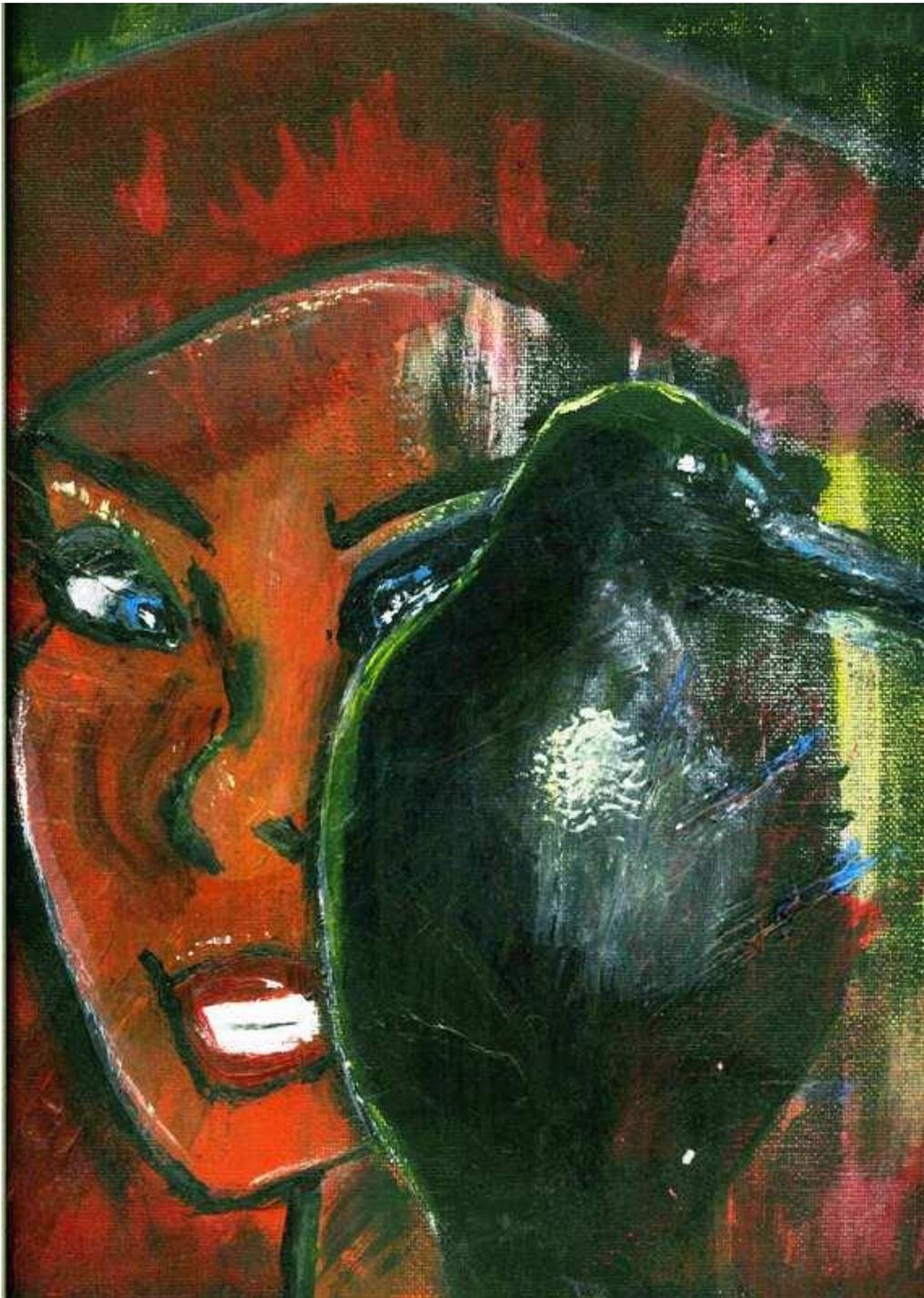


POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #19 – June 2025)



POLAR STARLIGHT MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

By Rhea E. Rose

“*Witchy woman, see how high she flies...*” (Eagles, 1972). Often, when I sit down to write the editorial for the latest edition of *Polar Starlight*, I listen to music which echoes issue themes. Songs and music are one way to find my inspiration; a way of diving below the surface searching for the primordial force driving the issue.

