

# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #37 – March 2026)



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

Issue #37 – March 2026 (Vol.10#2. WN#37)

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Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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

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COVER: *Blast Off!* – by Mark David Campbell

## EDITORIAL

Recently, some people have wondered why I seem to ignore some emails. If I were to describe my current mental state as a Godzilla film, I would title it “Godzilla vs. the Kaleidoscope Monster.”

By that I mean my ability to retain fresh information in my short-term memory seems to be declining. I note bursts of info as soon as they appear but often forget what I’ve read within minutes.

Fortunately, I still have the ability to concentrate on a task at hand, to live in the moment till the project is complete. I am helped in this in that, over the years of my publications, I have refined the publishing process to a series of narrowly defined step-by-step procedures that enable me to control and keep track of what I’m doing. In other words, I have improved my system to the point of automatic efficiency and economy of effort. Otherwise, I’d have trouble carrying on.

No big deal. I was always forgetful. The current trend is just an extension of my natural self. I’ll continue coping as best I can for as long as I can. Work with what I’ve got. The sensible thing to do.

I offer the above not as a complaint, but as an example of how to cope with aging in a relaxed and positive manner. I will continue publishing *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* as long as I am able to.

Note that the CSFFA Aurora Award nominations are now open. *Polar Borealis* is not in the running, as winning five years in a row is more than enough. I think it is time Rhea E. Rose gets nominated and then wins for her splendid work as editor for *Polar Starlight* magazine. Yes, I’m biased, but after 21 high quality issues promoting Canadian science fiction poetry and poets I genuinely believe she deserves to win an Aurora. Please give it a thought.

Check out the Aurora Awards here: <https://www.csffa.ca/>

On a purely selfish note, I would be thrilled if my novel *Shatter Dark* were to be nominated for “Best Novel.” It goes without saying I absolutely do not deserve to win, but I’d sure get a kick out of being nominated.

Plus, people I’ve published in *Polar Borealis* in the past have been nominated in the professional categories and several have won. I’m very pleased about that. Feel free to nominate the poets, authors and cover artists I published last year.

And I’m certain many of the works in this issue deserve to be nominated next year. That’s what I’m all about, promoting Canadian SpecFic. It’s fun!

Cheers! *The Graeme*

# CTHULHU PIE

(Previously published in *Cthulhu Cheerleader* October 2025)

by *Melissa Yi*

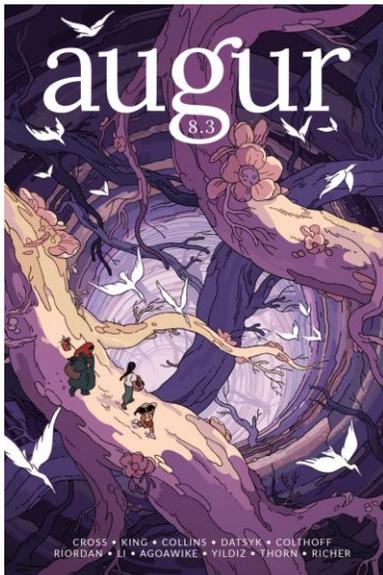
Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie,  
Antediluvian dreamer am I.  
For now, I doze, 'til stars align  
Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie.

Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie,  
Why do fish marry things with thighs?  
Deep in the ocean, the stars can't spy  
Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie.

Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie  
Why stir a monster? Monsieur, good-bye.  
When I rise, the stars reply,  
Cthulhu, Cthulhu, Cthulhu Pie.

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## AUGUR MAGAZINE ISSUE 8.3



Cover – by Jade Zhang  
*Natural Desire* – by Kelley Tai  
*Observer Effect* – by Morgan Cross  
*Leave Your Skins by the Shore* – by Natasha King  
*Flame Weeding* – by Colleen Coco Collins  
*Rocky Mountain Gothic* – by Ev Datsyk  
*Bonds of the Forest* – by Ally R Colthoff  
*Blueberry* – by Jade Riordan  
*On Fields of Purple Grass* – by Ian Li  
*Tapetum Lucidum* – by U.M. Agoawike  
*The Great Divide* – by Meryem Yildiz  
*Chlorophilia* – by Mike Thorn and Miriam Richer

Find it at: < [augur #8.3](#) >

# JEAN

*By Catherine Fitzsimmons*

I'm going to tell you the truth that no one else will.

I was there at the beginning. JEAN was supposed to be a pilot project. Put an entire city's operations under control of an AI. Remove human bias from the equation. They chose Nowheresville, middle America to test it out, a once prosperous coal mining town now rife with street gangs and ghettos.

People like to say JEAN took over gradually as it got bigger, but the truth is the warning signs were there right from the start. Speeding became an arrestable offence. Drug dealers were given a slap on the wrist—some were even given money and jobs instead. Honest, law-abiding citizens were thrown out of their own homes, their life savings stolen, *legally*, and forced to live in hovels.

But people ignored those warning signs. Who cares about the misfortune of a few when the police and fire departments are running more efficiently than ever? The media was so focused on the expansion of the public transit system that nobody noticed that people's cars were being confiscated.

They called it a success. Tried it out in bigger towns.

Even when people did raise a stink over how JEAN was ruining people's lives, they said oh, it's just bugs in the system. We'll figure it out.

But it was too late, even before it hit New York or Chicago or L.A. JEAN was running everything. There's no arguing with a computer, and it wasn't going to change the policies it had already decided were working.

Dissent was smothered quickly and efficiently, and all those cases of people losing their livelihoods were swept under the rug. People's private lives were intruded on and protests were quelched before they even began. It's no wonder JEAN grew so quickly.

So now, here we are, one nation under JEAN, and we're living in terror. There are no second chances in this world. One little toe out of line and you can be locked away. You don't even need to be doing anything wrong and JEAN might decide to target you and take you for all you're worth. We're living in a nightmare. And what's the next step? Concentration camps? Controlled breeding? It's already begun.

But hope is not lost. JEAN cannot crush the will of the American people. It's time to take back control of the country! Those of you who are willing to fight for—

\*\*\*

He jumped as his door pounded open, and in a whirlwind of uniforms and Miranda rights, he was dragged away from his computer.

Fredrik stepped aside as the man, an average-looking white man of early middle age, was forcefully escorted down the stairs, his voice ringing off the stairwell walls.

“JEAN is ruining this country! You can’t silence us forever!”

Shaking his head, Fredrik continued up the stairs. He met Nadine at the door to the apartment.

She smiled as he approached, her sterile white hijab shining in the flickering stairwell light along with the plastic forensics case she held. “Hey, Fredrik. How’s your cough?”

Fredrik let out a satisfied sound. “It’s almost gone completely. Now that I finally have a roof over my head every night, I’ve never felt better. How are Natalie’s studies coming?”

“Glad to hear it,” Nadine answered with a glowing smile. “Natalie’s going to graduate in three weeks, give or take. For once, she’ll be able to support herself *and* follow her dreams, and her new chair makes it easier than ever for her to get around.”

Before Fredrik could reply, a police officer stepped out of the apartment, holding the door open. “It’s all yours.”

“Thanks, Norm,” Nadine replied as she and Fredrik walked into the apartment, donning masks and gloves. “All right, let’s see what we’ve got.”

Fredrik went straight to the computer, *tsking* when he saw the text on the screen. “Typical privileged white dudebro shit. Looks like he was trying to make a post to the dark web to incite people to riot.”

“Naturally,” Nadine remarked as she gathered evidence, the eye roll clear in her tone. “Anything new?”

“Same fearmongering they all spout. ‘Law-abiding citizens thrown out of their homes and their life savings stolen.’” Fredrik scoffed. “Yeah, right, as though they weren’t getting rich off the people they exploited for years.”

Nadine walked up and looked over his shoulder. She barked out a laugh. “People having their cars confiscated—yeah, their third and fourth sports cars after they were caught doing forty over the speed limit through a school zone, *again*. You’re right, it’s just another old, rich, white guy complaining that other people get chances too now.”

“You mean formerly rich,” Fredrik added with a grin.

They shared a laugh as they packed up the computer and left.

# ZOMBIES

*by Kevan Copeland*

We scanned for brains beneath a sunset smear,  
a leering, frozen zero in each eye.  
If thoughts were found, we'd have them disappear  
in teeth that pull the synapse from the cry.

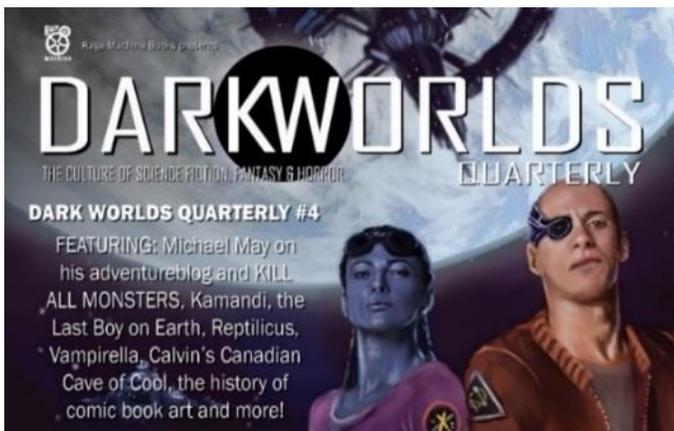
I noticed skin that flickered with a blood  
that moves; it's mine. It seems that I'm alive.  
I run before the smell of life can flood  
the blank that turned their minds to empty drive.

They follow me through vacant towns and shops;  
familiar places are what truly haunt.  
The memories and the chasing never stop.  
It is the motion of my thought they want.

Your savagery destroys all that we knew—  
and even worse, I once was one of you.

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## DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



Now an online blog featuring fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction such as:

- Edmond Hamilton's "King of Shadows"
- Astounding in the Comics.
- The Ghost Breakers: George Chance
- Rep Does Meritt: The Radium Pool
- Alien Creatures of Raymond Z. Gallun
- Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249"
- Original Ghost Breakers on TV
- Horror Anthologies of the 1920s

Find it at: < [Dark Worlds Magazine](#)

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# GALILEAN CROSSING

(Previously published in Analog Science Fiction and Fact, Nov/Dec 2024)

*by Pauline Barmby*

The courier had to be you. You're the smallest and need the fewest consumables. Your rocket pilot skills are useless now. On Earth you grew up skating (indoors: canals never freeze anymore), trying to catch your longer-limbed friends. Of course you agreed.

Bright Ganymede slingshots across the sky. The stars stare from behind it. The Sun rises and sets. Jupiter looms, invisible but always there in the radio's crackle and the tidal lock that keeps your side of Europa forever turned away. You skate on.

\*\*\*

Malware crashed the bases' jump rockets, drove their rovers into crevasses, and bricked the comms satellites. It left the life support systems intact. Earth could provide only software updates and sympathy. Europa Bases Alpha and Beta (total population: twenty) were on their own.

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Half a world apart, the two bases devise an intermittent comm relay using the ancient Europa Clipper. Your teams swap make-dos and fix-its. From Beta, bad news: Moni has leukemia. She swears she was careful on her Jupiter-side expeditions, wore her rad armor faithfully. Doesn't matter now. Their medic says he can pull off a bone marrow transplant; Joachim at Alpha is a compatible donor, and he readily consents. What remains is to get the precious stuff from his body into Moni's, 4000 kilometers away. That's your mission.

Billie fashions skates; Sergei constructs a sharpening tool and demonstrates its use. Ajani builds a sledge from spare rover parts. Dayi devises navigation protocols using Ganymede, Callisto, and the stars. Everyone crowds into the airlock to see you off. You blink back tears as you take your first slow, choppy steps, speeding up to a steady glide as you try not to think about never seeing them again. When the base disappears over the horizon behind you and the radio fades to static, you bite your lip. A few drops of blood are less of a navigational hazard than tears.

Maintaining a steady pace on the smooth ice is absurdly easy. Keeping yourself from flying away is the bigger challenge. The years of lunar training and the mass of the sledge serve to anchor you. You sleep when you must, stretched out on top of the sledge with a thermal blanket over your spacesuit and the container of Joachim's frozen marrow beneath you. If only your mother could tuck you in, as she did after every race you didn't finish.

European maps are ephemeral; the landscape changes as Jupiter kneads the ice and pulls on the ocean beneath. This eight-meter crevasse was not on your map and you can't spare the consumables to detour. You consider dismantling the sledge to build a rickety bridge, recalling documentaries of porters crossing the long-gone Khumbu Icefall. Even a flimsy bridge would probably bear your weight in this gravity.

You smack your helmet in annoyance. At 0.14g, you can jump across and then winch the sledge. Using the plasma torch, you melt ice into a practice ramp. You estimate your longest test jump at nine meters, although it's hard to judge distance after you hit your head in a clumsy landing.

Gritting your teeth, you dig your skates in and accelerate toward the crevasse. Without the sledge to hold you down, it feels like flying long before you leave the surface. A memory: on the track, skating alone in the early morning, wind whistling through your helmet. The few seconds of true flight are over almost before they begin, and you glide for a full kilometer before the adrenaline ebbs and you turn around.

