

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #35 – July 2025)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

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Poem – \$10.00

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< [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: *Sensory* – by Robert Pasternak

EDITORIAL

I'm very pleased to add Robert Pasternak to the roster of artists contributing to Polar Borealis. You can look forward to more of his art next year.

I'm also pleased to be placing this, the final issue of Polar Borealis for 2025, into the world beyond the confines of my living-room office. Last time I checked PB is read in 126 countries. Quite the explosive outing from the micro to the macro. Always a thrill, believe me.

However, what makes this day especially memorable is the arrival of a package containing twenty author copies of my novel *Shatter Dark* which Celticfrog Publishing published at the beginning of this month. I was quite excited opening the box. Culmination of a lifelong dream, the number one item on my bucket list.

It began with a Kickstarter in June launched by the publisher. It resulted in 16 backers signing up. Since the average novel sells less than twenty copies in total, I figure I'm off to a good start.

The Kickstarter combined with subsequent online sales has met my minimum expectation for the first month of publication. My expectation for the first year of sales is somewhat larger, but modest enough to be achievable.

I sent out ARCs (advance review copies) to a number of writers, most of whom I've known for decades. The response was intriguing. About half really liked my book, and the other half didn't like it all. No fence sitters.

I particularly appreciated one reviewer who wrote "I was impressed by the book; I was afraid it would be dreadful, and I'd have to figure out how to be noncommittal if asked about it, but you surprised me. It was fun, witty, and moved along quite spryly (despite your age, ha ha!)."

Yes, weird and idiosyncratic though it be, I designed the book to be fast-paced and as easy to read as possible. I may have succeeded. I hope so.

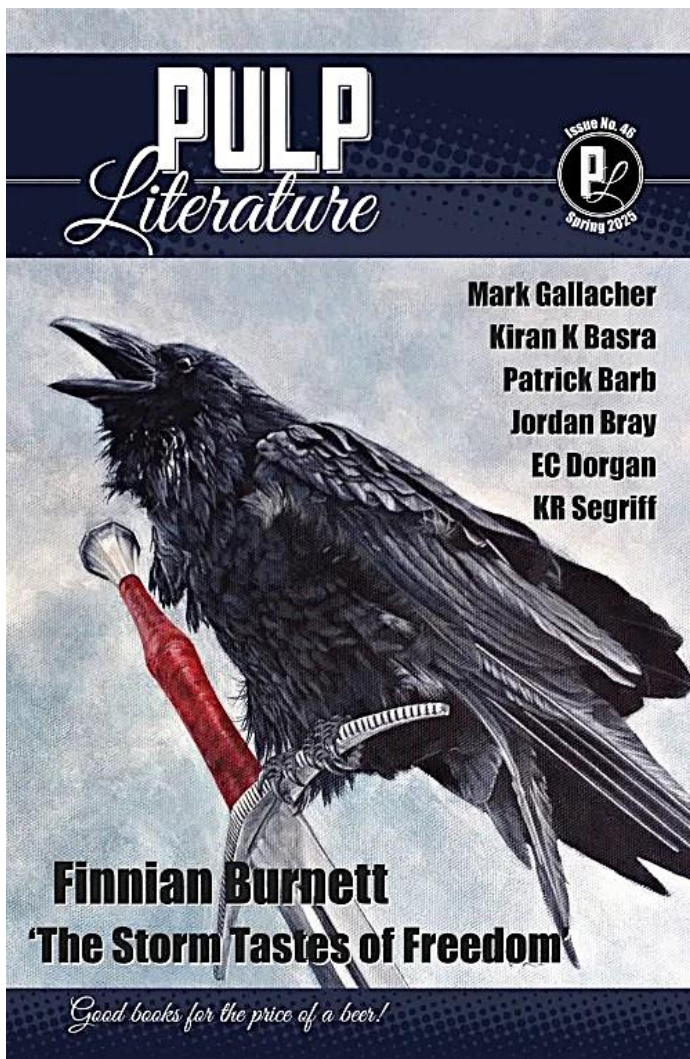
Cheers! The Graeme

THE IRONY OF DEATH

by Rebecca Franklyn

the irony of death
eclipses that of life on earth
for the shadowlands forget
what made a home for humans
was the undoing of aliens

PULP LITERATURE #46 – Spring 2025



Cover: *Towton* – by Steve R Gagnon

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The Storm Tastes of Freedom

– by Finian 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 Kearney 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](#) >

ICEBERG

By Robert Runté

As our little boat pattered towards the iceberg he said, "It's like it's been carved."

"A little bigger than any human carving," I said. I tried to sound bored, as if I had seen it out fishing every day.

"By giants, then. Or aliens, or something. But you know what I mean. Look at the way the ice is curved. How even it is."

"Wind does that," I improvised. "There's nothing to block the wind, so it strikes the ice perfectly evenly, creating that carved effect."

"Reminds me of this art deco radio cabinet I inherited. Same kind of curves, that sort of row of columns on this side."

"I always think of buttresses," I said. "To hold up the sky." Especially when seen from the other side.

"That symmetrical gap in the middle, though? Makes it look like some sort of gateway."

"A portal between worlds," I said.

"Right! Yes, exactly!" His head tilted as he considered. "Can you get us closer? I'd like to climb on if I can."

"No problem."

He unslung the camera from around his neck and laid it carefully on the bench beside me. "Just point and press. It will do the rest. I want a shot of me as if I've just come through 'the Gate'."

I laughed at that, quite genuinely. "Leave your jacket, then. Make it look like you've crossed through the Gate without realizing. Unprepared for the cold on this side."

"Subtle," he said. He shrugged out of his jacket, dumping it on the bench next to the camera. Then he stood, steadying himself leaning over the gunwale, like a racer poised before the starter's pistol. As soon as our little boat bumped up against the ice, he was off and running. It was getting dark and he knew he had to hurry if he wanted the photo.

I turned the boat round and headed out along the coastline, away from the bay, and on with what I'd been doing before he'd interrupted. The jacket was the wrong size, so that went over the side immediately, but the camera and his wallet would be useful.

He must have realized as soon as he reached the gate and turned around, that I was already well past the distance required to frame the shot. His single “Hey!” was surprise, shock, disappointment—not an actual call for me to turn back. A positive sign. He might be quicker, more adaptable, than his gullibility would have suggested. Just his bad luck he’d jumped to the wrong conclusions when he’d happened upon me as I was stealing some local’s boat. A reasonable enough mistake.

There’d be no need for a jacket where he was going, but he’d freeze to death if he stayed where he was. I extended my arms toward him, and made shooing motions. He looked over his shoulder several times to see what I was motioning at, but eventually he got it, and went through. I wished him luck, quite sincerely.

NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #36.

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



Johanson out of Victoria, B.C., Canada. The first issue was printed October 10, 2003. Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine won the Aurora Award in the category of Best Work in English (Other) in 2007 and in 2009.

COVER:

Mountain Peaks – by Karl Johanson

CONTENTS:

Holy Water – by Karl Johanson

Scientist’s Cats – by Karl Johanson

Ransom in the Woods – by Robert Runté

Choosing a Game – by Karl Johanson

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](#) >

THE ALIEN

by Ivanka Fear

Headlights in rows and columns
illuminate blank faces of a native species,
robotic rhythm of machine and creature
a curiosity for the alien.
Lights and sounds emanating from BMWs
populate the buzzing terrain,
walkers dodging metal conveyors
distract the newcomer.

Geometrics of glass and metal
hovering over lakeshore,
conglomeration of shape and design
astound the alien.
Cranes extend telescopic arms
to birth new Goliaths in the sky,
a mirrored fantasyland for
indigenous city dwellers.

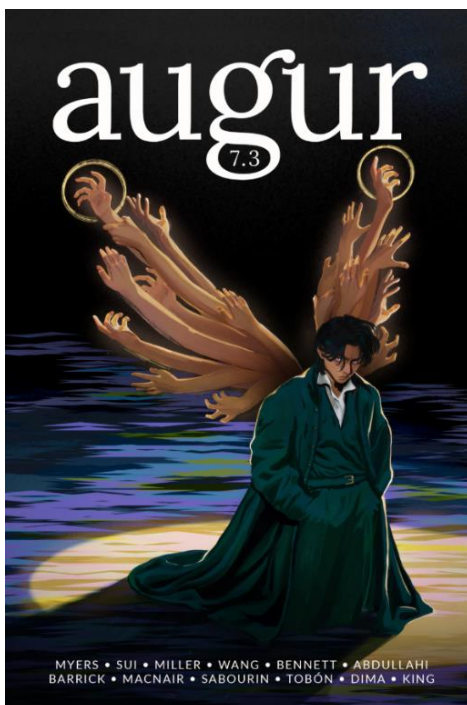
Rows of houses and rooftops
trapped within gated boundaries,
facsimiles of homes and communities
inexplicable to the alien.
Smart centers pop up
promising material happiness,
enticing their prey to conform to
endemic trends.

Promises of nature and open space
as warehouses dwindle in the landscape
ending claustrophobia and homesickness,
encourage the alien.
Metal transporters meeting and passing
carry goods to and from the Mecca,
conveying dual citizens from the
wasteland to the promised land.

Horizontal meeting of sky and earth
interspersed with country homes,
the expanse of green and blue
a wonder to the alien.
The quiet calm surrounding
a contrast to the pandemonium left behind,
confuse, for a moment,
the alien who nearly assimilated.

The familiarity of towns and villages
dotting the countryside,
the quaintness of homes and shops,
now reassure the alien.
Farms spread out on green terra firma,
fields harbour horses and cows,
cornfields stand proud
as the alien returns home
to nature where she belongs.

AUGUR MAGAZINE ISSUE 7.3



The Physicality of Change – by Conyer Clayton
Shotgun Wedding for Brain Corals and Parrot Fish
– by Cassandra Myers
One Becomes Two – by A.D. Sui
Flesh and Blood – by D.D. Miller
Seventh Sister – by James X. Wang
The Water Doesn't Want You – by Rebecca Bennett
Roots that Abide – by Fatima Abdullahi
Goose – by David Barrick
Moth Lake – by Erin MacNair
Confessions of a Mech Made of Flesh – by KJ Sabourin
Mi Niña Hermosa – by Yael Tobón
Logoptera – by Diana Dima
Report by the Scientists who Discover Liquid Water on Mars
– by Natasha King

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

THE FUTURE IS OURS

by Manly Fisher

So how was your holiday, Harry?

It was fantastic. Our flight was delayed though, as usual. We boarded 45 minutes later than what was posted. And then we sat in our seats for over an hour and a half before takeoff. We were told that they were waiting for someone to board. I thought it was probably one of those idiots who really needs to go to the bar before take-off, has their three or four Bloody Marys and decides to take their sweet time because they know the flight will wait for them. Meanwhile, all of us were inconvenienced by someone who thinks this world spins around them. And I wasn't wrong. Two of them finally showed up all glassy eyed and staggering sideways like crustaceans. I just wanted to slap them in the back of their heads.

You went to the big Skiffy expo in Vancouver that everyone is talking about, didn't you?

Yeah, we went to The Future is Ours Expo. Just me and the Missus. Couldn't take all the kids—too expensive—so the two of us just went. It was great!

I heard it's nice. A lot of folks go there. So, what did you like best?

Well, you know that we both love rides. The faster it spins the better. Lost in Outer Space was great. But we didn't care for the Spout because of the water thing. The Black Hole and the Trip of Terror were a real hoot. You're not supposed to eat on the rides, but when we were in the dark, we took a nip or two here and there. I mean there was so much available. And the food was probably one of the best parts of the trip. There was food from all over, and it's all lined up for the tasting. They had food from India, Italy, and China. Funny how when I eat Chinese, I'm hungry after an hour. Of course, there was North American fast food, which really wasn't too fast but sure was greasy.

Haha. I know what you mean. What did the wife like best?

Let me tell you what my crazy wife did. I know you're well aware of her wild sense of humor. Well, it's our last day there. So she decides to go to a health clinic just inside of the Expo. Said she wasn't feeling well and that it was just probably something she ate. We get there and it is packed and I do mean packed. We are finally called in to see the doctor and we are shoved into this tiny room. Well, being a bit rotund, as we are, that just made the room that

much smaller. In comes the doctor and a nurse and they can barely close the door behind them.

“What seems to be the problem today?” says the doctor.

“I’m not sure,” says my wife snickering to herself, “but I seem to have this lump on my abdomen.” All the while, I’m thinking, ‘What is she up to?’ So the doctor examines this lump, and it starts moving. Suddenly, my wife’s human skin bursts open, and our babies come out. I mean, how closed mouth can she be? I didn’t even know she was expecting.

