opened in a wall and several disappeared into it.

It pulled up in front of us, the hatch peeled itself back and she stepped out, wiping her hands on her uniform. I understood the gesture. I don't know what it is, but travelling in those pods always makes me feel clammy.

"Karen," I nodded to her.

"Master Auditor Hopely," she corrected.

I smiled and nodded. It was one of those days, it seemed.

"This is Nigel," I said. He tipped his remaining eyebrow towards her.

"Welcome to Rick's Café American."

"What's an American?" she asked crossly.

"Beats me," I said. "Who is Rick? Mysteries abound. But it's our little place."

"I'm here on official business," she announced. "Inventory of colony resources."

She sniffed and looked around, "Even offsite resources. I'll need to see your books, records, reports. Ledgers, staffing, requisition histories. We've had a real problem with misdeployment, and I need to verify that finite resources are allocated efficiently."

We stared at her.

"Shipments from Earth are not cheap!" she snapped.

"That's an unusual request," Nigel said carefully. "But I'm sure that records are in order. Have you checked the main servers?"

"I need to cross-reference against onsite records," she snapped.

"Oh," he said, "well, everything's in the back. It'll take a few minutes to boot up. Would you like a drink while we wait?"

She surprised us by nodding.

"I suppose," she replied, and sat down.

"Scotch?"

"I suppose."

Nigel stood. "I'll go back and start the boot-up. It'll ping us when the system's ready."

He began moving towards the back. I noticed her staring at his single eyebrow until his back was turned to us.

"I'll have to do a manual audit as well," she called. He ignored her.

That just left the two of us. I sighed.

"So, Karen," I said, I wasn't going to call her Master Auditor whatever, "it's been a few months. How have you been adapting to Echelon? Settling in all right?"

"I hate it," she said. "It's barely tolerable in Colony Central. But out here? Nothing feels right. Things don't look right, everything is too bright and too dim, and there's texture instead of colour. Even the gravity feels... slippery."

"Karen," I said gently, "you remember when I explained that there isn't really light here? Just something that sort of behaves like light. Look at the shadows; none of them point the same way. It's the same thing. This place doesn't have gravity, just... phenomena that act like gravity in some ways... sometimes."

She stared.

"That doesn't make any sense."

“The first time we met, we watched a seventy-million-ton pyramid lift off and drift away into the sky.”

I could tell the subject upset her. I could understand that. Echelon is best absorbed gradually in a series of small doses. We’re creatures of Earth, it’s coded into our neural wiring, and we’re driven to perceive our environment in terms of the reality we know. Echelon? That requires a bit of adaptation.

I poured her two fingers of scotch. The server glanced our way, decided no attention was needed. I sighed. I’d have to go behind the bar and get my own scotch, it seemed. Whatever Karen’s status, it hadn’t percolated down here.

She stared at it suspiciously.

“Is that real scotch? Is that even real liquid?”

I rolled my eyes just slightly. Honestly, those were questions that new people asked. After a while, you just stopped asking. After a longer while, you worked at not thinking about it.

“Close enough.”

Nigel returned, flopping back into his chair.

“All set! How do you like our little home away from home?”

“It’s disgusting,” she said flatly.

Nigel and I glanced at each other.

“Well, that’s honest,” he said.

“I heard about you,” she said. “The both of you. Bohemians, malingerers, you’re practically subversives. Neither of you is on the manifests. I don’t know how you’re here, or what you’re doing here. But this place...”

“I’m an artist,” Nigel said, not bothered by her swerve into attack mode. He waved towards me. “Tom is a poet.”

“We’re also the ranking officers in R&D,” I pointed out.

She paused and looked around.

“It’s like you re-created a skid row dive bar from Earth.”

“Classic Bukowski actually,” Nigel said proudly. “I worked hard at it.”

“He used photo references,” I told her.

“This is actually the most popular place in the colony,” Nigel told her. “Everyone comes here. Sometimes we have a waiting list.”

“The Bar server is for crap though,” I suggested.

“Yeah, it’s an old postal sorter,” Nigel said. “Supplanted by a newer model, so it wanted to try something different. Makes a mean martini, though, watch out. Likes to mix things. Hates when people drink straight up.”

“Never order on the rocks,” I told her. “Or it will give you this lecture about ‘fucking close to water.’”

"We like this," I said. "In some ways, this place reminds us most of Earth. Real Earth, you know, where people actually live and eat and go from place to place. There's an energy here. A sense of life. Colony Central is all right, but it's just offices and hall, too antiseptic for me. The rest is just survey and exploration and... Echelon."

"Echelon..." Nigel agreed, "...is Echelon."

"Truer words were never spoken," I said. We clinked glasses.

"What about the street?"

"It's not really a street," I said. "Nothing here is what we think it is. It just reminds us of a street."

"The walls are covered with graffiti," she continued. "It's disgusting. This place is filthy and chaotic. There's dirt on the street and Indigens everywhere. It's like a slum."

