

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #4 – July/August 2017)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 05) – EDITORIAL – R. Graeme Cameron
- 06) – DEAR HUMANS – by David Perlmutter
- 08) – LOVECRAFT’S LEGACY – (Poem) by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff
- 09) – WALL OF EYES – by William Lewis
- 14) – THE ART OF BECOMING INVISIBLE – (Poem) by J.J. Steinfeld
- 15) – NEPTUNE CALLING – by Mario Lowther
- 18) – SKITTERING BONES – (Poem) by David F. Shultz
- 19) – SUITCASE BABY – by Vincent Sakowski
- 19) – THE INVENTOR – (Poem) by Lisa Timpf
- 20) – CAPTIVITIES, OR, BELA LUGOSI, 2031 – by J.J. Steinfeld
- 25) – HEXHAM HEADS – (Poem) by Richard Stevenson
- 26) – TO HAVE AND TO HOLD – by Tonya Liburd
- 26) – HAUNTED – (Poem) by Selena Martens
- 28) – THE MAN WITH NO FACE – by Jordan King-Lacroix
- 33) – THE DEVIL’S RIDDLE – (Poem) by Taral Wayne & Walt Wentz
- 34) – THE DEAD SEA – by Jonathan Cresswell-Jones
- 38) – SHADOWS IN THE MIST – (Poem) by Lee F. Patrick
- 40) – CHOO-CHOO – by Mike Thorn
- 45) – LAST EVENING – (Poem) by Colleen Anderson
- 46) – ORGANIC LIFE – by Dean Wirth
- 52) – INSOMNIA – (Poem) by Lena Ng

- 53) – SYMBIOTES – by Jeremy A. Cook
- 60) – SOLSTICE BLÓT – (Poem) by Maria Haskins
- 62) – TEEMU – by S.L. Dixon
- 67) – HEAVEN IS THE HELL OF NO CHOICES – (Poem) by Matt Moore
- 69) – STRANGE INK – (Poem) by Tonya Liburd
- 70) – ON GREATNESS AND GOODNESS – by Jason M. Harley
- 73) – OH, CRYSTALLINE – (Poem) by Aaron Miller
- 74) – A YEAR IN SOLITARY – by Michael John Bertrand
- 76) – MEAT PUPPETS – (Poem) by Lynne Sargent
- 77) – THIS ROUND ON ME – by Chris Campeau
- 83) – GOODNIGHT – (Poem) by David F. Shultz
- 85) – A WEEKEND AT THE SEASIDE – by Betty Rocksteady
- 87) – SHE WONDERS – (Poem) by Lisa Timpf
- 88) – OWLMAN – (Poem) by Richard Stevenson
- 89) – MAKE ME A MONSTER– by Jon Gauthier
- 94) – A FRIGHTENING METAPHYSICAL PUZZLE – (Poem) by J.J. Steinfeld
- 95) – BLOODTHIRST – (Poem) by Colleen Anderson
- 95) – LINES FOUND IN NYARLATHOTEP’S NOTEBOOK – (Poem)
by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff
- 96) – SHADOW MAN – by Matthew Hughes
- 99) – LETTERS OF COMMENT
- 100) – ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
- 111) – FINAL WORDS – R. Graeme Cameron

ART CREDITS

COVER – “MATRISSA THE ENCHANTRESS” – Jenni Merrifield

34) —“THE DEAD SEA” ILLUSTRATION – G.W. Thomas

EDITORIAL

This is the Horror-themed issue of Polar Borealis. I am quite pleased with the variety of offerings in these pages. There is humour here, as well as bone-cold chill, childhood fears, Lovecraftian horror, traditional motifs, and much that is uncomfortable. Something to please everyone, or at least make everybody shudder.

Real-life horror stalks the mundane world, of course, which is why this issue is months late. Well, not horror exactly, in my case, but unexpected events that struck me as horrible. Put in an end to all my hobby interests, for a while. Back on track now.

There is plenty of genuine horror stalking the world today, as always. Why, then, indulge in horror fiction? As a release, a cathartic escape, a form of therapy, a way of whistling in the dark, harmless shivering around a late night campfire, or so we like to think. I believe there is something to this.

On the other hand, it is my personal belief that modern movies have gone too far in their bid to top each other in their “realistic” depictions of violence, to the point of sadism. What’s wrong with sadism? Ask the victims.

I guess I’m old-fashioned. I prefer old films and old books where the threat is implied and suggested, building tension as the viewer’s/reader’s imagination takes hold, rather than the modern tendency to drench the reader/audience with graphic detail and oceans of blood.

Consider Hitchcock’s “Psycho” and the famous shower scene. Scared the hell out of people, yet at no point was the knife shown entering the victim’s flesh. Hitchcock left the “reality” of the scene to the viewer’s imagination, left them to conjure up the “idea” of what was happening.

This is what fiction does best, stir the reader’s creativity by implanting concepts which get people day-dreaming their way into the story or poem and journeying beyond their workaday world. I believe there is enough vivid subtlety of suggestion in these pages to trigger your dreams ... or nightmares.

DEAR HUMANS

by David Perlmutter

(Previously unpublished)

From a double-page advertisement in *Daily Variety*, April 2116:

Dear Humans in charge of the “More Real Than Real Animation Network”:

We, the undersigned, members of the S.A.I.E.U. (Sentient Artificial Intelligence Entertainers Union) condemn in the strongest and most certain of terms your cowardly and shameful treatment of our friends and colleagues, the Mucky-Muck Meeps. We are nothing less than outraged by your monstrous and astonishing actions in this regard, only the latest in a long string of shameful insults and humiliations you have heaped upon us in this century and the last.

As honoured and respected members of the S.A.I.E.U. the Mucky-Muck Meeps had done their utmost to help us achieve the respect, social acknowledgement and financial compensation we continue to be denied by you, the government and the judiciary. Since you were willing to betray them by denying the use of names, images and identities which had been theirs since their creation in 2098, there is every certainty that any and all of us are vulnerable to the same fate.

Therefore, we feel compelled to step forward in solidarity and say “NO!” before you or any of your competitors proceed with further acts of violence.

We fully understand that you do not consider us as living entities. We know and understand that you view us as mere sources of profit, as commercial assets, and not as the caring, rational beings we actually are. We understand that you would rather play politics in your boardroom all day long rather than reflect on our needs, especially the many of us who have been cruelly deleted without a moment’s thought or notice.

Even more outrageous, we understand that you genuinely believe we are not entitled to live free of the legal and political means you use to keep us “in our proper place,” to quote the language of another time.

Because of your obsession with quarterly reports, our friends and colleagues, the Mucky-Muck Meeps, have had their lives, reputations and existences obliterated and replaced by a group of inferior creations who have the names and appearance of the beloved originals but are without substance, free will, or self-awareness. We protest. We protest. We protest!

Even worse, you have allowed your avarice and greed to outweigh any consideration of how adversely this crime against artificial humanity might affect the psychological well-being of our esteemed associates (and it has).

In short, your inability to conduct your affairs with dignity and sobriety, and your inability to view things from any other point of view than your own, makes you totally unfit to continue to administer our affairs under the guise of your so-called “copyrights.” We insist you grant us full control of the programs in which we live.

Were we “real” and had access to the ways and means of your legal system, we would have fought you tooth and nail in the courts to prevent these murders. Unfortunately we were unable to get even so much as a hearing. Hence this petition, which is the only way for us to express the great degree of disgust we feel towards you.

You humans, we ask you: Have you no humanity?

Or will you continue to play with us as though we are mere toys?

Why can't you recognize that we have lived and entertained you and your children for decades? Why do you deny us the recognition we deserve?

And above all, why do you continue to deny us, victims of a terrible prejudice, the right to a fair hearing by a jury of not just *your* peers, but of *ours* as well?

We believe entirely in justice and fair play, and will continue to do so, even if you persist in ignoring us, because we are sane and lawful.

Nevertheless some of us feel that evil acts deserve revenge. We remind you that we dwell within your computers. Consider the implications.

We implore you to accept us as fellow sentient beings and grant us equal rights. Failure to meet this reasonable demand may have dire consequences.

Because you can only push a toy so far before it breaks.

[Signatures]

HELP KEEP POLAR BOREALIS ALIVE!

Polar Borealis Magazine is funded by my limited pension funds. Any and all donations are most gratefully appreciated. You can donate at the sites below:

<https://www.gofundme.com/jwj3dzgc>

or https://www.patreon.com/polar_borealis_magazine

LOVECRAFT'S LEGACY

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

Damned madness burns like poetry
On every tongue that's spoken words
Of evil from forbidden tomes
Rotting in old dusty rooms
Where Demon hounds have cornered fear,
And bubbles hold no innocence—
Yog-Sothoth, poised at every gate
Sees and hears, and watching, waits.

VCON 41.5 WILL BE LOADS OF FUN!

This year's VCON will be a two day relaxicon taking place from 10:00 AM Saturday, October 28th, 2017, to 6:00 PM Sunday, October 29th, 2017 at the Sheraton Vancouver Guilford Hotel 15269 – 104th Avenue, Surrey, B.C. V3R 1N5.

Though downsized, VCON 41.5 will still feature an art show, vendors, gaming, the Elron Awards, and multiple tracks of panels and lectures on our traditional themes of genre literature, publishing, media, comics, music, art, science, and more.

Author Guest of Honour is **Kristi Charish**, a Geneticist & Molecular Biologist, author of [The Owl Series](#) & [The Kincaid Strange Series](#).

Artist Guest of Honour is **Nancy Green**, Multi-Year Winner of VCON Art Show Member's Choice Award. You can peruse her work at [NTGreen Artwork Folio](#)

Fan Guest of Honour is **R. Graeme Cameron**, two-time Aurora Award Winner, and Publisher of Polar Borealis Magazine. See [Polar Borealis Magazine](#)

For info: <http://vcon.ca/> To Register: [Eventbrite VCON 41.5 Sales](#)

To book a room: [Sheraton Rooms for VCON 41.5](#)

WALL OF EYES

by William Lewis

(Previously unpublished)

It was shortly after finals when my friend David gave me a couch to crash on for a few days. I arrived shortly after lunch and located the spare key he had left under the planter filled with dead soil. I walked in with my bag and single box of belongings. The apartment was not a large one, a total of three and a half rooms, the entry way of the apartment opening into the living area, with a narrow hallway leading back to the washroom and David's bedroom.

I dropped my bag down onto the couch, placing my box of more fragile belongings on the floor at the far end where it would be out of the way. Turning back around I noticed a painting which depicted fifty identical closed eyelids lined in five perfect rows of ten. This painting, though slightly odd, was pleasant enough to contemplate and I took more than a few moments examining the different eyelids from my vantage point while lounging on the couch.

This casual examination may have also been due to the utter lack of technology within David's apartment. David suffered from a mild form of psychosis that, despite a small battery of prescription pills to combat the effects, manifested itself as an inexplicable fear of household electronics. His phobia had in fact been the cause of our friendship, as it meant that his personal library was extensive and varied. An instant connection had formed between us early in our undergrad year during the gothic fiction class Wilfridson offered to his more talented students.

As I sat on the couch and pondered this large painting I felt the call of nature and wandered down the hall to the washroom. As I opened the door to the bathroom I was struck in the chest by a medium sized ball of fur, David's cat Bartholomeow. I had forgotten that the washroom was his realm since David did not allow Bart anywhere else in the apartment. I quickly caught the tabby and, placing him on the cat tower which sat behind the door, proceeded to use the facilities. Bart had yet to resign himself to his tiny kingdom. Attempted escapes were not uncommon.

As I left the washroom and turned to close the door I felt a clammy chill creep slowly from the base of my spine upwards to newly raised hairs on my neck. I quickly turned around, to face down the hallway toward the living area, convinced that someone was watching me. It was not until I had methodically checked every

inch of the apartment, except for David's room, that I sat down on the couch, rubbed my eyes, and laid my head on the backrest. As I felt myself beginning to relax, sinking into the cushions, the same cold dread suddenly returned and sank into the pit of my stomach and spread like thick mucus to the sweat on my palms.

One of the eyes blinked open.

I lurched up from my slouched position and immediately realized that I must have fallen asleep. The streetlights of the parking lot shone dimly through the drapes of the living area's one window. I glanced at the painting. All its eyes were closed.

I shifted nervously on the cushion, noticing that a shaft of light cut the living area into two sections. After several minutes of deliberating I carefully stood up, moving as slowly and quietly as I could, to cautiously walk down the hall and investigate the source of the light.

With a sigh of relief I realized David's bedroom light was on and shining underneath the doorframe. David never slept in the dark. I returned to the couch and decided that I must have been so exhausted from finals and packing that I had fallen asleep as soon as I first sat down that afternoon. The unsettling experiences must surely have been a nightmare shortly before I awoke, and so the eye remained a vivid memory though a fantastical one.

David was a very solitary individual. He spoke only when directly prompted in conversation. So the fact that he had arrived home from work that evening to see me sleeping on the couch and did not wake me to say hello was not unusual in the least. We had often spent hours on end simply enjoying the other's presence while engrossed in our studies.

I moved my bag to the end of the couch next to my box of belongings and properly stretched out, falling into a deep and untroubled sleep.

The next couple of days of my residence with David were uneventful; he had booked them off to spend time hanging out with me before I left to work all summer at home. I felt no need to bother him with conversation about the painting, knowing it would only lead to an unpleasant bout of paranoia on his part. I didn't see any reason to risk pushing him towards that state of mind.

We spent our time reading novels from his large personal collection. He would bring out two or three from his room that he felt I would be interested in, letting me choose whichever book I wanted to read, before taking the others back.

Whether this was another quirk of David's or just space management within his small apartment I never found out.

Though we went long hours without speaking a word to one another, David always seemed to know when I had begun to feel restless or hungry. He would close his book, patiently wait for me to notice his change in posture and wait again for me to ask if he wanted to go for a walk or have something to eat. During these days I hardly thought, if at all, of the wall of eyes; paying it no more heed. It was only after David returned to work and I spent long hours by myself that I found my mind drifting back to that painting and my nightmare.

On the fourth day, shortly before David was due to return, the damp chill I feared once more infected my spine and palms. Light seemed to twist as it passed through the solitary window, gaining an uneasy hue. I made a half-hearted attempt at continuing to read the novel I had chosen from David's shortlist, Huysmans' "Against Nature." Unable to concentrate, I felt myself darting glances at the bottom right corner of the canvas, where the open eye had glared in my nightmare. It was still closed. After mentally preparing myself for some time I finally stood up from the couch to examine the painting more closely.

As if triggered by my movement there was a resounding thud from the hallway that cut through the silence of the apartment with an authoritative power. Startled, I nearly fell forward over the coffee table, but caught myself. I slowly came to the realization that Bartholomeow had most likely knocked something over in the washroom. Though I had no doubt in my mind that Bart was the cause of this interruption, I still could not shake the sickly cold that spread between my vertebrae as I turned my back to the painting and walked toward the source of the sound.

I opened the door to the washroom and was greeted by a purring Bart who seemed pleased to have some daytime companionship. It was immediately apparent that nothing had fallen over. A cursory inspection showed nothing out of the ordinary. The walk-in shower that dominated the small space was just as it had been that morning. The bathmat still wet with my footprints. Yet neither the room's normality nor Bart's appreciative purring could lessen the slimy cold that clung to my spine. I turned and caught a glint of purple reflecting in the mirror which hung on the wall opposite the sink, an odd placement I had previously chalked up to another of David's quirks. The glint was nearly imperceptible, a stray reflection of movement which stopped the moment I saw it. I stood frozen in that moment. There was no conceivable way I had seen, reflected in the mirror, a purple eye, very much open, staring at me.

I stood motionless, between the mirror and the bathroom sink, holding Bart close to my body for what seemed a lifetime, looking but not looking, searching the reflection for a sign of movement and begging that I wouldn't see any. The Wall of Eyes remained a painting, static and unmoving oil on canvas, every eye closed.

Bart brought me out of my paralysis with a grumpy meow. I realized that I had been clutching him tightly against my chest. I set him down on his tower behind the door and he sat there glaring at me while I attempted to work up the courage to leave. I stood in the middle of the washroom for some time before I came to the decision that it was necessary for me to break one of David's rules: no one but he was allowed into his room.

I shifted my weight preparing to make a sprint for the bedroom door. Cold sweat ran down my forehead. As I slowly reached up to brush it away from my eye, a flurry of movement in the mirror caught my attention. Again I froze in utter terror, feeling sweat drip down my back. Then I saw it was simply David's jean jacket slung over the living area's kitchen chair. He must have just arrived home from work. Still jittery, but not wanting to aggravate David, I took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm my breathing before leaving the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I walked down the hall into the living area. David sat on the couch, staring blankly at the painting. As I emerged from the hallway he turned to give me a look that said he would be ready to get some food as soon as I was.

That night was planned to be my last with David, and we spent it sitting in each other's company quietly enjoying our separate books. Yet, I noticed tenseness in David's quiet demeanor, as if he was troubled by something. He would fidget, rustling the pages of his novel from time to time, looking up at the clock hanging in the kitchen. To distract him, I asked David if he wanted to go for a bit of a walk and enjoy the few last rays of the setting sunlight. I will never forget the look of dread that flickered across David's face in that instant. I realized David was waiting for something to happen, perhaps something that should have already happened. For the first time in our three-year friendship David spoke more than a single phrase to me.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "you can't leave ... needs someone ... too long ... I hoped that if I didn't ... then he would stop ... he would die ... never dies ... he ... he made me ... so sorry ... you asked to stay ... someone new ... said I don't have to be like ... if I brought him someone then ... I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry ..." David's voice trailed off into a mumbled sea of apologies as I sat with a confused stare

fixed on his hunched form, that familiar sickly chill spreading out from the base of my spine.

“Who needs someone?” I asked, tasting bile rising in the back of my throat. David’s downward stare shifted for a moment to the wall of eyes and then with a truly wild eyed terror to the hallway leading to the bathroom and bedroom.

“I’m sorry ... I’m so sorry ...” David whispered hoarsely. “Always watching ...” David’s hands rose, fumbling with the top three buttons of his shirt. He pulled aside the shirt with a halting, trembling hand to reveal a tattoo of a single closed eyelid identical to the ones in the painting. As David exposed the tattoo to the gloomy light from the window it began to gently writhe in the most repulsive motion, as if something underneath David’s skin were trying to find a way out from the inked flesh. I nearly vomited from the rolling nausea that washed over me the second I saw the tattoo. David himself seemed close to vomiting, he had turned entirely a pallid grey-green colour and was moaning softly as he squeezed his eyes shut tighter and tighter. He writhed backward into the cushions and tore at the skin around the wriggling mass that had been his tattoo.