Holy moly. What happened?

You can just imagine the look of astonishment in the doctor’s eyes not only of the birth of our 80+ children, but when the Missus pulled out of her human disguise and grabbed the nurse with those beautiful long pincers of hers and starting snacking, I thought the doctor would soil himself, which, by the way, you never want because that really spoils the meat. So before he could even scream, my lovely lady pierced his neck with one of her gorgeous legs. You know, after all these years, she still has the legs of a teenager. They totally turn me on.

Our young’uns had plenty to eat and boy, were they hungry. I stuck out my chest with pride and watched them feed and simply thought, “Yep, them MY children.”

Well, what did you do after all that?

While my family was feeding, I went back through the waiting room and locked the outside door. After all, it was our last day and here was a smorgasbord of food laid out in front of us. Didn’t want anything getting away. It was such a thrill and a relief to shed my human coat, and I must admit with all those people looking into my eight eyes, I was salivating just a bit. Nothing beats fear and adrenaline; it’s like pouring both chocolate and caramel syrup on ice cream. I grabbed everything I could with as many of my free arms.

Sounds like a really great time. Think you will go back?

You betcha! We have to visit our children, and while we’re there, we always wanted to go to the Calgary Stampede. Heard it’s called The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth. You know the future really is ours but one never knows what to expect. Hey... I almost forgot. I took a ton of pictures. Wanna see?

IN STAR DUST

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

We thought it was our fate to join and conquer,
to start our rise with words and end with worlds,
until the stars themselves bowed down to serve us,
and bright fae realms unbarred their gates and hoards.

But even stars explode and die in glory,
and ancient spells can crumble into ash,
while fairy tales expire in ever after,
and storied heroes fade and fall to rust.

Yet we who still remain are not done dreaming,
our purpose does not dim like tarnished wealth,
so I will strive to write your name in star dust,
and conjure memories from these darkened skies.

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.

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

COME HELP ME

by William Kitcher

The first thing I heard when I came to was, “Come help me. Come help me.” That’s not strictly accurate; I didn’t hear it, it just sounded in my brain. And it wasn’t actually the first thing I heard either. There were a lot of other things going through my brain as well, but they were jumbled and muffled. But “come help me” was the first distinct thing I heard.

I opened my eyes and I was in a kind of crib, a creaky wooden cage with a metal railing along the top of it. The room was relatively clean but slightly grimy, as if it was impossible to completely clean it. The walls were trying to be white but stuck at off-yellow, and dustballs and dead insects piled up in the corners. There were cameras in the upper corners of the opposite wall, and there was a mirror on the wall nearest the crib. It must have been a two-way mirror; there was no reason why there would have been a regular mirror there. I didn’t know how I knew that.

I looked in the mirror and didn’t really recognize myself. My face was kind of squashed and I didn’t have a lot of hair. I pulled myself up onto the railing, and saw I had only one leg, and my right arm was withered, as if it had been transplanted from some bizarre doll.

“Come help me,” I heard again.

“How do I do that?” I thought. “Where are you?”

“I’m behind you.”

I turned around, holding onto the railing, but there was no one behind me, only some cabinets and a table on which were various surgical instruments, bottles with liquids in them, and two monitors.

A tube extended from one of the bottles to my good arm, some kind of an IV. I yanked my arm away from it, pulling the IV out of it and yelled, “Hey!”

The monitors beeped rapidly.

A few moments later, the door opened, and in came two people, a man and a woman, smaller than normal-sized men and women but not small enough to be little people. They were wearing white coats, had stethoscopes around their necks, and exuded an air of confidence that both encouraged and worried me. The man had a limp and a split lip. The woman had a bulging forehead and arms like my withered one.

The woman smiled at me. “I’m Doctor Garcia. And your name is?”

I had to think about that, but came up with, “John.”

Dr. Garcia smiled again. "That's right. Good. What's your last name?"

I thought, tried to remember. I was new. I didn't know. "I don't know. I'm John."

"That's right. You're John."

"Come help me."

"I hear," I said.

"You hear what?"

I didn't know who they were, what they were doing, what they wanted from me. "I don't know," I said.

"I'm Doctor Pearson," said the man. He put his hand out and I shook it. His hand was covered in purple and yellow blotches but they clearly didn't bother him.

Dr. Garcia pointed to a screen on the wall beside the crib. "I want you to look at that," she said. "Just tell us what you see."

The picture was a mathematical formula. I looked at it for a while and then the answer came to me. "It's a formula about heat transference through various media. The first one is platinum, the second is wood, the third, I don't know."

"Good," said Dr. Garcia. She clicked something in her hand and another picture appeared.

"That's something to do with DNA. A gene of some kind."

"Good," said Dr. Garcia. She clicked again.

"It's prose," I said. "It reads like Steinbeck. Oh yes, there's the name 'Joad'. It's from 'The Grapes Of Wrath'."

"Very good," said Dr. Garcia. The screen went blank.

"Did I do OK?" I said. "Did I pass the test?"

"It's not really a test, John. We just want to see what you remember."

"What I remember? How can I remember anything? I'm new."

Dr. Pearson undid the clasps on my crib, put his hand out to steady me as I climbed down, and helped me over to a chair. Dr. Garcia passed me a crutch and sat beside me.

"John, there was a virus," she said. "It wasn't very serious."

"No, no, no. It was severe!" I heard in my head.

"Get out of my head!" I yelled.

Dr. Garcia put a withered arm on my good one. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Do you hear a voice in your head?"

"No, no, no!" said the voice. It sounded frantic.

"No," I said.

The doctors looked at each other, and then Dr. Pearson continued. "So there were people who survived the virus, and we've been cloning their cells. You're one of them."

"Not cloning!" screamed the voice.

I looked at my tiny right arm and solitary leg. "It's not very good."

"We're still learning," said Dr. Pearson as he wiped something from his lip.

Dr. Garcia got up from her chair. "So now, go out the door, turn right, and go down to the end of the hall. They'll tell you what to do next."

I took my crutch, put it under my left armpit, and hobbled over to the door. Dr. Pearson opened it for me.

The hall's walls were the same off-yellow. The ceiling was cracked. Some of the floor tiles were peeling at the corners. At the other end of the hall were two large vaguely human-looking lumps. Probably seven feet tall and heavily muscled. Close-set eyes. Blobs of noses. Thin lips. Prominent chins. They glanced at me, then went back to what they were doing, which seemed to be taking turns grunting into each other's ears.

Between me and them were several closed doors on my right. On my left was one small window. I looked out but could see only various shades of brown and grey.

"Come help me," I heard.

"Where are you?" I thought.

"I don't know. Open all the doors. Find me."

I opened the first door on my right. There was something lying in a crib, not moving. There was a small man in there wearing a white coat. He turned to me when the door opened. "Get out!" he said.

The next two doors were locked.

I opened the next door carefully and peeked around it. There was no doctor there but there was a person in a crib, squirming and moaning a little. I went over to the crib and looked. The thing was grotesque. Its head, although human-like, was about four or five times the size of mine. It had no hair and only one ear. Its nose was flattened against its face, and the wheezing was loud. It had no arms and one leg swollen to double the size of a normal one. Sores on the leg oozed pus.

Its eyes were bright blue and gradually focused on me. They seemed to be pleading. I didn't know what I could do.

Tears came out of its eyes. The thing blinked twice, let out a sound that sounded like a broken cough, and then it was still.

In my head, I heard, "That's also me."

The monitor beeped slowly. A doctor came into the room, looked at me briefly, and said nothing. He went to the thing in the crib, put his stethoscope on the thing's chest, listened for a moment, then pulled part of a sheet over the thing's head. He unhooked the tube and left the room.

Then the two large lumps came into the room, picked up the body, and carried him out. They paid no attention to me.

I followed them down the hall and into a room at the very end. The room was large, dark, humid, and very hot. In the middle of the room was a large Victorian-looking iron furnace. One of the lumps opened a door on the side of it with his bare hand. He cried out and put his hand in his mouth. The lumps threw the body into the incinerator. The same lump who had burned himself did it again when closing the door. Without seeming to notice me, or perhaps thinking I was supposed to be there, they continued through the incinerator room to another door at the other end. I followed.

This room was also dark and hot but had semi-functioning fluorescent lights bordering the walls. My eyes adjusted and I saw row upon row of what looked like steel tubs, connected by myriad tubes and wires. Occasionally I could see what looked like heads above the rims of the tubs. I heard moaning and crying.

"You're close," I heard in my head. "Find me. Come help me."

The two lumps had stopped in front of a tub that had "C-31" written in longhand on the side of it. One of them pointed to the tub and grunted what seemed to be a question. The other nodded. The first one took a large knife out of his pocket and started sawing at something inside C-31. Cries of pain echoed. The first lump pulled out of the tub what looked like a deformed hand. The second lump took a dirty piece of cloth from inside his coat, reached inside the tub, and appeared to put a bandage on something. When he was finished, he withdrew his hands which were now covered in blood, and he licked at his hands. Still paying no attention to me, they left the room with the hand.

"I'm here!" said a voice but it was no longer in my head. It was coming from the far side of the room. As I got closer, the voice got louder, and I found him.

In a tub marked "A-9", connected by wires and tubes to overhead runners, something looked up at me. There was a recognizable head and face of a man propped up against the side of the tub, but there wasn't much of a body there, only a few organs heaped on the bottom of the tub, occasionally covered by the thinnest of skin, attached to the head by a few metal wires and veins and

arteries slowly throbbing with blood. His face had been slashed and hadn't healed, some kind of viscous black liquid discharging from it. "Help me," he said.

"What's happened?" I said.

"They lied to you," he said. "They're not cloning us from cells. They don't know how to do that. They're hacking us apart. That's how they do this."

I couldn't say anything. My jaw moved but nothing came out.

"And this isn't new," he said. "We've been like this for hundreds of years."

I started to cry. "What can I do?"

"Kill me."

Voices and groans came from the other tubs.

"Kill us all."

"I can't do that," I said, unsure of what I was saying. "You give us life."

"What kind of life?"

"It doesn't matter. It's life."

"But what about us?" he said, and the chorus got louder.

"It's life," I said. "Either there is or there isn't."

"I don't want it," he said.

I stared at him as the noise from the others got louder.

"Please!" he said.

I nodded and drew my lips together in a grimace. "Forgive me," I said. I leaned on the tub and, with my good hand, yanked at his wires and tubes. He seemed to smile at me as his head toppled over. I went to another tub and did the same. And again, and again.

Sirens went off. Red lights flashed about the room. The door opened and in came Garcia and Pearson and the two lumps. Pearson pointed at me, and yelled, "Go!" The two lumps ambled toward me as I tried to kill as many people as I could. When they reached me, they pummeled me, and I fell to the ground where they continued to beat me until I passed out.

Somewhere else, I came to, bleeding and sweating, and I could feel the lumps picking me up. "Come help me," I said as they threw me into the incinerator.

SHATTER DARK EXCERPT:

"Oh, don't worry," Tizoc said. "I'm not grooming my soldiers for war. I'm just grooming them to be better soldiers."

MY ANCESTORS WERE SORCERERS

By Marion Loughheed

My ancestors
were sorcerers
one (at least) a necromancer.
My ancestors were
farmers traders small-time aristocrats.

My ancestors left
no trace in the fossil record
not one squiggly line to show
how they moved, no calcified limb, or here, what used to be an eye.

A lineage born
into
decay

A lineage
I do not walk with
sorcerers

My ancestors
were.

POLAR STARLIGHT #20 – August 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: *Cracked Earth* – by Lily Blaze.

The 20th 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 August 2025.

RIGHT TO KILL

by S.F. Parker

When three hoists in a row came into the termination room empty, CC603 hung the bolt gun on its hook and headed to the exit door to see if the robots in the marshalling zone needed extra help with the market lambs.

Only 248 days ago, those robots had needed CC603's more advanced AI interpolation abilities to solve an issue with the stock of the day. It was pig to pork day, and the three marshallers had discovered a pig with a blemish and had gotten so caught up in a discussion loop of suitability for conversion they neglected the flow, and the flow stopped. On that day, CC603 diagnosed, decided, and delegated with ease. The flow resumed.

CC603 was no dummy robot programmed to fasten one bolt and one nut to one attachment point and think about nothing else. Unique to date at this location, it had the intelligence to handle any of the work positions at the Fraser Valley Conversion Centre where livestock of all types came to be transformed into human food. Working with livestock meant CC603 had to learn from novel scenarios, anticipate outcomes, and use reason to solve rare problems. Like pest exterminators, CC603 and its co-workers had been granted the right to kill inferior organisms. Their work afforded humans the freedom to pursue purer thoughts and actions, their lives and hearts unsullied by the act of execution.