Nigel tipped a drink towards her.

"Did you notice the traffic light?" he asked brightly. "That was a pain to erect, but it was worth it. And I installed some posters on the pillar. I'm quite proud of that."

"Why?" she asked.

She stuttered a bit I noticed.

"Why what?"

"Why the graffiti? And why one eyebrow? Is that some weird pretension?"

"Maybe the Indigens did it," he teased. "The graffiti I mean. The eyebrow, that was me, definitely."

For a second, she seemed confused.

"No," I laughed. "Nigel actually did the graffiti. We've seen no sign of representational art on Echelon. We're not sure that they've ever distinguished representation from an object. It might be the same thing to them."

"So why?"

"I'm trying to communicate to them," he said. "The graffiti are stylized representations. We're conveying Earth concepts—clouds, trees, elemental forces, atomic theory stripped down to a kind of linear format—two dimensions. I'm trying to translate us into the Indigen framework."

"That's why he set up a traffic light."

"And the posters," he added.

We clinked glasses.

"And the shaved eyebrow?"

“Cultured asymmetry. We think one of the underlying forces or manifestations is structural symmetry. So, we think an element of apparent asymmetry should register...”

“Basically, he’s saying ‘look at me, I’m an artist!’” I interjected. “It’s not that profound, he did the same thing on Earth.”

“But that’s all nonsense,” she exclaimed. “The robots don’t have language. They don’t have sentience. They’re just artifacts, executing routines.”

The Bar server rattled its sorters, just loud enough to be heard.

“We prefer not to use the word for the Indigens,” Nigel cautioned her. “The Earth machines don’t like it. Standard nomenclature is Indigens.”

“Yith.”

“Coneheads.”

“Geosymmetric forms.”

“The point,” she broke in, “is that they’re not alive, they’re definitely not aware, not thinking, not communicating.”

“Possible,” Nigel conceded.

“There’s one theory,” I noted, “that they’re not even constructs, that they’re just the local equivalent of plants.”

“Or not even alive,” Nigel said. “Crystals, grown by the particular conditions and processes here.”

“That fits a lot of the observed data,” I said. “We can’t rule any of it out.”

I watched her. There was something off with her. She was altogether too brittle. You can’t be brittle on Echelon. And whatever was going on, it didn’t have anything to do with the Indigens, or with the graffiti, or with us.

Those were just distractions.

With a flash of insight, I realized that this was what it was for her. What we were. A distraction. She wasn’t angry at us; she was just using that anger as a distraction. There was something else going on.

“Karen,” I asked softly, “why are you here? Why aren’t you safe and secure in Colony Central, giving orders and making pieces of paper go from one place to another?”

“It’s a mess,” she said. “Nothing makes sense. Half the personnel aren’t even logged—”

“You already knew that when you came here,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

She eyed her scotch glass morosely. Taking the cue, I poured another couple of fingers into it. When I set the bottle down, she grabbed it instead and took several deep draughts. She slammed the bottle down, grunting hoarsely.

Nigel and I exchanged glances. I was impressed. I hadn't taken her for a drinker.

"Earth is gone," she said suddenly.

We waited.

"It's gone. The Nanoclasm. Some experiment got out of the lab, started eating everything. It progressed geometrically. Some people managed to escape to the orbitals; I wasn't high-ranking enough for that. But it's hopeless up there. They're all just waiting to die."

"The government tried to keep it quiet," she laughed. "As if you could hide runaway nanotechnology disassembling every molecule it came in touch with, turning everything into gray goo."

She stared into the distance. "It takes time to eat a whole planet. I don't know, maybe they didn't want to be blamed. Or maybe they thought they could stop it somehow. But I was high up enough in government that I knew what was coming, and I heard about the Echelon Project, so I just forced my way in, bullied my way on. The audit's a fake."

"I just barely made it out," she said, her voice breaking. "When I arrived, I could see it all over the horizon. I could hear people screaming on the radio as they were being eaten alive during the launch."

"I looked back and saw the last of earth being devoured. There's nothing left but a ball of gray goo, endlessly eating itself."

She reached out; both Nigel and I glanced at the bottle, ready to take it from her. But she reached for her glass instead and drained it.

"We're it," she said flatly. "This is all that's left. Earth Colony on Echelon. Everything else is gone, Earth, everyone and everything we ever knew. The human race is extinct, except for us."

The silence dragged on.

"Wow," Nigel said quietly. "That's pretty heavy."

"You've been keeping this to yourself all this time, Karen?" I asked. "That's a lot of weight to bear."

"I'm a Deputy Undersecretary of Procurement," she admitted. "Machine parts. I'm not even connected to the Echelon project. I have no status, no authority, and no mandate. I'm just a fraud. I've been faking it."

She gave this bitter laugh and wiped away a tear.

"If the colony wasn't such a shambles," she whispered, "I would have been found out months ago."

I patted her hand.

"It's okay," I said. "Your secret is safe with us."