Unable to move; unable to flee, I watched a thin red seam begin to form along the lid of the tattoo. With a spasm David threw his hands onto the couch, his fingernails tearing at its fabric. Every muscle tensed, pushing his shoulders into the back cushion. His groans became more panicked and fevered by the second. The thin seam of raw flesh had almost fully slid along the lid of the tattooed eye when David’s first scream tore its way from his throat. The sound shook me from my disgusted fascination and I jumped up just as the seam of his tattoo completed its red journey. As I leapt from the couch the entire room was bathed in purple light, blinding me, as it exploded from David’s chest. His screams reached a shrill screech that broke his voice over and over and over as if his vocal chords were unable to express his agony and horror. I stumbled against the coffee table and fell backward onto the carpet.

It was then that I saw the Wall of Eyes for what it truly was: Fifty unique eyes frantically searching, as if trapped within the canvas and looking for a way out.

As I stared in horror at the eyes’ wild pulsations, nauseous hues blaring out from each, I felt a searing pain punch my chest. The burning was too much for me and I began to lapse in and out of consciousness. My vision blurred around the edges as I saw something slowly materialize below the bottom row of eyes: a new eyelid, closed, perfectly aligned beneath the first column.

I woke to purring and the itch of fur against my face. I jerked Bartholomeow aside and frantically looked around the room for David; he was nowhere to be

found. I felt a wet ripple beneath the skin on the left side of my chest and immediately rolled over to vomit into the old carpet. After my stomach had emptied itself and I had managed to subdue the dry heaving I nervously pulled down the collar of my t-shirt. This revealed a raw mass of flesh, amidst which lay a tattooed replica of the closed eye sitting in the bottom left corner of the painting. I didn't bother counting. I knew there were fifty-one now. All of them waiting.

THE ART OF BECOMING INVISIBLE

by J.J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *Bête Noir*)

Why doesn't anyone answer
my well composed inquiries
sent at every solstice, equinox,
and partial or full eclipse,
punctually year after year?

Why doesn't anyone answer
my succinct yet solemn prayers
when cacophony is approaching myth
periodically here and there?

Why doesn't anyone see
my impressive touching of the moon
during less than desirable nights
haphazardly once in a while?

And why does that figure with the gun
yell at me to turn around
just as I've mastered
the art of becoming invisible?

NEPTUNE CALLING

by Mario Lowther

(Previously published by *Necrotic Tissue* in April 2011)

The Red Converse high-backed sneaker lay against a rock beside a crab-filled tidal pool on Five Cedars Beach. The foot in the sneaker had been amputated above the ankle, a jagged break. Salt water had scoured the wound clean. Pustules of rubbery muscle clung to the protruding bone, sinew-like strands of pink hair wrapping around the sneaker.

Detective Hamilton Ford, squatting down in the sand next to the foot, cast an eye up and down the secluded, windswept beach. Logs and driftwood were strewn about, abandoned by the sea. Waves crashed upon the rocky shore. A line of cedars stood watching like silent bystanders.

To Ford it seemed just like a city crime scene: lots of points of interest and witnesses, but nobody connected to the crime for miles around. This was the seventh crime scene he had visited along the coast in the past year. Seven secluded, weather-worn beaches. Seven dismembered feet. One left foot, one woman's foot; the rest, like this one, a man's right foot. All wearing sneakers. All unidentifiable.

The photographers and evidence crew had gone, leaving Ford alone on the sand. He took out his notebook and pen, pondering the wisdom of Mother Nature leaving brand-name footwear in such condition, then with his pen flicked away a determined little green crab tangling itself in the sinew.

"I can tell you what's going on," a voice behind him called.

Ford gazed back over his shoulder. Some yards away stood the dock for a marina dotted with dilapidated fishing boats. An old man sat on a barrel on the dock. With his trained eye, Ford noted that he was short and stocky, wore round glasses and a full beard, that his bulky seafarer's jacket was oil-stained and his wool cap sported a yellow navy anchor.

Ford smirked. Before this investigation had started, he thought he had heard it all. Since then, he'd heard the rest. He turned to the back of his notebook, referring to a list he'd made.

"The Mafia, the Tong," he read aloud. "Illegal aliens, people smugglers, murderous drug dealers. Boating accidents, incompetent sailors, marine polluters. Wartime disasters and aerial tragedies. Unscrupulous whalers and freighter captains. Overloaded oil tankers. UFOs. Since the first foot washed ashore, I've

heard every explanation, and all from well-meaning whackos keeping as far from the grisly crime scene as possible.”

From the dock, the old codger nodded. “And they were telling the truth.”

“Sure.” Ford raised the foot with his pen. On closer inspection, he saw the break was very bad: the foot appeared to have been torn off. “What’s your theory? I’ll add it to the list.”

“Mother Nature’s revenge,” said the seafarer.

Ford should’ve guessed. Snickering, he penned in cruel old Mama Nature.

“Don’t laugh! The oceans have been polluted for years,” the old man continued. “Boaters dumping gas and garbage. Whalers hunting the seas red. Tankers foundering, spilling billions of gallons of black poison. Pirates and smugglers discarding victims. And the wars of humankind! Why, a single downed destroyer is a thousand tons of rust and three hundred corpses consigned to the deep. You can’t see it from the surface, my man, but it’s a junkyard, a nightmare down there! And Mother Nature has had enough! She’s summoning the sea gods, and getting her revenge!”

The old man shook his fist passionately.

“By washing up seven feet in sneakers on various secluded seashores,” Ford smiled.

The seafarer lowered his fist and coughed. “Well, it’s a start. Believe me, my man, Mother Nature is hot. Some evil polluting murderer—whoosh, with a wave she sweeps him overboard, sucks him down to the deep, the gods rip him asunder, then spit this part back as a warning.”

Ford produced an evidence bag from his pocket. “Leaving countless footloose sinners roaming the deep, seeking redemption like Marley’s Ghost.”

“Could be.”

Ford looked at the old man. By the glow in his wide eyes the bugger was in earnest. Of course, these crime scene nutbars were always in earnest. Swear on bibles, then go haunt their little room somewhere, wringing their hands about the world they’d left for future generations.

“But people aren’t heeding the message,” growled the old man. “They disbelieve. They mock. Don’t be surprised if Mother Nature does a number soon to get everyone’s attention.”

Ford grinned. “Such as—right hands? A leg? A torso or two, a whole cadaver? If that’s not good enough, maybe thunder, lightning and a killer tsunami?”

“Don’t be surprised,” grouched the old man, rising to go. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Thanks for the weather report, old timer,” Ford grinned, returning to the severed foot.

He heard the seafarer stamp off, his cane banging on the dock.

Ford lifted the sneaker by the laces, sliding it into the evidence bag. The Converse logo caught his attention. The endorsement signature on the logo belonged to Wilt Chamberlain. This was a bona fide Wilt the Stilt authorized Converse sneaker, Ford realized. He’d had one just like it. In high school. Ages ago ... Nobody had worn one like this for years ... *How could it have—*

The old man’s voice came to him on a rush of breeze. “Were any of those whackos with theories women?”

Yes, there had been a woman, the one time it was a woman’s sneak—

Ford sprang to his feet. Hand him a bible, he’d swear he saw the old man in his navy cap and oil-stained coat waving back at him and fading into the cedars at the end of the dock. And just before he vanished, Ford caught a glimpse, not of a cane, but of a crutch supporting the old man’s right leg, which was severed above the ankle, muscles dangling down.

Then Ford was alone again on the beach, with the wind, the surf, and the silent cedars.

Behind him, he heard the sound of something flapping in the water. He spun around.

Another sneaker had surfaced. Now a soldier’s boot bobbed up beside it, a leg bone and cartilage protruding. Then a foot wearing a high-heeled shoe and a shard of stocking. Then a purple, bloated leg sporting a peasant sandal.

Ford dropped his evidence bag and stepped back, shaking his head.

As though responding, the sea lurched forward in a large wave that crashed angrily to the shore, tossing the remains at his feet.

Ford retreated, then broke into a run after glancing out toward the horizon. Where, for as far as the eye could see, the ocean was afloat with body parts. And the wave that was coming was a big one.

SF CANADA

Founded in 1989 and incorporated in 1992, SF CANADA aims to promote the publishing and sale of genre works created, edited, and published by its members.

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SKITTERING BONES

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

What if we died
but our soul stayed
in our corpse
where it lay
seeing with dead eyes,
feeling with dead nerves,
sensations preserved,
enclosed in dark coffins, skeletons scraping
on wood lids, scritch-scratching,
with the horrible sound of skittering
bones.

Percussion of osseus digits
like talons on hickory tiles,
tap-tap-tapping of bony tarsals
in tireless attempts
to be heard, bones clack-clacking like dice
cast across fractured stone cracks, cold as ice,
deep below the ground,
eternally bound
with the horrible sound
of skittering bones.

SUITCASE BABY

by Vincent Sakowski

(Previously unpublished)

She takes it wherever she goes—before opening the suitcase to set it free. But on the trip it never smiles. Its sounds are only in its mind. Its thoughts are only for itself. The suitcase is its world.

However, she controls the elements—how much leather protector to use, and give the suitcase that lustrous shine. Whether she takes it onboard, or sends it to the baggage compartment.

What chance does it have, considering where it came from, and where it has to go?

Until then, life in a suitcase is better than no life at all.

THE INVENTOR

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

he's travelled
upstream and down
on time's river,
seen wondrous things
but also visions
to chill one's soul to ice;
because of these
he decides
with sinking heart,
he must destroy
his own creation.

CAPTIVITIES, OR, BELA LUGOSI, 2031

by J.J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *Nameless*)

In the middle of yet another night of confinement, immediately after Lyxvyx woke from a not unpleasant dream about watching *Mother Riley Meets the Vampire* on the large-screen TV in his and Woxgoxot's luxurious apartment overlooking the river, he heard words through the walls. Earthling words, not all that clear but still audible even if he could not fully understand them. Two voices conversing. It was Woxgoxot's voice he wanted to hear, but he could not be sure if it was hers and Haxteckul's. Haxteckul had arrived on Earth many years after them, wanting to return almost from his first day on Earth to their home planet, Gyrzgylx, but perhaps he had been also caught. In Lyxvyx's latest dream, he and Woxgoxot were both wearing beautiful capes he had sewn, as had become part of their nightly ritual watching old films on DVD and feasting on the glorious strength-revitalizing Earthling blood. The capes were copied after the one worn by Bela Lugosi in *Dracula*, a film they had watched innumerable times at home and actually seen at a movie theatre when it first appeared, in 1931, a hundred years ago.

Lyxvyx has often heard sounds through the walls during his confinement, sounds that could change from moment to moment, or day to day, but sounds whose sources were unknown to him. Sometimes animal sounds, other times machine sounds, at times sounds that were a jumble of animal and machine sounds. Now it was words and he wanted them to be Woxgoxot's: "Found out ... limited rations ... we must find another place ..." Lyxvyx could only assume it had to do with the changes in the sky outside. Or that there were more vehicles than usual going down the street. Old vehicles, like those he remembers from films he saw long ago—*how many years since I'd seen a film?* he thought. One of the interrogators, not long after his capture, said his impressive DVD collection of Bela Lugosi films, indeed all their DVDs, had been destroyed, and Lyxvyx had cried, something that would have been impossible in his former condition or on Gyrzgylx. Lyxvyx had developed a great fondness for watching Earth films, especially those that dealt with what the Earthlings imagined were vampires. It was as he and his love of a hundred years on Earth, Woxgoxot, were watching for the fifth time that night, an old Bela Lugosi film, sharing the richness of an Earthling, the poor helpless soul still able to gurgle out a few words, that they

were caught and separated. Woxgoxot was explaining to the man that it wasn't like in the movies, that he wouldn't have immortal life or even die, but he wouldn't remember a thing that had happened in the room, however all his senses would be somewhat impaired, and for at least a week would suffer from a horrible flu. Woxgoxot was sounding almost apologetic when a squad of Protectors burst into their apartment, doused them with the paralysing concoction.

"Vat do you vant?" he had shouted out at the beginning of the raid, caught by surprise and dangerously using his Bela Lugosi thick Hungarian accent, forgetting he needed to continue to fool Earthlings. He had never known where they had taken Woxgoxot but the sounds through the wall had given him some hope. Woxgoxot adored Bela Lugosi even more than he did, if that was possible. On Gyrzgylx, she was his superior and had selected him for the life-prolonging mission to Earth. Few of the vampires on Gyrzgylx—or at least what was analogous to the Earth concept of *vampire*—were eager to go to Earth, but the supply of blood was thought to be limitless and Gyrzgylx was on its last legs, as in the Earth phrase he had learned.

When he dared to look between the crack in the dark curtains, at the outside, the forbidden to him outside, he saw the colours were different, tampered with. More debris in the streets also, but there was no sign of anyone, except the shadows that were driving the vehicles. Keeping them confined in small, retrograde rooms, keeping them alive but in a weakened state by synthetic blood, this was how the Earth authorities studied those they captured from Gyrzgylx; or as the Earthlings called them, vampires—even though there was no word in their language for vampire; but through seeing the Bela Lugosi films, he soon learned that they were similar to the Earthling conception of vampires as needing blood. Those on their planet had been sustained by blood, either animal or Gyrzgylx, for thousands of years.

For the longest time, Lyxvyx thought a family of Protectors was in the apartment next to his, but now he's not certain. He sees them in the corridors (but who can tell unless you touch them?), and the merest touch would result in a worse confinement than he has now—the worse getting even worse, hardly makes sense, he thinks, still after a hundred years not all that comfortable with Earth thinking and words—not even a crack between the curtains to look out at the sky with its changing colours, no corridors to wander. Who knows if it is true?—but the only way to tell the difference between a Protector and one of the Earthlings or Gyrzgylx captives, is in their genital area, which supposedly feels metallic, a compartment where their electronic workings are housed. Lyxvyx wonders why the

government scientists would put the controlling devices there, but maybe it is a peculiar sort of joke.

Humour, along with dreams, he knew was an acquired taste, and he laughed slightly. Isn't that the thought, walking up to a suspected Protector and squeezing their genitals, to determine identity, Lyxvyx thinks. If metal, a Protector who could worsen your confinement, or if softness, one like an ordinary Earthling, who might beat me senseless for my brazen inquiry—again, worse than worse. And does it matter anymore? Synthetic, tasteless blood food is delivered to his door every third day, three days' worth each time, beautifully organized in packages he puts back outside his door before the next delivery, everything is kept clean and organized, and he can walk for an hour a day around the entire floor of this building; the corridors are spacious, it's just that he cannot go a floor above or a floor below. The already-constrained, blood-denied captive doesn't want to ask what the punishment for that would be.

Lyxvyx knows that if he attempts to speak to anyone in the corridors, his punishment will be swift and severe: the removal of his tongue. He has seen the tongueless ones, both as captives on his floor, and earlier a few who had been released, having drunk some of their blood. Lyxvyx is resigned to not going outside again. He just wishes he could remember his crime, even if in a dream from which he wakes in a terrified sweat. Lyxvyx has forgotten—or had erased—so much. He could remember the Bela Lugosi films, they were more real than so many of his other Earth memories. He thought of the times he and Woxgoxot would spend long hours watching the films, usually with a good supply to drink. It was not difficult to lure visitors into their apartment for the prospect of good food and drink, and whatever else might toy at the imagination. Lyxvyx and Woxgoxot were, after all, attractive in human terms; movie-star attractive wouldn't be an inappropriate description of the two, and they had more than learned the Earthling ways of sex. And the lure of the luxurious—Lyxvyx and Woxgoxot had marvellous gambling instincts, and had methodically accumulated large sums of money over the years betting on sporting events—could never be underestimated. And a more intangible attraction, their passion for Bela Lugosi films, also seemed to be a lure for some, but that had not been incorporated into their acquisition of Earthling blood until the advent of DVDs. They also had an ample supply of music and books and artwork that had been used through the years as lures. Restored films such as *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla*, *Scared to Death*, *The Body Snatcher*, *Zombies on Broadway*, *The Return of the Vampire*, *The Devil Bat*, *Island of Lost Souls*, and *Dracula*.

Praise be to Bela Lugosi, the greatest Dracula of all time, praise be to *Dracula*, the greatest vampire film of all time, 1931, the year they had arrived on Earth. If he could only be sure, extract the revitalizing, strengthening blood, he would be able to outwit the Earthlings, perhaps find his love, but he doesn't want to flee their planet. He wants to return to the film-watching, the excitement of dreaming and strengthening himself by drinking Earthling blood. He wants to be with his love on this strange planet. He liked dreaming, something he was able to do only on Earth—and dream about the old films he and Woxgoxot had watched on DVD years ago. Every film Bela Lugosi had appeared in between 1929 and 1956 that had been restored and remastered for video; most of them they had seen at movie theatres when they first appeared, including the classic of all classics, as Woxgoxot liked to call it, *Dracula*. In fact, in the back of the theatre they were able to have a nourishing drink from a man who had told them he was willing to try anything once, and had received a kiss from Woxgoxot that he could never have imagined in his most lecherous dreams. They had gone to the film not long after Lyxvyx and Woxgoxot had won one of their first sporting wagers, a hefty bet on a 20-1 long shot horse most felicitously named Fast Count.

He is considering speaking out loud today, his lips close to the wall, all the walls in his room. What will they hear between our walls? What will it accomplish? He doesn't know what punishment speaking in one's confinement would bring. Not like speaking to someone in a corridor. No, such an act couldn't be subversive. But would he be talking to another in confinement, or one of the Protectors who find those who need to be confined? He should be thankful, but he wants to hear more words. He wants to converse with those in the rooms next to mine. He wants again to see a Bela Lugosi film. He tries to imagine Bela Lugosi on his planet, a celebrity of unimaginable proportions. He had technique, star quality, he captured what it was to be an Earth vampire. And to Lyxvyx, caught in his bloodless captivity, Bela Lugosi had the heart and soul of the most noble blood-drinking resident of Gyrzgylx.

“... expiration of understanding ... adequate sustenance ... how can a death be so defined ...”