There’s nothing subtle about this issue’s theme. Witches, spells, magic, healers—women and witchery will always be bound. Good or bad, beautiful or haggish, the female aspiring or daring to behave beyond what society prescribes will always be marked as a magician of sorts, dark or light. The witch is an iconic symbol of unseen natural forces, feared and revered in all her roles.

Some quick research reveals the song by the Eagles quoted in my opening paragraph is about Zelda Fitzgerald—the long suffering (if somewhat spoiled Southern belle) and wife to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Wikipedia has an interesting story on her character and life, if you’re curious.

In this nationalistic moment of “Elbows Up” and “Let’s Be As Canadian As possible,” I wondered about Canadian witches, besides the ones found in the pages of this issue (metaphorically speaking, myself included), are there any famous Canadian witches? Shamans, priestesses or otherwise?

The short answer is not many, but three are noteworthy: Mother Barnes (Elizabeth Barnes) known as the “Witch of Plum Hollow.” She’s famous for having been a “psychic adviser” to Sir John A. MacDonald, a past Prime Minister of Canada.

A French-Canadian woman, Marie-Joseph La Corriveau, with a chilling legacy hung for the murder of her husband. (1700s, Google search, famous Canadian witches). Google Corriveau for a deeper dive.

In 1919, Maggie Pollock, a fortune teller and medium, was the last woman in Canada charged with being a practicing witch. (www.ctvnews.ca)

The real kicker is that a prohibition against witchcraft in Canada's Criminal Code was repealed in 2018! But fraud involving witchcraft remains on the books. Faking witchcraft isn't allowed, nor are fake magical abilities. The witch— her/his magic—must be genuine. No phony hocus-pocuses for the folksuses.

And speaking of real magic, we have a few new spellcasters—er, poets—joining us in this issue. Please welcome *Pam Martin* and *Marion Lougheed*, whose poetry conjures unsettling infant homunculi. Scary taboo stuff. Enjoy.

Rhea E. Rose

MORNING IN THE GARDEN OF FEAR

By Candás Jane Dorsey

from scorched-earth-and-betrayal dreams
the monster wakes to fearful flowers
that in foul air unfold their bowers
her favourite dwelling-place, it seems

she tends her garden carefully
she plants a new grudge every day
lets no old sorrow fall away
recites their virtues prayerfully

this smothering vine will kill a child
this acid nectar etch its toll
entangling thicket trap a soul
spirit pierced by cactus wild

but I am innocent, she cries
and all about me earned their fate
did not assuage my piteous state
and found no favour in my eyes

a life of vigorous assault
on all of those who are to blame
for keeping steadfast hearts aflame
and loving her despite her fault

we can't escape the toxic thorns
we writhe amid the poison stalks
along the path the monster walks
plucking the fruits her soil has borne

GARDEN VARIETY PROBLEM

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

We knew her by her finery,
the silks and velvets
clinging to her waist and thighs,
the diamond jewelry
pressed bone deep into her throat and wrists,
were all that still remained
to tell us who it was that perished there,
dissolving limbs akimbo,
her face a liquid mask of flesh
that would not serve to tell the tale.

And all the guests were baffled;
her hunting days were long years past,
adventurer turned wealthy dame
who no more bothered seeking threats.
Her hobby? Simple gardening, arranging blooms—
yet, here she lay,
yards from her garden party gate,
a pouch of salt clutched
in her melting, flesh poor hand,
a trail of slime stretched towards the wood.

APPLES ROLLING OUT OF TIME

By Lene MacLeod

an apple rolls from its pyramid,
crosses the aisle, landing below the
raw bulk nuts
remembrance of apples in my childhood kitchen
then realization, like the knock on Newton's head,
apples can wear different skins
memories I dreamed were
mine alone are universal
yet seen from different angles
nostalgia dissolves into awareness
a medieval child watches an apple
roll across the road
cursing the inevitable bruises
as their snack becomes the cure,
with toxins strong enough to dull
a dragon's bite
a modern child becomes sick
pesticides made his apple shiny and red
a futuristic child eats apple-flavoured slop
and asks what in this world an orchard once was

IF YOU COULD LOOK IN THE WITCH'S WINDOW

by Lynne Sargent

She hums as she works,
counts and measures her herbs
by the beats of the bars.