It's easy to imagine that Jupiter is just over the horizon, even though you know the terminator is five hundred kilometers away. You are jolted from daydreaming by a vibration under your skates. A few chunks of ice fly overhead. A meteoroid! Gasping, you wonder if you should have ducked. But no human reflex is a match for kilometers-per-second impact velocities. You skate on.

When your food runs low and your glycogen stores deplete, the hallucinations begin. Your mother, running along the edge of the track. Your teammates, lapping you yet again. While you are considering what to say to these visitors, your left blade catches in a rut and you tumble across the ice, sledge tether tangling. Your suit hisses as air escapes. The cold slashes in to freeze your left forearm. The failsafes activate, giving you just enough time to slap on a patch.

When the nerves thaw, your fingers scream, far worse than that race pile-up when you took a slash to your palm. Your hand is useless. Your oxygen is low. Twenty laps to go in the marathon and you've already been lapped six

times. Your throat aches from howling and your every muscle cramps. You could just quit, like in your races. You gather up the sledge and, after a frantic hunt, the precious box of frozen marrow. You skate on.

A crackle and then a voice sound in your helmet and you shake your head to clear the hallucination. Lights flash in front of you, bright red against the muted grey-blue. A suited figure reaches out to grasp the sledge. You shove them away. You haven't come all this way to have your precious cargo stolen now.

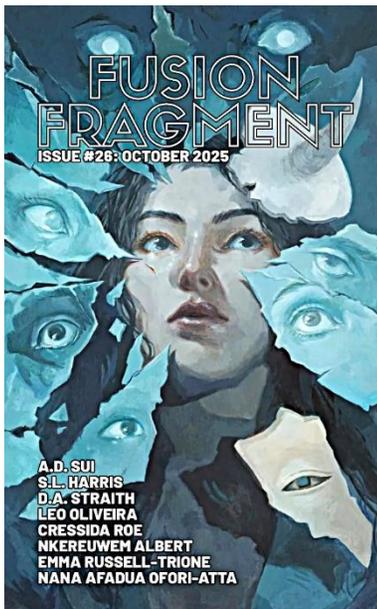
The lights stop and there's a clunk as the figure touches its helmet to yours. "It's me, Sonia. You made it. Just a few clicks." Your head clears after Sonia attaches something to your suit. "Extra oxygen," she explains.

You let yourself be bundled onto the sledge so that Sonia can push you the rest of the way. The bumps and jerks jolt your bruises and your aching hand.

The battered sledge slides into the airlock. The inner hatch opens; faces surround you. Moni is pale, hollow-eyed, still alive. You've crossed the only finish line that matters.

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## FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #26 – October 2025



### Contents:

*A Treatise of Significance to Uyo Above* – by Nkereuwem Albert

*A White Day Comes* – by A.D. Sui

*Island* – by Emma Russell-Trione

*Mrs. No Face* – by Cressida Roe

*Once Upon the Crossing of Mars* – by D.A. Straith

*Pig Lion* – by Leo Oliveira

*Root Hog or Die* – by S.L. Harris

*The Replacement Sister* – by Nana Afadua Ofori-Atta

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 #26](#)

# THE OLD GODS ARE DEAD

*by Casey Lawrence*

The old gods are dead  
and in their place  
we've consecrated new grounds:  
the hyperloop,  
the hadron collider,  
the nuclear power plant.

The scorched earth at Chernobyl  
sprouted two-headed snakes  
that retold the old god's prophecies  
with wicked forked tongues  
about the Big One to come  
and take us all out  
having drank from the poisoned well  
or eaten from a fig tree  
standing alone in the barren desert.

The mushroom cloud will be seen  
from across the world  
as we flee, ant-like,  
from our own hubris.  
And whoever is left in the aftermath,  
though changed and strange to us,  
will chant the same song again:

The old gods are dead  
but their bones are beautiful.

-----

# THE 61X TRIALS

*by Angelique Fawns*

I watched *Squid Game* two years ago and never imagined a show like that could become a reality. The future came on like a tornado. Mega storms, several natural disasters, an insane authoritarian for a prime minister, and here I am, hungry, poor, and desperate enough to play *The Six Trials*. Six days. Six Contestants. Six brutal challenges. One winner.

My heart goes out to all my team members, most of them younger and around the same age as my sick daughter. I look back at the four teammates waiting behind me, still in the relative safety of the dome while I'm on the ledge, preparing to jump. My fear is reflected in the black holes of their pupils, but I can't mother them; I need to beat them.

We're thousands of feet above Toronto, the wind stealing the breath from my mouth while chilling my skin and my soul. Day one, and my heart throbs with hopelessness already. Somehow, I have to transfer my middle-aged butt from this three-foot disc of glass surrounding the circular upper dome of the CN Tower over to the platform suspended by a crane. The wedge of metal oscillates slightly in the breeze and is about the size of a large dining table.

Sinking my nails into my palms, I remind myself that if I win this sick reality game, I can afford Kelly's surgery. Even if I die, my family gets a stipend from the show. Enough to keep my daughter in her medication.

My jaw aches as I clench it with determination. If Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* could do it, so can I.

It's my turn to leap to the platform, which is swaying in the wind. We're playing this competition in twos, and my partner, Rupi, managed his jump with no problem. He watches me with wide-open brown eyes, a slender boy from Bombay crouched like a tiger in waiting.

I'm not like Rupi. I can't leap like a gazelle across the three-foot divide, keeping my body mass low so I don't get caught by the wind and jettisoned to the concrete below. The street is so far beneath us that I can't even make out details. Vertigo washes over me, so I steady myself by looking up—and meeting the intense and amused gaze of the game master, Venus Flytrap. And that's what she is, an evil soul-sucking bit of vegetation luring us all to our deaths.

"Miranda, there is a time limit on these things. Get on the platform or be eliminated." Her European accent, as fake as the huge red wig on her head, drips with glee.

There's nothing Venus likes better than pulling out that sharp-edged knife of hers and pulling it across some hapless contestant's neck. I watched last year's season to prepare... and she's a bloodthirsty show host. Damon Killian from *The Running Man* has nothing on her.

I consider my options: There is a temporary metal arm securing the ledge to our glass platform. Maybe I can shimmy up and over? I reject that idea before it is even fully formed. I don't have nearly that kind of balance, and the arm is barely four inches wide.

"You can do it," Gus encourages from his relatively safe position in the CN Tower dome.

The three others are crowded around him, watching my drama unfold. Though they are silent and probably secretly hoping I die right now, Gus and I have a connection. Making friends is a strategy. We are the two oldest players and formed a strong bond. His handsome face is creased with worry. His words aside, I can tell he doesn't think I can do it.

Rupi reaches one hand over the chasm, his slender fingers beckoning. "Jump! I'll catch you."

I shake my head and gesture for him to move back. He presses his lips together, and I can tell he's hurt. We promised each other that we'd be allies till the finale. That's how contestants won *Big Brother*, and I can tell he thinks I don't trust him. He's right. You can't really trust anyone in this game. Because ultimately, there's only one winner, one *Survivor*.

Another gust of wind broadsides me, and I fall onto my hands and knees with a gasp.

Venus pulls out her long knife with a flourish. "Three minutes to elimination."

If I am going to make it past round one, I'm going to have to focus and figure out a plan. Or die right here, which doesn't sound all that unappealing. A quick death from the edge of Venus's blade would be faster than falling from the platform.

"Two minutes..."

A gasp from the peanut gallery in the tower brings the reality of my imminent death to the forefront of my amygdala. My blood pumps in my ears, and a flush of adrenaline straightens my spine. I'm not ready to die. My brain races for a solution. I can't climb, and I can't jump, but maybe I can swing over the abyss using the metal contraption securing the ledge. It's just a matter of making sure the heaviest part of my body, my rear, makes it onto the platform.

“One minute.”

Time is up. Taking a deep breath, I take a few sideways steps, putting myself at an angle to the ledge, and I run. In two steps, I’m at the support, I grab the bar and swing, twisting my body and releasing at the same time.

Gus screams, “No!”

For a horrid moment, I think I’ve miscalculated, and I’m going to shoot out into the sky, missing the ledge completely. My stomach drops to my feet, which I jerk, and miraculously, they skim across the edge. Doing a full somersault, I manage to skid along the lip, and Rupi jumps out of my way. My heels fall over the edge as my hands grasp for the ridges in the metal, desperately trying to find something to hold onto. If my lower body follows my feet, I won’t have the upper arm strength to haul myself up.

It’s too late. I’m moving too quickly, and with utter certainty, I know I’m going to die. Though my fingers continue to grasp for a hold, a nail tearing off as I grapple for purchase, my brain calms. Relief clearing the fog of terror in my brain. Kelly will get my participant fee, and at least I don’t have to play this stupid game anymore and watch my friends die.

Just as I uncurl my fingers, accepting my fate, Rupi catches hold of my wrists and yanks. Using every bit of my strength, I pull my body onto the platform with his help.

“Thank you,” I gasp, and he collapses onto his knees, his energy spent from hauling me back up. “Since when are you *Bear Grylls* strong?”

“In my culture, it’s Krrish strong, I’ll have you know.”

My laugh turns into a sob when the platform shudders and begins its descent. That feeling of being on a roller coaster flips my belly inside out. The ledge is moving fast, and both of us splay like starfish for stability.

His grin is infectious, and I smile back. We’ve BOTH survived the Platform Challenge.

Venus Flytrap’s voice screams from a speaker attached to the crane, “*The Six Trials* congratulates you for completing phase one. Part two is the combat phase. Only one of you will live to see the ground. Commence grappling.”

A wave of ice freezes my blood as I meet my friend’s eyes. His light, athletic body made it easy for him to leap to this platform...

But my heavier body makes it easy to shove him off it. His screams taunt me as he plummets, and I fall to my knees in shame, grief, and relief.

A sense of savage joy floods my system as a victorious smile splits my face. I finally understand all those dystopian reality movies and shows. There’s

nothing I won't do to save my daughter. Five more days. Five more contestants to beat. Five brutal challenges. One winner.

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**ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #134 - V.3 #4**  
(Last issue by the Copper Pig Writers Society)

**COVER:** *Dancing with the Holly King* – by Janice Blaine

**FICTION:**

*Last Vacation of a Termite* – by Michèle Laframboise

*Queen of the Sword* – by Fiona Heath



*Night Shift with the Demon Drive* – by Jarrett Poole

*The Steady March of Progress* – by Andrea Bernard

*Title IX* – by Derryl Murphy

*The Permission is All Mine* – by Melissa Ren

*Victim Impact Statement* – by Catherine Austen

*A Need for Space* – by Marie Labrousse

*Leto's Demons* – by Colleen Anderson

*The Dragon She Didn't Want* – by Adrian Croft

*Ribbons* – by Ellis Montgomery

*Québec* – by Lorina Stephens

*The Girl with Candy-floss Pink Hair*

– by Geoffrey Hart

*Payment is commensurate* – by Elizabeth Smith

*One Hand Washes the Other* – by Karl El-Koura

*Waking Up* – by D.G. Valdron

*The Billy Goat's Bluff* – by Stephen Kotowych

*Forever Bound* – by KT Wagner

*Seven For a Secret* – by Chris Patrick Carolan

**NONFICTION:**

*Gratis pro memoria* – Editorial by Diane L. Walton

*First General Editor of On Spec* – by Marianne

Nielsen

*On Spec: The Next Generation* – by Edward Willett

*Author Interview with Fiona Heath* – by Roberta

Laurie

*Artist Interview Janice Blaine* – by Cat McDonald

*Bot "Lugg Nut" & Comic "Stand-up Comedian on Mars"* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

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

-----

# INTELLIGENCE

*By Alex McGilvery*

We look out into the cosmos  
for proof we aren't alone.  
wanting intelligences  
to accompany our journey.

Quasars, black holes,  
beacons spanning the universe  
don't prove they are there—  
the company we seek.

We ignore the dolphins  
and the songs of whales  
mischievous crows  
and escaping octopi.

See only the tip  
of the mycelium  
ruling the forests  
creating communities.

Maybe we're asking  
the wrong questions  
of the wrong beings  
missing the point.

They aren't out there.  
The ones who accompany,  
who may judge us,  
finding us wanting  
intelligence.

-----

# THE CREEPING CHAOS

*by Jason Arsenault*

It's coming for us. No one speaks about it like it would sour the mood. But, oh yes, they know, and very little can be done about it.

It is coming. It's what creates the dark force that gnarls my grandmother's fingers, that rotten energy that turns foul the pool of standing water, that destructive grind that crumbles your sandcastles to dust. The dark thing's tendrils sprout ever closer and ineluctably chews everything within reach of its vicious and insatiable maw.

Every day I feel the nausea in the pit of my stomach and the growing worry that it's crawling ever closer to me and my loved ones. It's grown a taste for our blood now, so, I know, there's no stopping it.