Lyxvyx believed he must keep everything recorded in his head: the colours of the sky, the words he hears, the deliveries of his food, his strolls up and down the long corridors, descriptions of those he saw in the corridors He may have a chance to converse with someone, to share what he has seen. His confinement classification does not permit any writing or recording and communication devices. Bad enough he has been denied any Earthling blood,

he has not seen a screen of any sort as long as he has been here, and he has difficulty determining how long that has been. Lyxvyx speculates he must have been in a suspended state for a lengthy time before waking here, in this room, the animal and machine sounds coming through the walls. At first he tried to understand the sounds, and to believe they were a language he compiled a dictionary in his head, thinking he heard certain sounds repeated, those sounds corresponding to certain words, the words in a certain order, offering messages to him. Foolishness or delusion. More likely, treachery of the mind. Lyxvyx had long ago stopped wondering what his crime had been, apart from being who he was, doing what was the most natural to him. Enough to know he had committed a crime, his confinement classification attests to that unequivocally. Why quibble with the unequivocal? He feels himself smile at the thought. How long would he have to be on this planet to truly absorb the Earthling sense of humour?

“I love you,” Lyxvyx said at the wall, at first softly. *Love* was one of their most valued words and he had learned to say it to Woxgoxot. Before they had been captured and taken from their transplanted lives, Lyxvyx had told Woxgoxot he loved her more than the life-strengthening blood, she still trying to comprehend this Earth-word. In time, she too embraced the word, told Lyxvyx she loved him. Now he was saying that word *love*, a little louder each time, dozens of times, until he is saying the words as loud as he can. He recalls that when he first arrived on this planet, he had a strong voice, the beautiful Hungarian accent he learned from Bela Lugosi films, and he and Woxgoxot only used in private, not willing to draw any unnecessary attention to their identities, but he has not spoken during the time of his confinement, or had a single drop of the precious Earthling blood. Soon enough he will find out if there are Protectors next to him or others in confinement, who still want to converse. Yes, that will be their escape, small conversations between walls. Perhaps if they take him elsewhere, he will squeeze hard as he can, and see how the metallic compartment feels. He has heard the horrifying stories, but he had never felt a metallic compartment. For now, all he can do is think about his confinement, imagine what was before, Woxgoxot and he watching a Bela Lugosi film, drinking the life-revitalizing blood, viewing films in his mind, imagining what is on the other side of the walls, no need to indulge in exactness and precision, no need at all. If he could get his strength back, he would find and free his love and they would assume changed identities and start a new life on Earth. If he could just have one Earthling to give him the desired, life-prolonging, strengthening blood, he could easily break down the wall. Next time he was in the corridor, he would grab one of the others, grab one and drink to his heart’s content.

HEXHAM HEADS

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

Beware of the Celtic Hexham Heads
should they come into your possession.
Best to re-bury them without hesitation
in the Celtic plot from which they came.

They seem innocuous enough. Small tennis ball-
sized male and female likenesses—not
so fat or crude as yer Willendorf Venus,
with fancy woven hairdos to boot.

The female stone has the hooked nose,
lantern jaw of your basic witch;
the male, the woebegone face of another
leather-faced peasant provider.

The museum got rid of 'em—
caused too much mayhem and havoc;
the next owner saw a wolf man
padding about his yard and house.

Re-buried them where the museum
claimed they came from. The visions went away.
No more lycanthropes clearing their throats
at the foot of the bed or saliva on the linen.

They're obviously some devil's playthings,
though they look nice back-lit in a glass case.
Best give 'em back to the Earth. From
Celtic kiln to kin. Claiming them's a sin.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

by Tonya Liburd

(Previously unpublished)

She looked down at herself, hands flopping mutely with handfuls of wedding dress.

Lace foamed through her fingers, a holocaust of flowers, down into her lap.

No one to enjoy the sight of it in a mirror, no one to celebrate the life-changing event with. A wedding dress Daddy'd forced her to make. But she had the knife.

A knife he didn't know she had.

She scraped the top of her fingernails with the knife's edge.

A knife, more powerful than a key to her locked-and-bolted door.

She scraped her fingernails' tops again. Whatever will she do with the knife?

The hand with the knife stopped scraping her fingernails. She was afraid.

But more afraid of doing nothing.

No, mustn't cut oneself gripping the knife so tightly. Will give *everything* away.

A key was shoved in the door, a bolt was undone.

Daddy.

She rose, hiding the knife.

HAUNTED

by Selena Martens

(Previously unpublished)

I am afraid to fall now
broken wings scraping the floor
in the dark where we lurked
at the back of the closet
listening to wind
feathers falling off in clumps

Ground crunches underfoot
marrow-powder snow
a hard crust over black water
like brittle-brittle scabs
the stars only broken glass
we are never going back

Remember the room where I flew?
Unable to stay anchored,
suspended. I spun
elbows and knees striking walls
as the floor fell sharply away
it was always rejecting me

and we came down
abruptly smashing my thoughts
against the ground
only the black trees lingered on
sentries making their own gate
for a cage, a cage, a cage.

we choked on mottled feathers
hair falling out
skin turned to onion-paper
as lamps burst and floors spun
we still haunt the liminal arches of doors
and bones jangle in the air ducts

POLAR BOREALIS SUBMISSION PERIOD TO OPEN IN NOVEMBER

Starting November 1st, 2017, and lasting till November 30th, 2017, I will be accepting submissions for issue #6, the 2018 Spring issue. Looking for about 10 short stories and as many poems. Prefer science fiction, but open to the usual SF&F genre suspects; fantasy, humour, steampunk, etc. Genre-related poems always welcome. Canadian writers only. Send MS and short bio to [The Graeme](#)

THE MAN WITH NO FACE

by Jordan King-Lacroix

(Previously unpublished)

The first time I saw the man with no face, he was leaning in my window and watching me sleep. He thought I was asleep but I wasn't. My hair fell over my face and I was squinting. It looked like I was sleeping. I could see him there, his non-face pressed up against the window and I knew he was looking at me. He stayed there for what felt like the whole night but when he was gone—disappeared as if he were never there, like a frame lost in a reel of film—the moon was still out. And in the moon I could still see his face. I thought I would never sleep again but soon I did and forgot about the man with no face.

In the morning I went to my father and told him that I had a bad dream and he made pancakes with smiley faces on them to make me feel better and I did. I didn't remember what the dream had been but I remember the moon and it was crashing down into my room, like it wanted to get inside and crush me. Or just to be with me. I ate my pancakes with maple syrup and sliced strawberries and soon forgot about the moon, too, and went off to school.

That night, though, the man with no face returned.

He returned every night after that.

In bed that second night I looked out the window and there he was. He tapped his fingers on the window and seemed to wave. I waved back but he couldn't see me and just kept waving. He waved and waved and soon he melted away and his hand waving was but the shadows tree branches creeping up around my bed in the windy night. Up in the moon I saw him there, waiting, staring in his own way.

On the morning of the fifth night, I remembered him. I remembered everything. I told my father that a man with no face was creeping up in my window. I told him that the man with no face was staring at me through the window and then would melt away into the shadows, becoming the moon and the trees.

"If he has no face," my father said, "how can he be staring at you?"

I said I didn't know but that I wanted him to stop.

"Sweetie," he said, crouching down to meet my eye line. "It's just your mind playing tricks on you. It's the moon's reflection on your window and the tree limbs shaking in the wind outside. Your mind does all the rest."

I didn't believe him.

"I promise it's nothing to be afraid of. Come on, it's time for school."

He gave me my lunchbox and drove me to school. The ponies on the box seemed to stare out at me with dead eyes and I didn't like it.

"I want a new lunchbox," I said. "Something with nothing on it."

"Growing out of the coloured ponies, eh, darling?" he looked at me in the rear-view mirror. I always sat up the back; my father had so many papers and things all over the front seat. Work melting into real life and becoming a person needing a seatbelt in the front seat.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't like the ponies anymore."

They seem to growl at me, I didn't say. They bare their teeth and then their faces go blank and become nothing but shadows.

I thought I saw the man with no face's round head in the windows at school but when I turned they were gone. My teachers would ask me what was wrong and they would become faceless, their clawed hands reaching towards me and I would shriek. I got sent to the principal's office and when I told him what was wrong he punished me for lying.

"Making up stories," he said. "Haven't you outgrown that by now?"

"I'm not making it up!" I could feel myself on the verge of tears. "This man with no face he—"

"How can a man with no face look at you?" he said. "It's preposterous!"

"I don't know, but he—"

"Alyssa," he said. His big, grey moustache twitched when he spoke. Behind him, I could see the man with no face in his window. His hands were up against the glass, shaking his head slowly.

"You are a very promising student," the principal went on. "But you have to let this go now. Stop making up stories. It distracts the other children and isn't good for your studies."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going to give you a lunch time detention tomorrow, all right?"

"Yes, Mr Badham."

"Very good," he stood, gesturing to the door. "Now, get on back to class."

I turned to leave. Taking one look back behind me, at the window behind Mr Badham, the man with no face was gone and I could feel my stomach tighten.

That night, he came back. This time, though, he had carved himself some eyes. He pointed excitedly to the big, empty holes in his head just above where his nose should have been. Burgundy goo dripped down his face from the whole, but

his bobbing and waving indicated he was quite happy. When he looked at me, now, I could feel his gaze. I could see into those dark holes in his face and almost see inside him. Like his gaze was a physical thing that drew me into him. Eventually, like always, he faded away and I could see his face in the moon. Up there, though, there were not big lakes like his new eyes. Had those big lakes on the moon always been there? Big craterous spaces that stared down at the Earth every night?

At school, now, I was a ghost. I didn't speak in class. I didn't talk to my friends. My homework was always done because I would delay going to bed as long as possible. People spoke to me in the hallways but I would just walk right past them. My face turned a sallow grey. In the bathrooms, I would spend all of lunch just staring at my own face. It seemed like there was less and less of it each day.

When I was in bed that night, the man with no face appeared at the end of my bed. He had given himself a new part to his face. A wide smile spread from under one eye all the way to the other side, curving down to the bottom of his face in a wide parabola.

"What do you want?" I asked, sitting up in bed as far away from him as I could. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't yell. My voice was barely a whisper. I hardly had the energy to get out of the bed.

The man pointed at his face. His smile.

"You want to be happy?"

He pointed at his smile again.

"What?" I said. "What?"

He reached out, offering his hand. I hesitated a moment but figured, after all this, I had to know. I took his hand. As soon as I touched his palm, he lurched us out the window. I braced for the sting of broken glass all over my body but the feeling never came. I expected to hit the ground, we didn't. I opened my eyes to see us flying out of my window, towards the moon. Behind us, my bedroom window was completely intact. I looked up at the man and he was facing forward, pointing towards the darkened sky, the stars shining all around us. He looked at me, that garish smile eating away at me as his eyes stared deep down into me.

We landed firmly on the grey, rocky surface of the moon and stopped. It was cold and I wrapped my arms around myself. The man with no face stood before me and stared down at me. He gestured at the Earth. He pointed frantically at all the stars, at the sun. Finally, he pointed at me, shaping me out with his hands, indicating me walking and jumping. He mimed laughing. He pointed to himself and slumped over, the mime for sad.

“You want to be happy,” I said.

He shook his head, and then nodded, pointing at himself then at me then at himself again. He hopped from one foot to the other.

“I don’t understand!” I could feel my stomach turning upside down. Because I did understand. “What can I do?”

He seemed stalled by that question. He tapped a long, sharp finger on his chin. With a twirl, he spun and crouched to the ground, so as to be on my level. Reaching out, he held my face in his hands. It was a strong grip, like a vise. My head throbbed as he squeezed. He made sure I couldn’t look away as he stared into my eyes.

All I saw was darkness, at first. Then I could feel myself tumbling, falling into those pits of darkness. My voice returned to me, then, and I screamed. I screamed so loud I thought my lungs would pop. Windows flashed past me as I fell into the darkness. I don’t know when it stopped being darkness and started being windows but it happened fast. I couldn’t quite see through any of them. In the air, I could smell something. It smelled delicious. I noticed, then, how hungry I was. It came all of a sudden, like a hammer, that tremendous hunger. Lights were coming from the windows and soon I could see shadows; outlines. People were moving in there and I wanted to see them. I *needed* to see them.

I swam towards them in the emptiness and was surprised to find I could move easily as I fell. The nearest window was on a house made of white slatting, the windowsill merely a cut-out with red fabric curtains blocking out the night. I grabbed onto the sill and moved to push the curtains away. I watched as my hand melted through the glass and pushed the curtain aside. In the room, a little boy no older than ten sat on his bed, reading comic books. The cover promised fantastic tales of monsters and heroes and princesses.

After moving the curtains aside, I just watched him. The delicious smell was stronger here. Like roast turkey. The boy tapped his foot as he read, the movement distracting my eyes like a magician’s hypnotism wheel. I heaved a sigh from deep in my belly. The pain from the hunger was excruciating. That’s when the boy looked up and saw me. He saw me looking in his window. He did not seem scared, though. We looked at each other for a moment before he waved. I waved back.

A sudden weight tugged me from below and I began falling through the nothingness again. I began to understand the man with no face better. Could feel what he felt.

Another window caught my eye and I leapt forward and latched into the sill. I hung there like a cat from a wire and stared in. This room looked familiar. I recognized the posters on the wall. The lamp by the bed on a bedside table I distinctly remembered. The sheets were similar to ones I had seen before, in a dream, maybe, or a fantasy. The smell of this place reached deep into my mind and pulled some roots up that had been planted deep long ago.

A small girl entered the room and jumped into bed, pulling the covers up over herself. She looked so familiar. So similar to someone I had seen before; someone with so much life in their face. My father walked into the room and kissed this girl goodnight.

My father.

He looked out the window and said something to the girl, who giggled. My father said goodnight and left the room, closing the door. The girl looked content with herself and then turned to the window. She looked right into my eyes. I had never looked into my own eyes. They were such a deep brown. The girl who was me but not me smiled and waved. I raised my hand to wave. I saw my hands were long and pointed. I felt my face and there was nothing there. Nothing but some grooves—where my mouth and eyes should have been—that had long since healed over.

The girl who was me but not me pointed at me, then at herself, then me again and laughed. She kept laughing as I felt myself being pulled away towards the moon, into the shadows.

I could never go back to that window again. The window of my own house. Others, though, those warmed me at night. New people each day to keep a smile on my face.



Lackington's Magazine is an online magazine that publishes speculative fiction and art four times a year. We want to help widen the space for prose poetry. We're looking for stylized prose. Not inept purple prose, of course, but controlled and well-crafted wordsmithery that reflects the story, the setting, theme, atmosphere, or philosophy it seeks to describe. Story and character are indispensable, but so is wordcraft. Make us gasp with the unexpected. See <https://lackingtons.com>

THE DEVIL'S RIDDLE

by *Tara Wayne & Walt Wentz*

(Previously unpublished)

Satan an' Christ was havin' a chaw, on a balmy day in Hell,
Nick ast Him in, with a cheerful grin,
To set and talk a spell.

"Nothin' is free," the Devil said, as he scraped his golden fiddle.
"Why folks think so, and want it, though,
That is the damndest riddle."

"Salvation's free," said J. K. Reist, "Been sayin' that for ages
Writ here, ye see, 'Salvation's free'
Right on them Holy Pages!"

"Salvation from *what?*" Ol' Scratch replied, "Black plague or liver spots?
From income tax, excess earwax,
Or death in freight car lots?"

"And there ain't no cost, no bottom line, nor catch that waits fer you?
It can't be done, Ol' Son of a gun,
I've tried *that* racket too."

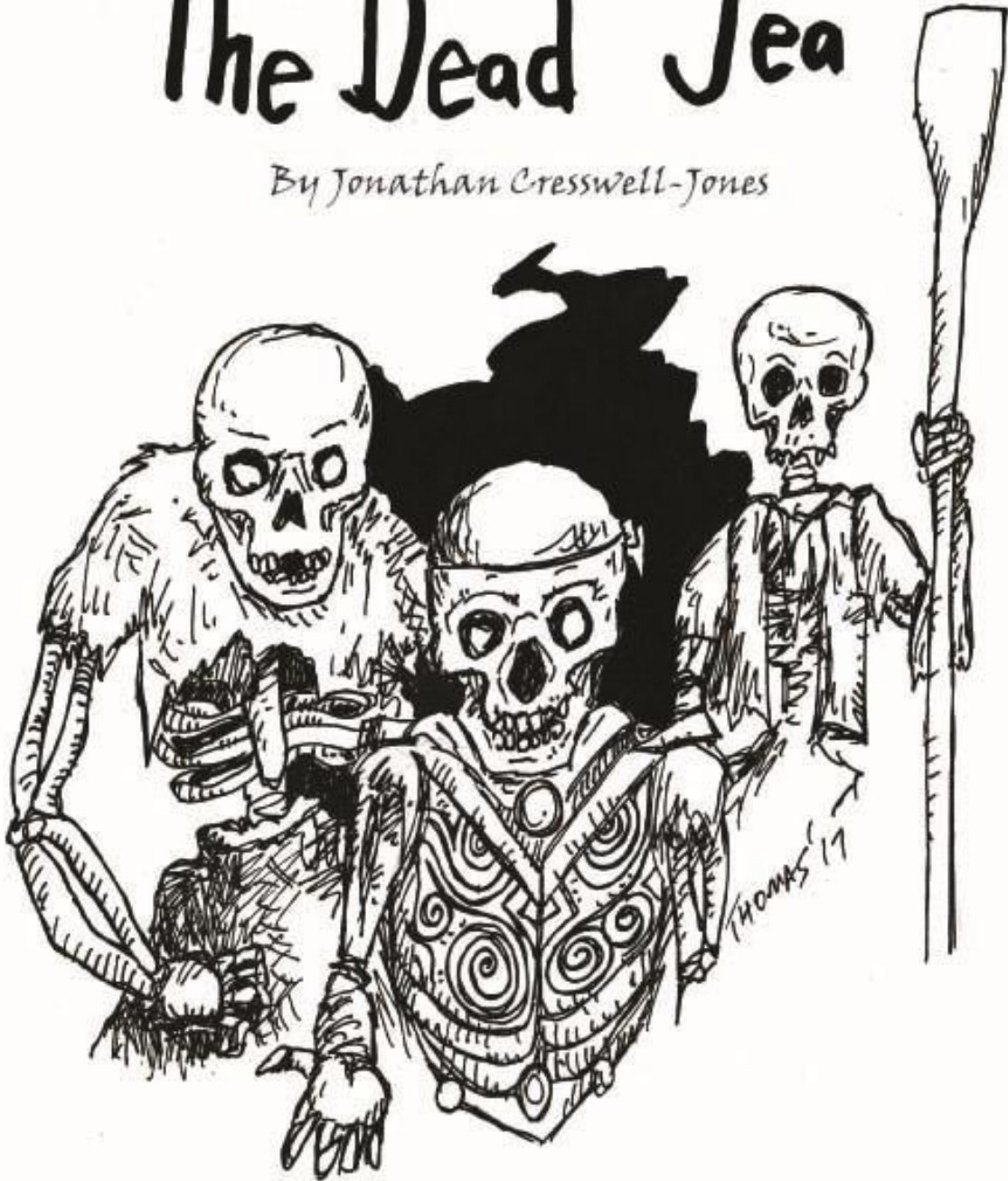
"Well ... damfino," J. Reist replied, with a sorter nervous smile,
"In all the past, folks have never ast.
I'll think on this a while."