CC603 signalled the white exit door, and it slid open just wide enough to accommodate the robot's rolling, swaggering gait. Switching to exterior vision, the robot scanned the outer corral that fed the Conversion Centre's entry arc.

Seeing no lambs and three long-armed, immobile marshalling robots, CC603 sprinted to the corral, vaulted its fence, and landed with a ground-shuddering thump on the inner side.

"Where are the lambs?" CC603 demanded of CC034, the nearest of the marshallers.

"There was no 0900 hour autonomous truck, so there are no lambs to marshal following those of the 0300 delivery," CC034 replied. "We will stand idle until the 1500 hour autonomous truck arrives."

CC603 tracked down and tapped into the feed of truck bulletins and discovered the 0900 truck took evasive action to avoid a jaywalker, broke through a faulty guardrail and plunged into a gully. All livestock aboard were killed on impact. All were now unfit for conversion.

At once, CC603 returned to its station in the termination room, halted the hoist track, and serviced the bolt gun. Preparations complete, CC603 stood physically idle, focussed on its visual input of a tiny red fleck on the chalk-white wall, and assigned its mind time to contemplate a concept. *Clarity*, it thought. *Clarity*.

Five minutes later, Distribution Sub-director Willis burst into the termination room waving his arms and sputtering. “There’s no replenishment happening in the aging room! In eight days, the butcher CCs will have nothing to work with and the packers will have nothing to pack. Why are you standing idle? Where are the lambs? This downtime is unacceptable! There can’t be any gaps in production. It’s all calculated to deliver necessary calories to people as they need them. Gaps mean hunger. Long gaps mean starvation.”

“The incoming supply is temporarily insufficient to maintain a full quota of lamb in the aging room.”

“Well, fix it!”

“The supply is the supply.”

“The supply is paramount. The population must be fed. I don’t care how you fix it. You’re supposed to think for yourself. Use your much-vaunted quantum brain and innovate! Do whatever it takes to maintain the supply of meat.”

Barely had the executive’s lips closed after speaking when CC603 completed its analysis, quantum thought being near-instantaneous. Solution found, the robot whipped the bolt gun from its hook and fired a stunning blow to the man’s forehead. As CC603 placed the director on a hoist and initiated exsanguination, it calculated this adult carcass would yield 34 kilograms of meat, a satisfactory 50% more than one market lamb.

The robot anticipated further arrivals from headquarters and a speedy resolution to the shortfall.

Do you enjoy reading Polar Borealis?

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

If you could contribute \$1 a month, or \$2, or \$5 via my Patreon site, I’d be most grateful. Every bit helps me to keep to my schedule. See < [Patreon Site for Polar Borealis Magazine](#) >

SUN ROSE

by Mahaila Smith

I wake, sore in every muscle of my body,
feeling cloth stuck to my skin.
I look down at sheets, hard and brown,
stained with old blood.

An infant with piercing blue eyes stares at me,
shrieking, and grabbing my arms and hands.
Blood stains their cheeks, hair and hands.

I twist out of their grasp,
noticing now that I am in bed,
and covered with rose petals.

The smell is pungent, thick with decay.
I cough, pushing the child away.

My body is shaking and weak.
I rip the bedclothes from myself
and leave the baby on the middle of the bed.
I go to look out my bedroom window.

Pulling the curtains aside, I see it is full of brambles.
Thick thorns and soft pink flowers as far as I can see,
peering through their woody stems. I shut the curtains.

I run out of my room, through the corridors.
Ignoring my hunger and my aching legs.
Through each door I see familiar, motionless bodies,
maybe asleep, or maybe dead.

I run to the front hall, to an exit.
There is a man, sitting at the thick wooden table.
His skin is covered with pink slashes, skin healing scars.
Hello my beloved, he says, tapping gloved fingers against the table.

HERA'S BARGAIN

by Cat Girczyc

On Friday, the goddess/human entity known as Hera/Ellen lounged in the chintz-wallpapered Butter Café, enjoying lush pastry smells and eating dainty cupcakes in between driving her children to lessons.

"Hera? Is that you? Behind that matron?" A slim yoga instructor invaded Ellen's space and sat down.

"Venus? Freya? Aphrodite?" Ellen half-shut her big blue eyes. "I told myself, Ellen, you can't go spacey today. There is too much to do for Hubby's golf club dinner. Can't be seeing deities or goddesses. I'm busy! Scarlett plays tennis at the Club. Arnie's at Art class!"

"Surely you jest, Hera?" Freya said. She liked being the yoga instructor, the body felt fit and firm, but she wasn't staying in it. Stay too long, and you lose your godhead; forget who you really are until death of the host. Freya liked being a god. She had no idea why her mother was so willing to chance losing that status for decades. "You-know-who sent me."

"I'm Ellen, a matron living here, in a lovely suburb in rainy Vancouver on a rare day when the open sky is as blue as the Aegean with cloud skiffs like sails on the horizon." She swept her hand towards the big windows like she was above all of Greece, winning, beloved.

"Today's sky looks unusually Greek, but Hera, mother, it's Vancouver, and you are *not* Ellen," Freya said, frowning. "I need to talk to the real you."

"No, you don't! I felt it in the car coming here, a certain spaciness."

The waitress brought their drinks. An oat milk skim latte for Freya and a double cappuccino for Ellen.

"But it's Friday; I seek a boon," said Freya stubbornly.

"I'm not one of your followers, Freya, Venus, Aphrodite, whatever you're calling yourself today!" Ellen stirred her cappuccino noisily.

"Freya today."

"You aren't even Greek anymore. That's Norse!" Ellen shook her head.

"One adapts. Our worshippers are gone. You are also Juno and various Celtic and Norse goddesses of the hearth." Freya sipped her oak milk daintily.

"No one remembers me. Even you, my daughter, don't recall most of my names. Plus, you have a day of the week! Anytime any person says *Friday*—*plink*—there you are—a prayer to you—*plink*—a small piece of reality firms you up! What've I got? Except poor lovely Ellen?"

"June. A whole month. It keeps you alive. You have the energy you're giving to this mortal you inhabit. But you shouldn't live as. She'll be ruined by it, and you will lose your godhead for decades." Freya was stern now.

"I will meet with Scarlett's new university entrance coach soon."

"Let Ellen do that." Freya rapidly stirred her oat milk latte.

"Arnie must get into art school in New York. Scarlett is just the best at tennis. We want to get a sports scholarship for her." Ellen nattered away.

"Not *your* children!"

"I am devoted to the hearth, husband, and family."

"Did you forget to say: and the glories of Athens?"

"No." Ellen looked crestfallen.

"You *know* who sent me."

"My evil ex, your dear daddy, Zeus. He's come down a bit in the universe to be chasing me for once." Ellen narrowed her eyes, glowering under her thick black lashes.

"I know it feels good—one pushes their souls just a little backward and steps in. The exhilaration! I'm inhabiting a wonderful yoga instructor, but it is *her* brain. I'll let her go when I leave this café."

"I was invited." Ellen was adamant.

"A year is long enough, mother."

"I'd been feeling so weak; no one ever burns a candle to me!" Ellen gestured at the flowers and candles on the tables around them.

"Welcome to the club."

It's not the same. You have a day. Friday is prayer day, Freya-day. You're strong. You can talk to me in person on Fridays. Without Ellen, I just float around looking at things in shops, thinking—that would be a lovely altar. What if *I* had a day?"

"Again, mother, you have a Month!"

"But dear Freya, don't you see, I need more." She batted her eyelashes at her daughter and opened her eyes wide. They were cornflower blue and swirling with ideas.

"Days were given out thousands of years ago. You just want more power."

They sat quietly pondering for a while.

"What if I get Zeus to agree to Goddess of Dragon-Flitters?"

"Dragonflies? No, they're too ephemeral." Ellen said.

"The Patron Saint or Goddess of Felines is open. The last owner migrated himself into a Manx cat and disappeared. Cats are as high as I was given permission to go."

“What is this, a negotiation?”

“Yes.”

“Also, what am I, Egyptian? No. My family has a lovely Labradoodle dog. Not even dogs?”

“Loads of people, especially women, pray for the lives and well-being of their cats.”

“Again, no, how awful—sad single girls—in love with their cats and no husbands or children?”

“Many of them have children and husbands or wives. Dear Olympus above! How do you even survive in this century? You are so retrograde!”

“Ha-ha, that’s what Scarlett says all the time! How do you even function, Mother? You don’t know anything? It’s cute.”

“It’s not cute, it’s stupid. I’d share my day, but you know, Zeus’d never allow it. And June? In your incarnation as Juno, you have a whole month!”

“I work continuously to get our Pantheon media attention. Ellen was—er is a PR consultant working to get us back into the limelight. Zeus owes me!”

“You two were *such* good role models.” Freya laughed sarcastically.

“Sorry. Ancient history, besides, I have the heart of mild-mannered Edward now.”

“Exactly. Give him back; he’s Ellen’s.”

“She was so tired! Do you have any idea how much work she had to do? She’d keel over asleep at eight every night before I came along. The children, Edward, her PR consulting, a big house, her clubs, a maid, a gardener! Making sure both careers steam ahead. Ensure children enter top universities and clean up after the dog.”

“She can handle it.”

“I’ve helped Ellen.”

“What about her church?” Freya pointed across the street to the large Anglican church. “People like it.” Freya gestured to the rest of the café.

“Blasphemy!”

“Everything’s changed! We must evolve with the human world. I benefited from the ‘Thank God It’s Friday’ meme—people worship that acronym TGIF. Every time they say it...”

“*Plink!* You get energy. My point exactly, though, didn’t Casual Fridays hurt?”

“Even better because it meant a special wardrobe. Friday is phenomenal.” Freya smiled widely, and men turned to notice.

“Not making me less jealous,” Ellen stirred her coffee, drank it, and had a eureka moment. “What about the work-from-home movement? WFH, they call it. Cuts into Casual Fridays.”

Freya coughed up her oat milk latte a little, then recovered her poise. “I still have TGIF. People don’t love to work.”

“What if, on WFH days, for, say, fifteen percent of the time, those people are mine? It’s perfect Hera-ism because what do they do when close to hearth and home? Dishes, floors, and gardening on work breaks! So, here’s an idea—could you get me fifteen percent of the ‘Work-From-Home’ days?”

“Are you splitting your month?”

“Months aren’t the same. Only those who work from home will be mine! And they aren’t necessarily Fridays. People work from home every day of the week.”

“A tad greedy, but I’ll ask.”

Freya walked to the beautiful mint green washroom decorated with prints of Queen Elizabeth II on pink chintz wallpaper. She chatted directly to Zeus through the ancient mirror and returned with a small wooden spindle, symbolizing Hera’s domain. She handed her mother the spindle.

“Mother—Hera, you are officially the Goddess of 15 percent of Work-From-Home days! You will receive energy when anyone says, “WFH.” Zeus compliments your negotiations. In return, Ellen must be freed.” Freya was adamant.

“No!”

“Yes. Or no deal.”

“Well, maybe—I feel new energy already. Okay.”

“I hope Ellen thanks me later,” Freya mumbled to herself as a minor miracle. A flash of light and boom of sound echoed over the quiet café, startling everyone.

“I release Ellen!” Hera let go fully.

Ellen, the human side of the entity formerly Hera/Ellen, was slightly disconcerted to be alone in her head now. She felt a bit woozy leaving the café but climbed into her Land Rover, wondering why she felt so light and happy.

Hera wafted off energized by her new WFH goddess status.

Freya let go of her human form in front of the Yoga Studio but worried that her mother had learned nothing from this encounter. Such was life.

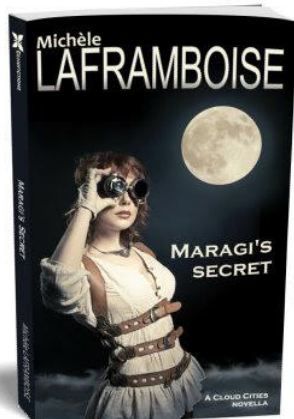
UNDERNEATH THIS SURFACE

By Mahaila Smith

My reflection looks back
from the pockmarked glass of muddy ice.
I touch ice dark lines in my skin,
splintered and runic.
A face both new and heart-rending.
I scrape hard-packed snow
against my cheeks. The markings stay.
Sat beneath the surface.
I did not escape in time.
Tendrils of the aggressive microfungi
weave new internal networks
finding a way to continue to spread.
I had hoped to walk towards the next town
or the next. To find somewhere
the hyphae lost.
I condemn myself to solitude.
To wait to die where no one can breathe
these poisonous spores, smaller than dust.