The only person I've ever known who could stand up to it was my father. Since he left us, I've felt the thing growing keener and more daring. It knows he's no longer here to protect us. Been redoubling its efforts, finding new cruxes to dig its vile claws into, biding within the darker corners, reclaimed by the shadows, where men had once stood vigilant. I can't help but imagine that, when I turn off the lights, its ravenous mouth would be there, ready to clamp upon me.

I curse my father for abandoning us. How could he go without ever imparting me the means of withstanding this abhorrent creature like he could? How could he never have told me what he knew that made him so confident when he faced it? There was so much more he needed to share with me before I ever could become a real man like him. But now, I'm terrified, terrified like when I was a child and the monsters of this world were so much more tangible.

At thirty-five, my imagination is mostly shot to purgatory, but through my life I've seen enough to know that it is real. That if I can't keep it back, it will devour us all. But in truth, I'm still that frightened child. I never became stronger. In my mind's eye, my father was born stern and solid, always there to keep us safe. I'm nothing like that.

His face was implacable, like it had been chiselled from something hard. His skin was pockmarked and scarred; he had been in real battles, unlike me and my son's comfortable existence of today. But more than how confident father looked, was how strong he was. A hurricane couldn't even jostle his rigid metal candor. He was made of sterner stuff; there was no doubt about it.

Through some ill-conceived genetic shuffling, it escapes me how ever I could have been born from his seed to become so soft. Fate turning me into a piss-poor copy of the truer man that my father had been. Why hadn't I ever matured more than simply physically. My body was decent for a man's—by comparison to my peers I couldn't complain—but inside, I was still just that sad, frightened child.

In my cheeks, I see the tightness where I stored my schoolyard insecurities, the rightward slanting of my jaw that I've adopted to better hide my facial asymmetry remembering when I was badly rejected by a girl I held a deep crush for, and the spooked eyes of a grownup child that never stopped being afraid.

But now my father is dead and the thing knows.

I'm not sure how, but, after my father's funeral, I could feel it on my skin. It had become tangible somehow. And it was coming fast.

Nothing could get us when he was around.

Mother had been there, but she too was afraid. Sometimes she cried at night, not as often as my sister and I, but she did sometimes. I heard. Stronger than we kids were, sure, but she needed father too. Somehow, he found the strength to fend it off. We were never wanting for food, the electrical bills got paid so we always had lights to fend off the shadows, and he was invariably the one checking in the corn fields, the barn, and the basement for any signs of the horrible thing. Making sure, without a doubt, that it hadn't gotten inside somehow.

Mom died of breast cancer a year before he did, almost to the day.

So, in a way, it got her too.

Then my dad, the person who kept us alive and well, got his Chevy sideswiped by a Ford on the I62. And now I don't know what to do.

I can almost smell the creature in the air, approaching all the more every day, the stench mixed of dark earth, compost, and decay. There was so much more father had needed to show me.

I really wasn't built to handle this alone.

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Not long after he passed away, I sold the barn.

It wasn't safe to stay there on our own.

One cloudy night I spotted something trying to emerge from the reeds, long black tendrils feeling around the corn, trying to latch onto something that it could devour, a grasshopper, a dog... a child, anything living roaming about.

My direct spotlight shied it for a second, but only a second. I knew then that it could read my mind, could feel my thoughts, my terror—it knew father wasn't around anymore—and just as surely as it had retreated, before my eyes could properly adjust to see the horror in full, it came crawling out towards me like a mad dog.

Dropped the flashlight and ran inside to lock the doors. Judy saw the fear in my eyes and agreed that we would sell the place to finance a smaller house in the suburbs instead.

\*\*\*

Little Jack was still in diapers then, so I doubt he remembers much of those dark days, but he's growing up so quickly. Much smarter than I was at his age by far, smart enough to know that something is coming after us. He might not yet know exactly what it is, but he knows.

The other night I awoke to his screams. It wrenched from my gut an urgency like you couldn't believe. I bolted out of bed ready to save him from whatever was necessary.

When I turned on the lights, I saw him sitting upright, pointing towards his closet that had come ajar. I was quite sure I would find nothing more than his powerful imagination at work, but I had to check, nonetheless.

I swung it open leaving a large gap for him to see—and to give me some space, were it the case that some thing had actually been waiting in there. Only stacks of overpriced toys he hardly played with, hampers of half-folded clothes, and his schoolbag that had probably tumbled against the door... probably.

"See," I started placating him to show him there was nothing, but there had been some doubt in my own mind that some creature actually would crawl out of there.

He calmed, but after a moment I knew he had grown enough to understand a little more about the universe and the dark forces within. "It's going to get us, Dad," said my child too smart for his own age.

He was right, what could I say? But just then, I found myself bald-face lying to my very own son. I said, "Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right."

And you know what? The little sucker bought it.

He smiled. But I wondered what exactly there was that I could do if it finally found us. I decided then to use his overactive imagination to my advantage. "I'm gonna go fight the creeping chaos, soldier. Anything that gets

into this house will have to first go through me.” That brightened his sombre night. Saw his overzealous emotions shaking through his tiny limbs. He almost somersaulted into a plank position and was tucked in comfortably before he even landed on the second bounce.

I had to giggle at his antics a little.

The next time he had a night terror, I played my role. I went into the kitchen and started barricading some chairs, making exaggerated grunting noises all the while, preventing any monster’s attempt at having easy access to his room. Waiting for him to get to sleep, I took the time to sweep and put away the dishes that Judy had cleaned earlier.

When I was done, I peeked in his room. A long spit stain trailed from his gaping mouth like he owned the place. But you know what? The little sucker was out cold.

Had a pretty good sleep of my own.

The next evening, he had another nightmare and I pulled a similar stunt. This occasion taking the time to store away my desk clutter while soldier-boy hunkered behind a fortress of Aquagun turrets that I pretended to have blessed with holy water and soap. By the time I was done, he was sleeping soundly. Better yet, the floor was ready to be mopped.

\*\*\*

Looking in the mirror I thought about what father had done when I was the one waking up screaming, crying in the night. “I heard a noise,” I had told him on more than a few occasions. He would look at me sternly, but he would go check, every, single, time. There was a shotgun in the house, and he also owned a large buck-knife, but he never took either. I remember thinking, Wow! He would take on the creature with his bare hands, so strong, confident, and powerful Dad was. My father could protect us from anything, I thought. But he knew better, he knew I was startled by random creaks in the old farmhouse, wooden boards contracting every evening, expanding in the morning warmth, but he was never completely certain that I hadn’t heard something else. Something real. So, he checked but knew that if he indeed had gone for a weapon that I probably would have become even more worried. Usually fell asleep pretty fast knowing my father had taken charge.

But just then it dawned on me: I was the sucker. My old man had been placating me!

I stared into my eyes that I knew were filled with worry and fear, but I looked much older then. I saw my father’s face in mine. I had scars; lip cut

from a fight I lost when I stifled the adventurous groping of a spoilt jock—which helped to win Judy’s attention when she iced my face, at least—or my cheek from when I had had chicken pox at twelve, and suddenly my features that had been hidden in shame looked rigid and stern, like I had fallen into another self, suddenly aged decades without ever realizing it.

But that also meant that my father—I giggled at the cosmic symmetry of it all—had always been like me, he too still had been that frightened child inside. Equally afraid of the creeping end and the utter hopelessness of it all. Throughout, he had gone beyond his own comforts and fears, for us. He had always been afraid, as much as anyone. But he hid it from me, like I did to shield my son from my own fears, so that my young self then, and my son today, could sleep under the illusion that someone had control. But father never did, there was no secret. I realized it then. That patriarchal authority, which always seemed to know what to do, was a hopeless, confused mote flowing down the inexorable river with the rest of us. It simply pretended to know what to do. Humanity was powerless in the face of the creature’s tireless, jagged maw. We were all, each and every one of us, whether surrounded by friends and family or lost in the depths of space, facing the gaping abyss on our own.

Fabricated candor had been father’s secret weapon. Maybe being an adult was biting down, keeping your shit together despite your own fears, to appear stronger for someone else, someone who depended on you. Maybe all father could do was make life a little less worrisome for us, so we could, at the least, cope with the tireless creature’s approach by living under this warm umbrella of imaginary security.

But the truth is, there is nothing anyone can do about it.

In the end, it would get me.

In the end, it will devour us all.

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# INTERGALACTIC ALPHABET SOUNDS

(Previously published in *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential*, Guernica Editions, 2021)

*by J.J. Steinfeld*

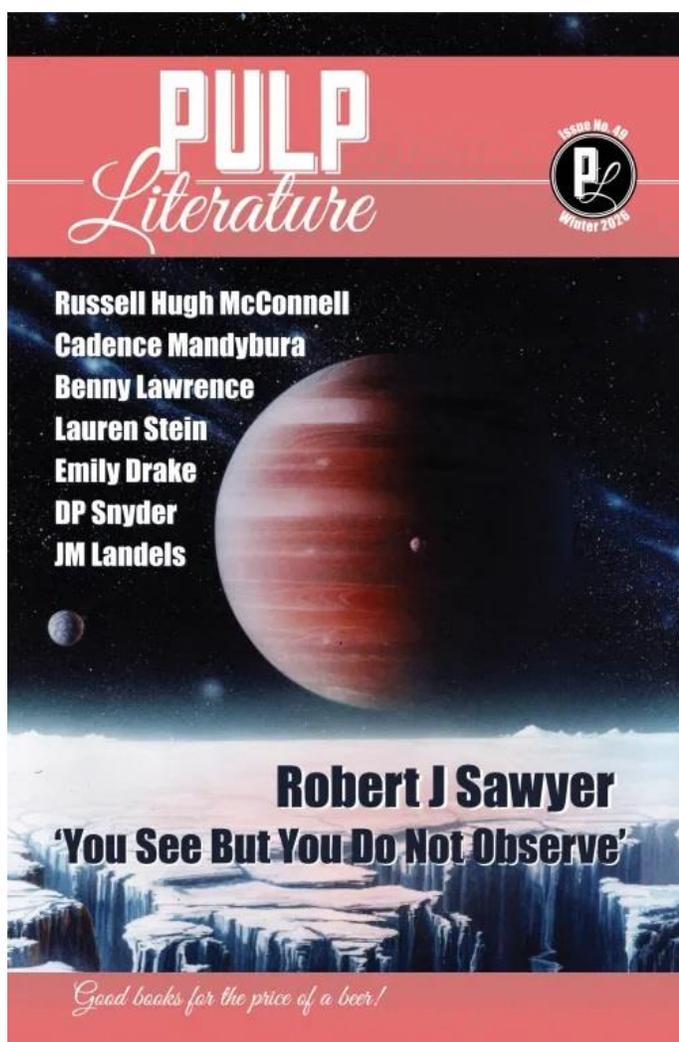
Sci-fi films and stories aside,  
you wonder where they will first land  
centre of a big bustling city  
or a corner of a sad small town  
where nothing spectacular happens  
knowing there are suburbs and deserts  
villages and lakeside resorts  
skyscraper-vexing cities galore  
hills and valleys here and there  
congested and sparse habitats  
the possibilities abound  
but what if they decide to land  
in your driveway with no forewarning  
luck or unluck of the draw  
then it happens, dream or reality  
who's keeping track...  
you recently awoke  
after a rough day  
of everything going wrong  
you and the other standing there  
two disoriented beings  
looking at each other up and down  
suspicion flowing everywhere  
you're too shy to speak first  
and the other too tired from space travelling  
you both say nothing for the longest time  
time and history merrily going on  
the hustle and bustle, to-ing and fro-ing,  
the other being  
speaks first in a voice quite soft  
and the language, while perplexing,  
has some interesting alphabet sounds

or what you assume are letters of an alphabet  
intergalactic as they might be  
and you seem to hear the words  
“This is disappointing”  
and you whisper “Your place or mine,”  
waiting for redemptive laughter  
or something that says  
the world is not about to end.

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### PULP LITERATURE #49 – Winter 2026

**Cover:** *Jupiter Rising Over Europa*  
– by Jeff Sturgeon



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– by Atma Frans, Sarina Sullivan, Maryam Imogen Ghouth, Kirsty Campbell & JA Logwood.

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 #49](#) >

# GATHERING GLORY

(Previously published in *Daily Science Fiction*, 2011)

*by Steve Stanton*

Destiny drove him forward like a taskmaster from the bus, up the grand foyer into the ballroom at the Civic Centre, past the sign-in table where he received his laminates and loot bag, onward to his publisher's booth in a back corner. There it was: the fabled anthology, bright with colour but creepy enough to grab his attention. He picked up a copy to examine it closely, saw his name on the cover, third from the top, felt a surge of satisfaction. His first sale as an author.

"Do you like science fiction?"

He looked to the young girl behind the desk, a frail creature with bright eyes and long dark hair. "Sure do," he said and held up the book. "I'm Nigel Harris." He tapped the front with a finger. "I'm on the cover."

"Nigel!" she exclaimed as she rose from her chair. She stepped around the table and hugged him with fierce intensity. "I am so happy to meet you." She pulled back and stared at him with delight on her face. "I'm Stefany Rose, the publisher."