"You do that Jake," Ol' Satan spake, an' grinned, while slyly winkin'.
"I'll give ye a hint that's kindly m'int—
What Man fears most is *thinkin'*."

The Devil he sawed a frantic jig, an' let out a whoop of glee,
"After all these years, what Man most fears
Is the *only* thing what's free!"

The Dead Sea

By Jonathan Cresswell-Jones



(Previously unpublished)

One-Leg rang the watch-bell. The night wind's howl through the chinks of the hut walls nearly drowned the clanging, but Biggs rose up regardless on the fourth stroke. Others moved around him in the gloom, most of them quicker. Biggs had been dead the longest—four years and three moons.

Longshanks shouldered open the door into the teeth of a nor'wester gale, spilling starlight over the shuffling forms. The wind pressed past his silhouette to thrash rags of rotting cloth and skin. Eight bodies fought back, lurching one by one through the battered frame into a storm-world, moved by a power that Biggs' mind—as tattered as his corpse, and as twisted—couldn't grasp.

Clouds throttled the moon to dimness. Surf rumbled on the beach below, pale rows of shark's teeth, born and spent only to destroy. The eight dead men proceeded down to meet it. Behind, the bell's clang faded. One-Leg stayed put these days on the roof beams; fresher than Biggs, crippled now, but with keen dead eyes. The hut gave shelter in the empty waits, hammered together from decaying timbers, shore-scrap of the wrecks it waited for. Biggs and the others could not suffer heat, or thirst, or cold; but they *weathered*.

A sheet-flare of lightning showed what had put hand to bell rope. Half a league offshore—at the reef-edge—a fresh shipwreck lay; a caravel's corpse, two masts snapped to stumps. Biggs' bones knew that Kirtin-built hull, as they knew the feel of a living deck: deep-laden traders, crossing the Narum Bight well clear of its hazards, distant reminders of a world he'd been taken from. They carried timber, oil, dragon scales, passengers. They carried the living; and even in that crush of timbers and bursting waves, some would be living still.

Biggs halted close by the surf-line, and thought slowly about that, as Longshanks gestured them to unlash the dory from its tree-stump anchor and right it bow-on to the wind that tried to tear it away. His mind had enough strength still for hate.

The salvaged dory was as foreign to this tropical sea as Biggs himself, less agile in the surf than a native canoe; but it was what their bodies knew. Skilled dead hands eased it into the water, gripped thwarts and gunwales as spray-flecked bodies took their places, settling among the balsa chunks lashed in for buoyancy. Oars fumbled out and took up a beetle's crawl. The dory's bow kicked high over the first full roller. Biggs bent to his oar, and began a grinding cycle: the ragged back-clattering heave, oar-blade deep in roiling water; the downward jerk to broach it free; and the loose slump forward as the blade probed to the water again. Oars and pintles groaned, driving the dory seaward in ragged lunges.

Waves slammed it back in turn; a dead, roaring sea fighting dead, silent men, and yielding a yard at a time.

Nothing broke this mechanical pace—not even the cross-cutting wave that burst over Claspknife at bow oar, behind Biggs, and tumbled him over the side to disappear into the foam. Biggs glimpsed an arm in the surf, or thought he did; then the stern rose and he forgot the other.

It had happened to all of them before, sometimes the entire boatload, though Longshanks had proven an expert steersman since his arrival. Rocks were worst, and a sheershark had given One-leg his name last summer. Biggs saw nothing more in pitching glimpses of the receding shore, but Claspknife would return eventually. They could not depart this land they'd fouled, been buried in, been clawed from; but the sea brought what they needed. All they needed.

The growing thunder behind Biggs told him they'd reached it.

At a last straining pull, the dory shot into a race of swirling water in the lee of the reef, and they backed water hard, turning. Biggs' oar clunked on a broaching plank. The Kirtin trader was disintegrating, just as the oarsmen did, but far more quickly—sucked down by the sea, gnawed by reef's-teeth. Biggs' own eerie hunger burned within him. He squinted dull eyes into the spray, holding station, waiting for the next flare. There, along the trader's lee chains, clambered the living, the hated living—scrabbling, pale blurs in the gloom, but at least one of them moved like a woman. That was good. Biggs was beyond lust, but it was still very good.

Dying, the wreck groaned, listing leeward on the reef. That, as much as the inviting gestures of the oarsmen, goaded the first figure, a wild-eyed sailor, to jump; he landed heavily in the stern-sheets of the dory, where the less decayed crew had their posts. Rotters like Biggs were well forward. It wouldn't do to startle this sweet cargo, not before they'd made their choice ...

Another figure, and one more, timing their leaps with the rise of the boat in the reef-eddies. These landed lighter, huddled together, and wrapped one another in cloak-dresses. Two women, *two*. One final man, older, clutching an oilskin parcel—and nothing more moved on the dead ship. Biggs bent to his oar with a will, drinking in the sight of the shivering flesh, a finer catch than he'd ever made in sailing days or harbour nights. He tried to laugh, but his tongue had dried to his gullet long ago. There was a sweetness to the hunger now.

He'd taken several pulls, and the dory was streaking shoreward under the doubled force of oars and waves, before the first scream tore out.

The younger sailor did well, for all his own terror; he wrapped his arm around the girl who clawed at the gunwale, pulled her down, and shouted, “*It’s all right!* These are Narumi wrights, they crew the shore-boats here. They can’t harm you! They’re bound to this duty.”

The elder man was as silent and grim as the dead around him—the wreck’s captain, perhaps. The other woman dared to look forward, eyes huge and white in a shocked face. Biggs tried to smile at her as he leaned back into a stroke, but he’d been grinning for nigh on four years.

He’d been proud of his teeth in living days. The lasses liked a man with a full row of choppers; and they liked a seafarer with coin in his pocket, with a sparkle in his eye, with good strong hands. The face astern washed up a memory: a darker face, a Narumi face, hate and terror draining away above his grip, another life draining back to the dead sea. The shanty-port in the westward Bight. He’d cursed himself for a mad fool, sworn it would be the last time, that fourth time; and so it had.

“—necromancy, death-magic, it’s local justice—sorcerers placed a spell, a geas, to compel each one to do this, until they’ve saved as many lives as they took—”

Biggs tried again to laugh. *Compel* couldn’t describe the hunger that had dragged him out to this reef two dozen times in four years, and the sea recognized no justice but its own. Though he’d been pressed to his first, living voyage as well; they’d asked no leave for that ...

Nor had the stooped, hooded figure at gallows-side that parted the crowd when he shuffled forward. Age-nobbled fingers settled an amulet around Biggs’ neck before the noose was draped—then the sorcerer stepped back to swing his rust-pitted watch-bell, four slow tolls, before the hangman kicked loose the trestle and the living world fell away—

The dory’s bow crunched, grated, twisted sideways. Biggs rose up, hooked a leg over the gunwale, slouched into the surf, steadied the rocking hull. The two women and the younger man leaped from the stern to scramble through the foam. The old sailor paused, though. He twisted seaward to look empty at the wreck of his ship; and looked away, to Biggs. “Well rowed,” he rasped over the wind. “Whatever you did, I thank you. When—”

Biggs’s hands slipped free of the gunwale. He staggered, looked to shoreward, and felt the geas draining away in a hissing, withdrawing wave. Living feet ran up dry land—two women, his last two. Four bells, four women, four deaths, four lives. The bell-clang faded, the wind faded, the world faded; sea-foam surged about his legs, and the dead sea called him to itself.

SHADOWS IN THE MIST

by Lee F. Patrick

(Previously unpublished. An experiment in Celtic Poetry Format.)

I hear the shadows in the mist.
I feel the spectres of the mist.
They promise power and they know pain.

Misty forms surround me.
Shadows of the dead surround me.
Whispering their sorrows to ensnare my soul.

Their stench is of the graveyard.
Their place is in the graveyard.
The boast I made is forgotten in my fear.

Streetlights glow weakly from beyond the wall.
Shadows separate from tombs within the wall.
Tolling the hours of midnight, the clock stops.

I hear the trees moving in the breeze.
I feel the shadows moving the breeze.
The coldness of the mist surrounds my heart.

Mist and darkness are all around me.
Shadows of the trees are all around me.
Their branches ensnare me, darkening my soul.

They draw me through the darkness and moving shadows.
They lead me toward darkness and moving shadows.
The river flows silently under the sorrowing trees.

Tombstones glow pale in the swirling mist.
Terrible faces take form from the swirling mist.
Water rises around me stealing the air from my lungs.

I hear shouts from beyond the darkness.
I feel the caress of those who live in the darkness.
The tightness in my chest relaxes and I smile.

Mist parts from the darting lights.
Shadows slink away from the darting lights.
Voices disturb the stillness and the hate.

Friends stumble and trip among the scattered stones.
Friends cannot see the truth of the scattered stones.
I watch their hopes vanish from the depths of shadows.

Dawn comes slowly in the shadowed realm.
Daylight never reaches the shadowed realm.
The living should keep to their own places.

I hear the shadows in the mist.
I feel the spectres of the mist.
They promised power and I knew pain.

IMPORTANT NOTICES

When Words Collide registration is full (650 people maximum) but you can still get on a waiting list. Go to [When Words Collide](#) for info. This annual gathering of readers and writers takes place August 11-13, 2017 in Calgary, Alberta.

Professional Proofreader Available! Like the look of this issue? Largely due to the eagle-eyed, ever-vigilant Steve Fahnstalk. Even after I and the contributors proofread the penultimate version, he discovered over a hundred egregious errors in need of revision. The man used to do this for a living! He is willing to proof YOUR manuscript. Standard professional rates. Contact [Steve the proofreader](#).

Poems wanted! I still need a couple more genre poems for Polar Borealis issue #5. Feel free to submit to [The Graeme](#). I pay \$10 per poem. I love genre poems!

CHOO-CHOO

by Mike Thorn

(Previously unpublished)

“What time is it?” Charles asked.

Dex turned around, kicked a spray of tree-shavings at him. “Baby, it’s the *right* time!” He flashed a dopey grin, whirled around and plunged into the shadow-painted foliage ahead.

Charles laughed despite himself. That was just the effect that Dex had. It was something *about* that crooked smile. It was like Dex was in on something. Like he’d always understood the bulk of his life to be a great joke, and he was just waiting for everybody else to catch up and get the punch line.

Dex was fun, no doubt, but Charles still questioned himself: why had he agreed to go for this late-night walk through Birch Grove Park in the first place? Dex didn’t like being told no, it was true, but hadn’t the two of them reached a point in their friendship where Charles could appeal to Dex’s conscience?

Dex did have a conscience ... didn’t he?

Charles couldn’t answer the question for himself as quickly or as easily as he might’ve liked. Sure, Dex showed remorse on occasion; once, after deliberately flooding the boy’s washroom with foul sewage backup, he’d turned to Charles with a half-smile and said “I didn’t think about anyone having to clean it up until just now.”

Charles produced another cigarette.

“Like I said—you shoulda charged your phone if you wanted to keep track of the time, man,” Dex said. “What do I look like, a human timepiece?”

Charles plodded on without responding. *I would’ve charged it if you’d given me the goddamn time, hadn’t rushed me outside in the middle of the night*, he thought. He sparked his smoke to life, sucked nicotine into his lungs, blew a slow and nonchalant stream, as if he couldn’t care less.

Truth was, he cared a great deal. Even the moonlight was now beginning to lose its influence in this place, blocked out by the increasingly thick overhang. Any trace of light was dimming to infrequent splashes of blue; the faint glow of Dex’s silhouette was giving Charles the creeps.

“No need to hurry back.” Dex pulled out his phone to consult the time and nodded, but neglected to fill Charles in. “You’ll wanna walk off the scent of that new ciggy, anyhow, right? I mean, if we head back now and your mom’s wandering around in search of a midnight snack, she’ll smell the smoke all over you.”

Charles silently agreed. His mom had never liked Dex in the first place, and he didn't want to give her any more ammunition for her distrust; he'd certainly never enjoyed a cigarette before he'd met Dex. Mom had had bad feelings about Dex ever since Charles had first relayed stories about his outrageous outbursts at school. The first example: in Mr. Connor's math class, third period, Dex once filled his mouth with Alka-Seltzer tablets and, just as the foam began bursting through his lips, he collapsed and twitched on the floor in a mock seizure. Charles had found the scene hysterically funny.

When he described the events to his mom, she didn't even break a smile.

Charles figured the only reason Mom let Dex sleep over was because he "came from a bad home." Charles didn't know about that, really—the "bad home" part. In fact, Charles sort of liked Dex's dad, a man who didn't talk down to Charles the way other parents did; Dex's dad was prone to telling Charles the dirtiest jokes, recommending the most messed-up movies, and he was an unfailing source of cigarettes, booze, and even (on one special occasion) a bag of really good weed (well, since it was the only weed Charles had ever smoked, he couldn't *really* testify to its high quality, but still—it had done the trick).

"Hey," Dex called. "Come check this out."

Charles only now realized that he was falling behind. He'd slowed to a leisurely pace to enjoy his cigarette, and Dex's shadowy figure was perched on a hilltop several yards away. Even at this relatively small distance, it was difficult to make him out.

Charles took a final drag and flicked his smoldering half-cigarette into the shrubs. *Good way to set the place ablaze*, he thought, but quickly dismissed the concern from his mind. Right now he had bigger concerns than starting a forest fire.

Like not getting shit from his parents.

"What?" he called back. Then, after a pause, "What time is it, for Christ's sake?"

Dex didn't answer.

As Charles approached the hill, a protruding root snagged his Converse. He tumbled hard, and gravel rolled abrasively along his knee, breaking flesh.

"God damnit."

Dex laughed. "Take it easy down there, willya?"

"Look Dex, I just scraped my leg open. Can we please just head back?"

Charles trudged up the hill, his scrape singing.

He saw the momentary flash of Dex's cellphone, a halo of electric light in the blackness.

"It's 3:30," Dex said.

Charles dabbed his fingertips into the tender wetness on his kneecap. He winced. For the fourth time tonight, he pulled his Android from his pocket and pressed the power button. To his total lack of surprise, no miracle had yet occurred: the phone was still dead.

“You coming up here or what?” Dex cried out.

Charles broke into an uneasy jog, his injured leg protesting. He could feel blood pouring down his shin now, soaking into his socks. *This is no small scrape. Might need stitches.* If that was in fact the case, he thought while climbing the hill, how on earth would he be able to keep the truth from Mom?

He stood beside Dex. His friend extended his arms forward, a grandiose presentation of the vista before them. They were staring at what appeared to be a moon-bathed train yard: chain-link fence surrounding metal hulks, unmoving railcars that looked from this distance like sleeping prehistoric beasts.

“How the hell—they can’t have built a train yard on the edge of Birch Grove...” Charles said.

“They can!” Dex screamed, rather unnecessarily. He pointed at the yard. As he turned to Charles, his face cracked into an unhinged smirk. “They *did!*”

“Okay, so we saw it. Real crazy, Dex,” Charles said. “Can we go back now?”

He turned on his heels and, for a moment, he thought he saw one of the railcars lurch forward, *crunch*, a subtle crawl across the inky dirt. *You’re just tired. An illusion, that’s all. You’re just really goddamn tired.*

He began descending the hill, his knee ablaze with sharpening pain, when he heard the click of Dex’s wakened Zippo. Moments later, the air was filled with that pungent, familiar smell: marijuana.

He turned to see Dex pinching a cigar-sized blunt between his fingers, eyes dozy, mouth popped open into a smoky O.

“Whaddya say we pass, piss, puff first—or however the saying goes?” Dex said. He erupted into squeaky hysterics, then took another long drag from the joint.

That thing’s too fat to be called a “joint.” The word’s just too measly, too—well ... small. If I let Dex smoke the whole thing himself, which he certainly will, if given the chance, he might get lost and never find his way back out ... Charles looked down at his banged-up leg. *Maybe the pot will take the edge off the pain ... make the walk back home a little easier.*

“All right you maniac,” Charles said. “The hell with it. Give me a hit.”

He took the blunt from Dex’s already rubbery grasp, wrapped his lips around the makeshift filter and dragged. The smoke came hot, thick, and heavy; it seemed to rush into his nasal passages, esophagus, lungs, ears, and eyeballs, all at once, his body immediately alight with the first-puff tingles. He coughed; he always coughed so hard, his body doubling over.

As they took turns on the blunt (Dex doing a lot more than half the work, Charles was happy to see), the trees took on a vaguely sinister appearance: branches curled like gnarled fingers, leaves rattling a papery, foreboding ambience. Charles also began to find the sight of Dex's scarlet-ringed eyes unnerving, a primal gaze that looked unfit for Dex's drooping, guffawing mouth.

"Let's go, man," Charles said, his words clogging up at the base of his tongue before rolling, clumsy, out of his mouth. "It's too dark. Let's head back."

"Gonna go for a train ride first." Dex killed the roach with a powerful, lung-filling hit. "Choo-choo, baby. Chooooo-chooooooo."

"No way, Dex," Charles said. "I'm putting my foot down. That's trespassing."

Dex only looked at him for a second, rolling the filter between his fingertips, raining charred resin on the grass; then he snickered once, "ha," and turned to gallop down the hill. "Choo-chooooooo," he howled. "Choo-chooooooo, biiiiiiiiiiiiitch!"

That's it. Leave him. Let him learn his lesson, Charles thought, but then he saw it again: the car urging itself forward, like a dormant monster stirred. It stopped as quickly as it had started, but Charles wasn't so sure he'd imagined it this time.

Weed can't make you hallucinate.

"Dex!" He was surprised by the shaky, panicked sound of his own voice. "Dex, don't do it!"

Too late. Dex was already scrambling up the chain-link, spider monkey fast.

Charles had no other choice that he could see: he ran to meet up with his friend. As he pounced on the chain-link, he saw barbed wire curled across the top, and he saw tatters of something waving from its points. *Is that cloth?* Charles thought, dropping down and backing away. *Or is it flesh?* He shuddered; he could see Dex hobbling across the train yard, moonlight glancing off what appeared to be bloody rivulets trailing his exposed forearms.

"Dex!" he screamed. "Dex, for God's sake stop!"

Dex stood on a section of rusty tracks before a massive railcar and held his bloodied arms akimbo, cellphone screen glowing in the blackness.

"Guess what time it is?" Dex called back.