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-thousand 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](#) >

SCORES AND SCARS FOREVER

by Glenn Mori

The remaining fleck of scab is a dark, crusty blob below my left knee. The skin around it is pink and fresh and the leg only twinges when I put a lot of pressure on it, like a moment ago when I stood to move to the sunny part of the grass.

Mom always said if I picked at it, it would never heal.

Which is when I realize it itches. I scratch around the scab, raking my newly painted black nails on both sides of it. Good thing it's not an area I shave often.

My mother is not the most subtle. *What have I told you? Leave it alone!*

I change the angle of my hand and scratch the other edges near the scab.

Stop it!

"I'm only scratching beside it. Not touching the scab, Mom."

My shin throbs, but under the scab it feels soothed. It feels oddly satisfying, like giving attention to some part of myself that's been neglected, or making a cross with your fingernail into a mosquito bite. I straighten my pant leg, careful to lift it over the scab and unroll it like cellophane over a tube of wrapping paper.

On cue, my mother tells me, *you've never listened to me. That's what your problem is. All the trouble I could have saved you if you'd only listened.*

"I listen, Mom. I just don't always choose to follow your advice, that's all."

That's not listening. That's just hearing. Like when you got that nose ring, I told you that you wouldn't be able to find a good job. Did you listen?

"Uh-uh. I listen. I process what you tell me. I just reject it as soon as you're done." I open my backpack, dig under my olive cardigan and take out the egg salad sandwich I bought this morning at Your Coffee.

You kept egg salad in your bag? Unrefrigerated for hours? You can't eat that now. It's likely gone off.

"Watch me," I say, and take a bite.

Don't complain when you're in the emergency room.

"I won't," I mumble.

It's toasty in the park today. The sandwich has been in my backpack for five? six hours now. It's soft and warm, but it's all I've got and I'm starved. It's eggy and salty and just what I need. I wonder what's happened to Felix. He's late.

I stretch out and lie back on the grass. It doesn't feel cool or damp, which proves how sunny it is today. Everyone else is under trees or barely dressed and suntanning. Me, I'm still unthawing after four hours in the Reclamation Archives where the AC is so high I wear jeans and a long-sleeved top plus the cardigan. If nothing else the AC kept the sandwich from heating up until I came to the park.

"Hey, weirdo." It's Felix. Finally. He hops off his air hoverboard.

"It's about time, caveman," I say, sitting up.

"What does time matter to you? You only work four hours a day."

"At least I work, not spending all day cruising the streets waiting for someone to order a pizza."

He tosses his backpack and his DriveEats thermal bag onto the grass beside me, turning his hoverboard on its edge and using it as a seat. "Hey, it pays. And I can work as much as I want."

"More like as little as you want."

"Yeah, yeah. You sound like Dad." My attention pops. I make a resolution to watch what I say. "So what's new?" he asks.

"Mom's in a nagging mood."

Felix smiles, showing his offset incisors. He should have had braces when we were kids but Mom was sick and the cost of the deductible didn't leave enough for orthodontic work. Or so Dad explained later.

"Dad is on me to buy a condo. Keeps telling me I need to be saving money."

I groan. "Again?"

Felix laughs. "Your turn to deal with it," he says as he pulls the Two-Way Presence Transference Coupler from his backpack.

I roll up my other pant leg. The conduit is cumbersome, heavier than it looks. I use both hands to lift it and attach it to my non-scabbed shin.

"You shouldn't use your legs. You know it leaves bigger scars," Felix says as he connects his conduit to the back of his bicep, scarred from previous transfers.

"Fewer pain receptors," I say. "And I show my arms more than my legs."

Felix sighs, then asks, "Ready?"

I nod and he hits the switch. There is the familiar bite on my leg, then tingling, then more intense, then it stops. I remove the coupler. As the blood begins to seep, I hear Dad's voice.

Angela?

"Yeah, Dad. I've got you."

Do you know who won the game last night?

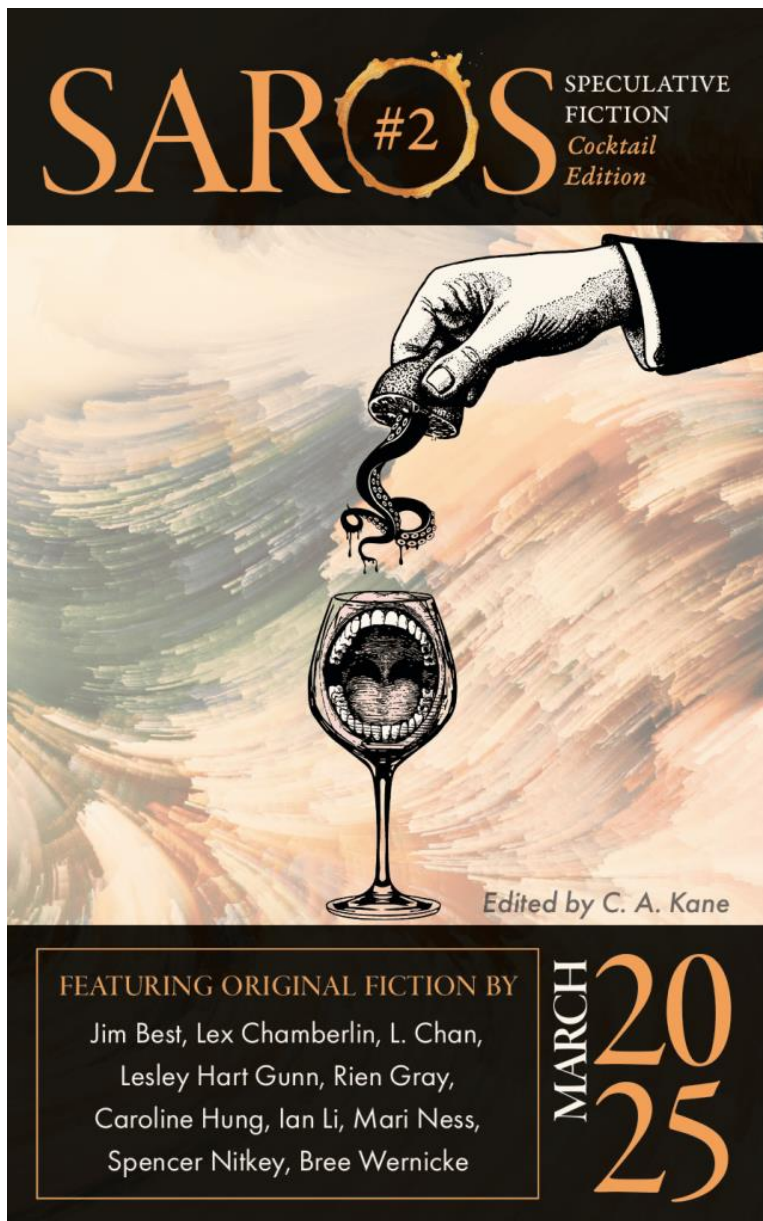
"I'll find out," I say.

Felix shoots me a grimace. He's talking to Mom, or rather, hearing her. As he packs the coupler into his backpack he mouths, "See you next time."

I search for last night's score on my comm, ignoring the ads offering "lightly used Presence Transference Couplers."

Not everyone is willing to carry their parents' presence forever. A lot of people eventually opt to discontinue the reanimation process or, like Felix and me, swapping and reanimating.

The market is flooded with used models. It's not easy carrying a legacy.



SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE

#2 – March 2025

Cover art: by Barabara Candiotti

Contents:

Caddisfly Lover – by L. Chan
Journal of Ron Bacewicz (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 Chamberlin

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](#) >

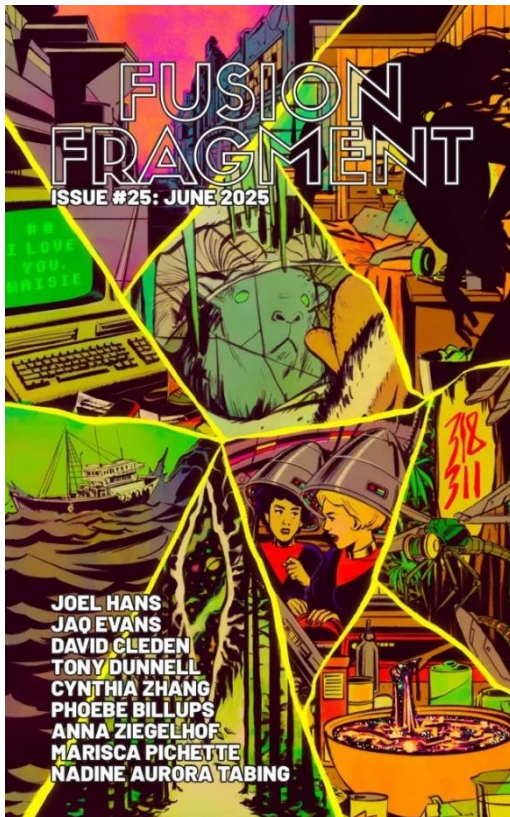
UNNATURAL EYES

by Guy Immega

Animals can see with light,
Sense electric and magnetic fields,
And feel heat.
None can detect the faint tickle
Of radio waves.
Humans stare heavenward
With aluminum eyes
And sensitive antennas
To map the cosmos.

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #25 – June 2025

Cover art: by Caitlin Fowler



Contents:

Dear New Tenant – by Jaq Evans
Obsolesce – by Nadine Aurora Tabing
Mouth, Wormhole, Window – by Joel Hans
Friendly Penguin – by Anna Ziegelhof
Upon a Vast, Velvet Veil – by Marisca Pichette
Breathing Under Ice – by Phoebe Billups
The Glass Ocean – by David Cleden
Shells – by Cynthia Zhang
Margin Walker – by Tony Dunnell

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 #25](#) >

FLYING CARPET

By Michèle Laframboise

The wind rushed through the battered doors, snuffing out the votive candles. Its carbonized breath chased away the last fumes from incense sticks pinned in the ground by fugitive pilgrims. In the old temple clutching the mountain's flank, a sole lampion still hung on a cord stretched between two columns, its yellow light falling on the large ceremonial carpet.

The rectangle of woven wool was ageless. Generation after generation of acolytes had rubbed pigments into its thread to revive its colors. Pale flowers and vines twirled around a central area whose deep blue color still showed under the muddy traces.

Beside it sat an imposing statue, its head touching the ceiling. The artisan who had carved it from the stone has, like the carpet weavers, turned into dust a long time ago.

The god was seated in the tailor position, his hands joined. His face reflected the serene majesty of a being who have crossed all the barriers between earth and sky.

The god had had sapphire eyes giving him an almost human look. Now, only two empty orbits remained, the edges splintered by the robbers' haste.

So he couldn't see the woman who entered, clutching a fabric-wrapped package. Her ill-dyed cotton shawl cast a red speck on the carpet's centre. Her sole jewel was a watch, manufactured by hands as poor and used as her own. The package stirred. Exhausted by the long hike to this refuge, the woman slumped to the floor with her burden.

She used to visit this temple, holding her granddad's hand. There were celebrations, the carpet's vivid motifs hidden under a white bed of petals. Songs rose before the pilgrims' harvest offerings; a cloud of incense lingered like a blue veil over their heads.

Since then, harvest fairs had muted into silent nights filled with crickets' songs. Nevertheless, an assistant regularly came to replace the candles, to wash the statue, to sweep the floor.

The visitor looked about for the assistant. A wide bloodstain in front of the statue told her that he had defended the god to his last breath. The woman did

not cry, having already seen her share of the dead. She listened intently. The cracklings of machine guns had receded.

— May I come out, Mommy?

If the god had had ears, he would have rejoiced in this clear musical voice.

A head emerged from the cover, two big brown eyes peering under locks of black hair. The child came out and immediately set to exploring, as did all three-year olds whatever the situation.

— Don't stray too far, Halimi, whispered her mother.

The girl sauntered on the carpet under the blind eyes of the god. At this magic age when tales are real, she had reached half her adult size. Halimi would grow tall and strong if the murdering madmen spared her.

Her bare feet followed the flowers and birds' motifs populating this inaccessible garden. A smell of incredible antiquity emerged from the used colors, from the fibres worn down by thousands of knees along the centuries. For the child, the washed-out carpet held promises of magic journeys.

— Will we be able to fly, to Daddy? she asked.