A mother will come today,
lay her child's sweat-streaked brow
on this woman's examination table,
fall on the mercy of this witch.

A young man with a festering wound
will arrive later, needing her help
in the fight against those smallest creatures,
infection, though he won the bout
he was wounded in.

The witch keeps her windows dirty
that her clients' reputations might be kept clean—
no one will know that they visit her
that they have been tainted by the muck
of her dishevelled hut, her dark work

but those visits, and that gratitude,
and the song she marks her labour by
is the only light she needs.

WHAT THE BABY GOD MADE

by Pam Martin

look at what the baby god made
scraped together with sticks and shade
dead some leaves, bit of moss,
stuck in mud
forgot they eyes
forgot they feet
lean on each other
like child and mother
don't look like much
but sweet and kind
stuck some stones
make they eyes
can't hardly see
almost blind
help each other
they don't mind
shaped some clay
make sweet little feet
when soft winds blow
dance
sing
move they arms
move they feet
sweet and kind
what the baby god made

HUNTER'S HAVEN

by Colleen Anderson

Night gently holds
its milk-white children
curled into fetal blooms

waking, they crawl spider-limbed
between
lamplight's reaching fingers

they crave to taste
sun-warmed treats
drink in the owl's cries

Night closes its shadowy fist
as predators blindly seek
bathe in moonlight's whisper

the city comes to life
as softly slumbering souls
exude unencumbered mindscapes

gape-mouthed, Night's spawn
gulp effervescing realms
then burrow sleepily
into people's dreams

HORRORKU SUITE

by Marion Loughheed

sunken sealer
darkness on the ocean floor
threads of light emerge

rain drums on the roof
not a soul home to hear but
the one in the walls

asleep in the crib
baby opens her small mouth
a deep voice booms out

STAIRS OF THE DISAPPEARED

by Lene MacLeod

These stairways lead not to heaven,
gaps in the stairs where a hand will most certainly come out and
tickle your shins or send you spinning, tumbling, breaking bones,
cracked concrete stairs lead down, down into the abandoned root cellar
twenty feet from the back porch of the abandoned house,
metal fire escape stairs that are made out of gaps,
they are too steep and reach too high
staircase of disappearing
the stairwell in a sunny parkette in the centre of town
the steps lead down to a storage room, lawncare tools for summer,
rakes for autumn, shovels and ice melter for winter
a urinal in an alcove, no door, no women work here
rats scurry about in the darker part of the room
air hangs dead in the part that is darkest
before the staircase, on the concrete path with
mica inclusions that glisten in the sunshine,
that is where the bones are found
like an offering, arranged neatly,
a pyre, a cairn, an inuksuk
not once, three times so far as we know
bones of the missing
once it was a missing dog
once a missing grandmother
once a missing teenager
and now the day is not sunny
the mica does not glisten
my inner voice warns, but legs do not listen
down, down I go
because
someone left the door ajar
something beckons from the room
below the parkette
I can see only darkness then
I don't know what I am missing but
I know that I am missing

FAIT ACCOMPLI

by Heath Bleau

Negative feedback eating me alive
Positive promises promise to be lies
Inside-out, a visceral feast
for the well-seasoned autosarcophagist beast

Flagellation tenderizes the toughest of meats
Garlic and self-loathing make savory treats
I'll serve myself portions, sous vide or en croûte
Amygdala and genitals make amusing amuse-bouche

My loin will, no doubt, make a wondrous fillet
Encrusted with failure and peppery dismay
My words will be salty and spicy and sweet
when served with my gastrointestinal gastrique

I'll brine my own brisket with tears
A flat-iron steak could be cut from my rear
and prepared in the sauciest hate demi-glace
seasoned with hope, but just barely a trace

And then, what of love, the sweetest dessert?
Topped with a crumble of perversion and hurt
finished with a cream of jealousy and pain.
Best not drop a drip, that shit leaves a stain.