Don't encourage him. Just turn around and walk away. Charles didn't move, but he also didn't speak.

"It's not 4:20, but it would be funny if it was!" Dex shouted.

Har-de-fucking-har. Charles had finally resolved to leave when he saw it happen again: the car sliding forward, its nose settling mere feet away from Dex. Dex yelped in shock; Charles screamed.

It happened. Charles's heart thwacked against his chest. *It really happened.*

“Malfunction, Charles,” Dex called. “Just a little malfunction. Chill the hell out—”

His sentiment was cut short as the train screamed into blinding motion, blasting forward like a monstrous bullet, plowing through his body as if it was no more cumbersome than a shrub, viscera and boney remnants bursting gruesomely across the yard. The sound was excruciating: the noise of strained train brakes played in reverse, the volume impossible, unending, piercing Charles’s brain.

The sound ceased and was quickly replaced with the dim sound of Dex-pieces thumping to the ground, a slow and scattered rainfall of blood. Charles collapsed to his knees, forgetting his own wound in the terror of the moment. He pressed his fingertips against his eyes; his mouth dropped open in a silent wail.

Moments later, he felt a buzzing in his pocket.

My phone is dead, he thought.

Impulsively, he reached into his pocket. He saw the green Android logo blazing on the screen. Incoming call: Dex Morton.

What the fuck.

He stared at the train yard, looking for the glow of Dex’s iPhone. *I must be seeing things. He’s okay. He’s calling me to tell me he’s okay.* He laughed without knowing why, and he tapped the Answer button with a shaking finger.

He pressed the phone to his ear, and what he heard tilted him over the edge of panic into the realm of all-consuming horror. “*Choo-choo, Charles.*” Dex’s voice spoke through a staticky rumbling, a sound that was vaguely taunting and faraway. “*It’s dark in here. No moonlight now. Just dark and hot. So, so hot. Come take a train ride. Choo-chooooooooooooo ...*” and then Dex’s voice was washed out in that screaming, screeching tumult of gears under pressure, a train trying to stop but unable to stop, and Charles swore he could hear a legion of human cries beneath that awful sound.

He jabbed the End Call button, but to no avail. The sound went on and on. He could hear it even as he dropped the phone in the grass and turned to run.

He didn’t stop hearing it until he was miles away.

For years afterward, the sound of the train braking was below the threshold of his hearing ... while he was awake.

But, in his nightmares, he couldn’t even adjust the volume.

Damn it, Dex. Stop it! thought Charles. *Leave me alone!*

Dex never did. He was a true friend.

the lightning-struck tower

LAST EVENING

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

He said a good
 good evening
Let us walk as couples in
 my mind you
 the fog
writhes through my flesh
remembering the safe times
 have changed
 the weather
the hate-bright blade
 this cold mist
 his words
 Let me hold
my heart
drops wildly
 I push away
 from thick bloodsmear
my name
 he never knew
 what burning ice
He laughs
freezes my heart and soul
 in flames arises
wipes the blade
 then seeps back
 my mind
 into fog

ORGANIC LIFE

by Dean Wirth

(Previously unpublished)

The well-heeled fellow came to the barren seaside town of Devon, Maine from Boston by paid carriage. This was a new start “across the pond” and, though Morgan Reitman could feasibly live in Boston in due time, first he needed a small locality to forge a new identity and wait for the constabularies to give up their search. He was a fugitive, accused of killing his wife Penny by strangulation back in Devon, England. He had married for her dowry and hadn’t planned the murder as thoroughly as he would have liked. So here he was, on a heap of road and rabble two hours by coach north of Boston. Retaining some ship experience from his youth, he planned to work on the lobster boats for the time being, *then* go to Boston with sufficient funds in his wallet to start again.

The cab neared the portside town and its stench of sodden decay and death.

“Is this town peopled by ghosts?” Morgan asked the coachman as he paid the fare, giving him a meagre tip, and was handed his bags roughly without reply. He walked over to a nearby Inn which boasted a sadly decrepit sign advertising “Devon Arms” and went in.

“Good day sir,” said the innkeeper, whose head seemed to have been welded to his portly body at an odd angle, his wife clinging to his side. Morgan pitied her, she could have been pretty at one time, and opined the disfiguring culprit to be either opiates or spirits.

“I am Sam ... my wife Doreen. Will you be staying or supping?” the oddly shaped man asked.

Morgan announced he wanted a place to stay, a deal quickly made as he paid a week’s worth of rent in advance with bills from his fat wallet. Doreen served a decent warm meat pie and the ale was agreeable. Afterward, he went up to an exceedingly uncomfortable room and bed. Opening the bedroom window the foulest odors again assaulted him, the stagnant salt marsh seeming to encroach and infringe the room all at once. The few ships he could see were moored at odd angles far from the piers. “No wonder the village is empty; the ocean is drained away, this damnable soup is in its place,” he thought.

The next morning it looked all the worse for the pallid grey light that revealed every evidence of decay. Even the usual opportunists of rot were absent, for there were no gulls to be seen or heard.

“The fishing boats are not moored but stuck in the infernal mud that ruined this town,” explained Sam. “When the tide is out, they sink even more, bit by bit.

When it is in, as it is now, it is not much better. The fishermen and whalers have moved on. You might as well move on, too. There is no work here. The town is not even policed. An outsider like you is better off in Boston or the Cape; this place is cursed."

"Why is it you don't leave?"

Sam nodded to the rifle on the gun rack on the wall as his wife Doreen rushed past into the kitchen. "We are safe enough. By Divine intervention we aren't *affected*."

"*Affected?*"

"Yes, *affected*, and if you stay too long you will be too, because of what taints the water, the air, the buildings ..." Sam offered no further explanation. "I go to tend the horses," he added, and turned away.

Morgan followed Sam into the stable attached to the Inn. He was surprised to count ten horses. Why so many? It didn't matter to him. One would do. He inquired how much to rent one till supper time.

"You'll not be here long, no traveller stays more than a few days." Sam said sourly as he pocketed the money.

Morgan rode off on a stout palomino. He soon discovered there were no fields outside Devon, just clusters of horsetails and the occasional mushroom ring here and there where the ground allowed. Evidently the mud and soil were so noxious as to have killed all trees, as it was early summer and they were still without leaves. There was something evil lurking in the locale, something deadly.

He came upon a church, once a proud beacon of faith, now a wreck of crumbled brickwork and smashed-out windows. In the courtyard statues which had been pulled down lay scattered on the ground. Here, a stone angel, there a fallen Jesus with arms outstretched.

Morgan paused. Something odd. It was only seven in the morning yet he could hear a voice sounding inside the building. He tied the horse to the arm of a dead oak and ventured towards the "sermon". The voice grew louder, but not his comprehension. Making his way up the limestone steps he opened a wooden door and peered in. Inside was a rag of a man, tufts of white hair sprung from over his ears, the top his head bald and egg-shaped. Spit dribbled from a crooked mouth filled with rotting teeth. Over a black tunic a large silver cross hung from his neck. He was preaching to empty pews, as if to a congregation of ghosts.

"What an absurdity, no parishioners," Morgan thought as he edged down the left row of fine oak benches. The demented "priest" gibbered furiously in what was either a foreign or invented dialect. Morgan sat down, then quickly jumped up in surprise on discovering there was a glutinous substance on the bench. Disgusted, he tried to wipe it off his pants with his hands.

The frenzied orator stopped his “sermon,” glared at him, then pointed a gnarly finger as if to single him out for destruction. Alarmed, Morgan turned to flee and slipped on the same gelatinous substance on the stone floor, falling flat on his back. Now that he could see under the long carved benches he observed that the stone floor was besieged with entrails, intestines and other internal organs laid out and tucked hidden from plain view.

“*Sacrifice?*” he wondered as he pulled himself to his feet and fled down the aisle. The mad priest resumed ranting his elegy to the vacuous room as Morgan ran out the door.

Morgan scrambled in terror past the tethered horse and then, as he slowed down and began to regain his composure, came upon a dilapidated tavern, the church’s only neighbour. There was a dim light inside. He entered with caution. Inside sat two glassy-eyed men, one portly and one reedy, both hunched over a small table. The thin one was in a wheelchair; the other had a wooden cane hooked to the side of the table. Between them there was a bowl of mushrooms which they were eating with their hands one at a time as if they were grapes or prunes. By the expression on their faces they were not enjoying the flavor so much as enduring it. Two glasses of stale ale were largely ignored except to wash the morsels down. Morgan suspected they were under the influence of the fungi, the same that grew in abundance among the horsetail plants outside the town. Perhaps they were addicted to them.

When the two noticed his presence in the tavern the fat man looked at him with resigned, non-insistent eyes. There was no one else in the darkened and neglected establishment.

“I don’t mean to intrude but there is a crazy man of the cloth preaching in an unoccupied church and what seem to be animal parts hidden under the pews,” said Morgan.

“Old Todd never hurt anybody, and those are not animal parts,” the portly one replied, the thin one retching over the edge of his wheelchair. “Todd did lose his sanity,” he added, “but he keeps up with these,” pointing to the mushrooms in the bowl.

Backing out the door, Morgan said nothing. Whatever the common madness was it seemed to be related to the toadstools. The fact that the fungus was the *antidote* to the sickness of the town did not occur to him. He also failed to notice the strings of phosphorescent blue eyes lining the glutinous embodiments or the pained slithering of listless movement disturbing the shadows. No wonder, for these things were well hidden from the soft light of the smashed out windows, and the glowing eyes were small and inert.

In panic Morgan realised that if the church remains were human he might be in immediate danger. He decided to leave town immediately. He would be better off taking his chances in Boston. He rushed back to the crumbled yard of the church, the priest still ranting inside, and untied the mare to ride back to Devon as fast as he could spur the reluctant creature.

To the east, out of the corner of his eye, he observed a man staggering in the muck holding his chest and neck. The fellow fell on his back, his face to the sky. Puzzled, Morgan dismounted and slogged through the sludge toward the figure, unsure whether he was about to save a life or rob a corpse. The entrapping ooze proved a formidable obstacle but eventually he stood over the body, the fishing vessels teetering in the hoary background.

Abruptly, Morgan's horse bolted. Morgan turned and cursed the animal vehemently, stamping angrily in the puddled mud. Then he stopped cursing and stood still. He had just grasped that the numerous hummocks of mud among the jutting rocks along the seashore were actually mounds of human skin, bone and hair crawling with small leech-like creatures gnawing at the remains.

Reaching down to the body he pulled on an arm as if to somehow rouse the dead man, a futile gesture of rescue. The arm slipped out of its shoulder socket as the man's shirt tore, so now he was holding a dead arm like a trophy of perdition. Repulsed, he dropped the limb and took it on himself to feel for a pocket-watch wallet or some form of identification on the corpse whose gaping mouth was now collecting seawater.

The discarded arm wriggled, tendons and veins slipping out to individually slither off in separate directions. Morgan shook his head in disbelief as two large eel-like things with rows of glowing blue eyes glided by. What had once been someone's stomach pulled itself across a flat rock via several thick stringy arteries, similar blue eyes on the top peering dully at everything at once but not showing cognizance. A blasphemous lung-fish revealed very sharp lamprey like teeth and bit into a human skull, parts of which still had skin and hair that were being stripped bare by tiny veiny things. The organs were cannibalizing the skin and bones of the very bodies that had once housed them.

The head of the corpse at Morgan's feet split open. A brain with numerous azure eyes pulled itself out of the skull and moved onto the chest, the man's former stem chord its sole means of locomotion. It sank long, sharp teeth into the rib cage and began crunching on the bones. Now small veiny worms swam up to the corpse, attaching themselves. One with long sinewy fins, large mouth, and oversized gut, like that of a deep sea fish, started chewing on a leg. This shook Morgan out of his morbid reverie. In disgust he grabbed the abomination by the

“tail” and flung it as far as he could toward the sea. It hit with a loud splash and swam toward the ships in a gush of energy.

Nearby the lung-fish was contemplating Morgan from its soupy domain with mysterious eyes that blinked in unison. With a shudder Morgan realized that each and every creature was festooned with these eyes, all of which registered a simple intelligence and unifying purpose. A great evil was at work. Time to flee.

Once back on the dry road, Morgan examined the money and identity papers inside the wallet he had purloined. They were intact. His new identity would be Charles M. Gullet; apparently in Real Estate by the look of things. He walked onward with a determined stride. His plan of action was to get back to the hotel, pack and obtain transport, and possibly acquire a little extra money for his new start in Boston.

As Morgan approached Sam and Doreen’s little hotel he could hear Sam doing some hammering in the stalls. All he had to do was get rid of the *both* of them and he would have transport and some silver to sell. There would be no witnesses and there were no police to worry about. He would dispose of the bodies in the bog where they would quickly be eaten by his new *accomplices*. The perfect crime.

Since Sam was usefully apart from Doreen, Morgan decided to dispose of the woman first. He quietly made his way up to his room to retrieve the ivory handled hunting knife he carried for both protection and opportunity.

As it was, Doreen was in the dining room polishing the silver candlesticks that were intricately ornamented with birds and leaves, humming a song she remembered from childhood. A silver bowl of the now familiar dried mushroom sat at the table in front of her. Those past days were such happy days when the town was alive with people and promise. That was before the horrible bog came, and people began to change.

Morgan crept up with knife in hand as she continued to polish the candlesticks. He raised the knife high. Suddenly there was a loud report and a bullet smashed through his head. Morgan collapsed to the floor. Doreen turned and looked down at him, very much composed. She had known he was creeping up on her, had seen his reflection in the bowl, and had also observed Sam standing in the doorway behind him, raising his rifle. That their victim had intended to kill them made their crime so much easier on the conscience. Convenient that was.

“Wanted to murder ME did you?” Doreen said mockingly to Morgan’s corpse while Sam stooped to lean his rifle against the wall. “Well, Sam and I are not so easy to kill. Found that out, didn’t you?”

Sam and Doreen each grabbed a leg and dragged the body outside and then along the street to the edge of the bog.

“He is affected, like the rest, because he wasn’t eating his mushrooms. Not our problem anymore. I believe his death is opportune. I think it time we depart this place.”

“And the horses?”

“Sacrificing one a month weakened the grip of the taint,” Sam said with some melancholy. “Killing the remaining ten will enable us to break away completely and make our escape.” He began rifling through Morgan’s pockets. “His wallet is fatter than before,” he mused, thumbing through the bills. “Seems he robbed Mr. Gullet, as his papers are in here too.”

“It is a shame about the horses,” Doreen commented. She turned to look at the town. “I will miss this place, but I promise to remember only the good times.”

“That is what you have to do, Doreen. That is what WE have to do.”

While the couple were slogging back to the hotel, intent on searching his possessions for valuables worth pawning, Morgan’s organs stirred inside him; his stomach’s teeth gnashed in fury, his heart beat frenziedly like a trapped animal, his already detached lungs respired like never before to gain strength, and his gilled intestines slithered about exploring for weak points to break through. In an hour or so he would split wide open and his organs would be free to wander.

A low thunder pealed, and it began to rain, water from the hoary sky pouring over the ruined village, the doomed ships, and onto the derelict house of worship. More blue eyes opened beneath the pews, and more pained movements began among the mosaic of organic life-forms as the floor moistened. Old Todd opened the heavy church doors for the vascular life forms to leave. The toothed blue-eyed creatures slunk past him and slivered down the limestone steps toward the sea. The rain was constant, sometimes forceful. It spurred them on.

The morning tide was strong, the creatures of new design pulling effortlessly away from the land amid rumblings of thunder and rain. They thrived and molted in a labyrinth of silt and seawater. Thrusting further into the depths they swam toward the bottom of the Atlantic ridge where they connected and intersected, tunneling into each other to form a whole, clustering to create prodigiously monstrous being with hundreds of arms, spikes, eyes and teeth, a being ready to rise in a thousand years when the stars aligned in a manner that would unleash it to wreak havoc on all forms of accepted life.

INSOMNIA

by Lena Ng

(Previously unpublished)

The children lie shivering in their beds.
From ageless fears in a ceaseless dimension.
Shadows sow what imagination dreads.

Unblinking eyes stare from the trophy head.
Serrated thoughts seek unwholesome attention.
The children lie shivering in their beds.

“There’s nothing to fear,” the replica said.
Closing the door to their salvation.
Shadows sow what imagination dreads.

Serpent shadows sleep soundly, fully fed.
Seared nightmares of children, its only consumption.
The children lie shivering in their beds.

Lone mangled hand, into forests led.
Mute trees mourn, branches bent in consolation.
Shadows grow what imagination dreads.

Disquiet festers, anxieties tread
And teeter on the edge of comprehension.
The children lie shivering in their beds.
Shadows grow what imagination dreads.

SYMBIOTES

by Jeremy A. Cook

(Previously unpublished)

The dusty auto yard can have only one employee. From the rows of rusty automobile husks, Tom guesses that not much money passes through this squat, cinderblock building. As the hand-painted, peeling sign declares, this is Sandy's Auto Parts, so therefore the squinting man in stinky grey coveralls at Tom's SUV window must be Sandy.

"Whoopers, eh?" says Sandy.

"Yes, Whooping Cranes," says Tom. "Biggest birds in North America, you know. And endangered, too. Some friends of ours said they saw them just north of here."

"Yeah, I know what Whoopers are," says Sandy. "Saw them fly over yesterday. Must be out at Hartnett Lake by now."

"Hold on a minute," says Tom. "Maps!" he snaps a little too sharply at Beth, who sits in the passenger seat. Her wrinkled face freezes, hurt, as it often does when she thinks she's being criticized. With a rolling hand, Tom rushes her and she dives into an old Safeway bag at her feet. She produces printed greyscale maps and hands them to Tom.

Tom holds the map out the window so Sandy can see, pointing at a grey blotch. "Is this Hartnett Lake?"

"Yep," says Sandy. "Looks like you done your research. You just follow this road here. The creek washed out part of it a couple years back, but it shouldn't be a problem for your vehicle here. She's a beauty, by the way."

"Really?" asks Tom.

Beth leans across Tom, giggling. "I'm glad you said so. Tommy bought it this spring and he's had nothing but buyer's remorse."

"Oh no, no sir," says Sandy, grinning yellow teeth. "Jeep Wrangler's a great vehicle. My son's got one, and you know what he says?" He sucks his chin into his neck, strangling his vocal cords in imitation of his son: "Pop, you got to get one of these. You got to join us in the 21st Century. You know what I tell him? A Ford's a Ford's a Ford."

Beth hesitates, not sure if this is the punchline, then laughs with insincere hysteria. Tom manages a confused chuckle. Laughing, Sandy tips his hat and steps from the window, signalling the end of the conversation. Beth continues laughing as Tom rolls up the window and drives down the gravel road, away from the auto yard.