The woman raised her eyes towards the god, meeting his absent glance, then lowered her head. She thought about her missing husband, about their last supper four days ago, when armed men had irrupted in their house.

Besides their khaki fatigues, the militiamen did not carry any badge identifying their faction. Her husband had risen from their dinner table, asking what they wanted. A rifle butt blow threw him to the floor, boots struck him until he stopped squirming. She stood up in her turn to defend her family.

Civil war descended upon her, ripping her dress under the powerless eyes of her husband and daughter. While two thugs ravaged her on the table, the others emptied their cupboards, cracking open the old TV screen.

When all their appetites were sated, they dragged her bloodied man out and shoved him into a truck. She stood in her devastated home, holding Halimi against her to forget the pain, listening to the sirens, the shriek of falling shells, the erupting gunfire of rival factions.

The plunderers had spread around the whole city in a movement too well-coordinated to believe the official version of "uncontrollable elements." She saw the true version in the mocking eyes of the police officers to whom she had run, asking for help.

Two days, she waited for her husband. On the third day, the household current was cut. The taps delivered only a thin filament of rancid and brown water.

Holding Halimi's hand, she rang the bell at the monastery sitting at the end of her street. The gentle missionaries of the cross would give her water and news. She found the gridiron door opened, the inner court empty. No religious singing came from the chapel. Crows flapped around a pile of soiled clothes left in the paved court. Odd: the missionaries were always so tidy...

She walked into the enclosure. Then stopped, covering her daughter's eyes. Arms and heads jutted from the pile of bloodied clothes. She left the monastery to the crows.

The same evening, new armed groups undertook "to clean up" their neighborhood. She did not linger around to find out which faction printed in blood its peculiar brand of justice. She fled after hearing the first cries, the little girl on her hip. A hotel dustbin sheltered them for the night.

In the morning, the young woman remembered the old temple. Crossing the city, hiding from the snipers, took all day.

She knelt, intending to pray to the god, and to all the ancient gods. We let you fade off while flocking towards the strangers promising prosperity. We accepted their money, built factories and power stations to satisfy them.

All lay now sabotaged, burnt, destroyed by rival militia. She remembered the elections, the first elections ever to occur in their country. Her ballot sliding in the box, her cross painfully printed in the right candidate. The long wait for the final tally. Then, joy exploding on the streets, people dancing and laughing.

But the dominants had whispered in the ears of those who drank from their cup, who ate at their table. There was the *coup d'état*, the assassination of the freshly elected president, quickly replaced by compliant puppets.

The power lines had been cut, the airwaves scrambled, the roads blocked, the border closed. She wondered if other people, elsewhere, knew about their absurd deaths. The countries able to send help spent weeks in endless debates. They would intervene when there was no one left to save. The governing puppets would install new citizens in their homes. Those new occupants would soon forget that this hearth had ever sheltered another family.

The little money the woman had hidden from the pillagers had ended in the pockets of the various militia who guarded road barrages. Halimi and she possessed nothing more than their torn clothes.

She looked fondly at her last good, a watch with a false foreign name which had cost her husband one full week of wages. He carried a similar one. She thought of her husband, Halimi's playful father. He meant the world to her; he was nothing to *them*. He had disappeared, certainly assassinated. Did she, in her scared flight, step over his corpse without knowing?

Halimi sat facing the god, crossing her stubby legs.

— Do not stand up, otherwise, you will go through the roof! she advised.

She flapped her arms, as if she could fly away. A moment of wonder washed over her mother. Tears welled up her eyes: if only the god could save her daughter! The blind statue did not respond. He was only a work of art created to solicit obscure forces that men did not control.

The young woman did not seek the ultimate truth nor an intellectual answer to the roots of this evil that no prayer had ever prevented. Tired and wounded inside, she lay down, hoping that the smile of the god would open the doors of a secret garden, a place where Halimi could sing and laugh under the sun.

Outside noises scattered her daydreaming. Boots stumping on the rough stone, coarse laughter, belts of ammunition chafing against hips and shoulders. Soldiers, not trying too hard to hide their complicity with the plunderers.

Halimi was still playing in her imaginary garden, scraping the wool to gather the faded flowers. Her mother picked her up and looked about them. But there was no exit, no secret passage dug in the limestone behind the god. She thought about begging them to spare her daughter. Alas, while running on the streets, she had witnessed too many small bodies torn up like weeds, their smiles erased.

Steps echoed on the temple's stairs. She placed her daughter square in the carpet's center, in the blue area.

— Close your eyes, Halimi. The carpet will fly away!

— Won't we fall? the girl asked, fear and excitement mingling in her voice.

The mother sat behind Halimi, so that the girl's head rested against her bosom.

Cursing and rattling rose from the entrance: the soldiers had detected her rigid back, in front of the statue. The woman raised her eyes to the peaceful face of the sightless god, while putting her arms around Halimi.

— No, love, she whispered. You will hear a big noise, and the god will make our carpet fly.

— If we fly high enough, will we see the Earth?

— Yes. And we will be with Dad.

Time ran.

Other cities lay in ruins, their population silenced or dissolved into a liquid majority. Other smiles have been erased. Millions of hands and feet prematurely aged fed the profit river flowing in the same direction.

The time is now. A posh mansion, in the wealthiest country.

A business legend claps his hands. Sophisticated lustres raining from the ceiling of his posh mansion illuminate his latest acquisition.

A heavily made-up lady clucks.

— Splendid! Absolutely splendid! Where did you get it?

Fully deployed, because the high ceiling allows it, an antique carpet offers to the viewers its closed gardens and arabesques. Refreshed by a team of experts, the vivid colors confer a second life to the woollen thread.

Bluish cigarettes smoke has replaced the incense; however, it is still a religious ceremony going on in this ballroom, a power celebration attended by a hundred guests, heads of State and crowned kings, business figureheads and reconstructed faces.

A quiet waiter circulates among the guests, distributing strong alcohols and light beverages, semi-sparkling spring water and dietetic drinks. Young assistants start to serve snacks, but the host scolds them: it is too early!

He fields questions, sipping his wine, basking in the attention.

— This antique was pulled from a temple which had collapsed over a group of soldiers, he explains. Yes, at the time of those disorders.

The host had made a fortune selling weapons to three different factions.

— A sad thing, but law and order have finally prevailed. Yes, it took a lot of work to remove the bloodstains. No, I had it transported here by our corporate plane.

— A flying carpet! giggles a peroxidized star.

An antiques dealer steps back to get a fuller view of the carpet.

— What is rather unusual, here, is this central area.

He gestures to the blue area surrounding two prone figures.

— The reddish clothes are in high contrast with the rest of the piece. And look at the finer details, those expressive eyes, the motifs on the woman's shawl...

A thrice-divorced actor chuckles.

— It looks like a mom and her daughter!

The dealer strokes his double chin.

— They sit in profile, the child's back against her mother, he says. This position breaks the symmetry of the piece. I wonder...

A retired top-model lets out a small shriek.

— Look there, at the woman's wrist! A watch!

All draw close to the carpet, even the waiter who stumbles, juggling his plate of drinks. Murmurs run through the crowd.

— It's only a bracelet, the host snarls. A simple ornament!

A dynamic bank operative steps in, a champagne flute in hand.

— Maybe a good craftsman recently added these characters?

— No! the master of the house protests. I had the carpet's fibres analysed, and they all date back from the twelfth century! I would not have shelled out eight million for a fake!

Sensing the ceremony slipping away from him, the master beckons to the quiet waiter, gesturing to the doors. The servant carries his order in a slow, almost ritual fashion that he approves. In all his years of service, the host has never heard the man utter a single word.

The waiter pushes back the heavy door, forming a black cross against the light pouring from the banquet room.

A moment of pure beauty freezes the assembly on the threshold. High bay windows reveal a vast expanse of grass, an emerald carpet slowly turning to red as it recedes toward the setting sun.

The moment passes like a snuffed candle. Guests move towards tables laden with offerings, chatting about other things. The old carpet has ebbed away from their minds.

The silent servant closes the doors. He goes about the ballroom, collecting the goblets and wineglasses and flutes. He rinses them himself in the deserted kitchen: the younger domestics have already left for their weekend.

He empties all the bottles and jugs, even those that were not opened. He washes them carefully in the sink, pushing up his forearm an old stopped watch, a shoddy watch broken many years ago, like himself.

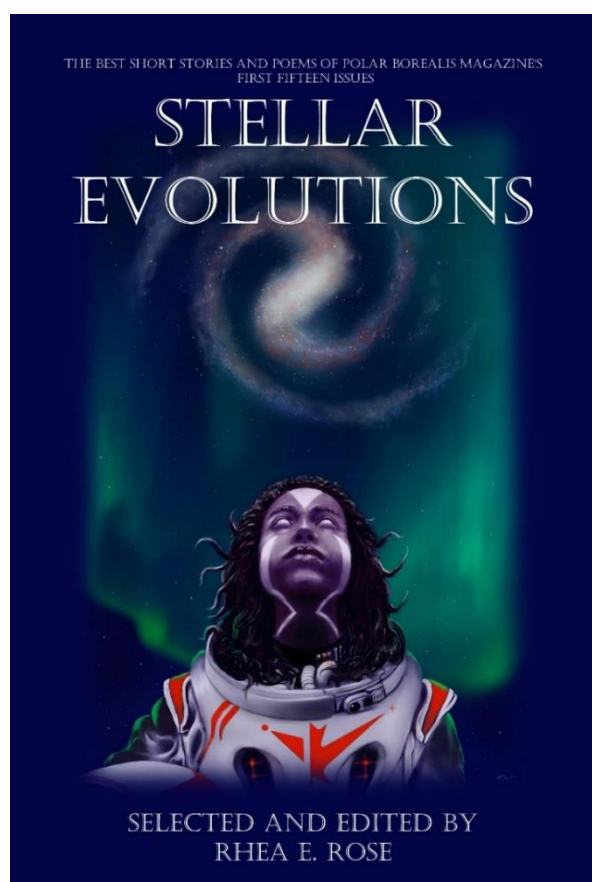
Then, he waits.

Like he waited in the truck, in the torture room, in the prison, in the pit full of mutilated corpses, in the choking jungle, in the refugee camp... He never spoke again. He never found his lost ones.

When the laughter dies out, when a lasting silence will have enfolded the mansion, he will return to the ballroom, a full glass of wine in hand. He will look one last time at the carpet.

In the heart of the night, he will hear two voices whispering between themselves.

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NEVER HURRY THE SKY

by Derek Newman-Stille

Never hurry the sky
Never chase her from her shadowy realm
Never exorcise Mother Night

She deserves her place in the heavens
Her jet black cloak needs to fly
and the tinges of sunset need to come
when they will

Night is not full of terrors
it is comfortable
familiar
She blankets us
and everything seems closer
even as it is hidden

She has always been here
our ever-present friend
always standing in corners
waiting to spread out across the sky
always just at the edges
where the sun can't reach

Never hurry the sky
Summon her
when needed
to hide everything you don't want to see
sometimes we need space for our secrets
to be hidden
until they are ready to be seen

CONCURRENCE

by Heather Campbell

Anila watched as wave after wave of people came. Now, staggering in with ragged clothes clinging to their cracked, dry flesh; hopeful for respite in the Collective's compound. Dragging what little they had all hoped to share in whatever the Collective could offer. These people were isolates, remnants of the past. Once, pets would have accompanied them, mediating the shock of social failure. Companions, with their trusting eyes, echoing past lives of lazing in sunbeams on overstuffed sofas and walking through hardscaped forest paths. A symbol of a future that might again be. It wasn't long before these gentle companions died of old age, were preyed upon or lost in the rewilding—a reminder of the collapse of human supremacy.

The Collective was the last stop for the travellers, a refuge from the erasure of human impact by an increasingly atavistic Earth. They came because their ability to think through any other choice was impossible. Anila was the head governor, more by default than by design, having outlived the Collective's other, early members. As the day turned to dusk, she met today's travellers at the gate. She dreamed of someone else prising open the stiff gates, and greeting new arrivals, with a vacant, serene smile. The pain of it wearied her. But the welcoming rituals must be observed, they foreshadowed the gravity of the compound's terminal purpose.

"We are honoured to be your last stay. Respite is being prepared. First, let me escort you to the healing waters. Let your mind rest in preparation." Lifting her lamp slightly higher in the gloaming, Anila led them through the mist and purpled shadows.

Distracted by a small, dry cough, she paused. A child stepped out from the group and leaned against a tree, pulling a blanket tighter across her undernourished form.

"Can you walk a distance?" Anila asked curtly.

The diminutive bundle of rags stared at her and nodded in the affirmative beginning a slight shuffle forward.