The mind, I'm told, is a terrible thing to taste
And dyspeptic dispositions go straight to the waist
But far be it from me to turn down a free meal
Even if indigestion is part of the deal

Would that I could leave this seat at the table,
"Excuse me, I'm not feeling at all well or stable."
Alas, I'm force-fed by my own calloused paws
My gullet, a guillotine. The basket, a gaping maw.

MY SONG, MY DANCE

by Renee Cronley

I was seen in the woods,
dancing in the forbidden way,
and word travels like the wind
in our small, pious village.

He thunders his sermon—
hurling hollow virtues like lightning,
while casting his evil eye on me.
“*Witch*” sits on the edge of his tongue,
ready to strike me into a pyre.

I mouth a quiet chant,
and draw his attention to my lips,
where I pull up the corners
like a seven-string lyre.

Sensual beats slide through
the restrained church organ
like a poet serenading their mistress.
light as lavender

The congregation comes undone,
swaying their hips to the rhythmic
thump of an unseen drum.
fierce as fire

He twirls in tandem
with the trim I cut from his robe
as I wind it around my finger.

He has made it his life’s work
to preach a leash around their inner animals.
I show him how easily I can let them out.

The beats disappear with my smile
and the moment is gone
as though it never were.

He shakes till I steady him with my glare,
writing my sheet music into his soul
so that he knows he will dance
to whatever tune I play.

PAPER KNIFE

By Neile Graham

you in here amongst the leaves
flipping the pages of this stranger skin

only a blade this thin can slice
the space between words

letters scramble to their places
too late and too soon

the story reads you, syllables
hide and reveal your name on every page

not like a rock you lift up
and what scurries away, no

a knife shivved so thin as to eviscerate
the seconds between your words you

FOR EACH OF US IS A THING UPON WHICH THE WORLD RESTS

By Lynne Sargent

Think on the Norns,
that first coven of witches.

I longed to join them,
and perhaps you do as well

for you are here,
wanting to be entranced by these words,

and what is magic,
but agency in the face of fate?

Perhaps all who love
such deities become writers,

I did,

that I might tend to the river's waters
add new branches to the world-tree,

hold out spindle, loom,
or scissors to foolhardy heroes

when I could give
answers in their place.

But alas, those are only for you,
dear reader

and now it is time for you to take them
away from this place

cultivate your seed,
find your magic,

your coven,
your fate.

THE GODDESS OF CURIOSITIES

by Neile Graham

What was it she asked us?
She is counting rivers.
She is tracing veins of leaves.
She is placing cloud-pieces in the puzzle
of the sky.

Each night she needles night's velvet shroud
to let the suns peer through. To let
them see our sleep.

She is naming birds.
She is slipping into the spirals of shells.
What marks do her fingerprints
leave on our skin?
She is watching the garden's breath
through cat's eyes.

Each day she lifts the shroud to let
the suns roar through us over us. To let
them watch us wake and walk.

She is sketching the shapes of grains.
She is noting the spiders' spells.
She is weaving solitudes together
the warp and weft of us, bit by bit.
How is it she sings us so true?

LOSING IT

By Candás Jane Dorsey

I discovered today I have lost one of the mittens of human skin
I made last time I was flayed by circumstance. it was lined with the contents
of my thoughts, which are fuzzy and self renewing. they were good for insulation at least
but now I will have to sacrifice
the skin of a thigh, perhaps, or the soft belly I try to keep safe and hidden. after all
I have to go on
and some protection is necessary.

perhaps I'd better sit down here, try to figure out
what I can do without. my belly skin for a while? the soft warmth between my thighs?
or maybe just let the hand freeze normally. let it happen. how much do I use it
anymore anyway? that's what the ice is about. reduction of the liveable land mass
to someplace just large enough
to lie down when it's time to die.

or I could wait until someone gives me some of their sloughed-off or sliced-off hide—
we on the road, we give each other these useful gifts often, knowing
we can't carry them all ourselves. yes, perhaps
I can walk with my hand tucked into the sleeve of my jacket for a while
not reaching out with it
not really touching anything with that part of myself, until someone proves to me
they are willing to give up something for my sake

for a change. I may or may not meet a generous person
before the ice advances.