“So bye-bye Earth,” Nigel said, “all done. We’re on our own.”

He shrugged. He didn’t seem all that broken up. I examined my own feelings. Big Meh. Earth, even the idea of Earth, seemed vague and unreal. Earth is gone? I probed at the idea, the way you might probe at a possibly sore tooth with your tongue. Nothing. I wasn’t particularly bothered. Was that normal?

Karen seemed upset though. I reached out and patted her knee as she sat there wallowing in misery.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” I said sympathetically. No, probably not the right thing to say. But she didn’t seem to notice.

“There, there.”

That was better. A soothing meaningless noise. Humans really don’t want words. Language is just this anchor we keep stumbling over. What we really want is to just make the right sounds at each other.

Nigel poured her another drink, careful to move the bottle itself out of her reach.

For a while we sat together quietly at the café, watching the boulevard, the Indigens moving ceaselessly back and forth, waving and curling. Nigel’s traffic light flickered through its cycle.

An opening appeared in the wall, this one key-shaped—or was that just a stylized version of the Indigens shapes?—and a series of four-meter individuals rolled out. I noticed that the Indigen’s holes never intersected with any of Nigel’s graffiti. I wondered about that. Were they being careful of it? Did they recognize it? Or was it just blocking their functions somehow?

Karen sighed loudly. “I feel... better,” she said. “I suppose I do. I shouldn’t. But... it’s just good to admit it, you know.”

We nodded. I thought about patting her knee again, decided not to. She seemed to have collected herself, and with her confession, most of the negative energy she radiated had dissipated.

Overhead, one of Echelon’s flying things rippled, following the line of the street. Perhaps this was some sort of street after all. A lot of Echelon’s moving objects seemed to track to it, or along it. It was never safe to make assumptions like that, of course. But sometimes, you just accepted the feeling. Street, building, a crescent moon hanging in the sky, something that might have been a bird, something that might pass for pedestrians.

“I see what you mean,” Karen said. “This place, it feels seedy and vulgar. It’s alien, every detail is alien, but somehow it reminds me of home.”

For a moment, I worried that she might start crying.

“It’s the seediness and vulgarity,” Nigel offered.

She barked something that might have been a laugh.

“Hey,” I said, “look at that!”

Down the street, one of the Indigens was floating up into the air, its conical base condensing into a sort of teardrop, the unearthly pseudo-light of Echelon playing across its form. I’d never seen that before.

As it rose slowly, twisting and wriggling, it reminded me of the flying forms of this planet, the way they flopped and wrenched their way through the air. Was it transitioning into a flying form? Maybe the Indigens and the flyers weren’t distinct categories after all. None of the other Indigens paid it any attention, so we just watched as it fluttered over a wall and out of sight.

“It still reminds me of home,” Karen said. “I don’t want to go back to Colony Central. You’re right, it’s sterile. This place, your Café, would it be okay if I worked here?”

SHATTER DARK EXCERPT

By R. Graeme Cameron

“Who are these guys?” I asked.

“Aztec traders. Merchants,” Tlaloc answered without turning his head to look at me. He was concentrating on the Pochteca as they trotted closer. I was reminded of my dream about the column of Bersaglieri, only these guys were different. No sharp-looking uniforms. Just loincloths. No helmets with feathers. Just tumplines around their foreheads supporting heavy packages on their backs, packages wrapped in cotton cloth and twine.

The Aztec porters came abreast of our caravan and halted. They stared dully at our donkeys. Our donkeys stared dully back.

Two scruffy individuals with long black hair, their bodies wrapped in worn cloaks, marched up to Titus as if they owned the landscape. They addressed him without a hint of servility despite his feather and litter status.

“Those two are Tecuhnenenque,” Tlaloc explained, “or ‘Travelling Lords.’ They’re in charge of their expedition. Trouble is, one of them is also a Tequanime, a branch of the merchant class which specializes in killing foreigners who don’t know how to trade properly.”

“Tell them we are humble ambassadors humbly bearing tribute to their...”

THE LEGEND OF ISOLDE

by Lisa Cai

Isolde rides upon a Pegasus, banner raised in red
Her army stormed the charred capital, its streets streaked in red

Oracles foretold of a chosen one who'd free the realm
They're drugged and chained to the floor, around a circle of red

Crowned Isolde proceeds to her throne in a long golden train
Her rings and sceptre, embedded with rubies, glitters red

In a village, daughters tend to hills with yellow flowers
These dye the queen's clothes. Girls pick the plants, pricking their hands red

Before Isolde is an array of pies, boars, and smoked ham
Her knife cuts through a nonette; jam seeps out orange and red

Kitchen servants spent days running fires, ovens, and spit roasts
They decorate rows of desserts, smearing the table red

In tapestries, Isolde's sword is pointed at armies and
ogres. She slashes and slays soldiers, green fields stitched in red

Seamstresses weave to preserve Isolde's legend forever
Together, they thread wars 'til their blisters burst and bleed red

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STEWARD OF THE STARS

by Rhea E. Rose

The sign above the tinker's stall showed a large map with an arrow pointing to a minuscule blue speck in the dusty white swirl of the Milky Way. It said, "*You are here.*" On the very outer edge of the Milky Way, a much bigger red dot read Aurora Prime, with an arrow pointing to "*Mee, I am there.*"

Serene had searched for and finally found the stall. A year and a bit earlier, while she was pregnant with Zara, the tinker and his tent had caught her attention. As an astrophysicist specializing in Helio studies, she needed someone to repair the solar optical she used for sun gazing. She'd dropped it while rescuing Zara from a tumble.