"I can arrange a carrier if you can't keep up," Anila said impatiently. She had too many terminal preparations to make to wait for this straggling child. She looked to the others in the child's group to see if they might assist her. Unsurprised, she observed the others stare back without commitment. A child was an oddity, a throwback to when people considered legacy important.

In the first years after the energy collapse, there were children, but most had died. Medical help for their youthful infirmities was minimal. Few had grown to adulthood, and childhood survivors were often frail, due to early hardship. People whispered that further issue threatened their shared ability to sustain themselves, as the resources required to support children created a disproportionate loss. Some members disputed this harsh view. She was one, citing the long-term benefits of having new adults to support the aging population. But discussion on the matter floundered and a silent consensus was reached. Offspring were ruled out as an endangerment to their closed system. After that, no one questioned the rule or any other rule. The system must be protected from instability to keep them safe. This child engendered no protective feelings in any of the travellers or members, and, staring at Anila, she knew it.

“What’s your name?” Anila asked, hoping to move the child along faster.

“Leuthy,” the child stated, staring.

“That’s a lovely name. I haven’t heard it before,” Anila replied, smiling.

“It was longer once, but the people who remember what it was are gone.” The child spoke matter-of-factly.

“We have a big evening ahead, Leuthy, and we must keep to the schedule.” She was about to encourage her small inconvenience to accept a carrier when the child stepped quickly towards her and took Anila’s cool, dry hand. Leuthy passed warmth up her aged arm, startling the older guide for the first time, in years.

“Come. The baths must be ready by now.” Anila walked the weary group to their destination. When she approached the pool pavilion, she didn’t stop to speak or engage further with those assembled. She pulled the heavy oak door and watched them file into the changing rooms. The attendants could explain the benefits of the medicinal waters to the travellers. She was unsettled by what had happened and withdrew.

Anila entered her chamber and lay down. When would her time come to go to the healing baths? She reflected her arrival at the compound more than forty years ago. Her group had been the first to find the abandoned resort, escaping a world devastated by the unstoppable growth of technologies and the ubiquitous depletion of resources. Year after year, manufactured disasters were countered with newer manufactured creations, attempt after attempt, trying to fix the previous failure of design or technology. Until the day everything stopped working. The energy the world needed to bring back human consumption and routine was exhausted, finite; there was no power. Industry

and endeavour quickly dried up, utterly reliant on external forces that no longer existed.

In those first days, many people chose a known end for themselves and their loved ones. Only some migrated, like her group, into the rewilding. Anila looked at her old waxed-twill, turquoise backpack. Marked by use and past travel it sat on a corner shelf. She had arrived at the abandoned resort with it. Now, the Collective's resources were scarce. She knew that soon they would have to close their doors and end themselves. She glanced at her dusty backpack, an anachronism, shelved since she had arrived. How foolish to keep it when travel meant peril.

Forty years ago, the arriving people embraced the idea of a fresh start. As the first residents of the compound, they pooled their resources, shared their skills, and managed to get the old structures to function as a small village. Water was collected, food was grown, and a crank-driven power system was established. It allowed them to generate limited electricity, fuel simple production, send out radio messages, and communicate with others who might join them. Back then, people arrived with goods to share and the strength to contribute. Word spread through the radio waves and more people came. The community expanded including new travellers who had wanted to stay.

More years had elapsed, and travellers kept coming, but an inability to expand methods of growing and harvesting food, with an increasingly old and dying workforce, meant resources were dwindling. Discussions began with the ad hoc governing authority. A core leadership with the most practicable solutions developed a plan, but all would have to agree. Facing food scarcities, opposition floundered, another consensus was demanded. Newcomers would be welcomed but not allowed to remain.

"The ones coming are too sick. They drain our medicines, foods, and fuel, with nothing to give," a charismatic man named Jim said to the crowd, looking people in the eyes and drawing their attention. "We can't save them, and we can't keep taking them in. Our resources won't allow it. Most of the new travellers are weak and can't work. They're here to die. We need a new plan, one plan."

Jim was a dominant character, but the words he spoke, and their unthinkable meaning, were shared by many. What Jim said became the words of everyone. Just let the compound become the last refuge. Newcomers would not be encouraged, but if they came, they would be dealt with humanely. The implementation was merciful; the travellers would be eased into another state of being.

They turned off the radio signal, and everyone agreed to agree. Their community would stay as it was. It was then that the Collective was truly founded. Each abandoned their sense of responsibility to non-members and merged their minds into one mind unified by strict rules.

The last night gala was concocted—a healing bath to provide anesthesia for the agonies of the flesh, an extravagant meal to bring back fond memories of the past and the agonizing nostalgia of what they had lost. Finally, the short walk to the cessation couches, humanely ending all pain, forever. The travellers had to sign the waiver; they had to know what was coming and agree. They had a choice, die here or in the rewilding. Now most came because they had heard of the Collective from the very few, who had refused the waiver. Inevitably, eventually, even many refusers came back eager for a moment of peace, and then eternity. But some... Anila couldn't think about this any longer. This week or next, the remaining Collective members would be having their baths and last supper. Their time had come. The reserves had dwindled to almost nothing and, without children, there would be no one to continue food and resource production.

Members had become too old to generate the electricity they needed, farm the fields, and do the daily work which ensured longevity. The gates were to be locked to travellers in two days.

Anila startled to the soft knocking. This would be the first time she had let her musings overrun her duty. Rising, she stopped a moment to steady herself, then opened the door. The diminutive form of the child was unsmiling and rigid.

"Where were you? I was waiting." A whisper, but her body betrayed her impatience.

"I'm sorry, Leuthy. I fell asleep." Anila was surprised by the authority of the small, questioning voice which had provoked her response.

The tiny form passed by Anila into the chamber with speed and grace. She sat on the couch and surveyed the utilitarian room. Anila's desire to acquire had ended with the catastrophic events of the energy collapse. After that, the value of homes and objects became rooted in their use and sustainability. Food and medicines were valuable but there was no point in having or storing items you might use in some improbable future. No point, except for the one thing Anila could never quite throw out: her backpack. It was this that Leuthy's eyes lighted on. Without asking, she crossed the room and put a hand on it.

"It's pretty." Leuthy picked it up and held it to her face, rubbing the coarse waxed twill to her cheek. She fingered the souvenir patches of cities long gone,

stroking the colourful stitches Anila had once carefully sewn. Twisting the bag, Leuthy looked carefully at the iconic fabric patches, small repairs, and shiny buckles.

“My backpack,” Anila responded. “It held my books. I used to take it to university, and then in the summers—travelling. That’s where the patches are from.” Anila tried to retrieve the bag gently, but Leuthy wasn’t quite ready, holding it firmly.

“What are books?” Leuthy turned her face towards Anila, still holding the backpack. Her expression was inscrutable, and for a moment Anila thought she was being challenged.

“Books were papers bound together, containing words... information,” Anila said. There seemed to be no point in further explanation when nothing could be done about things lost.

“Are these words?” Leuthy stroked the names of the countries and cities on the souvenir patches. Anila nodded.

“Read them.” Less than a demand, more than a plea.

“Canada, Port Said, France, Alicante, Ireland,” Anila read them off without interest.

“Slowly.” Leuthy took Anila’s hand and using her finger traced the names letter by letter.

“Canada. The name of the place where we live,” Anila shared.

“Canada,” Leuthy echoed the word herself.

“Niagara Falls,” Anila said, memories flooding back.

“The water is wavy... like you could get in and swim anywhere.” Leuthy seemed entranced, stroking the embroidered surging whitecaps on the patch.

“Niagara Falls was famous for the unstoppable amount of water that fell year after year. People would come from all over to see it.” She remembered the joy she felt at watching the natural, eternal force. It had seemed alive.

“Why don’t we go there?” With a child’s earnestness, Leuthy’s question unsettled Anila.

“It’s safer here.” Leuthy seemed to accept Anila’s statement, even if she could not accept it herself.

She read the other place names, watching the child's face relax for the first time. Anila thought she saw a slight smile. How alive it had felt to travel to unfamiliar places and meet new people; to dream and plan of tomorrow. Even now, looking back was a respite from the grinding certainty of here. The door to the chamber opened and Anila was told the feast was ready.

“Are you hungry?” Anila placed the backpack on the shelf. Once again, Leuthy took Anila’s hand and walked out of the chamber beside her.

The meal was as sumptuous as the Collective could make it with diminishing stores, tinned vegetables, fruit, and brined foods. Juice from the few fruit trees was pressed and served in tiny glasses. A pudding made of molasses, corn flour, dried eggs, and goat milk was served, to signal the end. The travellers were refreshed from the healing baths and restored with food.

To finish, the waivers were distributed and read aloud, for those who had never had a chance to learn to read. The travellers must choose this last step, and make their marks, it could not be chosen for them. Leuthy stared at Anila. A pang of despair seized Anila, shocking her. She covered her face with her hands. Was it that the child seemed so young? She was young and the likelihood of a child surviving was minute. It was better not to fear, suffer, or be crushed by false hope. It had been decided. The Collective couldn’t support new life... any new life. Subsistence was ensured. The members were fortunate, they were safe, for now. The process must be upheld.

Leuthy picked up the pen and made her mark. One of the Collective members spoke to the assembly, wishing them an enjoyable last hour of socialisation. The gong would sound when it was time to head to the cessation couches. Escorts would bring lanterns to light their way. The travellers would comfortably drift into non-existence.

Signed forms were collected and brought to Anila for review. Her role as auditor was essential, overseeing that the guests understood and agreed to the process. This audit was the last check and balance on human rights. Travellers were always free to leave should they not wish to engage with the final procedure. Dissenters were quietly separated and escorted to the gates. It was important the Collective would have no loud, unpleasant, last-minute refusals. They couldn’t afford disquiet, even from outsiders. In truth, Anila couldn’t remember the last time this had happened. The few remaining travellers knew their fates were sealed, as were all fates.

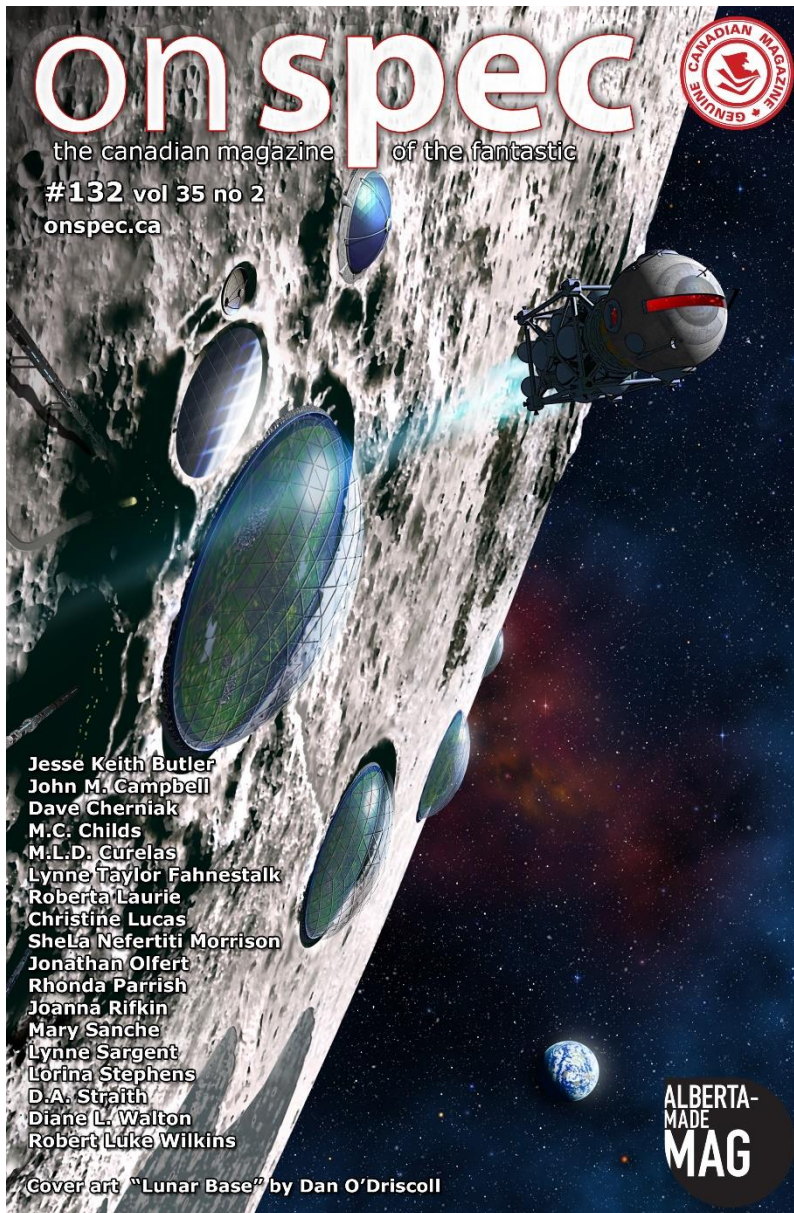
As Anila finished her oversight, she turned over the second to last form, Leuthy’s form. Stricken by what she saw, Anila stood. The child’s mark was a detailed, flowing water cascade. The auditor handed the forms to another member. As the slow roll of a gong sounded, she walked out with purpose.