It's a long walk. anything could happen.

OFFAL OFFERING

By Heath Bleau

peel back
split lips
of this
fiendish Afreet
revealing
black gums

grit your
razor teeth
laser edged
then grip my flesh
dripping bile
where blood
should flow

go deeper
into my
weeping chest
and carve out
my jaundiced heart
a bitter feast
for people
but for demons
it seems
none better

quell your hunger
in my
soft underbelly
then pick
your teeth clean
with my
atrophied spleen

grin your
gleaming
satisfaction
and be sure
to keep what's left
of my
withered innards
in a
canopic bento box
as a snack
on your
short trip
back to hell

when next
you well up
from the depths
of your
offal meal
and you feel
a hankering
for a
fresh flesh filet
please remember
that ours is
a shared fate
and never
a dinner date

HUMANITY'S DARKEST HITS

By Renee Cronley

I make these forest treks my habit,
because when I'm out of tune with the world,
a choir of meadowlarks and finches
syncs me back into nature's anthem.

But there's a brief distortion—
an ear-splitting hymn of silence
as the drumbeat of creation
cuts in and out at regular intervals:
6 seconds, another 6 seconds, 6...

A metallic flash from the shadows
behind the lip of an abandoned rock mine
glints for my attention.
I reach into its mouth
even as my senses sing against it.
A cool, slick silver cassette tape
rolls off its tongue like a perfectly timed lyric.

It hums in my hands,
sending vibrations through my bones,
rattling the knob of a door in my mind
I never knew was there.

I pop it into my cassette player
despite the label cautioning otherwise.
A chorus of clean vocals
in a language I've never heard
cuts through the air like polished blades
severing the surrounding bird songs.

Hairs on my skin stand like antennae,
picking up on a signal

that sits on the edge of my instincts
screaming through the keyhole,
“I’m in here! Let me out!”

The rise and fall of tones
weave together to create
their own beating heart.

They tap into mine
and show me where the key is.

The door opens—
they look into my soul,
read the dark pieces like sheet music
and the notes fly free.

The air tingles with them—
flowing into innocent ears,
unlocking doors Mother Nature sealed
to restrain our wicked side.

It’s time to come out.

ABOUT THE POETS AND ARTIST

Colleen Anderson

Multiple award-nominated and award-winning author Colleen Anderson has been widely published across seven countries, with works appearing in publications such as *Weird Tales*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Amazing*, and the award-winning *Shadow Atlas*. She is a Rhysling Award winner for “Machine (r)Evolution” and a two-time winner of the SFPA’s dwarf poetry contest. Based in Vancouver, BC, she has been a Canada Council, BC Arts Council and Ladies of Horror Fiction grant recipient. Her poetry collections include [*The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams*](#), [*I Dreamed a World*](#), and [*Weird Worlds*](#), as well as fiction collections [*A Body of Work*](#) and *Embers Amongst the Fallen*—all of which are available online. *Vellum Leaves and Lettered Skins* is her fourth poetry collection coming from Raw Dog Screaming Press in 2025.

www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

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.

Renee Cronley

Renee is a writer from Manitoba who stepped away from nursing to prioritize her children and channel her knowledge and experience into a poetry book about nursing burnout. Renee can be found at <https://www.reneecronley.com/>

Candas Jane Dorsey

Candas is the internationally-known, award-winning author of speculative novels *Black Wine*, *A Paradigm of Earth*, and upcoming (*At the Freak Show*; postmodern mysteries *The Adventures of Isabel*, *What's the Matter with Mary Jane?*, and *He Wasn't There Again Today* (The Epitome Apartments Series); YA novel *The Story of My Life, Ongoing*, by C.J. Cobb; short story collections *Machine Sex and other stories*, *Dark Earth Dreams*, *Vanilla and other stories*, and *ICE and other stories*; four poetry books; several anthologies edited/co-edited, and numerous published stories, poems, reviews, and critical essays. She has received a variety of awards and honours for her novels and short fiction.

She is also a community activist, advocate and leader who has won two human rights awards and served on many community boards and committees working for neighbourhoods, heritage, social planning, equality of policing, and human rights advocacy. Dorsey is also a visual artist.