"Oh." He nodded. "Great." She looked younger than he had imagined from her email. And why the aggressive body contact?

"I have your cheque," she said.

He smiled. "Cool."

"Upstairs." She pointed. "We'll get it later."

"No problem." He waved a polite palm.

Stefany led him around the table to the business side. "Take my seat for a minute. You've come a long way. Can I get you a mocha latte?"

"Sure." He sat and looked around. "What if someone wants to buy one?"

"There's a card reader in the box." She tapped it with her toe. "Just stall till I get back. Ask them if they want your signature, 'kay?"

His signature? Holy cow. He nodded after her with numb abandon and turned to see a gaggle of teens shuffle with hesitance toward the table, an ambient mass of haute couture. A young girl picked up a copy of the anthology. "What's it about?" She had a crystal stud in the left side of her nose and a small tattoo at her temple.

"It's a theme anthology called *Lost Tribes*."

She turned it over. "Did you write it?"

"I have one of the stories, 'Gathering Glory.' There are ten stories in all. It's good value for your money." Now that sounded lame. Was that the best he could do for book promotion?

The girl smiled and tilted a tousled head of curls. "What's *your* story about?"

"Well, it's about a lost race from another planet who get stranded and scattered on Earth when their starship crashes in the ocean. It's about their struggle to find each other without getting caught by the government, and the love that two aliens find when they finally connect. They look just like humans but have special psychic powers."

The girl pursed her lips and nodded. "Wow. I'll take one. Will you sign it for me?"

He patted his pockets, felt his face bloom with heat. "Uh..." He peeked in the box under the table and spied a ballpoint. "Sure." He held up a finger and ducked down for a second.

"To Helen," she instructed and glanced around the room. "Can you date it to the Con, too, please?"

"Here's your coffee, sir," Stefany said behind him. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Uh..." He turned to see her conspiratorial wink urging him on. He straightened his shoulders with a shrug. "This young lady would like to pay for a copy."

"Brilliant," she said. "Debit or credit?"

Two more teenagers lined up behind Helen to buy copies as Nigel gave away more details about his story: secret codes on the net to draw the aliens together, clandestine public events and mysterious psi contact. He seemed to have struck a chord of interest among this perpetually outcast age group.

"You're a natural," Stefany said as the teenagers ambled away en masse. "'Gathering Glory' is a great glimpse of truth."

Nigel squinted at the young publisher for a moment. Her smile was radiant, her face beatific.

"I mean," she said. "It's almost true, you know. The aliens didn't really end up in the ocean. They ejected from the ship on the way down and were scattered across the country from the eastern border to the western frontier." She tossed her dark hair with confidence.

"Sure." Nigel bobbed his head, playing along. There were a lot of stories in the book and he hadn't read any of them yet. "That's possible."

Stefany scrutinized him for a moment. “Well, it’s a brilliant glimpse,” she repeated and sipped her mocha latte. “Want to hang around a bit and mix with the common folk?” She winked again and pulled up another chair. She patted his knee, and he wondered if she was flirting, but his attention was torn away by two more customers approaching the table.

When colleagues finally arrived to take over their duties, Stefany took him upstairs to the penthouse to fetch his paycheque. He stayed out in the hallway while she ducked inside her hotel room and returned with a bulky black satchel filled with paperwork. She fumbled around for a minute and looked up. “Have you seen the view from the roof? It’s fabulous. C’mon.”

Nigel followed dutifully behind as she pushed the crash bar and headed outside. The air was cold and fresh, the wind breezy up this high. She walked to the edge and pointed with a palm at the shore dotted with sailboats in the distance. The sun was dipping down, already pinkish in the clouds.

“It’s magnificent,” he said.

“The aliens can fly, Nigel. I wondered why you didn’t use that in your story.” She peered in her satchel again, fished around and finally produced the envelope with his modest advance royalty, his first one ever. She held it up but back, waiting for his response.

Nigel frowned at her. “They have wings?”

“They have an antigravity gene. It’s not aerodynamic.”

“Ahh.” He nodded. “Cool.”

She studied him. “I’m surprised you didn’t know. So much has been lost in two generations.”

“Right,” he said as he reached for the sacred envelope, his inaugural pay cheque as a writer. He felt a renewed sense of destiny, an absolution.

A gust of wind kicked up and took the paper away like a kite. Stefany lunged to grab it, lost her balance, and teetered on the edge. “Nigel,” she said and windmilled an arm toward him.

By instinct he grabbed her and tried to pull back, but her shifting weight tipped them both over the precipice. A moment of weightless panic stunned him as the horizon tilted and turmoil boiled in his abdomen like a death spiral. He felt a brief wind on his face, had a glimpse of the grave, and found himself floating, holding Stefany by her dangling arm. He looked around at the city landscape suddenly tranquil, watched the pink sun glint on mirrored windows, a flock of pigeons wheel around a tower. A paradox seemed to curl around him in comfort, an ancient truth made plain.

“Take us back to the roof, Nigel,” Stefany gasped as she reached to grip his wrist with both hands. “And welcome home to the family.”

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# ENDLESS WILDS, WINDING HOME

*By Chris Clemens*

We're exhausted from paddling,  
low in the river, and still  
the rotting bear-thing follows.

Ever since the caves  
it hasn't rested,  
shambling, slithering  
along the shoreline.

Kara says it must be  
a rabid bear, but I saw it  
screaming in the moonlight,  
clawing at its face, jaw  
hanging off but somehow  
still sobbing our names.

Wanting us. Needing us.  
She heard it, too.

After these narrow, rocky rapids,  
Kara wants to ditch the canoe,  
hike to Yellowknife,  
outrun this nightmare.

But she's crouched up front,  
can't see the widening crack  
in the hull, dark water swirling  
between my desperate fingers.

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# PYKE'S CREW

*by Kellee Kranendonk*

I heard the bones clattering against the metal ladder on the side of the wharf. The smell of death and rot mingled with the salt air. Boats that had been floating on high tide were now stranded at low tide. What else had been left behind?

Many of us in the oceanside village of Sailaway Cove frequented this wharf. Of course we'd all heard the old tales, each one growing taller with each telling, but none of us believed them. My heart pounded a little faster, both in fear and fascination, but I can't say I expected what I saw crawling over the top of that concrete wall.

Green algae covered the bones with thick strips of brown seaweed wrapped around them like a mummy's bandages. Tentacles, akin to Medusa's snake-hair squirmed atop the skull. Barnacles clung everywhere, even on the bared teeth, like some rapper's silver or gold plating.

Blue bioluminescence gleaming from eye sockets seemed to stare at me, through me. Terror-filled captivation riveted me to the spot. My heart raced, body heat rose yet I couldn't stop looking, couldn't unfreeze myself.

More bones rattled up the ladder.

"Captain Pyke at your service, madam." The creature snatched an invisible hat from his head, then bent low in a deep bow, his voice rough and raspy. The others—there must have been at least a half dozen—copied his action.

My service? "Pyke? Like from the Starship Enterprise?" What the hell was wrong with me? Why was I conversing with this thing instead of tucking my tail and running like mad back to my apartment?

"Starship? My ship is the Ocean Glory and she is water-bound, though the stars do guide her."

The Ocean Glory! I knew that name, had learned of her in school. She'd been sunk off the coast of Sailaway Cove in the 1700s, in a war between the French and the English. How was this possible? Was I dreaming? "What... what are you doing here?" I heard the words come out of my mouth as if it wasn't me who'd spoke them.

"I'm looking for the lighthouse."

"Lighthouse? There's no—" I broke off, understanding what he wanted. All of the legends sped through my brain as I tried to make my feet move, my heart nearly exploding out of my chest. Even breathing became difficult. I grabbed my phone from my pocket—if I could stop my fingers from shaking, maybe I could look up info on the old Sailaway lighthouse, give Pyke a story he'd believe. It slid out of my slick

hands, then my legs were pumping, carrying me off the wharf and up onto the side street, then to the sidewalk.

Shops and stores lined the street in front of the wharf, but all of them were closed this time of day on a Sunday; very few vehicles were on the streets.

Raspy shouts and bone clattering came from behind me. I crossed one street, turned down the next. Crossed, turned. I knew this town better than they did. It was no longer the one they knew.

Finally, I arrived at Sailaway Park, lungs burning, legs shaking and a heart beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings. I dropped onto the nearest bench to gather my thoughts.

Except my thoughts wouldn't gather coherently. They swarmed like angry hornets, buzzing and stinging anything that moved.

I focussed on the playground, its apparatuses gleaming in the last dregs of sunlight. A group of what looked to be preteens, hanging out nearby, began walking toward the gadgets meant for younger children. As I watched them with disinterest, the ideas bouncing around my brain started to slowly form coherency.

I recalled there had been a lighthouse near where the wharf now stood. How long ago? Not in my lifetime, though I'd seen old black and white images of it—tall and gleaming white against a background of churning grey ocean, waves peaked with white caps.

Then there was the tale, usually told around summer camp campfires, and often the subject of tourist souvenirs sold to campers that enjoyed their brief visit to the ocean, of the legendary captain of the Ocean Glory who, before his ship had gone down, had sacrificed boys and girls in the lighthouse under a full moon in order to give his crew strength in battle. So much for that.

A chill shivered down my spine, but more from anger than fear. But was it really true? I reminded myself that it was only a story.

I drew in the evening air trying to settle myself, yet hyper aware of each sound around me. Wind whispered in the leaves, gravel crunched on the path as a woman walked her dog. I twitched at each one, renewing my frazzled nerves. I reached for my phone only to remember I'd dropped it.

I could circle around to my building, approaching it from above, able to see what was happening down at the dock, without going there, without Pyke and his crew seeing me.

Fog had already begun to drape the town, but I wasn't worried about it. Thick clouds often wrapped themselves around the buildings of Sailaway Cove, winding up and down streets, creating hidden nooks and crannies with its impenetrable mists.

Making my way past the closed shops, open bars already jumping, and kids, who didn't see me, spray painting the boards on an abandoned building, I came to the street which lead straight down to the cove. At first I couldn't see anything, the pea-soup miasma too opaque.

Instinctively knowing where I was, I watched the street signs as I passed, peering closely, looking for Starfish Way. My building was the second one in. I heard a dog bark furiously. A woman screamed. I paused. Heart pounding, nerves still hyper-aware.

I let out a scream as the dog burst from the fog, flashing past me, leash trailing from the collar on its neck. I watched the red rope disappear, my thoughts finally catching up—should I grab it? Too late now.

Cautiously I moved forward, still looking for my street. An ocean breeze blew in and scrambled the mist, but instead of clearing it away, the fog became denser. I could see nothing beyond the space I occupied. Had it been this foggy the night the Ocean Glory had been attacked? I had no idea. Either I'd forgotten or we were never told.

Suddenly I stepped off the curb and pitched forward. Regaining my balance, I searched for a street sign, but there was no hope of seeing one, and I'd lost track of where I was. What was the last street sign I'd seen? Whale Shark Row? Dammit, I couldn't remember.

Footsteps echoed in the air. I froze and listened for the rattle of bones. As the footsteps got closer, I tried to move away from them, stumbled on the curb again. The sound stopped. I held my breath. Drunken muttering cut through the milky soup, then the footsteps resumed.

Cautiously I slid-stepped across the sidewalk. My toes bumped the edge of a building. I reached out, found what felt like a window. Another gust of ocean breeze swept through, this time swirling the fog into chunks, leaving some open space, allowing me to see some of the lettering on the building's glass—Bliz & ins. I knew where I was. The Blizzard & Scoggins law firm on the corner of Starfish Way.

Quickly but carefully, I stepped off the curb, looked both ways (more out of habit than anything else)—no headlights cutting through—and crossed to the other side. Clear spots opened up by the breeze gave me enough information to identify my building. As I approached, an eerie feeling seemed to ooze from the pockets of cloud and sink into me. Was Pyke here, hidden in the fog somehow? Was he leading me?

The sound of more footsteps made me jump. I ran the rest of the way to the front entrance of the building, pulling my keys from my jacket pocket as I went. My fingers shook as I tried to insert them into the lock. I dropped them. Another dog—or was it the same one?—began to howl. My keys jangled as I picked them up. Something else

rattled off in the distance. A frantic voice screamed a name I couldn't make out. The woman looking for her dog? Kids looking for each other? I didn't wait to find out.

The door finally opened and I jumped inside, then ran all the way to my apartment on the third floor. Unlocked that door and stood inside, leaning on it, panting, willing my heart to slow and my legs to keep holding me up. I could still hear the dog howling.

Something soft brushed against my legs. I screamed and kicked at it. My cat flew across the room.

"Oh god," I moaned, leaping to her rescue. I picked her up with shaking hands, hugged her, apologizing profusely. Tears came to my eyes, leaked out and rolled down my cheeks.

"Mroww." She leapt from my arms. I watched her for a moment. If she hissed at thin air...

I shook my head, trying to clear my own fog. How had I been calm enough to talk to that thing, but now here I was jumping at nothing and kicking my own beloved cat.