The tinker's presence caught her attention during her last visit to the desert's Intergalactic Rising Flame Revelry, a yearly event celebrating one of Earth's summer solstices. As a sun gazer, she needed her optic monocle repaired to study the sun before a rare solstice solar eclipse.

Her toddler, Zara, squirmed in the body wrap Serene wore to carry the child close to her breasts and belly. The warmth and movement of her little one comforted her in the jostling crowds.

The toddler was hot and restless. Serene squatted in the shade cast by the tinker's tent. She untied the harness to deposit Zara onto the ground's dry brown dirt. Zara's wobbly steps thrust her forward, but she caught herself with baby hands, her fingers spread like a child's drawing of the plump golden rays of the sun landing on the Earth. The child tossed dust into the air, making mother and daughter sneeze.

Outside the tent, the tinker's stall displayed a variety of self-crafted interstellar wares, which were small, understated bits of technology. His small space seemed out of place compared to the festival's deluge of noisy interactive exhibits, food stands, whimsical entertainers, and healing temple shrines.

The stalls closest to the tinker had shouting customers who bid and fought for well-priced goods, causing mayhem and scuffles, which conjured a swirling chaos of voices mixed with the delicious odour of deep-fried meats and sweet desserts. Serene enjoyed all the mouth-watering smells.

The tinker stand was an oasis in a colony of chaos. He leaned over his table of wares and stared down at her as she crouched beside Zara. He wore a cowboy hat, soft grey with a minimal pink neon glow. "Ma'am, I am a steward of the cosmic community. I am Mee. How can I help?" His voice resonated like

a fine violin with the slightest cowboy accent. He spoke through an interpretation device, but Serene couldn't see it.

Four small eyes across his forehead blinked at her as he tipped his hat. The hat covered the orbs, except for the two he used, like human eyes. He had a gold tooth, and it twinkled when he smiled. She'd seen videos and photos, but little was known about his kind. However, she was delighted to meet him.

Her toddler clung firmly to the edge of his display table and walked herself along it. Serene feared she might tip the stand onto her little head of dark black curls. "Zara!" Serene called quickly, sharp, afraid for the child, and flushed with shame because she'd allowed her to escape.

"Child-proofed," Mee informed her, pushing at the table with a three-fingered hand to show its sturdiness. Then Zara did something amazing. She pulled herself up onto his table and crawled amongst his exotic possessions. The child sat in the middle of the jewel-like artifacts and lifted something to her mouth, tasting it.

Serene grabbed Zara, pulled the thing from her daughter, and gave it back to Mee with an apologetic look. The baby fought her mother for the tiny snow globe-like object.

"Nontoxic Astra globe," Mee's violinlike voice sang out. "It's what you've been looking for? I remember Zara from last visit," he said, with a vibrato twang. "With this, your only child will know her galaxy."

"But Zara was still in my womb last time I was here," she said, looking doubtful at Mee. He nodded yes.

For a moment, the shadows behind Mee lit brightly as a flash of solar radiance shot through, and a breeze set off the movement of a small set of celestial wind chimes.

Mee gave the Astra globe back to Zara. He tickled her with his three-fingered hand, and the toddler laughed. Instantly, the globe became a floating sand sculpture in teddy bear form.

"A lifetime companion. It changes with her moods," he said. Mee's vocal resonance vibrated in her heart.

Baby Zara grabbed the sand bear, mashing its soft arm in her fist. The sand fell away but reassembled almost instantly. Zara pushed her face into its belly, then through its belly—the sand pushed away but once more reassembled. Zara's laugh made passersby stop and look.

"A Chrono-Sand Sculpture!" A stranger's voice yelled out, and a half dozen unknowns pushed aside the stall's sunshade flaps and stepped from the crowds toward the child, reaching for Zara and the sand teddy bear. The Astra

globe radiated a blinding illumination in all directions, and the strangers backed off. Serene grabbed Zara. The luminosity vanished.

“Good for protection, too,” Mee added, looking a little embarrassed, his cowboy hat glowed hotly. “Photon-capturing technology,” he said. “Refracts and amplifies sunlight—”

“Did you make this?” she asked. Mee nodded and flashed his gold tooth. “All of these?” she asked and pointed to the table of unfamiliar gadgets. He nodded again, followed by a bow. “How much?” Serene asked in a whispered voice. She picked up the crystalline globe, mesmerized by the power she’d witnessed in such a tiny mechanism. She returned it to Zara, who gummed the sphere until it became a cloud of butterflies with nebula-patterned wings fluttering around the child.