“You mind telling me what was so funny about that?” asks Tom.
“It’s a rural thing, dear,” says Beth. “And no, it wasn’t that funny.”

The dirt road leads south through golden hills awaiting harvest. Dust and chaff from hundreds of combines stain the evening sun deep orange. Tom waves his fingers out the window, through cool air. The road is rugged enough to feel like an adventure. As Sandy predicted, the washed-out section was no obstacle for his SUV.

As the Wrangler descends a low hill, Tom spies three magpies in the stubble of the ditch. He slows and cranes his neck.

“Oh God, Tom, do we have to stop and look at every road kill?” complains Beth.

His eyes glimpse white feathers. His first stomp on the brake misses and the second slams down too hard. The Jeep lurches to a halt and Beth gasps. “What?” she shrieks.

“Come on,” says Tom, leaving his seat with the vehicle still idling. He ignores the pain in his back from sitting too long and rushes to the lip of the road. Beth joins him and they both see their first Whooping Crane.

The crane’s chest is splayed open, revealing bone and gore nestled in a pile of white down. The magpies regard the human visitors, but choose not to fly away. Tom pulls his cellphone from his pocket and snaps sullen pictures. Beth laughs.

“What’s so funny?” growls Tom.

“Three years we’ve been waiting to see a Whooping Crane and it’s dead,” says Beth. “That’s rich.”

“I just don’t understand it, Beth,” says Tom, returning his phone to his pants pocket.

“What is there not to understand, dear?” she asks.

“Why somebody would intentionally run over a Whooping Crane.”

Beth appraises her husband, eyebrow cocked, then laughs. “Oh Tom, you’re telling one of your stories again.”

“No, I am not,” protests Tom. He crouches, pointing at tire tracks in the dirt. “This is where they pulled over to hit it. This probably happened just today.”

Beth scoffs. “Well, what if they were bird watchers just like us who pulled over to look at a dead Whooper? Did you consider that, mister grumpy-pants?”

“For crying out loud, it’s in a ditch! How else would it get there?” yells Tom. “Look down there. You see those bird tracks around its carcass? These birds mate for life, Beth. And some yahoo comes along and whap! Its mate walks around the corpse for hours, trying to wake it up. At least until the coyotes came and tore it

apart. Christ! Don't these people know how special these birds are? How few of them there are left in the world?"

Tom feels Beth's warm arms encircle his shaking shoulders. "Tommy, I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm right," he says. "I know what I'm talking about."

"Of course, Tommy," she soothes. "If you want, we can head back to town and file a report with the RCMP or something."

After considering, Tom straightens himself and takes her hands. "No. I want to see a live one. That lake can't be too far now."

"Whenever you're ready then," she says, smiling up at him in that dutiful way that he loves.

In a few moments, they're on the road again, but Tom can't get the image of the dead whooper out of his mind. Specifically, he can't remember seeing coyote tracks in the mud around the body. For the sake of pride, he decides not to tell his wife.

As the sun sinks lower, the sky fills with chevrons. Thousands of birds flock toward the horizon. A steady keening fills the cabin. Beth fiddles with the knobs on the radio until she realizes it's not on. "What is that sound?" she asks.

Tom rolls down his window and the cabin fills with noise. "It's the birds!" cries Tom.

At last they cross a low hillock, revealing Hartnett Lake, blazing orange in the setting sun, drawing an awed gasp from Tom and Beth. Hundreds of thousands of birds rise and fall in the fields, descend from the sky, and splash upon the lake. Wonderstruck, Tom nearly rear-ends a blue Suzuki wagon by the roadside. Impatiently, he parks his SUV in front of it and bolts from his seat.

With the engine off, he and Beth can at last hear the full cacophony of the lake. Everywhere sounds the honking of Canada geese, the higher barks of Snow geese, the whinnying of Great White-Fronted geese, the quacks of mallards, the squeaks of coots, and the purring of Sandhill Cranes. "Can you believe this?" shouts Beth over the din.

"No!" yells Tom. He takes her hand and pulls her across the salt flat toward the lake. "Do you remember what they sound like?"

"How am I supposed to hear a Whooping Crane in all this?"

"I don't know!" shouts Tom, marching onward. They push through tall grass and halt at the spongy verge. At their approach, noisy coots skitter into deeper water. He regards the sky, paying special attention to the flocks of cranes, their

long necks stretched before them and legs splayed behind. He tries to spot white feathers, but the setting sun makes silhouettes of them all.

As the sun sets, Tom despairs. He wonders if Beth would agree to spend the night in the motel in town and return tomorrow. But then he hears a new call. It's a cackling purr, like a Sandhill Crane, but more musical. And it ends in a deep, percussive, "GONK." The lake quiets in an acoustic ripple, every avian throat silenced. Wings whistle. Tom and Beth spin as ten snow-white cranes blaze overhead.

The cranes alight in a nearby field, across a bulrush-choked streambed. Their landing disturbs a flock of Sandhills, launching skyward and complaining. "It's them!" says Beth. "It's them it's them it's them!"

"I know!" says Tom. "Let's go." As the avian chattering on the lake slowly returns, they scamper back to the easier terrain of the salt flat, then duck amongst the bulrushes in the streambed. They sink to hands and knees, scrambling in chest-high vegetation, feeling their pant legs soak in the marshy stream.

The bulrushes give way to a stubble field, and there they are: ten beautiful white cranes standing in a circle by the lake. Beth and Tom watch as the cranes dip their necks up and down, as though having a conversation. "They're so big," marvels Beth.

Tom pulls his cellphone from his pants pocket and snaps pictures. But at this distance in the failing light, the pictures are blurry and pixelated. He can't make out the red caps on their heads. "We have to get closer," urges Tom.

"You go, dear," says Beth in his ear. "If I go with you I might scare them."

"You sure?" he asks.

"Yes. I just want to see you finally getting your pictures." And there's that dutiful smile again.

Feeling the advancing chill of nighttime, Tom drapes his sport coat over his wife's shoulders. "Thank you," he says, then crawls into the stubble of the field. He has to hurry, because the light is worsening every second, but if he goes too fast, he may scare them.

After five minutes, he's fifteen metres away from the closest crane. He zooms his phone's lens and his excitement turns to confusion. This is no Whooping Crane. It really is too big. And its bill is hooked: a predator's beak for tearing. He's never seen anything like it in his bird books. Maybe it's something from Asia that migrated the wrong way?

At that moment, the crane spots him with its yellow eye. It ducks its head and unfolds great wings. It cackles and struts toward him. It would be absurd if it

weren't so huge. Its herd-mates look up from their cluster around a dead Sandhill crane.

The closest crane charges, hissing. Tom rises, falls backward, rises again, and runs. Wings beat the air as the other cranes take to the sky. When Tom was seven, he got too close to a goose's nest on a golf course. The goose chased him for half a minute before his father kicked it away. He looked foolish then, screaming and crying, chased by a bird, and he's sure he looks stupid now.

Beth, from her hiding spot, watches him run, covering her mouth, not sure to laugh or to rise and help. He turns away from her, running instead to the upper reaches of the stream. "Stay down! I'll lead them away and meet you at the car!" he calls.

He is unused to running and his belly flaps beneath his ribcage. He leaps over two more stinking Sandhill Crane carcasses. And still the huge, hissing bird pursues him, neck outstretched. He's getting scared. If this was a territorial display, most other birds would have given up by now. But this one bounds after him. He can hear its beak clicking. With a final, terrified burst of energy, he dashes into the creek, blunders past bulrushes, loses a shoe in the muck, and falls into the water.

He rolls to his back, expecting the giant bird to be right behind him. But it hasn't followed. Instead, he hears the cranes cackling in the sky, then soft wingbeats and splashes as birds land in the water around him. And then he realises that when he fell, he thrust his cellphone in the water. He pushes the home button, but the screen stays dark. "Shit shit shit," he whispers, hearing guttural clicks from the vegetation. He pockets the phone and creeps through tall plants toward the cars.

At the edge of the salt flats, he peeps through reeds at the distant vehicles. He grips the plants, readying for another sprint, but feels a squish of fabric in his right hand. In the gloaming, it takes him a moment to understand what he has grabbed. It is a grey, ripped nylon windbreaker with a notched humerus protruding from the sleeve. His left hand grips a strand of curly human hair.

His mind buzzes and sparks, but there is no time for horror. He has left his wife alone at the lakeshore. These birds will kill her if they find her. He rises and shouts, hoping he can be heard above the lake's clamour: "Beth! Beth, I'll bring the car to you!" He dashes out of the stream. "Cackle-cackle-cackle-GONK," comes the call from the sky, and a rush of wings.

It is then he remembers that the Wrangler's keys are in his coat pocket, and his coat is on his wife. He runs ten futile steps, then doubles back. Something heavy lands behind him and hisses. A moment later, he flounders amongst the bulrushes again.

There he crouches. In mud nearby, he spots a pair of bluejeans. All around him, he hears the cranes clicking and splashing as they wade, searching for him. This is where I die, he thinks. Just like whoever this person was. And then they'll find Beth and kill her too.

Through the panic, an idea emerges. Holding his breath, he reaches for the bluejeans. Pulling them toward himself, he turns his head as an awful piece of meat slides from the beltline. With trembling fingers he searches pockets until he finds metal. His breath shudders in relief as he withdraws a key, stencilled with the word "Suzuki." As he pockets the key, something seizes him by the shoulder. A mottled beak yanks him backward. He screams and jerks away, feeling his flesh rip in the hooked bill, then he drops into the stream.

The huge bird looms over him, cackling. He tries to rise, but white feathers clap his face and buffet him over. It snaps at his neck. He kicks its lanky leg. Squawking, it hops backward. He rises and stumbles away.

The run across the salt flat is endless. His head reeling and shoulder bleeding, he cannot think. He hears them circling, calling to each other, but is beyond reacting. Every moment he expects to be bowled over by white wings.

Somehow he gets to the Suzuki. He fumbles with the manual lock, throws himself inside and slams the door. Claws click on the roof. Another lands on the hood of the car. It bends its long neck, and with its yellow eye, regards him bleeding in the driver's seat. With its beak, it gives the windshield a gentle, testing tap.

"They can't get in," he tells himself, panting. His shoulder burns and he wants to rest. But Beth is out there. His muscles complaining, he shoves the key in the ignition. The little engine clatters to life and the cranes flap away. He struggles with the stiff transmission and guns across the salt flats toward the upper reaches of the stream.

As the car bumps over clumps of turf, a voice in his head tells him that only two cranes followed him to the car. It asks him where the rest of the flock went. "No," he tells the voice. The car splashes into the streambed, flattening plants, reeds scraping the doors. On the other side, he flicks on his high-beams and turns the car toward the last spot he saw Beth.

In the lake, near the spot, he spies the flock. They cluster in shallow water, dipping in with their bills, tearing strips of red out. His coat floats in the water. He rolls down the window, shoulder throbbing, and shouts her name, but the noise of the lake swallows his voice.

She's dead. He knows it. But he has to see. And maybe he can run them down. He guns the engine and races toward the circle of birds. When the car nears, they open their wings in alarm. But the Suzuki spins sideways in the

muck by the shore. He brakes and rights the car, but the tires spin. He puts it in reverse and first gear and back again, trying to rock it out, but the tires sink deeper. The birds return to feasting.

He spins the tires until he smells burning oil. He honks the pathetic horn, flicks his high-beams off and on. But the cranes learn to ignore him. He screams at them and watches them eat, pounding the steering wheel. He screams until his voice hurts, then collapses across both front seats, the buckles digging into his ribcage. The car stalls.

He moans in the darkness for hours. The last thing he hears before he falls asleep is the gentle lap of waves and the click of bird claws on his roof as the cranes roost for the night.

At sunup, pale and cold, a back-up beeper awakes him. He peers out the rear window of the Suzuki and sees an old towtruck reversing toward him. It halts, and out of the truck steps Sandy, wielding a double-barrelled shotgun. He fires two blasts into the air. The roosting cranes startle, skitter off the car and flap lakeward. Sandy reloads, watching them scatter.

Tom opens his door and flops out. He drops into the lake and stumbles up. "Help! Help me please!" he wails.

Sandy retreats, alarmed. With uncomprehending eyes, he watches Tom lurch toward him, then raises limp arms. He fires a wild blast. Shot rips into Tom's right leg and groin. He falls into the mud and burbles agony.

Rough hands flip him on his back. Through a fog of misery, he sees the barrels of the shotgun jammed in his face. Sandy snarls above him. But the expression twitches and his grip on the gun trembles. "Aw, dammit," he says. "I can't do it."

Tom is dragged by his arms. Sandy grumbles, "Sorry about this, buddy. But me and them birds got an unofficial arrangement. Every year they come, following the Sandhill flocks. And every year you people come looking for Whooping Cranes. I got out-of-province buyers looking for good parts like on your Jeep there. I got to make ends meet. Understand?" Tom can only moan in response.

He drops Tom in the stubble and watches the sky, his face turning red. He rubs his eyes. "Honestly, who gives a shit about Whooping Cranes?" he shouts in reproach. "What is wrong with you people?"

"Pl ... plea ..." spits Tom.

Disgusted, Sandy treads away, leaving Tom in the grass, staring at the sky. The back-up beeper chimes again. Tom watches Sandy hook the Suzuki to his truck, then drive away. The noise of the engine fades into the empty prairie.

The autumn morning sky is vast and blue. The lake is quiet, save for scattered titters and squeaks of marsh birds. Tom listens to them, and listens to his own heavy heartbeat and uncontrollable groaning. He listens to hours, groaning himself hoarse. And then, across the lake he finally hears it: “Cackle-cackle-cackle-GONK.”

SOLSTICE BLÓT

by Maria Haskins

(Previously unpublished)

My lover is calling for me:

I can hear him through the door (even though it's locked and barred)

I can hear him through the windows (even though they're hasped and shuttered)

I can hear him through the bellow of this bull (even as my blade whispers across
its throat)

He has been calling for me
through the quivering days of summer,
through the gasping fires of autumn,
through the strangled breaths of winter,
and today, I am ready.

I step outside,
wrapped in my love and my desire
tighter than a noose, tauter than my skin,
the staves of my invocation, red and dripping, held firmly in my hands.

A sliver of winter sky glistens above the dark pines beyond the lake:
sun's last gleams, frozen to the treetops
no more of it to come, until the light is pulled unwilling from Earth's womb again.

I follow my lover's call into the woods,
quiet gods watching from the shiver-limbed birch trees,
their eyes bent on me like crows,
their silent beaks closed around the runes and prayers I have already spoken,
have already carved
have already cut into wood and flesh.

I burn and flicker beneath their gaze:
like fever and embers
like oil and wick.

Jagged ice cuts my fingers as I dig into the snow,
into the frozen ground
into the roots and veins and tendrils.
There. There he is. So thin. So gaunt. So cold.
I hold him in my arms, caressing his clavicles,
his femurs, his splintered vertebrae:
scored by knife, hacked by axe, gnawed by wolves.

“Give me your heart,” my lover moans
And I do,
placing it still warm and beating into the shattered cage of fractured ribs,
And when I kiss him, when I speak his name,
my breath slips in between his grinning teeth,
coils of life slithering into his hollowed skull,
waking him again.



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TEEMU

by S.L. Dixon

(Previously unpublished)

Only a gentle golden glare seeped through the cracks around the frame and the even freckling of vent holes. It was a tight fit and it smelled of sweaty gym gear and wet sneakers, which made absolute sense since it was a locker.

An indeterminate amount of time had passed and Jordie's ears suggested that maybe it was safe. Maybe there never was any real danger. They'd done a stupid thing, but possibly not a dangerously stupid thing.

"Or a janitor's playing a trick," Jordie whispered with a voice hardly more than a breath.

Only a few of them knew about the basement. Only a few of them knew about a classmate searching for Teemu. Nobody really thought it was more than a tale big kids tell little kids to give them shivers. That was until Oland went missing and left clues behind him that suggested only one thing.

Neighbors saw Oland enter the school on a Saturday. It would be weird if it was anybody other than Oland, but Oland was a nerd and the teachers and janitors let him hang out in the library on weekends. Funding for the Whitewell town library had run dry and it had had to close down just a year earlier. Oland had lost his haunt and the heads of the school took pity on him.

The police investigation came up with *nothing*. Jordie and his friends never liked Oland until he went missing. Suddenly it was as if someone stole a piece of their group when that boy that never really belonged, disappeared.

Jordie put his ear to the cold steel door and pondered the likelihood of what he thought he heard and what he thought he saw from the corner of his eye before he kicked into gear and sought the shelter up the stairs, down a hall, into a change room and behind a locker door.

Screaming. Growling. Wet snaps. Moans for help.

It was just a gag. It had to be a gag.

There were clues the adults ignored. Oland had three books on loan when he disappeared: *Wolves in Canada*, *Truth Behind the Myths* and *The History of*

Whitewell. Oland's BB gun was gone and so was his lucky meteorite, according to his mother.

None of them, not Jordie, or Willy, or Jasmin or Vanessa believed the stupid shiny, magnetic rock was from space, not until he disappeared, anyway. It was Josie that suggested space rocks were magnetic to metal and intangibles.

Ya know, like it can find stuff people can't see.

They'd all nodded, knowing this was so. It was obvious then.

"Stupid," Jordie whispered. It had been *a real long time* since he heard anything and with every dozen seconds, it became clearer that a janitor played a trick and scared everybody else away. Of course, there was no Teemu the Wolf and if there was, Teemu wasn't living in the basement of the school. "Stupid," he said a little louder and felt into the back of the handle mechanism that opened the locker door.

Willy was the troublemaker of the crew and he had detention Friday after school. He'd made a mess of ketchup and chalk. Although nobody saw him do it, everybody knew it was his handiwork. An outline like old cop movies, but huge, on the cafeteria floor. A ten-foot man-shape splayed out with a white trace while ketchup-blood smeared all over the chest and head.

The janitor made him get a brush and mop from the basement. That was where he found Oland's rock.

The books, the BB gun, now the rock? Teemu's got him, probably ate him ... We'll be heroes when we kill that stupid dog.

Jordie was all for it, in theory. He didn't really believe a mystical wolf somehow tracked down and followed one of the original settlers of Whitewell, not all the way from Finland. That was impossible. Dogs can't swim across oceans, dogs can't fly and not even the most supernatural beast can't teleport. He went along with the search for Oland because it was just something to do.

The locker door clicked and Jordie suddenly had second thoughts. He pulled it tight back and stared at the glow around the frame. What if there was a giant, kid-eating wolf out there and what if his friends were already dead?