Neile Graham

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

Marion Lougheed

Marion grew up in Canada, Benin, Belgium and Germany. She is pretty sure her family was not running from the cops, but she still moves around a lot, just in case. One summer, she lived on a 27-foot sailboat in Vancouver with her partner. People sometimes say Marion has "hidden depths" but that's code for being a bit odd. She is happy being a bit odd. It

helps her write speculative poetry. She's been published at *The Arcanist* and *Black Hare Press*, among others. Read more of her work at www.marionlougheed.com

Lene MacLeod

Lene writes dark fiction, quiet horror, SFF, and poetry in Ontario, Canada. Her debut collection *Fringes of Grey* is now available from DarkWinter Press. Publishing updates can be found at www.lenemacleod.com

Pam Martin

Pam is a retired therapist who enjoys reading, writing, photography, and walking in the woods with her dog.

Born in Ottawa, Pam spent most of her adult life in PEI, with a few years in Northern Saskatchewan. She now lives in a small town in Ontario.

Pam's book, *Variations on Blue*, was shortlisted for the Atlantic Poetry prize. She recently finished her first novel, *The House on Waverley Street* and is working on a second.

In addition to a variety of jobs, Pam has a background in the book trade, including co-owning and managing a bookstore in Charlottetown PEI.

Lynne Sargent

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

Tracy Shepherd

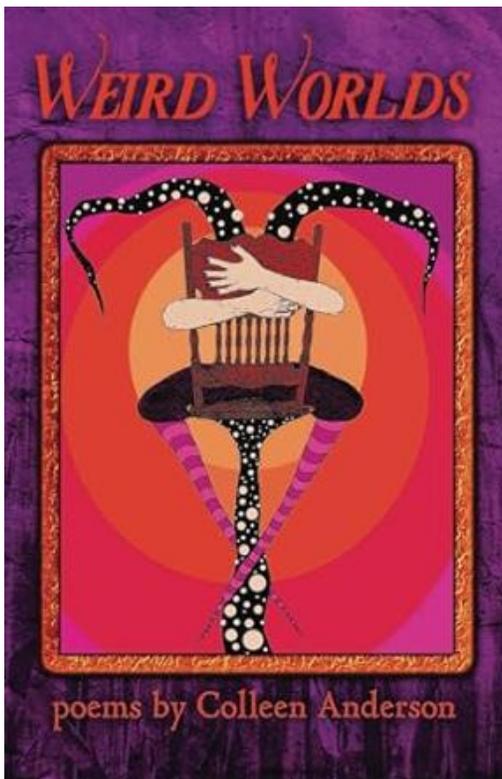
Tracy is a self-taught watercolour artist, a bold charcoal sketcher and an amateur acrylic trier. She is also a professional tarot reader/witch living in Canada. To date Tracy has published two books of poetry, *In Search of Dracula in a Moon-Shot Sky* and *A Sorceress Rising: Soulmate Rejections*, and two art books, *Temple of a Space Kitten: Unusual Water Colour Portraits* and *I am Thirty Seconds of Ripe Peach: Goddess Illustrations*. All four are available on Amazon.

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

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

REVIEW OF “WEIRD WORLDS”

By Rhea E. Rose



Colleen Anderson’s *Weird Worlds* is a poetry collection that lives up to—and goes beyond—its title. These poems are strange in the best way: eerie, emotional, haunting, and occasionally playful. They explore fear, sadness, myth, and transformation with rich, sensory language that sticks long after reading.

The collection is divided into five sections: *This is Horror*, *Shadow Country*, *Closet Skeleton*, *Mythic Nature*, and *Dark Matter*. Each offers something different, but together, they create a deep and dark layered

experience, bringing dread and beauty together in surprising ways, often shifting between the surreal and the emotionally raw.

From *This is Horror*, the poem *Vampire Girlz*—a personal favourite. Its subtle, humorous snark is pitch-perfect and a refreshing observation in a collection that leans heavily into the grim and gothic and shows the poet’s range and wit.

From *Shadow Country* comes two of the collection’s most memorable poems. *The Drowning Ones* is a standout piece that feels like a quiet myth unfolding. It follows a character from childhood into a strange union with the sea. The pacing is slow and reverent, and the language—like “glossy shells into hair”—creates an eerie and sacred hypnotic mood.