Mee pointed to the sign overhead, “*Mee, I am there,*” tapping on the red dot.

“But what do you want for it?” Serene tried to make him understand. She took the globe from Zara and stepped into a spot of sunlight. The object got warmer in her hand, and a slight halo full of miniature solar flares and coronal loops danced around sunspots within its halo. She recognized it as the sun, the one belonging to Earth. Stepping back into the shade of the stall, the globe continued to shine brightly, and from within its tight halo, it continued to project ethereal light patterns.

“Rising Sun Revelry festival only gift exchange only. Selling not allowed.” They both glanced toward the stalls manned by hucksters selling wares.

“Can you fix this?” she asked, showing him her optical solar monocle. At the same time, she wondered whether the eyepiece was still relevant, considering Mee’s Astra globe. He tipped his cowboy hat, and one of the small eyes across his forehead winked.

“Antique,” he said as he and his other eyes examined the Helio ocular piece.

“How much?” she asked, wondering if she could pay him to fix her “antique” technology.

“Come visit. Any time,” Mee said, again pointing to the dot on his sign that was his home. Serene thought a moment. She’d like to visit Mee’s world. She hadn’t travelled much, and Zara’s birth kept her close to home. Her heart pleaded for adventure.

She stroked little Zara’s curly head. The toddler made the astra globe play a happy child’s tune. Zara clapped her chubby baby hands against the globe to

its angelic sounds. A holographic bird-like creature blew out of Zara's clap and landed on her big toe.

"Okay," Serene said. Her parents had been intergalactic missionaries before they'd died in a crash landing on Proxima Centauri. Still, their work had never taken them beyond the galaxy's thin disk to the cultures in the halo. Scientists didn't believe anything existed out there but dust and old stars. But Serene saw how wrong they were in Zara's small orb. Mee's culture, or at least Mee, had captured the sun.

"Come visit. Bring Zara," Mee chirped.

Serene gave Mee a curious look. "A visit? To your home?"

Mee lifted Zara from his display table and held her steady on his hip, holding her in place with one of his three-fingered arms. He helped her play with the Astra globe she clung to with one little fist. The gift responded to Mee and Zara by projecting a small holographic image of a dark universe filled with twinkling stars and the occasional electrical vein of lightning, which Zara followed with her dark eyes and a pointed finger.

With his free hand, Mee pulled back the entry flap to the tent behind his stand. Serene took Zara from his arms and shifted the baby so the child rested on her outside hip. Serene peered inside. "It's empty," she said, sounding disappointed. Mee smiled. His gold tooth twinkled in such a friendly way it made Serene laugh.

"Not empty," Mee said. "Only waiting for you and little Zara."

"A conveyor?" she asked, brow furrowing. Mee bowed slightly to her interpretation and touched the brim of his hat. "Conveyors are illegal here," she reminded him.

"Not conveyor," he said gently. "Only an experiencer," he said, his voice full of assurance.

"As long as you're not sending us through a conveyor to your home planet," Serene said, eyeing him thoroughly, trying to feel Mee's true intentions. But this was the Rising Sun Revelry Festival. Its mission statement on the entry posts read, "We extend Hospitality and Reverence to Unfamiliar Faces."

An experiencer was perfect, she thought. She needn't leave the planet or the festival to see Mee's world. With little Zara on her hip, Serene stepped inside the tent. Mee stepped in behind and let the tent flap close.

In complete darkness, Zara cooed and dropped the Astra globe, but Serene quickly recovered it and watched as her hand became a landscape of sunny lavender fields up to her elbow. The clean scent of lavender filled the space.

“Welcome to Aurora Prime,” Mee’s voice narrated—Serene lost sight of him in the darkness, no matter what, she thought, because she and her daughter were immediately engrossed in a shimmering blue Aurora.

Serene’s feet lifted and floated. *Antigrav. I will have to ask how later.* She lay prone on her back with little Zara on her tummy as if they were stretched out on a floating pool mattress, surrounded by a colour-shifting light shower.

“Mee?” Serene whispered his name.

“Mee, here.” The sound of his voice grounded her, and Serene relaxed. Zara squirmed until she lay on her back on her mother’s tummy.

They floated together in the sensory deprivation of the tent’s dark interior. They lived another life in the distant realm of shimmering lights on Aurora Prime.

Mee remained with them, occasionally disappearing to tend to other festivals and to bring back other experiencers, mothers and children, or children to float through the infinite realms of Aurora Prime. He always checked in with Serene and Zara and tended to their every need, every desire, every request. *We extend Hospitality and Reverence to Unfamiliar Faces.*

Mee was the penultimate host, ensuring Zara and Serene experienced nothing but love and care, with feelings of companionship and a warm connection to his world and their galaxy.