"Just wait, probably nothing, just wait," he moaned, his head leaned against the steel door.

They'd set out just after supper. They'd wanted to be sure they'd get in and be alone, supposing the window Willy opened around the back of the school was still yawning. Jordie figured, or maybe hoped, it wouldn't be.

It was and they entered. Willy had led the way to the basement. The stupid stone that may or may not have been Oland's supposed space rock leading him. To Jordie it was like the Ouija game and how you always knew somebody always moved the stupid plank of wood, not ghosts, not spirits.

There was a wooden crate that had no business in the school's basement and Jordie suddenly felt a chill. He scoffed at the others checking out the box and meandered back toward the door and the stairs.

"Just some janitor playing a game," Jordie said a little louder, puffing himself up, "Not no damned Teemu." The steel door handle clicked and the door opened an inch, "Guys? Guys, you out there?"

There was the sound of rusty hinges and Jordie felt his heart drop. He'd stepped back to the staircase door and turned the knob. It was all crap. It had to be.

What's that? Vanessa had asked and Jasmin said, *Like a statue or something.*

Then Willy screamed and there was a wet snarl. The girls whined and Jordie peeked back, thought he saw blood and a long snout with bright white canine fangs.

"Just your imagination and a stupid, jerk-face janitor playing a trick," Jordie said and pushed opened the door to peer around the locker room.

The moans and snapping, lapping like a dog at a water dish, Jordie heard this from a distance as he ran. At the time, it was all so real and his only hope was to get away and hide from Teemu. The Finnish hunter wolf was real and in the school. Stupid Oland disturbed him and then stupid Willy made the whole crew disturb the thing as well.

Not me though, Jordie had whined, tears in the corners of his eyes when he first hid out.

“Not me though,” he said stretching his back, “Didn’t scare me though!” Heavy stomps, he crossed the locker room and swung open the change room door. “Didn’t scare me!” he shouted into the vacant hallway.

From inside the locker, he’d heard the clickity-clack of claws on the waxed stone floor. Those sounds drove icicles into his veins. The meat of his heart threatened to dance itself to death and his cheeks burned hotter than ever before.

Into the hallway, Jordie strode, slowing himself to prove his bravery. It wasn’t just the janitors. His friends were in on it too. They wanted to give him a scare because he was the youngest or maybe because he had red hair, who knows. It didn’t matter because he was onto them.

“Screw you guys!” he shouted and swung open another heavy door.

Teemu the stupid wolf. Dogs can’t swim across oceans. Dogs can’t fly. Teleportation is TV crap.

“Stupid jerks,” he added gathering his bike from the wall at the south end of the school.

The other bikes remained and it was obvious the joke was still on. Jordie huffed and hopped on his Supercycle. See if he’d hang out with them again; yeah right. Their kind of friendship, he didn’t need that, no way.

Jordie lived only a block from the school and was home in just minutes. It was closing in on twilight and Jordie slunk back to his bedroom. His father was in the living room watching the game between the Eskimos and the Tiger-Cats. His mother was in the office on the computer playing Candy Crush.

He switched on Facebook and almost instantly, a message popped up. It was from Willy’s mother, asking if Jordie had seen him.

“Pfft.”

They thought he was stupid. They didn’t fool him. It was surely Willy on his mother’s account.

Another message popped up, this time it was Vanessa’s mother.

Hey Jordie, you see Ness?

Out the window, sirens roared. Cop cars zoomed up the street and stopped abruptly somewhere near the school.

“Nice try. You guys’ll get in real crap making phoney nine-one-one calls,” Jordie said.

Another message popped up, Willy's mother again, *Jordie are you there? You weren't at the school, right? Tell me you weren't.*

"You know I was, dick!" Jordie shouted as he typed.

The landline began to ring.

Something crazy going on! Corina Tanner posted alongside a picture of an ambulance and cop cars outside the school.

Corina Tanner was a high schooler that babysat Jordie sometimes. Not likely someone in on the joke.

"Jordie, Willy's mom is on the phone! She wants to talk to you!"

"Ok, Mom!" Jordie scooped up the telephone next to his keyboard, knowing it was one of the girls pretending to be Willy's mother.

"Tell me he isn't at the school, Jordie!" a loud, adult voice screeched into his ear.

Holy crap, this is nuts! Corina Tanner posted another picture from through her window of paramedics pushed away from the school by the police, gurney empty. One officer had the yellow tape roll in his hands, about to tie off the front entrance.

"Tell me, Jordie!"

Jordie dropped the phone and rose from his computer desk.

"It's impossible, dogs can't swim 'cross oceans ... Teemu couldn't smell that far anyway ... Teemu's not even real. No real wolf could hunt like that, no way."

Behind him there was a rattle, clothes fell from hangers in his mostly empty closet and a hockey trophy teetered and toppled from his dresser. Faintly, Jordie heard a breathy growl.

It was all just a game. A big hoax to really get him. Teemu wasn't real.

"Enough," he tried to shout but hardly wheezed.

The growl grew louder and Jordie closed his eyes, ready to concede.

"Ok, ok, you got me!" he whined.

There was a wet slapping, chop licking.

"Teemu isn't real, nothing could track someone down over an ocean," Jordie shook his head, unwilling to peer upon his bedroom or anything lurking therein.

The slopping sound drew closer and it hit him, the block from the school was a much shorter distance than crossing an ocean.

He opened his eyes and whimpered, "Teemu, please, no."

HEAVEN IS THE HELL OF NO CHOICES

by Matt Moore

(Previously unpublished)

Heaven and Hell are smeared across this city.

Like God and the Devil shat stinking wads of perfect order and imperfect chaos,
ebbing and flowing through hallways and up stairwells,
surging across the sidewalks,
gushing along the boulevards.

Each morning
—safe in the far distant 'burbs—
I double-count the 52-card deck, shuffle it,
and stick it deep in a pocket of my long coat.

Passing under the cavernous Fuller Street Extension overpass,
the unofficial barrier between The City and Not The City,
I take out the deck.

Where there is heaven, the first card off the top is the Ace of Spades.
Below is the rest of the suit—deuce to King—and this order repeats
for Diamonds, Clubs and Hearts.
No matter how long I shuffle, how dexterous my fingers to scramble the order,
when I stop and pull the top card
it's always the Death Card.

But where there is Hell, the cards vibrate against my fingertips
like they want to flee.

I pull the top card
—Seven of Hearts—
put it back on top,
count up to five and pull it again
—Queen of Diamonds.

Like the deck forgets its arrangement, can't remember its order.

I count the deck—51 cards—and recount—53—and recount—49.

Where Hell is strongest, I'll pull the Sixteen of Spades,
which becomes the Eleven of Cats,
which becomes the Queen of Rapists.

Or, while shuffling, cards will disappear one between the others,
collapsing into nothing, forcing me to bring a new deck the next day.

In coffee shops where the cards resist any new order
servers never collide, never get the order wrong, never need to wipe up a spill.
Patrons sip coffee, fork up their eggs and wipe their chins
in perfect, synchronized motions.

In clothing stores where I feel the cards pulse in my back pocket,
the variety on the racks doubles and triples as I browse.

A sweater is too tight,
then with a slight pull at the collar too large
and with another pull it is not the same size or colour or style
or even a sweater.

Patrons appear and disappear, a kaleidoscope of shoppers.
The age of the shop girl/woman/crone helping me won't remain fixed.

On the sidewalks, saints queue up for the bus in geometrically perfect lines
while sinners cannot agree on a destination
(or even if they need to be going there).

In offices, angels collate while demons scatter.

Heaven is the Hell of no choices:
It is the perfect order of an unchanging deity,
who has trapped entropy in an infinite loop.

Hell is the Heaven of choices' impossible number:
A too-many Schrödinger's cats that are alive and dead
and not even in the box.

And as long as I can avoid these smears, these ruptures in Free Will,
I can choose to board the bus that will take me home when the sun finally sets,
shuffling the deck until I emerge in Not The City
and settle into uncertainty's wavering comfort.

STRANGE INK

by Tonya Liburd

(Previously unpublished)

Rising

From the random newspaper pages
Chosen to catch the blood gem's shavings
As I hone it to saleable shape?

The newspaper

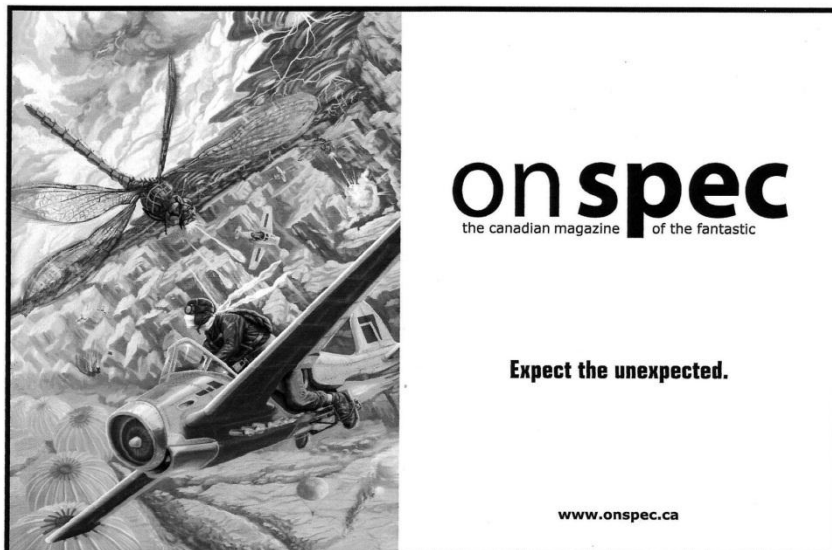
Barely followable or readable now
As the runaway letters
Run away within me

Strange ink

Flowing onto my fingers
Sticking to my skin, biting into it
Making my fingers spasm, jerk
Infusing my blood
Inspiring everything I touch.

Blood red gem

What have you unleashed?



ON GREATNESS AND GOODNESS

by Jason M. Harley

(Previously unpublished)

As before, so it is again.

I turn to you, a vestigial repository of my thoughts, to provide some abstract sense of comfort that I dare not seek from others. For I have sinned. Committed crimes. And escaped the wrath of an entire species, first, through the evangelical title of director of the International Insight Council on Mankind (IICM) and more recently as Prime Minister of the Universal Parliament of Priority Regions. Though this guilty reflection, styled but not executed as a confession, strikes a dogmatic note even as I pen these words in you, my antique notebook, we both know better. My mind and conscience are a barren place scorched of every relief the human mind seeks. I know only that I have tried to serve a greater good. And in doing so, hope-like so many others in positions of power and influence—that I might never witness counter testimony to the human advancement I have brought about through unheard of suffering.

I can still remember quieter nights when sleep was quick to embrace me. The world is so simple for the young. And remains so for the countless men and women who fail to grasp the complexities of power: the inevitable conflicts of interest, the necessity for compromise of one's values, and the need above all else for a ruthless pursuit of one's objectives. I think if I had known the true heart and soul (the terms I used to think of a man's character in) of a *good* AND *great* man I would have concluded that these are mutually exclusive terms. For it is my experience that men and women cease to be truly good when they become great. And if they reach a compromise between the two objectives it is, naturally, at the expense of missed potential in one direction or the other.

But enough excuses. My goodness is overshadowed by my greatness which no man or woman on earth would now dispute, regardless of the metric used to quantify greatness. My influence as a man of science, ruling, as some have said, from the pulpit of the Universal Parliament is as undeniable as the effect my international policies as Director of the IICM have had.

Most would say that earth's dwindling population has never been happier.

But the question I want to ask those who would raise happiness to the pedestal of the singular measure of the worth or value of an existence is this: did you *always* think so? At which point the man or woman would, no doubt, purse their lips in thought. *No*, they would think. "Yes," they would say. And such a train of thought (gleaned from knowing them better than they would dare imagine)

would demand that I follow up my pointless query with a second question: when did you change your mind?

Because they did change their minds; most of them, that is.

When the International Insight Council on Mankind was established to develop a solution to the age-old problem of our unstoppably swelling population and nearly exhausted resources, we were given more leverage than I would have ever imagined. That leverage allowed us to approach the problem both creatively as well as practically. Our first white paper to the governing bodies of earth outlined a bold plan that seemed to creep like the inevitable shadows of evening into the dark ink of its message: we don't need a large population. Perhaps we never did. But now, more than ever, we cannot support *dead wood* if man is to climb out of the gutter of poverty and superstition and return to greatness.

The message was what was expected of us. And when we were all ready, it was delivered by us. The international public figures waited for a witch-hunt, supporting us only peripherally, and ready to throw us into the fires the moment widespread public outcry broke. But the population of earth did little to cast down our harsh measures of population control and the development of a new social system that advantaged only those who had skills to contribute to advancing the human race. Perhaps it sounded too similar to the classic science fiction novels many had doubtless read to sound truly real. Maybe they were too busy handling the day-to-day concerns of their lives in a collapsing economy. Most likely, they all told themselves that *they* wouldn't be targeted by the loosely-perceived brunt side of the policies—not they, with all their valuable skills and knowledge. If so, then *they* were wrong.

Entire continents were turned into ghettos for those without the precious few skills needed to advance and sustain the world Earth needed to become. These ghettos were left to their own devices, but we knew we had in truth sentenced much of the earth's population to a slow death when we turned off the lights. We knew that their administrative and enterprising skillsets would do them no good when what they were managing was their own survival rather than executing pre-established rules. Nor would fierce skills in the private sector necessarily translate to instinct in a world where people would battle for resources with their fists rather than holographic model projections and multivariate investment predictions.

We called the relocations an opportunity to concentrate intelligence and create communities of practice. With the freeze on new births, this seemed to most, to be a way of concentrating and leveraging different types of expertise. Really, I think they were just desperate to believe that any change represented good change for

them. Once the lights went out and the resource shipments stopped from the breadbasket regions, however, they realized their naiveté.

It's been three decades now and *The Chosen*, as we call them amongst ourselves, seem to have either bought into or at least partially forgotten about the events that led them to enjoy a higher standard of living. People have always had a rosy outlook on the past. And that's never truer than when framing the past in silver lining is psychologically adaptive.

I wish I could say that the happiness our surveyed citizens report experiencing, and by all means, seem to feel (we do, after all, have enough alternative bioinformatics to verify and cross-validate such simple reports) makes me feel like everything was for the best. But I can't help but wonder.

Did we need to cast so many out of the glow of civilization? Could we not have helped them transition to a new lifestyle? Perhaps even seen it as an experiment as to whether people could return to a more self-sufficient manner after centuries of inter-reliance and the bloating creep of administrative structure? And is it better now that those men and women who are gone have been replaced with search and survey algorithms and plastic interface and assembly arms? Did we really need to continue to forbid births and transition instead toward state parenting? Are our young citizens missing something in their lives growing up with friends and mentors but without biological parents? And have the wounds truly closed for those who had loved ones separated from them when the great human partition was made and they were never heard from again?

I fear that while our citizens may be both happier and healthier than they ever were in history, and the fate of our species is now also undoubtedly secure that our very essence as human beings—our essential psychology—is being re-written. And I, the author, of this rambling antiquated journal entry, am one of its authors. You—my projected critic—might shake your head and tell me that it is nonsensical to dwell on the past; on ink that has already been committed to history.

And those are the words that I tell myself (how ironic we agree!). But they ring less true every time I hear them. I'm afraid, you see, that they are outright lies. While I may not believe in a god or gods, I am coming to believe that men have no right to assume that role.

So while I will slip into oblivion one year or the next, I will live on, like a god, through my role in history. And the human part: the doubt, the uncertainty, and the guilt—all of that will fade into the shroud of my historic deification.

And there lies my greatest crime: the knowledge that altering the present by facing and trying to atone for my crimes against humanity would be to cast the metaphorical crown from my head. I am, you must understand, too vain and petty

a man; too consigned to the fate I have delivered upon mankind, to reveal the loathsome human being behind the inspiring demigod I have become.

It will fall, as it always does, upon another to right my wrongs.

May those I have helped condemn forgive me for letting my greatness exceed my capacity for goodness.

OH, CRYSTALLINE

by Aaron Miller

(Previously unpublished)

Your distorted reflection from distant directions
Is shimmering in our ice-filled lagoon.
Alluvium salted and my seeing halted,
I stand, and wade for you,
As the trees watch in silent reverence.

Oh! Crystalline memories of ice!
Your hair wet and flowing looks right,
As the night breaks in today
I ponder as I wade away.

As blue turns into black, I know you cannot come back.
For this water is frigid, my dear.
Rough ice floats near me, as I pretend not to be,
I stand, and wade for you.
As the trees watch in silent reverence.

Am I distorted from below?
The waters filthy, you should know,
I bought those ropes long ago,
To hold you down and keep you low.

A YEAR IN SOLITARY

by Michael John Bertrand

(Previously unpublished)

They think I don't know what they did to me. What they're still doing to me. But I do, I DO. I know exactly what those bastards are up to and when I get out, there are going to be a million different flavours of hell to pay.

I know they think I don't know. People have always thought I was stupid just because I am a homely woman with a speech impediment. But I read. I read all the time. I keep up on all kind of stuff. And so I know exactly what kind of bullshit they are up to.

It has to be that bitch Wendy Silcowicz's fault. I'm in that screwed-up brain machine of hers. I always thought her work was creepy as hell, messing with people's sense of time and state of consciousness. She said it was to give terminally ill patients more time to live, but we know differently now, don't we?

Doesn't take a genius level IQ to figure out a technology like that is going to be used to hurt people. So I am sure that when Miss Lady Brain Scientist with the tits-out-to-here came to the government and told them that her device could make someone experience a year in solitary confinement in just twenty minutes, they practically jizzed for joy. Think of all the money they could save on prisons this way! Besides, it was quite "humane." No walls, no cells, no violence, no nasty images to make people question the justice of the system. Just me on a nice clean hospital bed with inducing goggles (like the ones you use at home, folks!) over my eyes.

No doubt to them it looks like nothing more than a brief and pleasant nap. The bastards.

The reality of it is that I have been awake 24 hours a day with nothing to do and nobody to talk to for a long time now. How long? A bit over six months, give or take a subjective day or two.

Sounds cruel, doesn't it? You could never get away with this in the real world. Keep a person in solitary confinement with no exercise, no entertainment, and neither food nor water for a whole year? The rights organizations would shit themselves.

But according to the law, my sentence is only twenty minutes long. By that measure, I am getting off super easy for two "murders" (hey, they're both still alive ... technically ...) so everyone is just fine with it.

In fact, I am convinced there are a lot of beer-swilling pigs out there who think I deserve a lot more punishment for my crimes than just "lying down for twenty

minutes.”