Also, from *Shadow Country* comes *Still Life with Gods and Monsters*, a surreal blend of underworld motifs from multiple cultures. A mythic convergence that reveals, through haunting imagery, a descent into both literal and symbolic death, memory, myth and madness.

After adventuring through cosmic places and other worldly domains, we find ourselves in *Closet Skeletons*, an inner world filled with the terrifying intimacy of our own haunted inner spaces. It’s here where my favourite poem from this section hides. *How to Cook With Children* nurtures imagery and playfulness with a tasty twist of make-believe.

Mythic Nature’s poetry is powerful. *The Tree of Eyes*, *Heart of the Woods*, and *Werewolf* connect the natural world with an ancient, living force—wild, watchful, and unknowable—confronting humanity with its deepest fears: the beast within and the mystery beyond. Here, nature is mythic—sentient, secretive, and transformative—revealing the wild force beneath the civilized.

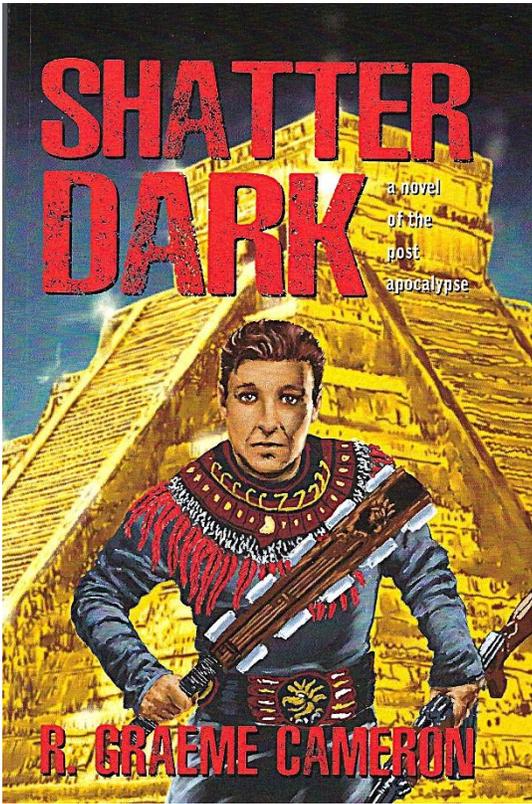
From *Dark Matter*, the sci-fi-themed poems—like *Darkside* and *Pilot Flight*—resonate with the ache of loss, longing and existential exile.

Weird Worlds is a darkly beautiful collection. Whether drawn to the mythic, the monstrous, or the mysteries of space and time, there’s something here to surprise—and maybe even unsettle in the very best way.

Find it here: < [Weird Worlds](#) >

REVIEW OF “SHATTER DARK”

By Rhea E. Rose



Set in a fractured future stitched together with myth, memory, and malfunctioning tech, this novel follows Rudwulf the Smiter—a professional killer with a dry wit, a talking AI in his head, and an unholy appetite for logic-defying bureaucracy.

I was pleasantly surprised by *Shatter Dark*. It’s a hilariously clever read. It’s a science fiction story full of cynicism, satire, and post-apocalyptic absurdity. Empires crumble, technology rots and mythical memories fade, but the voice, Rudwulf’s inner snarl and Buddy-bod’s snide AI commentary keep the tone biting and brilliant.

Our Rudwulf is a Don Quixote-like character, a broken knight in a fallen empire, searching for meaning as we laugh at the absurdity of it all. His embedded Buddy-bod is Sancho Panza meets HAL 9000. Windmills are now AI gods and plastic pyramids.

Parts of Rudwulf’s journey echo the legend of El Dorado and the quest for the city of gold. The reader finds plenty of mythical power, golden illusions, and doomed quests in this plastic-and-code paradise where grow-vats, religion, politics, and simulation blur.

Rudwulf’s reluctant diplomacy lets us see the last gasps of Gods, governments, and gadgets delivered with deadpan flair. The novel is fiercely intelligent but never afraid to be ridiculous.