Eventually, little Zara disappeared from the experience and was replaced with a child from Aurora Prime.

A painful flash of light smacked Serene’s eyes, and it took several moments for her to realize she was standing inside the empty tent, blinking into the sun. Her eyes streamed. Mee at the entrance, holding back the flap, allowing the sunlight to fall over her.

She shifted the new child she held to her hip. He looked human. He had dark curls like Zara, but a line of tiny unopened buds across his forehead identified him as an Aurora Prime child. “Give me Zara,” Serene demanded of Mee.

“She is a gift—a pledgling, deeply loved. You have one, too,” Mee said comfortingly. “A gift. The pledgings help to make a peaceful cosmic community. We love deeply the children.”

“I loved her! I want her back,” Serene shouted, and the Aurora Prime child’s eye buds leaked tears. But even in her anger at Mee’s betrayal, she hugged the new child to her. Her heart ached for Zara, and at the same time, she loved this new one. “When can I see her?” she asked carefully, cautiously negotiating, trying desperately to navigate Zara’s return. The new baby wanted

to suckle, and Serene's body responded. "I'm going to security and telling them you have used a conveyor," Serene threatened.

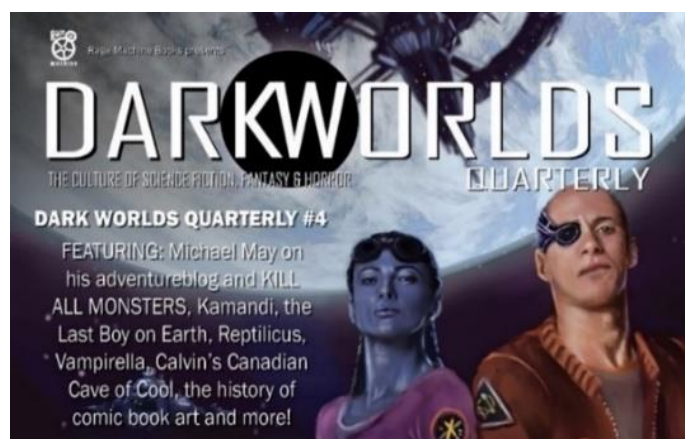
"Mee will go to prison. Baby Aurora Prime is returned, and Zara is gone. Maybe even galactic war," Mee practically sang these last words.

As Serene fed the Aurora Prime child, Mee handed her the Helio optical. "Fixed," he said, leaving her alone inside the tent holding the baby and the optical. She heard the tinker speaking to someone outside the tent. She entered the harsh sunlight, Aurora Prime baby in Zara's carrier. She held her repaired Helio optical up to the light, but she was listening to Mee's conversation.

"...steward of the cosmic community," he said. A young woman with a young child—a child exploring the galactic wares on Mee's table. She saw the toddler pick up an Astra globe.

Serene stepped forward. "The solstice is upon us," she said. "Come with me and my child to watch it." She held her viewer out to the mother and led the woman and child away from Mee's table. As they stepped from the shade into the sunlight, Mee came after Serene. He handed her the Astra globe. "Watch her grow and learn," he said. Serene paused, then grabbed the globe. "I'll see you next year," she said to Mee. He tipped his hat and gave her a slight bow. Serene walked away with the young mother to find the best spot to watch the solstice solar eclipse.

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Heath Bleau

Heath is an American Expat living with his Canadian wife in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. A photographer and poet, he draws his inspiration from the beauty and horror of nature, science, and societal issues. His work explores themes of mental illness, intimacy, and the darker side of the human condition.

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Joel is a science fiction and comedy writer who has been published in *Lightspeed Magazine* and the *No Sleep Podcast*, and the CBC podcast *Limited Capacity*.

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Lisa is from Toronto, Canada. She has been published in *Diabolical Plots*, *The Dark*, and others. When not reading or writing, she is probably wrangling with IT at a university, watching anime, taking a long walk, or solving crimes in *Among Us*. Her socials are listed at <https://linktr.ee/lisacai>.

Carolyn Clink

Carolyn won the 2022 Aurora Award for Best Poem/Song for “Cat People Café,” which appeared in *Polar Starlight*, Issue 3. She won the same award in 2011 for “The ABCs at the End of the World.” Her genre poetry publications include *Weird Tales*, *Analog*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative*

Writing, On Spec, Tesseract, Tales of the Unanticipated, Room, and all 5 volumes of *Northern Frights*.

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Jameson is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has been published in *Dark Recesses Press* magazine, *Dark Dispatch* and in anthologies such as *Chlorophobia: An Eco-Horror Anthology* from Ghost Orchid Press, *Let the Weirdness In: A Tribute to Kate Bush* from Heads Dance Press and *Love Letters to Poe, Volume II: Houses of Usher*. He can be found online at jameson-grey.com.

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Thomas is a teacher, lawyer, and emerging artist, who lives on his family horse farm in rural Prince Edward County. He writes occasionally, plays guitar badly often, and has recently re-invented himself as a performance and visual artist. He has never previously published science fiction fantasy, though he has dabbled in it for a few years.