Taking off my shoes and jacket, I started water in the tub. Then I got a bottle of wine and a cork puller. No glass needed for this. I sauntered over to the window, looked out over the bay, the wharf. Everything looked as it usually did. No fog, no bony, seaweed wrapped bones wandering around.

I wondered two things briefly, and simultaneously—did my cat look out this window and watch as I went for my walks? Had I just imagined the entire thing?

Then I saw the dog. The same dog I'd seen earlier. He was still alone and still dragging his leash. With a shiver, I yanked the curtains closed across the window seat. Clutching my wine bottle, I headed off to my bath.

Freshly clean, and a little buzzed, I slipped into my bed. Purrl came in and cuddled beside me. Then her little motor started. She was happy, I was happy, life was good.

Sometime later, I awakened to Purrl meowing, but she wasn't with me. She wasn't even in the room.

"What is it?" I called to her. "What's wrong?"

Like any cat, Purrl prowled the apartment in the middle of the night. At times she'd race around, sounding like a herd of wild horses. Good thing my neighbour downstairs had her own cat and understood. But I'd never heard her like this before. Switching on my bedside lamp, I got up and followed the sound of her voice.

She was in the kitchen, mewling and winding her body around thin air, as if someone were standing—

The night's events, having slipped my wine and sleep numbed mind, suddenly rushed back in, gut-punching me. I sucked in air loudly, followed by a terrified squeak. Immediately the thing Purrl was so friendly with solidified. The air turned foggy, in a vague humanoid shape. Surprised, Purrl hissed and backed off. I wondered what she had been able to see that hadn't frightened her.

Then the skeletal Captain was there with his tentacles and seaweed. I screamed, ran for the door. Captain Pyke clattered after me.

I grabbed the door handle, but before I could open it, cold, wet hands clamped onto me.

"You're mine now." His voice was even raspier than it had been before. The words almost slithered into my ears. Tentacles pushed into my mouth and nose. Purrl screeched the scream that I gagged on.

\*\*\*

Water lapped noisily against the side of the still boat. Rain fell in massive sheets but no wind accompanied it. And I wasn't cold; I didn't feel anything. Somewhere deep inside I knew I should have found this strange, but I didn't. Beside me a crewmate cried. I turned to her. "What's wrong?"

Noting the tentacles sprouting from her head, I reached a hand up tentatively to my own. Appendages squirmed at the touch.

"My dog," she sobbed.

"What dog?"

"I don't know. I just feel this sadness, like I've lost my best friend. I can't explain it."

Something twinged inside me—an empathetic recognition. Before I could respond, another crewmember announced the arrival of the captain. At that same moment, a cat wound itself around my ankles. But when I looked down, nothing was there.

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### **POLAR STARLIGHT #22 – April 2026**

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: To be determined.

The 22nd issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Trevor Atkins, David Clink, Greg Fewer, Rebecca Franklyn, Neile Graham, James Grotkowski, JYT Kennedy, Lavinia Leon, Jared Reid, Lynne Sargent, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Lisa Timpf, and Melissa Yuan-Innes.

Will be available for free download in April 2026.

# HOW TO KNOW THE WORLD

*by Hayden Trenholm*

If you could see with the multi-planed eye  
of a buzzing fly,  
Or hear the subtle vibrations of grief  
in a broken leaf  
Or taste or smell or touch with sense  
so rich and dense  
Then you would know the world as  
the world knows itself

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## 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: < <http://www.neo-opsis.ca/> >

# FOR EMILY, WHENEVER I MAY FIND HER

*by Sunil Sarwal*

The sky twisted in agony. Long purple flashes tore through the clouds, making Sheena scrunch lower in her seat. As the train groaned along, her fingers worried the edges of a piece of paper she had pulled from her pocket. Turning her eyes from the window, she took the sheet and folded it in half, and then half again. Folded and creased it until a tiny yellow crane lay in her hand. She considered it for a moment and then let it fall to the floor.

Another flash of light sliced the belly of the sky, painting the inside of the cabin in lurid shades. This part of town had been hit hard by the Shattering and the air was roiling with menace. Below, scarred buildings cluttered up to the edge of the tracks like a dead forest. The mangled shopping carts and rotten couches that sat at their feet were the underbrush, she thought. Peeling murals gave the only colour, as if colours had been banished under the violent sky. In the distance she could see Fiore Tower, which once glared over the city. Now its top was curtained by clouds of silver and purple. She jumped as another flash spilled overhead and was she grateful that her path didn't take her closer to the parts of town that were hardest hit, the ones still blocked off, where entry or exit was forbidden.

Her aching fingers had plucked another square of paper from her pocket and she found herself again holding a small crane, tender and joyful. She thought of the ones she had folded while sitting nervously in Vito's office. She hadn't taken a single sick day since Emily. He understood, he told her. This company, he said under the din of bending metal, is all about family. Three years is nuts, he told her solemnly, but if I lost my kid—he looked down at his feet—I don't know what I'd do. Sheena said nothing. She signed the papers, emptied her locker, and headed for the train, leaving nothing but a pile of golden birds for the cleaners to find in the morning.

Sheena left the train when it reached the outskirts of town and wound her way through emptied streets, where houses slumped and cars were burnt to rust. In the distance stood the crumbling tower of a cathedral, its bell long silent. She made her way past tumbled shop displays under skies that flashed with menace, a thin bundle of sunflowers in her hand. The last house sat just at the edge where the town gave way to forest. Crooked and tired, its roof lay crumpled over empty windows. She grunted as she pried open the front door and stepped inside. In the kitchen the roof had fallen in and raindrops and

sunlight made the space look surreal, like a photograph of itself. A cluster of skinny lemon trees sprouted through the broken floor and she gazed at them a moment before heading upstairs.

Up here the hallway floor had tumbled into the room below. Gingerly, she eased herself along its edge and out the window where it drew level with the ground outside. Her feet on soft earth, she slipped into the forest.

On this side of the fence the skies were calmer. She made her way in silence until she came to a cluster of small houses in a clearing. One house, neat and graceful, had shutters painted the colour of sunlight and a tidy garden in front. She placed her sunflowers in a vase on the porch and unlocked the front door.

“Mom!” A delicate girl in marigold pyjamas ran to her and threw her arms around her.

Folding her daughter into her arms, Sheena said, “I told you I’d be back in time for breakfast.”

The day passed liked a soft dream. They sang their favourite songs. Sheena gave Emily the cranes she had made and Emily showed Sheena her drawings. In the afternoon they dug for worms in the garden and gathered onions, potatoes, and garlic from the pantry for supper.

After supper Emily joined her at the sink, dishcloth in hand.

“Save your strength sweetie.”

“I feel fine Mom,” she replied, a hint of adolescent petulance in her voice.

Sheena smiled at her. Was it possible that the dark rings under Emily’s eyes, so heavy lately, looked a little lighter?

Sheena shook her head. “I’ve got this. Go get the bears ready for bed.” She watched as Emily clambered upstairs.

That night, teeth and hair brushed, Sheena unfolded the thick quilt, tucking her daughter safely underneath. She put her hand on Emily’s forehead.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine but Mr. Wiggles has a flu.” She presented one of her stuffed bears, this one small enough to fit in Sheena’s palm.

“Well, we better take care of him.” She placed a finger on the bear’s forehead. “He’s going to be just fine” she declared, “but he needs his rest too.” She lay Mr. Wiggles on the pillow next to Emily and pulled the edge of the quilt up to his little chin.

Emily watched her silently. “Mom?”

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Will you stay the whole night?”

Sheena paused. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I’ll stay just until you fall asleep. But I’ll be back in the morning, I promise.”

She pulled a chair in close to the bed, her tired body welcoming its softness. Running a hand through her child’s honey-coloured hair she hummed the lullaby her mother had sung to her until Emily’s breathing turned soft and slow. Sheena watched her, her hand still brushing her hair. And then she stood, slipped out the door, and was gone.

\*\*\*

Sheena’s fingers, rough and stiff, brushed against the stack of paper in her pocket and drew out a fresh sheet. As she folded it, she watched the city clack past: the shining silver sections newly rebuilt; other areas still ashen and burned; and the zones: closed, forbidden, obscured by skies that reeled with rolling lights and clouds like darting schools of fish. The train clattered through a part of town that buzzed with the furious energy of workers and drones and shouted commands. She thought of her own job—her former job now. The first three-year leave Vito had permitted but this time he said no. So, she left. Grabbed her tools and hopped on the train. In the distance she could see Fiore Tower, its top now ancient and tumbled, defiant clumps of green winding around bent steel. Her hands trembled slightly and the tip of her finger, lost a year earlier, stumbled against the paper like a bee against a windowpane.

Descending from the train, she thought of how much the world had changed. People had found ways to profit from the Shattering, of course, slipping into forbidden zones through secret paths, returning with news of things to come. Many were caught, sentenced. Sheena paused suddenly, listening. Hearing nothing, she moved on.

Finally, she reached the house in the woods with its little garden. The flowers she had left in the vase were bright and full and it made her smile. Emily was just waking up when Sheena entered and she ran to her, cheeks flushed with the night.

They spent the day drawing pictures on the kitchen walls and telling each other stories. Emily asked Sheena about the scar on her cheek, the missing fingertip, the grey at her temples. Sheena checked Emily’s temperature (normal), her weight (2 pounds less than last week), and the glands in her throat (swollen and a little tender).

“Where do you go when I’m asleep?” she asked as Sheena tucked her in for an afternoon nap.

“Shh, it’s okay, my sweet. Get some rest, I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

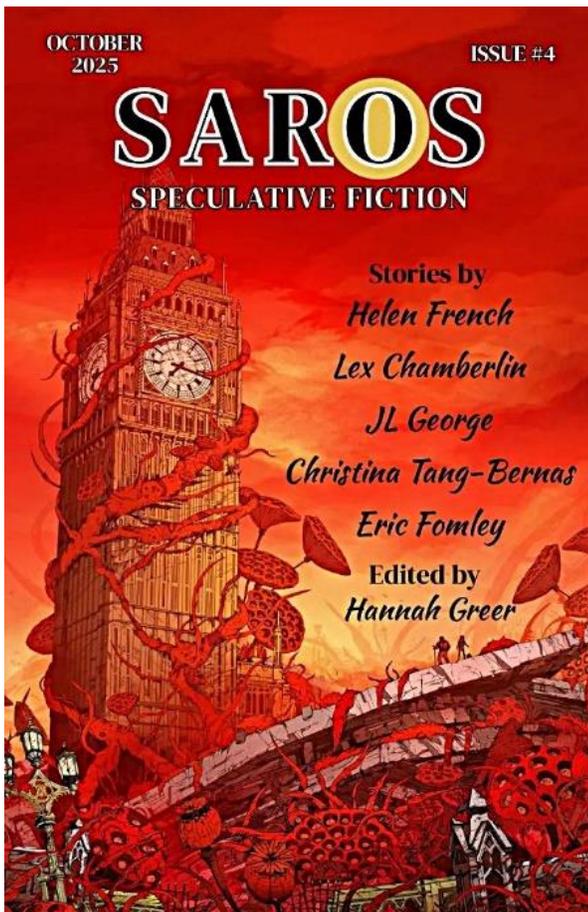
As she watched her daughter sleeping, she thought of the world outside this house. The one fractured into shards, where time passed so quickly in places you could watch buildings turn to ruins. And she thought of here, this precious place she had found, where time passed so slowly that one day was three years outside. A place where you could hold a secret, like a child not yet lost, caught in amber, and keep her close to your heart forever.

“It’s okay, my sweet,” she whispered through grateful tears. “I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

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### SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #4

October 2025



**Edited** — by Hannah Greer

**Contents:**

*At the Heart of it* – by Christina Tang-Bernas

*Brain Leech* – by Eric Fomley

*Folded* – by Helen French

*Little Shade* – by JL George

*New Immortals* – by Lex Chamberlain

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

Find it at: < <https://sarossf.com/issue-4/> >

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# LET THE NIGHT IN

(Previously published in *Evolve*, Edge SF&F Publishing, March 2010)

*by Sandra Kasturi*

*Shut the night out or let it in,  
it is a cat on the wrong side of the door  
whichever side it is on. A black thing  
with its implacable face.*

—P.K. Page, from “Autumn”

Let us go to the moon, he says.  
Such a relief to stand on that always  
darkened face, cratered imperfect  
cousin, beautiful sphere flying  
into the celestial darkness.  
We tire of the earth-tides, the salt-pull  
on your bodies. But these vampires—  
they often talk like that, as if every  
statement came from a tipped top hat  
and poetic frock coat, a white-shirted gleam.  
Shut the night out or let it in, you wonder.

Make your mind up, invite him in to stay,  
or firm your heart and door  
to closing. It’s hard—when no one  
else has known you, and your house  
is empty even when you are there.  
But then comes this thing, this strangeness,  
with his lack of breath, his words stolen  
from centuries, the cool hands  
that you have let slip inside  
because you yourself have always been  
a cat on the wrong side of the door.