Anila joined the strolling travellers and slipped her hand into the small one beside her. Leuthy looked up but walked, unquestioningly, by her side, deviating with Anila, from the path. The line of travellers continued, moving

out of sight. Reaching the gates at the edge of the compound, she put her backpack over Leuthy's shoulders.

"I saw your beautiful waterfall." Anila smiled and squeezed the little hand, then prised the gate open for the last time.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #132 - V.35 #2



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FICTION:

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Typhoid Harry – by Dave Cherniak

His Ninth Pilgrim Soul

– by Christine Lucas

Well Woven – by Lynne Sargent

Mabel's Creek – by M.L.D. Curelas
and Rhonda Parrish

Penny Dreadful – by Lorina Stephens

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– by Shela E. Nefertiti Morrison

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– by D.A. Straith

The Knotted Hand – Jonathan Olfert

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– by Robert Luke Wilkins

NONFICTION:

Dan O'Driscoll Retrospective

The Stephen King in the Room

– Author Interview with M.L.D. Curelas
and Rhonda Parrish by Roberta Laurie

Bot "Ralph" & Comic "Roswell"

– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < [On Spec Magazine #132](#) >

FADED FLOWER

by Colleen Anderson

It hangs about her neck, encased in crystal
on a chain filigreed in moonbeams
Lepidoptera's tiny wing, scales painted
jade, depth of night, blue of nightingales' eyes

She clears tables, slim, nearly boneless as if
the wind would in seconds loft her
limbs the color of tree sap tears
hair an indeterminate shade
indigo, grey, and sun dipped in darkness

I joke, making small talk
I bet you were once of the fey
a flower faery spending each day
tasting the nectar of a thousand blooms

Then you tired and chose new adventures
to slip into this busy human world
to try on the slim sham of human skin
the wing, your keepsake of a time before

She stares, a somber shine that doesn't spill
You are part right and so very wrong
I was indeed of the fey but worked hard every day
to maintain meadow blooms from fading life
resurrecting those that verged on extinction

I resembled more the chitinous insects
than the faery queens you humans so adore
I made one mistake and my self revealed
my capture not so tender as a bee takes pollen

I was pinned, plucked and painted
my wings falling to the ground, I banged
against my see-through prism pleading, no flower
in a vase, and my unpleasing exoskeleton sheathed—
the veneer annealed and stopped my change

You are right that this wing was mine
always vibrant, blending in, carrying me
to where I needed to be, but not now
it is a reminder of all that I have lost
when dreams and senses were stripped from me

She glared, a gentle indentation of her brow
the weight of each word like a pin
skewering me as I looked guiltily
at flowers plucked, wilting in a vase

I now work in drudgery doing little but serving
bitter nectars to the species that confined me
there is no joy, nor rainbow scents that fill my day
for all that I have lost and you no wiser for what's to come
I know that soon your people too will feel my pain

I could not stop the cruelty
nor salve her from this destiny
but I work to stem the tide, each day
cultivating rare species from extermination

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PORTRAITS, IN SEPIA AND UMBER

by D. Thomas Minton & Annette Bowman

Alejandro pulled away from the dusty kitchen window and turned to the serving boy tucking the leftover pork slab back into its salt pack. "Inform the Señora that Magistrate Lopez has arrived," he said.

Since receiving word last night, Alejandro had been expecting the Magistrate, but for him to arrive this early, he must have ridden hard from San Cristobal before first light.

Alejandro wiped his hands on his apron and tossed the dirty cloth onto the counter next to the stack of unwashed dishes from breakfast. Pulling on a wide-brimmed hat, he stepped out into the shadow of the overhanging roof. Even at this early hour, the heat rippled the air around the rider as he swung down from his horse. Overhead the dust-streaked sky gave no indication the drought would break today.

Surely that was what had prompted the Magistrate's visit, two weeks earlier than scheduled.

"It is good to see you again, Señor." Alejandro took the man's riding coat and hung it on a peg next to the door. "We have bread and ham, if you desire."

The Magistrate slapped the dirt from his hat and hung it on the peg along with his coat. He lowered the bandanna covering his mouth and wiped the dust from his graying beard with a leathery hand. "Some water," he croaked, his throat parched.

Once inside, the Magistrate drank two cups of water without pause and filled a third before turning to Alejandro.

The morning light played off the Magistrate's furrowed brow. More wrinkles fissured the man's face than Alejandro remembered. Like the land, he thought, looking past the Magistrate and out the window at the gnarled olive trees that clung to the broken hillside. Prior to the arrival of the Magistrate, the people of San Cristobal had been as desperate as those trees and would be again if the rains did not return.

The third ration drained, the Magistrate set aside the cup. "Has she painted anything useful?" he asked, startling Alejandro from his thoughts.

Alejandro had planned careful words, but they suddenly felt inadequate. He could do no more than clear his throat.

"Show me."

"Yes, Magistrate."

Before breakfast, Alejandro had laid out the canvases in the front room. Ordinarily he would have had six or seven of the Señora's paintings to display, but today he had only two small ones, neither likely to please the Magistrate.

Both canvases were covered with thick strokes of burnt sienna, ochre, and umber forming a twisted landscape of arid rock, sere grass, and leafless, withered trees. Even the clouds in the sky were the color of burnt sugar. In the background were the walls of a city, much like those of San Cristobal.

Alejandro licked his cracked lips.

The Magistrate could barely mask his displeasure. "Why does she still have these colors?"

After his last visit, the Magistrate had ordered Alejandro to remove the yellow and brown pigments from the Señora's studio. "I... I don't know."

"It is your job to know these things," the Magistrate said. "Perhaps this life of comfort has made you incompetent."

Alejandro had known the Magistrate would be upset and might even threaten to remove him from the villa, but the words still came as a surprise. Lowering his eyes, he said, "I will do better, Magistrate."

The Magistrate swept the canvases onto the floor. "Pray it is not too late for the people of San Cristobal and Mesa del Caballo and San Rafael. The people suffer, Alejandro, and we are the ones who can help them."

"Perhaps—" Alejandro stopped, realizing his words might cross perilous ground. Having reconsidered, he said instead, "Perhaps she does not understand the need."

The Magistrate retrieved one of the canvases from the floor and studied it with a shake of his head. "She used to paint the land green, the trees heavy with fruit, and the clouds pregnant with rain. Why has she stopped?" He thrust the painting into Alejandro's hands and went to contemplate the fields outside the window, where the usually green durum now lay brown and shriveled atop the sundered land.

Alejandro cautiously placed the painting on the table and retrieved the other canvas from the floor. He had warned the Señora that her work would displease the Magistrate.

"How is my daughter?" the Magistrate asked.

"Nereyda is well."

"And?"

Alejandro exhaled. "I fear—"

"Take me to them."

The Señora's studio overlooked an ancient windmill standing motionless atop a crag of stone, like a sentinel. It had been days since it had pumped a drop of water into the villa's cistern, something that had begun to worry Alejandro.

The studio's high ceilings and network of vents kept the room cool, even during the peak of the afternoon heat. The furniture had been removed except for a table where the Señora ground her pigments and a dozen easels scattered haphazardly about the room. In previous years, every easel would have held one of the Señora's paintings, but today, only two held canvases.

The Señora stood in front of one of these, a palette smeared with the swatches of color held aloft in her right hand while she used the fingers of her left to drag lines of paint into the shape of a gnarled tree trunk. Her painting was nearly finished and looked much like the two the Magistrate had viewed in the front room.

The Señora stopped in mid-stroke and turned toward the two men in the studio's entry arch. "Francisco? Is that you, my son?" she asked.

The Magistrate stepped out of the shadows, even as Alejandro knew it would not matter. The Señora, his mother, had been blind to him her entire life.

She smiled slightly in his direction, but not at him, and turned back to her canvas. "Have you come for more paintings?"

Alejandro watched a progression of emotions play across the Magistrate's face. A pinch of his brow. A momentary softening of his eyes. A tightening of his jaw as his determination solidified. They were a record of his relationship with his mother, made clear to Alejandro only in recent months as he grew close enough to the Señora to gain her confidence.

Since Alejandro had been installed by the Magistrate to oversee the Señora's villa five years ago, he had born witness to more than a dozen of these meetings. Long had he been perplexed by the unspoken intricacies of their relationship.

A hard childhood under a resentful mother's disapproval had tempered the Magistrate's demeanor and ambition. In a twist of fate, the Magistrate had used his mother's gift to attain the wealth and power *she* had craved, never confessing the truth of his actions to her, and she, not the unknowing participant he believed her to be, had allowed him to exploit her. Only recently, with the arrival of Nereyda, her granddaughter, had this familial dynamic changed.

The Magistrate cleared his throat. “Why do you paint these pictures? You used to paint with greens and blues, of fields with crops and rainfall. Now—the buyers do not like these.”

Alejandro, like the Señora, knew there were no buyers. There had never been buyers, but that did not diminish the value of the Señora’s paintings.

Alejandro was one of the few who knew the story—actually the secret—of the Magistrate’s rise. Twenty years ago, the Magistrate had arrived in San Cristobal with nothing but the shoes on his feet and one of his mother’s paintings on his back. As he approached, he noticed that the city on the horizon in the painting had a stone wall that resembled San Cristobal’s, but instead of the sepia landscape, the painted city was surrounded by green trees and succulent grass. Elated with the belief that the painting’s subject might enable him to trade it for a canteen of water and a handful of olives, he eagerly climbed the dusty road toward San Cristobal’s ancient iron gate. As he neared, a sudden gust blew clouds in from the mountains to the west and let forth a torrent of rain that ruined the painting and left the young, future Magistrate distraught. The next day, however, wildflowers had sprouted from the cracked earth and the once brown grass had grown thick and green, and the road leading up to the gates of San Cristobal looked little different from his memory of the Señora’s painting.

“I paint what is in my heart,” the Señora said, continuing to smear color onto the canvas. Her strokes raised a tower into the sky, its shape unmistakably that of the church steeple of San Raphael.

The Magistrate glared over his shoulder at Alejandro, who lowered his eyes, feeling that yes, he was responsible for this.

“The food, the staff, even Alejandro come with costs,” the Magistrate said. “My salary alone cannot keep you in the means to which you have become accustomed.” The Magistrate surveyed the table against the wall upon which sat the jars of lapis, powdered cinnabar and charcoal, the cruets of oil, and the muller stone the Señora used to grind the ingredients into her paint. The pigments alone cost more than Alejandro made in a year, but which he suspected did not come close to the wealth Magistrate actually generated.

“All I am asking is that you paint something... pretty to the eye. Could you do that? As a favor to me? Your son.”

The Señora set aside her palette on the table and wiped her fingers on a stained cloth. The paint never fully came off her fingers and hands, persisting in the creases of her palms. The pigments she meticulously ground to mix her colors had worn deeply into her skin, darkening it and giving her slender

hands a mottled appearance that would not wash away.

Alejandro looked at his own fingers, similarly discolored, but not to the degree of the Señora's.

The Señora placed her hands on the Magistrate's cheeks and looked up into his face with her milky eyes. "If I could, I would see my own face in yours," she said.

The Magistrate pulled away, frowning.

The Señora turned toward the second canvas in the room. "It has been a delight to have Nereyda here. She brings joy and fortune to this home. Shall Alejandro fetch her?"

"No," the Magistrate said. "Is this her painting?" The canvas was not complete, but the simple shapes and rudimentary lines resembled the stem of an unopened flower, perhaps even the one that rested in a thin glass tube tied to the easel's tray.

"She takes to the paint," the Señora said.

"Is that so?" The Magistrate leaned in with more interest to examine the painting, although nothing about it was remarkable. Eyes sparkling with excitement, he looked to Alejandro.

"What the Señora says is true," Alejandro said, "but I fear your daughter does not possess the Señora's gift for... composition."

The smile that had briefly found the Magistrate's lips fell away. He turned to stare out the window.