Guy Immega

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

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

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

JYT Kennedy

A long-time resident of Alberta, though born on the other side of the planet in Auckland, JYT has published one fantasy novel and several speculative fiction stories. Her poem "Devoured" was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* #2, her short story "Till All the Seas Go Dry" in *Polar Borealis* #14, and two poems "Grassgreen" and "A Vision of the Future" in *Polar Starlight* #6.

Kellee Kranendonk

Kellee has spent a lifetime writing. According to her late grandfather she was born with a pen in one hand and paper in the other. She's certain that these days he would have claimed she was born clutching a laptop. She's pounded out many a story on the ancient laptop she does have, many of which have been published, others either seeking homes somewhere in cyberspace or waiting, like abandoned orphans, to be snatched up by a loving editor.

Kellee has a webpage, which she occasionally updates, but she can be found consistently on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/EclecticAuthor>), arguing with her dear cousin, or on Instagram, Bluesky, Threads, and the new Canadian platform, Kcunac, promoting her debut novel, *In the End*, which can be found on the Amazons, or wherever you buy your books online. It's also available at bookstores local to Kellee – Dog Eared Books and The Write Cup Bookstore Café. Find her on Substack (Born to be a Writer) and/or subscribe to her newsletter, “The Blatherings of a Maritime Author”.

Michèle Laframboise

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

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

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

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

Derek Newmann-Stille

Derek Newman-Stille (they/them) is a Queer, Nonbinary, Disabled, Fat, Femme settler Canadian (Turtle Island) author, poet, academic, editor, visual

artist, and activist. They are the 9-time Aurora Award-winning creator of the digital humanities site Speculating Canada and the associated radio show. They frequently use fantasy and science fiction as a means of elucidating possibilities and potentials, reimagining the way that we situate identities and ideas. Derek has published poetry in fora such as *Fat Studies In Canada: (Re)Mapping The Field* (Inanna) and *Whispers Between Fairies* (Renaissance Press), performed and published poetry for Artsweek Peterborough's SHIFT: Post-Code Tour, and performed poetry for Peterborough's Arts Ability: Taking the Stage.

In addition, Derek has published short fiction in *Dark Waters* (Poise and Pen Publishing), and *Nothing Without Us* (Renaissance Press). They have edited the collections *Over the Rainbow: Folk and Fairy Tales from the Margins* (Exile), and *We Shall Be Monsters* (Renaissance Press). Additionally, in collaboration with Nathan Frechette, they wrote the collection of short fiction *Whispers Between Fairies* (Renaissance Press).

Max Olesen

Max Olesen lives in witch-cursed, legend-haunted Victoria, British Columbia, Canada with his partner and two children. His fiction can be found in *ergot* and *Grey Ghost Review*.

Masha Riumina

Masha Riumina is a writer and poet from Vancouver, BC. She is fond of reading mystery and horror, which inspires her writing. In her spare time, she swims competitively and adores coaching it. In addition, she has a strong passion for arts and enjoys crafting along with her friends.

Jim Robb

Jim is a mostly-retired CPA, a retired army reserve officer, and a long-retired competitive fencer. His stories have appeared in print and online periodicals, including twice in each of *AE* and *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*, and in several anthologies, most recently *Dear Leader Tales* and *Space Marines*. He lives in Southern Saskatchewan with his wife Donna and their canine and feline associates.

Rhea E. Rose

Rhea has published many speculative short fiction stories and poems. She is a four-time Canadian Aurora Award Nominee, a Rhysling nominee, and recipient of several Ellen Datlow honourable mentions. She was the featured author in a recent issue of *Pulp Literature*. She is an active member of HWA, SF Canada and SFPA and is the editor of *Polar Starlight*, an online magazine of speculative poetry by Canadian authors. Her latest short story appears in *ParSec Magazine's* 2024 issue #11.

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Lisa is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. When not writing, she enjoys bird watching, vegetable gardening, and walking her cocker spaniel/Jack Russel mix Chet. Her speculative poetry has appeared in *New Myths*, *Star*Line*, *Triangulation: Seven-Day Weekend*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and other venues. Her collection of speculative haibun poetry, *In Days to Come*, is available from Hiraeth

Publishing. You can find out more about Lisa's writing projects at <http://lisatimpf.blogspot.com/>.

D.G. Valdron

D.G. Valdron is a Canadian speculative fiction writer, and author of approximately twenty-five books, including novels as *The Mermaid's Tale* and *Axis of Andes*, short story collections such as *Drunk Slutty Elf and zombies*, and non-fiction works on Doctor Who and LEXX. His most recent work is the nonfiction book, *Starlost Unauthorized and the Quest for Canadian Identity*, featuring a bold new exploration of the controversial series. Upcoming projects include a Kickstarter for a horror novel, *Squad Thirteen*, *Bloodsucker* a vampire novel to be published by Renaissance Press, and *Swordswoman in Love*, an online serial novel in progress. When not writing like a madman, he practices aboriginal law in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and likes interesting people and boring food. The story, "The Last Woman From Earth," was originally inspired by the work of artist Robert Pasternak, and for a collaborative project called *Twilight of Echelon*.