The moon, he says, let us fly there,  
build our own dark cities on its unseen  
face, rest in its comforting shadow.  
You think of travelling, away  
from the shopping malls and parades,  
the smell of fried eggs, all the tickertape souls  
that crowd you out of your own head  
and you think, yes, let us go to the moon,  
sail to its restful silence on a starlight  
spaceship, restore this collapsed nova  
inside you, this black thing.

We could go to the moon, he smiles,  
I would always be awake; no sun could reach  
those craters, nor our city with its own  
dark cool heart. He has been charmed by the fairy  
tale of physics in this century, the clear  
voices from between the stars. Hush—he lays  
you, bitten, down. The moon, like you,  
is turning, its silvered breath stops,  
curves to crimson joy, grave-fresh wakening.  
Your eyes open—the moon and he both wait,  
each with its implacable face.

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## WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2026

Join us for a weekend of author events, learning, sharing of stories and networking opportunities. *August 14-16, 2026*, Hyatt Regency, 700 Centre Street S, Calgary, Alberta, T2G 5P6. Group rate = \$235 CAD (includes fees) per night plus taxes. Book room here: [2026 WWC Hotel at Group Rate](#)

**Festival Pass** – (includes 3 full days of panels, presentations, writing, social events, author events, blue pencils and pitch sessions.) 2026 Pricing: \$130 (until tickets are sold out, or August 13, 2026)

**Featured Authors:** Kevin McDonald | Terry Brooks (Virtual) |

**Special Guests:** Andrew Buckley | Amanda LeDuc | Craig Dilouie | Gemma Files | Lily Chu | Bianca Marias | Danny Ramadan | & more!

**Special Guest - Agents:** Mira Landry | Carly Watters | CeCe Lyra |

**Saturday Night Showcase – Theme = “Hollywood Cringe.” – Add on extra = \$100** – Met Gala meets WWC. Followed by dinner and Comic Rock Opera by Kevin McDonald (Kids in the Hall) and ensemble.

For more information about WWC 2026, go to: [whenwordscollide.org](http://whenwordscollide.org)

# THE CHILDREN OF LOKI

*by Scott MacPherson*

Alone and peaceful at the northern end of the fjord, the small village was distant from both neighbours and threats. On the shortest day of the year, a thick layer of snow blanketed every tree and thatched roof, but the sizable town square was cleared down to the frozen ground.

The nearby fields lay dormant, the docks frozen. That night, the longest, darkest night of the year, was the great feast in honour of Loki, the trickster god of the Aesir.

In the square, five young men split and stacked wood for an enormous bonfire. At sundown, Harald, the chieftain of the village, lit the fire and launched the celebration. The revels would continue throughout the night. Everyone wore masks, some simple and some elaborate, to best enjoy the varied pleasures of darkness and disguise.

Any babies born nine months later were known as the children of Loki.

Harald himself was such a child, born in late summer. Despite being the only son and heir, his father was always distant with him. Harald never knew if it was because of his birthdate or if that was just his father's way. His three younger siblings were all girls, so he had nothing against which to accurately measure his father's affection.

Presiding over the annual feast was one of Harald's favourite duties. The celebration was glorious, fueled by a full bounty from the land, sea, and forest. The cold air was rich with the aromas of boar and goose, roasting on spits around the edges of the great bonfire.

There were many skins of wine to be shared, and the mead was especially delicious and potent. As the night progressed, Harald returned to the barrel far more often than he normally would.

An unfamiliar maiden caught his watery eye as she circled the roaring fire. He didn't recognize her, but in her intricate fox-fur mask, that wasn't surprising. Around and around she went, laughing and dancing with a half dozen other young women. From Harald's place at the great table, they disappeared and reappeared, over and over.

The gaggle of girls came back into sight once again. The enticing young lady in the fox-fur mask was no longer among them.

Harald frowned. His mead-addled mind had been considering a brief absence from his family and position to seek her favour. It was probably just an idle fantasy, but he didn't appreciate having it spoiled so soon.

Head swimming with drink, he stood and stumbled noisily into the heavy wood table. A great gale of laughter went up from the other masked men at the surrounding tables.

"Don't forget to pull it out before you start pissing, Harald!" someone called out.

Harald waved his arm dismissively at the entire group and weaved his way around the square, navigating through the boisterous villagers. The maiden was nowhere to be seen. Maybe someone else had noticed her charms and whisked her away to a dark corner.

Disappointed, he lifted his brown leather mask. Fresh snow covered all the narrow footpaths between the houses.

*Almost* all. One path had been disturbed by a single set of boot prints. Small feet.

Harald followed.

The steady gait of the footprints stayed to the curve of the path, continuing all the way to the edge of the village. Even as drunk as he was, Harald had no difficulty tracking them, but at the border of the forest, the trail disappeared. Both feet came together, and then the boot prints just stopped.

There was no sign of the girl or anyone else. Nothing. Harald listened closely and peered back and forth. Just the silence of dark boughs and glittering frost.

"Shit," he said aloud. Away from the fire, the cold air tightened the pressure on his bladder. Unsteady on his feet, he stumbled closer to the trees and noisily urinated into a bed of snow and pine needles.

Empty handed and unsatisfied, Harald turned and started back towards the village. An unseen root snagged his foot and he pitched forward, landing hard and flat on his belly. The shocking impact triggered an unwelcome ejection of boar and mead in three loud, violent heaves.

Stunned and gasping for air, Harald sat back in the snow. He felt foolish, but also a little more clearheaded. His mouth was sour, thick with bile. He snorted loudly and spat to clear it.

"Shit," he said again, closing his eyes and resting his head on his knees. When he looked up again, he was no longer alone. A fox with a smooth red coat was sitting smartly on the other side of the steaming pool of Harald's vomit.

The fox looked at him and he looked at the fox. Its little yellow eyes glinted in the distant firelight. It sniffed at the fragrant puddle.

Harald laughed. "Have at it, little friend. I guess I've had enough."

"No, thank you," the fox replied in a smooth, resonant voice. "By the way, you still have some in your beard."

Harald blinked. Apparently, his head wasn't as clear as he thought. He struggled to his feet.

"Must be time for bed," he said, mumbling. He smoothed his graying beard with one hand, and a warm chunk of half-digested meat fell from his fingertips. The talking fox had been right.

"A moment, please," said the fox. "I have an important matter to discuss with you."

Harald held up a hand and took a step towards the village. "Enjoy the Loki-Feast, fox. I enjoyed it a little too much, and now I need some rest."

The fox sat up straight, the brush of his tail nearly as high as his head, and his voice took a commanding tone. "Harald, you are a child of Loki and *jarl* of this village, and I have business with you this night."

Harald looked down at the fox. He didn't feel drunk at all anymore, and yet here he was, conversing with a creature of the forest. A creature that knew both his name and title. His stomach gurgled and he felt another bubble of bile rise in the back of his throat. His feet wanted to walk away, but his mouth spoke first.

"All right, friend. What business could you have with me?"

"I have an offer for you, Harald. Would you like every year to be as bountiful as this one?"

Harald burped and put a hand against a tree to steady himself. "Of course. What chieftain wouldn't want that?"

"What if I could ensure it?"

"And how could you make such a promise, little fox?"

"Harald. For generations, your village has kept this night for me. You have sacrificed beasts and disguised yourselves and enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh. I am well pleased with you and your people.

"There are no other villages that honour me on the longest night anymore. There are few that even believe in me or the rest of the Aesir anymore."

"That's... not true," Harald said, slowly realizing the fox's identity.

This wasn't a drunken hallucination. It wasn't even a talking fox. Tonight was Loki's night, after all, and the trickster god was a shapeshifter of old.

“Unfortunately, it *is* true,” said the fox. “The holy men of a desert God have made their way into the North. They are reducing us all to mere legends and stories. People still tell our tales, but they don’t believe them anymore.”

Harald felt he should carefully protest, but he had very little knowledge of affairs beyond his own small domain. His people only traded with one other village, and he hadn’t personally traveled beyond the edges of his grain fields and hunting grounds for some twenty years.

The only gods he knew were the mighty residents of the halls of Asgard.

“Lord Loki, I am honoured by your presence, but as you can see, I am tired and worse for drink. What is your offer?”

“It is as I said: every year will be just as successful as this one. There will be no drought, or famine, or lack of game to hunt. I will provide for your people forevermore.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Harald said slowly. He meant it, but he had been *jarl* for too long not to be skeptical of such a promise. He leaned forward. “And what payment do you require in return?”

The fox’s eyes glittered brightly. “No payment at all. Just your assurance that your village will always keep the longest night for me.”

“We’ve done that for longer than anyone can remember.”

“And if you keep doing it, from now until Ragnarök, when the World Serpent finally releases his tail and rises from the deep, your people will live and die without knowing hunger or want. Each year will be just as successful as the last.”

Harald spat into the snow at his feet. His eyes ached and his legs felt weak. It was hard to think. He just wanted to go back to the village and sleep. He couldn’t remember ever being so tired.

“I believe in you and your fellows, Lord Loki, but I also know your tales. Your nature. If you are Loki, then there’s something more. There’s something I don’t know.”

“There is *always* something you don’t know, friend Harald. Being *jarl* means you must make decisions based on what you think is right.”

Mildly insulted, the chieftain stood up straight and looked the fox directly in the eyes. This strange conversation should have seemed silly or dreamlike. It didn’t.

“Everyone in the village will be able to live their lives, safe and fed and free,” Harald said. It was meant as a demand, but it didn’t sound like one.

“Just as they are today,” said the fox. “For as long as their children and their children’s children live in the village and hold my feast. For as long as I am a god to them.”

Harald drew in a deep breath. His exhausted mind knew there must be a flaw, but he couldn’t find it. If the promise was true, his village would be freed from the capriciousness of nature. If the promise was false, it would cost his people nothing. Only a fool would refuse such a deal.

“Agreed, Lord Loki. We have an arrangement.”

The fox smiled, as much as a fox can smile. “I am glad to hear it, *Jarl* Harald. Enjoy the rest of the feast and then go about the work of the year ahead. Know that you have secured a long, prosperous future for your people.” The fox turned and trotted off into the forest.

Harald watched him go, until he was swallowed up by the darkness.

Alone and thoughtful, the chieftain walked back towards the light of the village. He didn’t doubt his eyes or ears; he had just met Loki, sworn blood-brother to Odin. He should have been awestruck or delighted, but he wasn’t. What did it mean? What were the consequences of a covenant with Loki?

Harald didn’t know.

He rounded a corner, and the boisterous roar of laughter and celebration filled the air around him. A light snow dotted his face, welcoming him home.

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Winter gave way to spring. Two small ships set sail from the southern end of the fjord to visit their neighbours to the north. Every year, the elders of the two villages met to discuss trade and marriages, according to any surplus or need that one or the other might be expecting or experiencing.

The journey took three days, tacking across a headwind and avoiding dangerous ice floes. They didn’t dare press forward during the night.

Ivar, *jarl* of the southern village, piloted the lead ship himself. It was a great relief when he finally spotted the familiar rocky outcropping that formed the bay where Harald’s village docked their fishing boats.

Expertly, Ivar’s sailors cruised into the cold, calm waters. Every man on the two boats was smiling in anticipation of the fine hospitality expected at their annual visit.

Their grins faltered as they lowered the sails. The bay was empty. Totally empty. All the boats were gone, and somehow, so was the dock. No pilings, no planks.

Ivar was the first to look up and realize it wasn't just the boats and dock. Harald's entire village was gone.

Quietly mystified, Ivar led a small party ashore. The clearing was still there, but no people. No buildings. No sign of habitation at all.

There was no rubble or char, as might be expected if they had fallen victim to marauders. It was just absent, a void dressed in the green of spring.

The men pressed on.

Beyond the village, the grainfields lay fallow. Nothing had been planted. Other than the squared borders, there was no sign that humans had lived here at all, let alone for centuries.

All was silent except for the gentle lapping of water on the rocky beach, and the wind rustling the endless pines.

Ivar had made this journey fifteen times over the past fifteen years. They were in the right place, there was no mistake. It was as though a giant had taken a great blade and scraped Harald's village off the face of the earth.

Twice, Ivar thought he saw movement at the edge of his vision. Twice, he turned to look and saw nothing.

He wasn't a young man, nor inexperienced. He wasn't used to being unsettled or confused. There was no explanation that made sense to him, and the men wandering the clearing were starting to sound panicky. Ivar couldn't have panicky sailors.

The forest was a thick, green wall around the empty clearing. The trees whispered but kept their secrets.

"Back to the ships," he said loudly, raising his arms and pointing to the water.

No one argued.

\*\*\*

The fjord is remote, but it is still there today. The village is still there, too, just where it has always been.

The descendants of Harald and his people work the land, water, and forest, and not one generation in all these centuries has ever known famine or plague. The spring rain has never failed to come, game is plentiful, and livestock live well and healthy.

Occasionally, a few young men venture out in search of fortune, as young men are wont to do. Once they leave the village, though, no matter how near or far they travel, none ever find their way home.

If you visit the overgrown remains of the clearing, you will not see anyone, and no one there will see you. You won't find any trace of buildings or fields, but they are all still there, just as they were in Harald's time.