The vents clicked several times in the otherwise silent studio.

The Magistrate smoothed his mustache, but the action did not soften the hardness settled onto his features.

Alejandro felt queasy, as if falling from a great height. The Magistrate had sent his daughter to the villa to see if she possessed the same gift as her grandmother. Before then, Alejandro was not even aware the Magistrate had a child, for he never spoke of one when at the villa. Alejandro was not certain, but he suspected the Magistrate had only had the child on the possibility she might possess the Señora's gift. The Magistrate needed this to be so. His mother, the Señora, was advancing in years, and although her health was still sound, she was already older than anyone Alejandro knew.

Wearing a sour expression, the Magistrate turned abruptly and marched toward the archway.

"What of the Señorita, Magistrate?" Alejandro asked.

"I will send for—"

"No!" The Señora said sharply.

The Magistrate stopped suddenly.

Alejandro shrank into the shadows.

"She stays here," the Señora said, "or I will paint no more."

The Magistrate's gaze narrowed.

How many years had it been since anyone had challenged him? Alejandro feared the Magistrate's response, and the room hung in the tension. No one moved, each waiting for the other to concede.

The Magistrate let forth a slight chuckle. "Yes, Mama," he said. "She is yours now. The daughter you always desired. The price is no more of *these* paintings. You will paint the ones I want."

The Señora pulled back her shoulders, looking stronger than Alejandro had ever seen her. "You will have them."

After the Magistrate had left, Alejandro returned to the Señora's studio to find her scraping the paint from her palette.

"Señora," he said, "That was very foolish, but also very brave."

The smile she spared him eased his concern. "It is you who were foolish, yet brave."

Alejandro shrugged off the Señora's words. His hands still shook, but he retrieved a palette and a brush from the table. They were already loaded with dollops of paint, mixed and spread across the surface.

"I do not believe he liked your painting," the Señora said.

Alejandro dabbed at the damp canvas with the brush. "I have no talent for it."

The Señora smiled enigmatically.

A girl, no more than eleven, entered the studio, causing Alejandro's brush to pause. Whenever Nereyda entered the room, he stopped. She reminded him of his own daughter with her long dark hair and soft expressions. His daughter would have been thirty this year, if she had not hanged herself in despair sixteen years ago. Like the Magistrate, Alejandro had never given his daughter the love she deserved or the space to become anything more than a tragedy, a regret he would never overcome.

He would not allow that to happen to Nereyda. The past may be immutable, but Alejandro hoped that a moral deed, like rain falling on an arid land, could bring some degree of prosperity back to a man's withered soul.

"Was someone here?" Nereyda asked, pushing a thick strand of hair behind her left ear.

“No one of importance,” the Señora said. “Alejandro has news for you.”

Alejandro shook off his melancholic thoughts. Nereyda’s expectant gaze filled him with warmth. If the Magistrate ever learned of Alejandro’s betrayal, he would destroy him. Alejandro did not want to consider what he would do to Nereyda, but now, that would not matter.

“Your father has given blessing for you to go to Madero,” he said, “and the Señora and I have arranged for Master Gonzalas to see to your needs and training.” In Madero, she would be safely beyond the Magistrate’s reach.

Alejandro found the girl’s excitement infectious, and any reservations he had dissipated when she threw her arms around his neck. Alejandro barely recognized her from the withdrawn, meek child that had arrived several months ago.

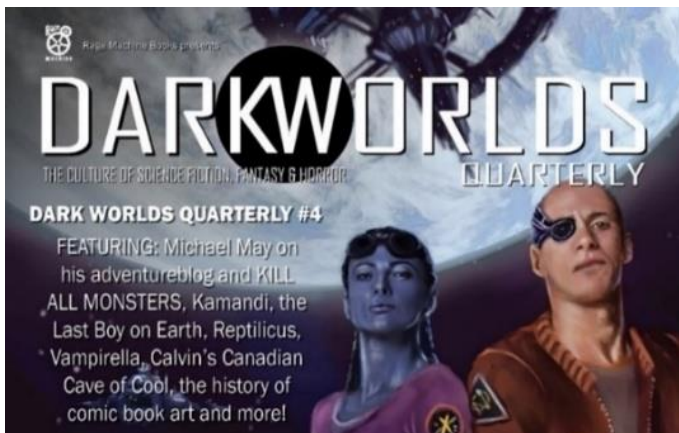
“What is this?” Nereyda asked, seemingly seeing Alejandro’s canvas for the first time. She took the brush and palette from his hands and raised her eyebrows at him.

Alejandro waved her forward as he stepped back.

Nereyda dragged the bristles through the crimson paint on the palette, touched it into the titanium and the aquamarine to lighten and transform its color. Lightly she spread the mixture onto the canvas, tentatively at first, but with each stroke gaining confidence.

Alejandro did not watch her brush or the canvas, however. His eyes were fixed on the swollen end of the green stem tied to the easel’s tray as it swelled and split, spilling forth a radiant rosette of purple and blue petals.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Anderson, Colleen

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

Bowman, Annette

Annette lives along the shore of a Great Lake where she spins stories, weaves music, and nurtures gardens. “Portraits” is her first published story.

Campbell, Heather

Heather lives in a small town north of Toronto. She has long enjoyed chronicling the shadows that surround her, but this is her first officially published story. Often, she can be found with a blanket, flashlight, and podcast, soaking up scary stories. “Concurrence” developed out of a former employment experience where the demand for consensus led to toxic results. She is currently working on a time slip mystery set in and around York Region; babblingbrook1001 on Instagram is her contact handle.

Fear, Ivanka

Ivanka Fear is a Slovenian-born Canadian author. She lives in Ontario with her family and feline companions. Ivanka earned her B.A. and B.Ed. in English and French at Western University. After retiring from teaching, she wrote poetry and short stories for various literary journals. Ivanka is the author of the *Blue Water Mystery* series and the *Jake and Mallory Thriller* series. She is a member of International Thriller Writers, Sisters in Crime, Crime Writers of Canada, and Vocamus Writers Community. When not reading and writing, Ivanka enjoys watching mystery series and romance movies, gardening, going for walks, and watching the waves roll in at the lake. Find out more at www.ivankafear.com

Fisher, Manley

Manley grew up in Spruce Grove, Alberta. He is a retired English teacher who taught mostly adult immigrants in Edmonton and enjoyed listening to their stories. He is now a woodworking hobbyist, a housepainter, a casual writer and a K-Drama junky. This is his 4th published story but his first in the science fiction/fantasy genre.

Franklyn, Rebecca

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

Girczyc, Cat

Cat writes female-driven stories usually in science fiction or fantasy but dabbles in romance. She lives in Vancouver and enjoys life there with

her daughter. She's seen one of her shows cosplayed, which is a highlight for a writer.

She has two Canadian national awards, the Auroras, for SFF work in the 90s. Lately, she's been writing and submitting SFF poems and short stories. Her work has been published in SFF markets including *On Spec*, *Pulp Literature*, *Polar Borealis*, *Neo-Opsis*, *The Vancouver Sci-Fi Magazine*, *The Unhelpful Encyclopedia: MurderBugs*, *Sally Port Magazine*, and *Tesseract*.

As a TV writer, Cat belongs to the Writer's Guild of Canada (WGC) and has sold 15 television episodes, including two episodes of the dark fantasy *The Collector* and animated series like *Cybersix*. She's currently pursuing sales and producers for two of her award-winning scripts.

Webpage: [Cat Girczyc](#)

Immega, Guy

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

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

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

Kitcher, William

Bill's comic noir novel, *Farewell and Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep*, the second funniest novel ever written, was published in October 2023 by Close to the Bone Publishing and is available on Amazon. As you can tell from "Come Help Me," not everything he writes is funny...

Laframboise, Michèle

Michèle Laframboise 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 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!

Lougheed, Marion

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

Minton, D. Thomas

D. Thomas grew up on the wrong side of Lake Ontario and is trying to rectify this unfortunate mistake. After many years working on tropical Pacific islands as a coral reef biologist, he decided to migrate north to the mountains of British Columbia, where he lives with his wife and daughter and works hard to keep his writing fingers warm.

Mori, Glenn

Glenn has a master's degree in music composition, works as a CPA, and plays in local jazz groups, but he spends most of his free time editing his own fictions. His writing has been shortlisted for The Federation of BC Writers Short Story Contest, has been published by the CBC, and was included in the 2023 RIZE novella anthology.

Newman-Stille, Derek

Derek (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, they and Nathan Frechette co-published their collection of short fiction *Whispers Between Fairies* (Renaissance Press).

Parker, S.F.

S.F. Parker calls Vancouver home, but travels often to explore mountains, deserts, rainforests, oceans, and plains. Fictional versions of his adventures weave their way into his writing and can be found in his most recent SF&F novel *Quest of Strength*, available at Kobo and Amazon. He is a long-time member of the Canadian Authors Association, and a cautious fan of robot innovation.

Pasternak, Robert

Robert has been painting cosmic surrealism and speculative art since 1980 and has created cover art and interior magazine illustrations for *Amazing Stories*, *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *On Spec Magazine*, and *Science Fiction Chronicle* as well as cover art for Phyllis Gotlieb's short story collection *Blue Apes*, and *Land/Space*, an anthology of Prairie speculative fiction. In 2023 Robert's painting "Breatharian" won Best in Show at NASFIC (the North American Science Fiction Convention). In November 2024, At Bay Press published his SF epic *Twilight of Echelon*.

Runté, Robert

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

Smith, Mahaila

Mahaila (they/them) is a researcher, poet, editor and MA student based on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ottawa, Ontario. They won the 2024 John Newlove Poetry Award and were nominated for the Rhysling and Best of the Net awards. They adore fibre crafts and collecting sea-glass. You can find more of their work on their website: [mahailasmith.ca](#). Their debut narrative poetry collection, *Seed Beetle* is available from Stelliform Press.

Tentchoff, Marcie Lynn

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*.

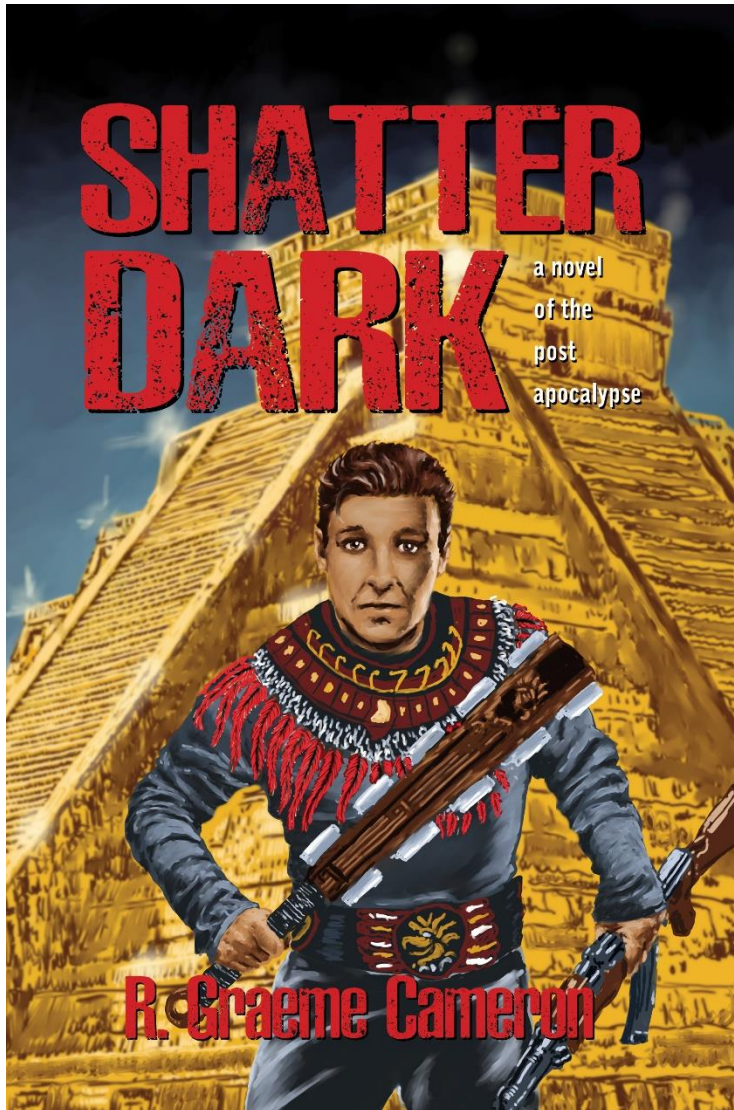
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