And this story asks an existential question. What does it mean to believe in anything when belief itself has been bought, sold, and pixelated?

A consistently sharp narrative voice and a charmingly unrepentant, cerebral and funny relationship between Rudwulf and his “love interest,” Myriad, keep the story gritty.

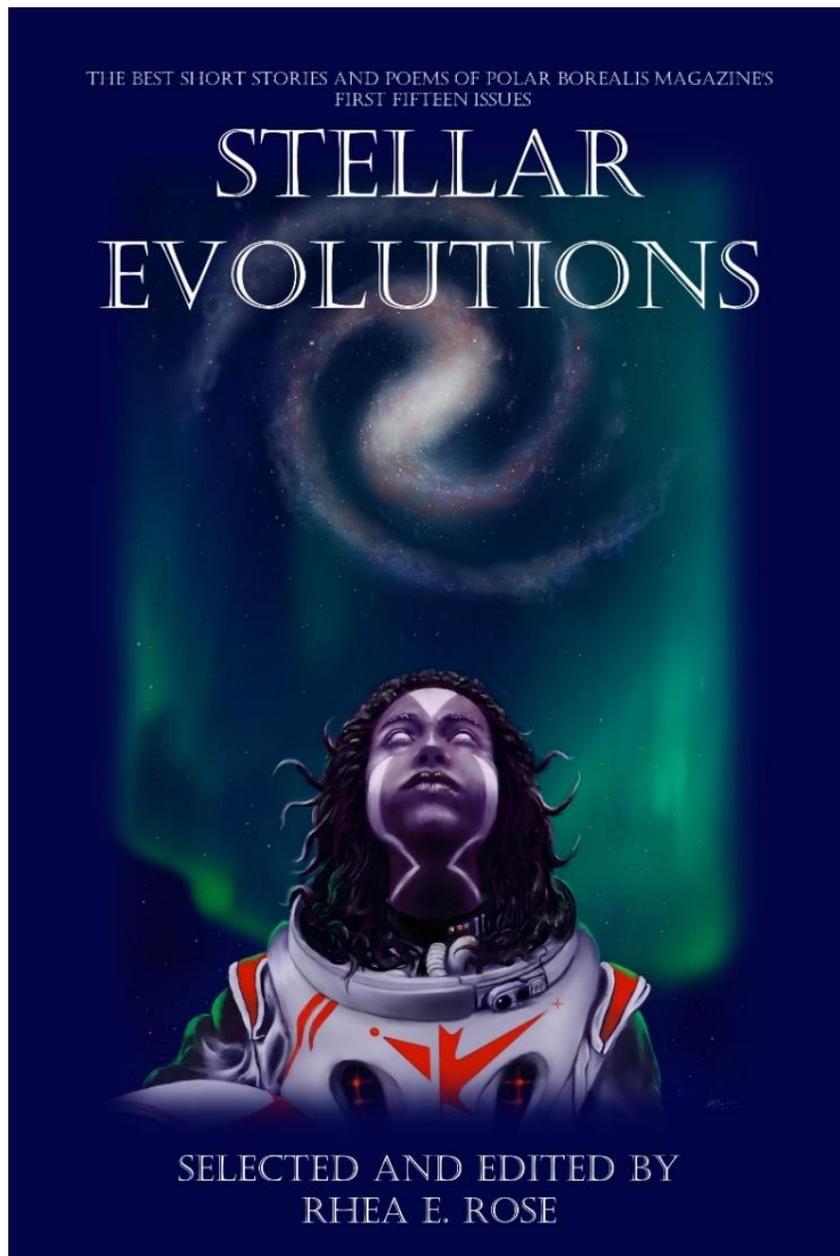
Rudwulf’s conversations and connection to his Buddy-bod are fun snark, and the technology is reminiscent of M.T. Anderson’s young adult novel, *The*

Feed, a dark dystopian novel, more serious in tone and outcome than *Shatter Dark*'s exploration of the aftermath of technology. Each time I picked up the manuscript for a read, I found myself smiling and chuckling at the page and subtext. I think readers will recognize this world and laugh out loud.

You can preorder *Shatter Dark* at:

< <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/alexmcgilvery/shatter-dark> >

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