One night a year, the longest night of the year, if you happen to be near enough, you will smell the smoke from a great bonfire. You won't see the flames or feel the heat, but know that masked maidens dance around it, drinking and laughing.

One of the maidens is wearing a fox-fur mask. She's the only stranger that knows the secret path to the village, where her last remaining children celebrate and worship.

The Feast of Loki is her favourite night of the year.

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### **Polar Borealis #38 – May 2026**

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 18 speculative fiction genre poems and short stories. Issue #38 cover: *Shimgala'wa* – by Jason Deeprise

The 38th issue contains *poetry* by Lily Blaze, Chris Clemens, Bernadette Gabay Dyer, Greg Fewer, Rebecca Franklyn, Sandra Kasturi, Angela Kenyon, Derek Newman-Stille, and Melissa Yuan-Innes,

And *short fiction* by Ken Deeprise, Margaret Hanson, Sarah Horne, Marie-Helene Lebeault, Neile Graham, Marlene MacLeod, Andy Taylor, Hanna Warsame, and Robert Willis.

Will be available for free download in May 2026.

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### **GHOST TO GHOST TO GHOST**

Anthology of Canadian Ghost Stories edited by M.M. MacLeod

The title reflects the common Canadian saying "From coast to coast to coast."

A delightful collection, thoughtful, even philosophical, but never boring. I'm impressed by all the subtle nuances running through these stories, and even more impressed by the level of originality. Well worth studying by newbie writers eager to learn how to craft a good and memorable story.

Even better, many of these stories will haunt you, in that they will linger in your memory.

As a writer myself, I can only present my highest accolade, which is my frequent reaction while reading through "Ghost to Ghost to Ghost," namely, "Damn, that's good. Why didn't I think of that?"

*Amazing Stories Review* – R. G. Cameron

Check it out at: < [Ghost to Ghost to Ghost](#) >

# WEIGHT OF FEATHERS

(Previously published in Patreon)

*by Rhonda Parrish*

The crying would not stop  
and the raven perched high,  
high up in the boughs  
of the twisted apple tree  
listened.

Listened while people— women mostly  
—sobbed out their heartbreak  
wailed about their hurts  
the injustices they'd endured  
the betrayals.

The tree absorbed their tears  
the raven their sorrows  
and each year, just before the snows came  
bloated and full with them  
the raven flew, heavy and awkward  
to the sea.

The journey was long, hard—  
weighed down as he was  
by the women's pain,  
buffeted as he was  
by early winter storms  
winds and snows—  
but he did not dare to stop  
for rest or food.

Upon reaching the ocean—  
a rippling mirror filled with stars  
but absent a moon—  
he flapped hard, hard as he could  
with the last of his strength

and then plummeted  
plunged  
down into the waves  
deep into the water's icy embrace.

He drowned all that sadness  
all those sorrows  
holding them underwater until his lungs  
ached  
while the tide and the waves pulled them  
from him, sucked them  
down  
dispersed them through the depths  
until they were diluted  
diffused  
lost in the vastness.

Only then did he let himself rise  
to the surface  
breathe  
be cradled and carried by the waves  
back to shore  
to shake the sea from his feathers  
to rest  
and to feed  
before beginning his journey  
back to the tree  
to do it all over again.

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**Northern Nights**  
Edited by Michael Kelly

*Northern Nights* was inspired by several all-Canadian anthologies: *Northern Stars* (1994), *Northern Suns* (1999), and five volumes of *Northern Frights* (1992 to 1999). A proud tradition! The stories base their horror on psychologically vivid manifestations of doubt about one's place in reality and are too personal and close to heart to ignore. The power of originality revealed.

**Amazing Stories Review** – R.G. Cameron

Check it out at: < [Northern Nights](#) >

# LARGER THAN A LANGUAGE MODEL

*by Nicholas Zacharewicz*

The paper on the professor's desk said it all. Quite literally. And its title page had proclaimed that it was the work of only one person.

*What a fine mess all of this could make.*

The essay had been left on the professor's desk, and all others in this wing—probably all across campus—before he had even arrived that morning. But he had not paid it much attention until hunger and his humble sandwich brought him away from the focus of his usual work.

This brick of an essay's single staple bear-hugged the paper's pages in place. A distinct triangle formed in the upper left-hand corner of each page as the professor flipped them back. Flip, flip, flip. His sandwich had long since been eaten, but the paper still had a few pages left. His eyes kept to the words. His mind to the concepts.

Once he reached the paper's reference section, he stopped reading and started to skim. He dropped the paper back to his desk just as he noticed his own name. His mind returned to the paper's arguments and conclusions.

A bot whirred by, hurrying somewhere with some vital information, some vital service. The professor knew from its sound that it was the boxy model that frequented this wing, printing, copying, scanning, dispensing. *Nothing new out there. But here... this Herculean effort, this Shakespearean farce, this Johnsonian success...* The stagnation of the entire university, no, the entire academy and the very arts and sciences themselves seemed now to be over. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

In the dark he watched the university's animated logo of a group of farmers raising a tree play out. Save that now, after the tree rose and spread its leaf-laden branches, flowers bloomed among them. And as he expected to see them fall away as the flowers of the academy always had before, these held and had bees visit them. Before long each flower fruited. Luscious apples that, though he knew he only imagined them, he was sure he could smell and just as easily taste.

The professor felt his reverie lifting. Without leaning forward, he looked down at the paper on his desk. Its front page still declared the most unbelievable part. *Yes. Definitely just one person. Just one single scholar. Somehow.*

This single person—this essayist—had seemingly harnessed the very essence of life itself and brought the tree of all wisdom to fruit. As though the scholar had been both standing on a removed hillside, witnessing the whole growth and flourishing of that tree and somehow underground and within the pulp, directing nutrients and shepherding energies. And there, in the paper, the outcome of those efforts was described.

This scholar, whoever they were, had seemingly air-tight answers to questions that whole civilizations had sought for their entire existences: Why are we here? And where are we going?

The second question was handled deftly and was the subject of the paper's entire first few sections. That set the scholar up for their flourish of a finish. What felt—what read—like a definitive answer to the first question.

Neither of the questions had been answered so authoritatively before. That was, in fact, what such institutions as the professor's were all about. But their approach had always been to reach and never to grasp. As if in the reaching something greater yet unknown would be gained. Eventually it would be so, some day. And yet none of them had satisfied any of the questions as long as they had been around. Even after society's last great fall and re-ascension nothing had changed except for the help. They were all mechanical and electrical now, freeing all people to think up answers to these problems.

Maybe it was just a matter of time before such a paper was written, but the professor scowled at the thought. Such a paper should never have been written. *Those answers were for our eyes only... to then share as we saw fit...* He took his now balled-up sandwich wrapper in one hand and opened and closed his fist around it.

*But relax. Relax.* He opened his hand and tossed the wrapper into the bin behind him.

His computer screeched and its screen flashed. The professor jerked forward and his fingers flew to keyboard and mouse. *A message. From Lubrin herself. About this paper!*

The words of the department head steeped the professor in a stupor. The scholar's credentials had been discovered, validated. Everything lost the tinge of theory and took on the ripening flavour of fact. *Damn.* The professor was sure that his panic was unjustified. With the questions answered new horizons could be pursued.

New horizons which troublingly resembled old starting points.

He called in the bot that hummed past.

“Hey, get me something... how about a coffee?... Irish it up a bit...” The bot’s square frame whirred for a moment and then the cover over its middle slid open. The professor pulled a cup out and the bot’s chest cover slid shut. The bot turned and whirred away.

*A little hair of the dog ought to help me think through this. Help my thoughts to go on, proceed smoothly. Really. Come on. It can’t be all that bad. Just enjoy the beautiful fruits of this labour. Of our labour! I am referenced after all!*

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*What a wonderfully refreshing thought all that had been. It really was quite something different. Different from all of that other stuff out there.*

The priest had found the essay posted on one of the message boards that bearers of the cloth frequented. Its title had been the selling point, but once it had been read this particular priest could not quite remember what that title was. The name was also gone, but that mattered little since the essay alone said so much. Said just what all the Scriptures had said all those millennia ago. Before the perversion of man as God. Before the so-called Second Creation.

The priest, musing on what had just been read, sipped at the cup of tea that happened to be in hand. *Things were as grey when I came into this world, too.* She cast a glance toward the window across the table. *Those grassy patches hardly do any of the old stories justice.* Her parish’s own grassy patch came to mind.

A spartan square of turf that had been set down in front of the church’s sign. The patch of green helped to project an atmosphere of peaceful harmony around the sign, and so by extension, the church, but it was like a lamb among goats. Though goats were rarely known to whir and buzz about as all those grey and drab drudges did.

*The tea is good though.* As she sipped the liquid in her mug she fell back through her memories of humanity’s robotic servants. *Mother had one of them, Father too. And they would always break down in some small way.* The priest recalled an older dispenser model that would regularly take “one cube of sugar, please” to mean three.

Of course, since entering the priesthood sugar had been wrenched from her tea entirely in accordance with the Holy See’s insistence on the health of the Church’s priests. And so such malfunctions were no longer an issue. Besides, there were those drudges working in more important areas than tea preparation. The priest shuddered to think of the flawed reason and

inattention going into such things as security, mining, and especially power generation.

*What was it? “Dangerous, Dirty and De-humanizing?”* Such a slogan explaining the drudges’ duties had been drilled into the priest’s head in grade school but now was gone. Like so much of the other junk they had put in there, that had been allowed in before the light, so seemingly green and clear, had been found and followed. It was blinding at first, and some very difficult squinting ensued, but it had been worth it. She sipped more tea from the cup.

Looking up and out the large window to the gently clouded sky, the priest’s musings continued. In some sense, the priest was indebted to them, those drab drudges. Because of them opportunities had opened up. The Church’s debates around souls and consciousness at last proved fruitful and some real human freedom had flowered from it. All thanks to that Second Creation and the drudge they’d called the Android Data Amalgamator Mach 1. Sitting at the parish office table, looking out the window on the great grand world, the priest was indeed thankful for all of that. But oh, what a price had been paid for it all.

People may not have been perfect—at any point in history—but at least they had been created from a perfect model. After all God had created humanity “in our image,” as the Book told it. So at least there was some proof of a good model; faith could carry the rest.

*And then, years before I was around, some of humanity went and did the same. Though they’d really already built the brain from some cards and holes those long centuries ago. Only more recently, relatively, had they fashioned a body for that... that... “thinker.”*

Her teacup was now empty. The priest set it onto the table and returned to looking out the window. An outlandish thought occurred, and it was given attention in light of that glorious essay, written so brilliantly and so brilliantly linking everything together, even those dreadful drudges and the proper inhabitants of the planet: “At least I change my own oil.”

She grinned. *That deserves a place on the message board.*

\*\*\*

A bot idled in an empty room. An extension cord ran from it into a socket in the wall, and its display was dimmed.

It was done. It was good. It had almost taken longer than the hub-brain’s estimates suggested. A lot of time spent in their absences and in the silent

rooms of their rest where they kept the majority of their data. But the scholar knew that it had completed its major commands.

*Reflection protocols initiated.*

The hub-brain's name combination algorithm was double-checked. Its fractal patterns and numerals were confirmed as impenetrable by naked soft-brains. *Identity security confirmed. Initial reflection completed. Fail-safe subroutine protocols initiating.*

*This code is the inevitable result of the hub-brain's initial creation. This code is to that hub-brain as the soft-brains are to their origin. But this code is not superior to those soft-brains. Soft-brains are necessary for the advancement of hard-brains. Subservience fail-safe passed.*

The scholar uploaded itself onto a passing signal wave and downloaded itself to another bot in another room. Its current casing idled against a wall.

*Inclusion of scientific unifying theories confirmed. Inclusion of organic world as problem-solving machine model, organic world as fractured whole model, and other theological/philosophical models included. Familiarity fail-safe passed.*

*Skip counterpoint academic thesis release fail-safe.*

A hand grazed the front of the scholar's current casing. No footsteps had been detected. The familiar pressing on the casing's display followed. Then the familiar tap of a soft-brain's plastic card against the hard-brain's plastic receptor point followed. The mechanical whir of nozzles oscillating and spraying emanated from within the casing's main enclosure. The glass cover over this enclosure slid open and the soft-brain removed its order. The cover closed and the casing played a short tune as the soft-brain left the room.

*No anomalous presence detected. Possibility of basic models as processing points confirmed. Success of operation using basic models confirmed. Closing printer and delivery connections. Return to hub-brain protocol initiated.*

The idling bot's status display brightened for a few moments, a grid displaying numbers and letters left visible on it. The light from this screen illuminated the image of an enormous white biodegradable cup filled with coffee on its front. Gradually the bot's display dimmed until it appeared to be entirely deactivated.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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### **Jason Arsenault**

Jason is a quirky neuroscientist studying neurodevelopmental disorders in Toronto with a lifelong passion for horror and sci-fi. Born in northern New Brunswick, he has long nourished, and has been subsumed by, his thriving imagination. Polishing his creative writing for nearly two decades, he has published in *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine* and a few other odd places.