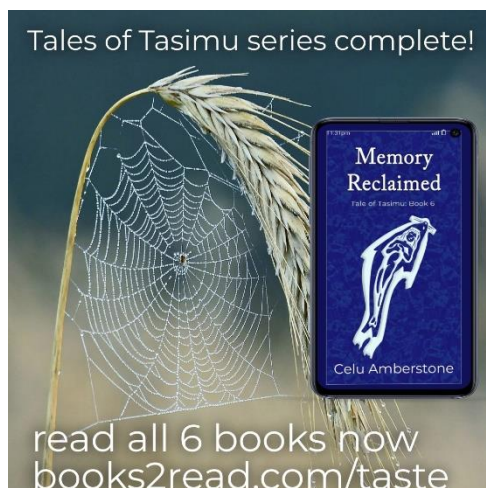
Melissa Yi

Melissa is an emergency doctor who can't stop writing. Her twelve weird, Lovecraftian poems will appear in *Cthulhu's Cheerleader* (<https://books2read.com/b/cheer>, currently on pre-order and scheduled for publication in October 2025. Melissa won the 2023 Prix Aurora Award for her poem "Rapunzel in the Desert" and the Derringer Award for short mysteries.

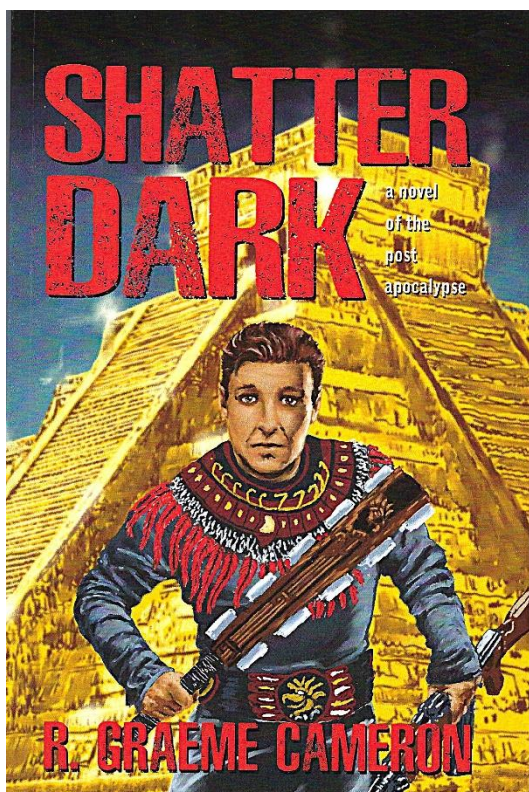
In *Killing Me Sloth-LY* (<https://books2read.com/b/slothly>), Melissa's heroine, Dr. Hope Sze, leaps from studying Parkinson's disease to battling a killer cult that draws its strength from the mythical force of Cthulhu.

Since Melissa wastes too much time on social media, you can find her on most platforms through <https://linktr.ee/melissayi>. She also invites you to

kick it old-school with a newsletter subscription and a free gift at <http://www.melissayuaninnes.com> and <https://melissayi.substack.com/>.



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WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT?

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After a limited nuclear war, climate warming, and the rising of the oceans, humanity managed to hang on, thanks to the tender mercies of the worldwide AI. But then the techgrid collapsed, and things really got tough.

Now that technology no longer functions, and all the easily exploitable metal and mineral resources have vanished, civilization can only be maintained at a stone-age level. There is a mad scramble as multiple demagogues attempt to revive their ancestral ways of life.

Among the future versions of past cultures struggling to be reborn: Egyptian, Assyrian, Roman/Fascist, Mayan, Tarascan, Azteca, and Viking.

Anything to do with cultural appropriation? Nope. This is about people, not cultures. The characters in the book know far less than we moderns do about ancient civilizations. Efforts to reconstruct the past are based on best guesses and false assumptions. Worse, they are led by demagogues exploiting past hatreds and current fears to stay in power through fear and terror.

I think you can see where the possibilities for social satire creep in.

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He has only one problem. He hasn't the faintest idea how to do his job, so he fakes it, taking credit for every fresh, unanticipated catastrophe. If his equally incompetent employers ever find out, they'll kill him.

Necessity compels Rudwulf to focus on survival. He dares not plan ahead. Instead, he reacts to events, always striving to react faster than anyone else, courtesy of his hyper situational awareness, while avoiding confrontation as much as possible. Not exactly your typical hero determined to conquer. Rudwulf relies on blind luck.

I think you can see where the possibilities for SF cliché satire creep in.

Like most of us, Rudwulf hates his job and wishes he'd chosen a different profession. Too late now. Maybe, too late for everyone.

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