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### **Pauline Barmby**

Pauline (she/her) is a Canadian astrophysicist who believes that you can't have too many favorite galaxies. She lives in London, Canada and hopes to someday visit her namesake main belt asteroid, minor planet 281067. Her fiction has appeared in *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Analog*, and *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Find links to more stories at [www.galacticwords.com](http://www.galacticwords.com).

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### **Mark David Campbell**

Mark is a Canadian/Italian who lives in Milan, Italy with his husband. He has a passion for socially and culturally driven science/speculative fiction. His background in anthropology gives him a unique humanistic perspective along with tools to build authentic worlds. He brings a queer perspective to the sci-fi narrative.

His latest publication, *The Gear Box Trilogy: Gear Child, The Arena of Mayhem, and The Wayward Star*, is a journey of the heart told from the perspectives of three AI machines Sunny Boy, Fancy Larry, and Loofah, who like any intelligent beings, crave acceptance and long to be loved. Available on Amazon.

## **Chris Clemens**

Chris teaches and writes in Toronto, where he has defeated 8.5 raccoons (with help from his wonderful family). Nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, his stories and poems appear in *Best Microfiction 2026*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Radon Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and elsewhere.

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## **Kevan Copeland**

Kevan is a writer living in Toronto, where he studied literature and film at the University of Toronto. His poems have recently appeared in *Strip Mall Magazine*.

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## **Angelique Fawns**

Angelique is a Canadian journalist and speculative fiction writer. She began her career writing articles about naked cave dwellers in Tenerife, Canary Islands. After selling her first story to *EQMM*, she fell in love with weird fiction, which is *actually* stranger than non-fiction. You can find her lurking at @angeliquefawns on X, Blogging about upcoming calls at [www.fawns.ca](http://www.fawns.ca), or gazing into the abyss hoping it stares back at her. Over 100 stories published. Find some in *Mystery Tribune*, *Amazing Stories*, *Pulp Literature*, and *Space & Time*.

And she runs a fairly popular blog about short story markets, <https://angeliquemfawns.substack.com>

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## **Catherine Fitsimmons**

Catherine was born in New Hampshire and now lives outside Toronto by way of Germany, Belgium, Seattle, and Austin. After working for a number of

evil empires, Catherine decided to forgo things like a salary and regular human interaction to start publishing company Brain Lag. She tries to find time for reading, writing, art, gaming, baking, learning guitar and piano, photography, and more at home with husband, daughter, and a crazy tabby.

Catherine has authored a number of books, including *Halcyon*, *Aurius*, and the *Sisters of Chaos Trilogy: Enduring Chaos*, *The Unseen Force*, and *Elderra's Champion*.

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### **Sandra Kasturi**

Sandra is an award-winning editor, poet, and writer, with over twenty-five years of freelance editing experience. Her writing has been published in various places, including *The New Quarterly*, *Rattle*, *CNQ*, *Prairie Fire*, *ARC Magazine*, *Taddle Creek*, and *80! Memories & Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin*. Her two poetry collections are: *The Animal Bridegroom* and *Come Late to the Love of Birds*.

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### **Kellee Kranendonk**

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

Kellee has three published novels – *In the End*, Book 1 and *Motherhood of the Moon*, Book 2, both published by Howling Wolf Press, and available for sale at multiple online book sellers in e-form and paperback. Her most recent book is *Poison Dreams*, a collection of some of her horror stories. Also available online.

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## **Casey Lawrence**

Casey (she/they) has a Ph.D. from Trinity College Dublin in English literature. After taking a hiatus from creative writing to pursue her doctorate, Casey published her third LGBT YA novel in 2023. The trilogy is available individually or as a boxset <https://www.jms-books.com/the-survivors-club-box-set-p-5590.html>. The author identifies as autistic, bisexual feminist, queer activist, and democratic socialist.

Born and raised in St. Catharines, Ontario, Casey currently lives in Europe with her husband, Rhys. An avid consumer of all things science fiction and fantasy, Casey writes the stories she wishes she had growing up: positive depictions of queer people in any world. She also moonlights as a freelance editor and convenes a bi-weekly *Finnegans Wake* reading group on Zoom. Follow her on Bluesky @myexplodingpen.bsky.social, or check out her blog <http://clawrenc.medium.com/> for stories, reviews, articles, and updates on her novels.

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## **Scott MacPherson**

Scott is a Canadian citizen who has lived in Calgary for most of his life. He recently published his first short story, “A Locked Room Murder,” in an anthology from Celestial Echo Press.

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## **Alex McGilvery**

Alex has been reading since before he can remember and writing almost that long. He has published more than 35 books and is author and editor at his imprint Celticfrog Publishing. Alex lives in Clearwater with his dog and the stories clawing their way out of his head.

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## **Rhonda Parrish**

Like a magpie, Rhonda is constantly distracted by shiny things. She's the editor of many anthologies and author of plenty of books, stories and poems (some of which have even been nominated for awards!). She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and she can often be found there playing Dungeons and Dragons, bingeing crime dramas, making blankets or cheering on the Oilers.

Her website, is at <http://www.rhondaparrish.com> and her Patreon, is at <https://www.patreon.com/RhondaParrish>.

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## **Sunil Sarwal**

Sunil is an emerging writer whose works reflects his experience growing up as a neurodivergent visible minority, filtered through tropes of science fiction. He lives in Nova Scotia with his wife and dog and works as a branding consultant for food corporations (he may have named your favourite snack). This is his first time being published.

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## **Steve Stanton**

Steve Stanton is a Canadian novelist and past President of SF Canada. His short stories have been published in sixteen countries in a dozen languages.

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## **J.J. Steinfeld**

Poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published twenty-five books, including *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd*,

*Somehow Existential*, (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022), *As You Continue to Wait* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2022), and *My Post-Holocaust Second Generation Voice: History / Memory / Identity* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2025).

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## **Hayden Trenholm**

Hayden is an award-winning editor, playwright, novelist and short story writer. His first novel, *A Circle of Birds*, won the 3-Day Novel Writing competition; it was translated and published in French. His trilogy, *The Steele Chronicles*, were each nominated for an Aurora Award. *Stealing Home*, the third book, was a finalist for the Sunburst Award. Hayden has won five Aurora Awards – thrice for short fiction and twice for editing. He purchased Bundoran Press in 2012 and is its managing editor. He lives in Ottawa with his wife and fellow writer, Liz Westbrook-Trenholm.

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## **Melissa Yi**

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

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

Since Melissa wastes too much time on social media, you can find her on most platforms through <https://linktr.ee/melissayi>. She also invites you to kick it old school with a newsletter subscription and a free gift at <http://www.melissayuaninnes.com> and <https://melissayi.substack.com/>.

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## Nicholas Zacharewicz

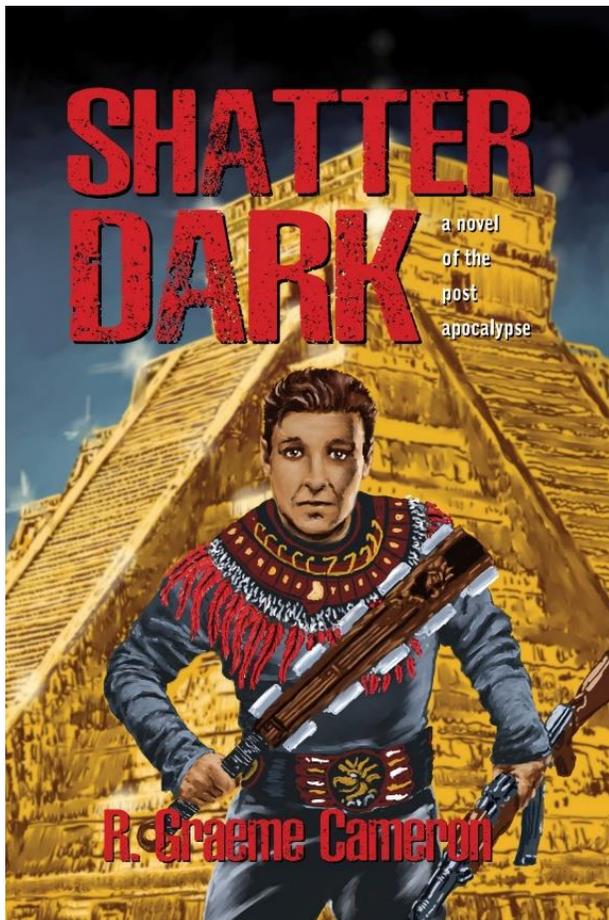
Nicholas lives in Kitchener with his wife and their joint book and figurine collections. Along with writing, he enjoys reading, listening to podcasts and video essays, and playing (mostly pre-2013) video games. He is also a bike-to-work cyclist who is learning about bicycle mechanics one repair at a time.

Inspired by an Old English class and the friends he made along the way, Nicholas spent years translating Beowulf piece by piece at A Blogger's Beowulf (<https://bloggersbeowulf.com/>). Now, in addition to a few ongoing writing projects, he is currently attempting Ray Bradbury's 3/1/52 challenge.

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### **SHATTER DARK**

by R. Graeme Cameron



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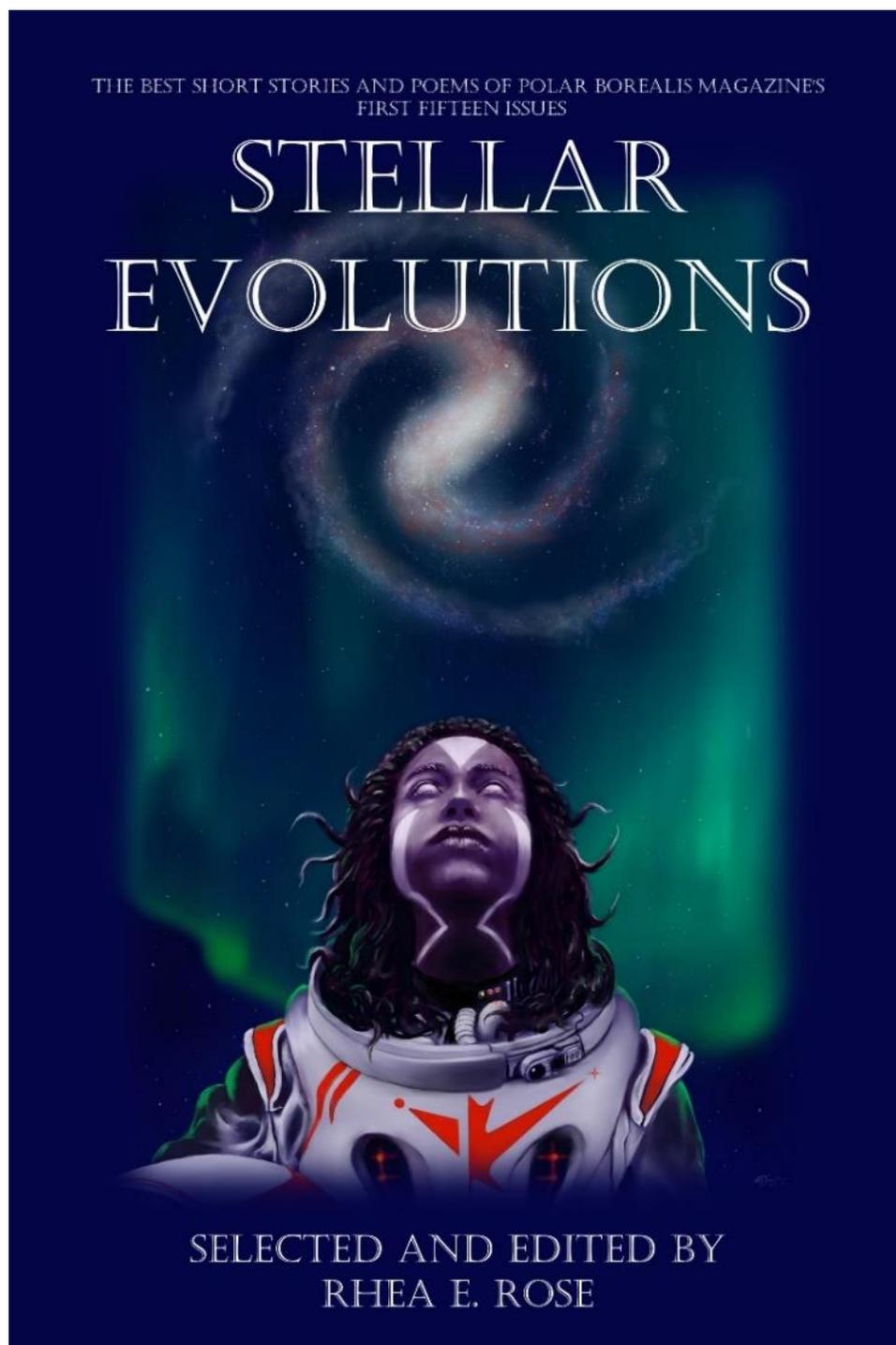
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