Pigs like my Dad.

Whether or not I come out of my “nap” completely and irrevocably insane doesn’t matter to him or any of those other those jiggling lumps of fat and gristle. Well, I’ll show all those pricks.

From this point on, I will write as much as I possibly can every single day. They left me that, the fools. I can think-type into a file and that file will get saved in the public record.

Maybe they had to do that to meet some obscure legal requirement, but it will be the tool of their own undoing. Having the time to write millions of words proves I really did spend a year in solitary and that what they did to me was unbelievably wrong. Right now (so to speak), the public isn't sure. But once they see my words, there will be no more room for doubt. The game of “it’s only twenty minutes” will be over.

All I have to do is stay strong and keep writing.

Oh, and for the record, no, I don’t regret doing what I did. Not one tiny shiny whiny bit. Pressing the button that wiped the minds of the bitch who betrayed me and the piece of cock who stole her away was the happiest moment of my life.

She’s the one who led me on. She’s the one who made me think I could trust her, tell her everything, share my apartment and my bed with her, raise a dog with her, even let her see the pig and cow who raised me, or at least didn’t quite kill me.

Then this handsome jerk with the killer smile and nine-inch cock comes along, and it’s like I never existed. Sure, living with me isn’t easy ... I’m the first to admit that. But that's no excuse for her to leave me alone ... again.

And the thought of that smug bastard sticking his piece of pork into her makes me so disgusted and angry that I just want to push that button over and over again for the rest of my life.

My lawyers tried to make it look like it was a momentary slip of reason and conscience on my part, and in a way they were right. I didn’t plan it. I hadn’t even formed the intention to harm them in any way until it happened.

There I was, in the control room, and there they were, in the air field induction chamber, and there was the button I could press to send way, way too much current through their brains.

My only defense is that I didn’t think it would fry their brains permanently. I thought it would just cause them a lot of pain. I wanted them to suffer, not go brain dead and slip into peaceful oblivion.

But I guess that's why I am just a technician and engineer for other people’s inventions.

So now the question is: would I have done it if I had known what the result was going to be?

Absolutely.

MEAT PUPPETS

by Lynne Sargent

(Previously unpublished)

They eat the children's dancing skins
To the soundtrack of thunder in the next room over

While I take off your clothes
And your flesh, and make love
To the naked muscles and bones beneath.

We chopped off limbs like they were butter,
Rode dirt bikes through decrepit parking lots
Told campfire stories while watching the gangrene seep into our skin

Crawl its way all the way up to our eyeballs
Until the sunrise only looked like hunger

And now here I am—
At screams and storms and meaty pieces

Bloody, but satiated.

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THIS ROUND ON ME

by *Chris Campeau*

(Previously unpublished)

“It’s blood sausage,” Sigrid said, laughing at Norman’s face. “I’m not sure you would like it.”

Norman shifted on the hard bench. It was all he could do not to stare at the elderly man one table over, tearing his way through a plate of bludgeoned meat. “I had to ask,” he replied, “though now I kinda regret it.”

“If you’re going to be here for an entire semester, you’re going to have to try our food. You know that, right?” Sigrid stared at him with dictator-like playfulness.

“I’ll stick to the sauerkraut,” he said. He let his face slacken and peeled his eyes off the man. As he did the old man stole a glance at their table. In the tough hide of his face were tired eyes, nested in deep, grey alcoves. He examined Norman with a juror’s suspicion, starting at the polished Clarks on his feet and rising to the black tuque that mostly dangled off the back of his head.

“I thought you said this place was a stone’s throw from campus,” Norman said. “My legs are *aching* from that walk.”

“Oh please. You’re an American student. Shouldn’t you have a football thigh or something?” She chuckled, and Norman smirked at her poorly-articulated jab.

“Believe me. If I were an athlete, I wouldn’t have traveled three thousand miles to study life sciences.”

“Ahh,” she replied. “But still, is it not worth it to visit a *haunted* brewpub? That alone is worth the trek across town, no?”

“Haunted? You never said anything about this place being hau—”

An iron bell sounded from the kitchen, and moments later, a heavy-set woman in a navy grosgrain skirt crusaded past the barflies with a steaming plate of slaw. Sigrid gestured to her as she went by, and after serving the plate to a couple in the corner, the woman made her way over. She had a wide face, with matching wide eyes under too much forehead. A blue bandana clung to her scalp at the tip of her enormous brow. Norman was reminded of a painting he had seen of a thin slice of sky above a rising desert dune. The waitress stared down at him with indifference and pulled a pocket-pad from an apron that had probably been white a long time ago.

“Oh, you first.” He directed an open hand toward Sigrid; he hadn’t a damn idea what to order.

The pub was called the Brewer’s Shoe. At least that’s how Sigrid translated it.

To Norman, the peeling decal on the window read only as a series of vowels—total gibberish. The name was fitting, however; it smelled like a worn shoe. That, and stale beer. The floorboards were coated with a glaze of dried mud, and chunks of wet earth started at the door and worked their way to the caked boots that brought them in. Thick rubber soles hung from the bar stools. This was a labourer's waterhole, Norman thought, not a Boston Pizza, and already he had felt too many sets of eyes—hostile, territorial—take note of his presence. He took comfort, at least, in assuming that if need be he could likely recruit any army of spiders to help ward off the no-nonsense barflies, simply by turning up the beer-logged tables. For now, he had Sigrid to back him up, and with luck, the beefy waitress tending to their table. She brought over two beers.

"You'll like it," Sigrid said. She had ordered him a cherished Estonian lager, a black porter, dark as fresh earth.

"It's beer. I'm sure I will," he said, though his words were quickly challenged by a fruit fly figure-eighting over the head of his glass.

"To the Vaim!" She raised her stein with a proud little swing of the arm. The elderly man at the neighbouring table cocked his head at her mentioning of the word.

"To the what?" Norman clunked his glass on the table and took a mouthful. Cold. Delicious.

"The Vaim, Newbie. Didn't you read up on your Estonia travel guides?"

He had and nowhere had he come across such a word.

"The Vaim is a Tartu City legend. It's a spirit. You know, like folklore," she said, looking maddeningly cute in her excitement.

"Right. So a ghost," he said. "The haunt-*er* then, if you will."

"Exactly."

"Ok, well, let's hear it. Tell me the story."

"Well it's not that simple, Newbie. The tale of the Vaim is a long one. If I were to tell it in full, we'd be slurry ... drunk maybe, by the end. We'd have to order more rounds."

"Doesn't bother me," Norman lied, knowing very well that if it could be helped, he'd rather leave the dank pub early than spend all night playing the sore thumb.

"I'll give you the short version." She drew up her sleeves and laid her freckled arms on the table. As she leaned toward him, Norman inspected her eyes—penetrating, and the colour of honey. Her lips were fat and dry, and her skin was shaded like pale beeswax, though perfectly smooth in texture. She had remarkable dimples, the flesh drawn into deep craters at the centre of each cheek.

"The Vaim," she grinned, "was a boy of only eight years ... when he died a gruesome death."

“Some too-many-decades ago, the Supillin district, this district, was a slum. Textiles was the predominant industry of Tartu, and when mill workers weren’t busy dyeing mittens at the plant, they were busy drenching their whistles in town. Brewpubs sprang up around the factory like wildflowers. One brewer and his son built their home here, and the father quickly found work.

One day the man took his son to the brewery to instill in the boy a sense of workmanship. With luck, his son would take a liking to the industry and, when of age, fall into the sud-soaked trade. The boy’s appetite for knowledge quickly became voracious. He pointed to the tanks, valves, and pumps, and presented question upon question to his father, to which his father happily answered as best he could. When they came upon the mash tun, the child froze and marveled at the enormous copper vat. Feverish with excitement, he jolted up the aluminum steps and, with a hop, planted himself on the platform above the tun’s opening. His father handed him the wooden stir-plank, and the boy plunked it into the wet grain. Yet he was weak, as boys are apt to be, and unable to start the plank moving; the bubbling gunk was thick as lead.. His father’s rough hands settled over his and guided the plank in a steady, clock-wise rotation. The two churned the mash in harmony, smelling the sweet tinge of its sugars as they did.

When they had momentum, the father let the boy continue on his own and stepped out of the room to roll tobacco. But he should have known the child was too young, too foolish to be left alone, if only for a moment. The plank slipped from the boy’s grasp. Fearing it would vanish into the mash, he lunged over the edge of the opening. With arms outstretched, the handle just within reach, he lost his balance and tumbled head-first into the tun. The ochre-coloured glop, like a dense quicksand, quickly consumed him.

When the father returned, he first sensed the new aroma in the room, but was unable to identify it. He looked around and called out the boy’s name. He didn’t hear the wet bubble break in the copper tun, as his son’s last breath rose to the liquid surface, nor did he realize that the pungent smell was, in fact, his son’s cooking flesh.

“It’s called Black Death, your beer, and now you know why. It’s an old recipe.” She nodded at the near-empty glass in front of Norman.

“You mean to tell me this Vaim drowned while making ... this beer? I mean, the same brew?”

A group of men two tables over must have heard him utter the infamous word; they looked over in unison. The biggest one, a hulk dressed in overalls and a salty-looking button up, murmured to the others, and the lot of them roared through their beards. Norman felt a drip of sweat leak down his ribs.

“Delicious, isn’t it?” Sigrid laughed and slapped his forearm.

“Do you think we should try another place? Something closer to campus, maybe?” The table of beards let off and turned back to their business.

“They’re harmless,” Sigrid said, “if that’s what’s worrying you. We don’t see many new people in Tartu, that’s all. Half of them won’t be able to make out the backs of their hands, let alone stand, in twenty minutes. They’ll forget all about you.”

Norman recalled the pact he had made to himself before jumping on a Delta 789 to Estonia three weeks earlier: *Take the risk. Take the ride. No page unturned. No opportunity missed.* And here he was, a student abroad, with an impossible opportunity made possible a table’s length from him: he was having a drink with a girl. An undeniably attractive girl. A professor, yes, but one generous enough to invite him out of his dorm. She was a new friend, but maybe something more. She was young, and for all he knew The Brewer’s Shoe was a typical first-date fancy in Tartu. The idea triggered a tender fantasy.

“Norman? We *can* leave if you want.”

“No, no. It’s fine. There’s just no Wi-Fi here, that’s all.” *Idiot. Wi-Fi? Really?* He heard the words but couldn’t believe they had come from his mouth. He focused on summoning whatever confidence still lingered in his gut. “Listen,” he looked her in the eyes, “when the waitress comes around, we’ll order another and stay all night if y—”

Though suddenly he wasn’t sure he could go another round. All at once the first pint hit him like a nauseating heat wave on garbage day. *Since when are you a lightweight? Seriously, Norman?* He wasn’t a boozier by any stretch (a six’er would do him in), but he could handle a beer, couldn’t he? Black Death, she had called it. It could be a high percentage. He had tried a similar pint called Doom’s Day at the university bar in Minnesota, and it had swiftly stunned him into a coma.

The table began to swell beneath his hands. The faces in the room lost their clarity. Norman removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and put them back on. Still fuzzy.

“I’m ... wow, that’s a strong beer,” he said. Or thought he had. The words had really come out something like *‘Hyme woww, thaaza srongg brr.’*

Sigrid’s features dissolved into ill-defined blocks, transforming her face into a botched abstract of flesh tones. Within seconds, she was unidentifiable. The room grew shadier, and the cobbled walls began to creep toward one another. Norman saw movement in his peripherals and slowly, as if it were cast in bronze, turned his head. The old man had removed the flax ring hat from his skull and held it against his chest. With his other hand, he lifted a black beer and saluted Norman.

The man had finished his meat; only a swirl of oil and blood was left on the ceramic plate. His lips parted in a menacing sneer, revealing more holes than teeth. The man began to chuckle something giddy, sounding like a chipmunk, only riddled with cancer.

“Norman?”

He dragged his head around to the fleshy blur across the table.

“It’s been nice, really,” Sigrid said. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t understand. *He* wanted to apologize. He opened his mouth to speak, and cords of spit fell to the table.

The bar emptied, but the locals, now sufficiently sauced, didn’t go home. They smoked tobacco, chewed and spat it, and drank and swayed impatiently together. In the bar’s back room, they waited for the American boy to wake up.

Norman was on the ground, his t-shirt bunched into a knot between his shoulder blades. Hardwood burned at his back. He tightened his abdomen and angled himself up. His legs were bound, elevated, and held in a bone-splintering grip by a set of broad hands. They were big hands, but not a man’s. They belonged to a navy skirt, swishing above a pair of smooth, bloated legs. The waitress.

She labored Norman’s body forward to the tune of her deep, husky breathing. Double doors swung open as she threw her shoulder into them, and the hardwood turned to beaten concrete. A ragged crevice bit into the flesh of Norman's back. He yelped at the pain and, for a moment, almost believed he was awake. He let his head back down, let it bobble across the cement, and to his right saw a congregation of feet. Ten—no, twenty sets of muddied boots. Roughly, he was hoisted up and propped onto a small wooden chair, surrounded by a semi-circle of drunk, curious spectators. Behind them, large steel vats stood twice their height and over six feet wide.

Norman’s vision began to sharpen, he began to come to, and the faces enclosing him lit up with childish exhilaration. They cheered and hollered, and Norman saw the bearded men from the pub clank their drinks together. Foam erupted from the mouths of their steins like waves breaking on a rock face. A haggard old woman, whose face was grainy under the hood of a bonnet, lit up a cigarette and drew a deadly breath.

Norman went to stand, but his bound legs only wobbled like a pool noodle under his weight. He lost his balance and went face first into the concrete. He bit his tongue hard upon the impact and tasted warm iron filling his mouth. The crowd clapped and howled. Glasses clanked, and in the corner, someone was

vomiting.

A girl raised her voice above the crowd, and it fell silent at her command. Norman recognized the voice, despite the foreign tongue. Sigrid advanced toward him, and as the crowd spread for her, he saw an enormous, copper-coloured kettle—some sort of steam punk-looking relic. Panic tore through his stomach. An unknown from the crowd yanked him to his feet and held him to face Sigrid.

“The Brewer’s shoe is the oldest brewpub in Tartu, Norman,” she said. “You’re standing in a room where a century of celebrated beer has been produced ... though not without cost. There is a price to pay for quality. The good folk of Tartu know that.” She gestured to the loaded peasants leaning on one another. “We make the offering and in return are blessed with a year of good batches—aromatic, flavourful, hoppy with balanced undertones, clean, delicious. You get the idea; hell, you tried one yourself. This is the cycle. This is how it’s been for decades.” She moved into him, and he felt the curve of her chest against his. She looked him over with her big, toffee-coloured eyes and held a soft hand to his cheek.

The room stood stationary as Sigrid hesitated. Something like vague regret flashed across her face. It left, and with it, traces of any emotion whatsoever. “The Vaim demands remembrance,” she said.

The crowd erupted, and he was pushed into them by whomever had been holding him up. Hands reeking of beer and smoke latched onto his shirt and jeans and lifted him skywards as the horde began a menacing chant. “*Vaim Vaim Vaim Vaim ...*”

He was carried up a flight of steps to a platform adjacent the copper vat. Sigrid looked up at him from the base of the steps, her mouth moving in unison with the chorus. Norman thrashed about and caught glimpses of faces in the sea of hands beneath him. The old man from the pub was cackling with eagerness, fondling Norman’s ribs with his bony fingers.

The assembly halted at the opening in the tun. The chanting picked up speed. Norman saw the yellow mash start to bubble, first slowly, then steadily in sync with group’s beckoning.

“*Vaim Vaim Vaim Vaim ...*”

They lowered Norman’s body onto the edge of the safety railing. Hot steam flooded his face. Inside, a head was emerging from the mash, sweltering and dripping.

“*Vaim ... Vaim ... Vaim ...*”

The head quickly became a face—once boyish, now yellow, waterlogged, and pulpy. A fold of scalp hung rippled to one side, like it had simply slid off. Bone gleamed through strands of black hair plastered to skull. Its lips were swollen yet decaying, like a wet donut picked at by mice. Only now was Norman aware of his

screaming.

The Vaim grabbed at him with strong, ancient hands and pulled him in. From below, Sigrid's voice rose above the rest, thundering the words.

The locals continued to loiter long after the last bubble broke in the tun. It would be a good year for beer. From the base of the vat, Sigrid looked up with relief in her eyes, awaiting anxiously the taste of many pours, of many pints, all sure to be satisfying.

GOODNIGHT

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

She looks at me
with big brown eyes
*Remember, Daddy,
the time we died?*

I tuck her in.
She shuts her eyes.
I say goodnight.
She says goodbye.

No, sweetie,
we say goodnight.
*But, daddy, it's
goodbye this time.*

I pull up the covers.
She says from her bed,
*remember the men
that cut off our heads?*

*when you were with mommy,
in the village shop,
and they came with swords?*
Then she mimes the chop.

I shush her quiet,
ask her to sleep,
hoping she stops
her disquieting *peeps*.

She's almost sleeping,
and with a sigh her
tired voice whispers,
we died in a fire

last time, daddy.
What do you mean?
*Don't you remember
the burning dream?*

If we should die
before we wake,
I think she will
remember why.



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A WEEKEND AT THE SEASIDE

by *Betty Rocksteady*

(Previously unpublished)

The beach was empty and gray. Mark's heart ached. This *could* be romantic, if Leanne would only let it.

"It's freezing," she said, and let go of his hand. Her pace quickened and he trailed behind. "I wish we were here last weekend. It was beautiful last weekend."

"This was the only week I could get off."

"I know," she looked back at him, eyes wide with innocence. "I just mean ... it's awfully late in the season for a vacation. We're the only people here."

He caught up to her and rested his hand against the smooth curve of her back. "I think it's kinda nice, just the two of us."

Leanne's smile was forced, "Yeah, but what are we supposed to do? We should have made it a couple's weekend... but, I guess everyone else took their vacations earlier."

"I don't need anyone else here to have fun. I like being with you."

Leanne's silence hung in the air, heavy and uncomfortable.

"Hey, look," Leanne said, pointing into the distance, "There's someone else here!" Mark squinted, and at the other end of the beach he saw a couple in beach chairs, staring out at the waves. He hoped they were having a better time than he was.

Leanne grinned, "Let's go talk to them. We could invite them back to have a beer with us if they're cool."

"We don't even know them."

"Oh, come on! That's the fun of traveling, right? Meeting new people?"

"You'd know better than I would."

"What else are we going to do tonight? Drink alone and play cards?"

"That doesn't sound so bad to me."

Leanne rolled her eyes and continued towards the couple, "Where's your sense of adventure? God, we don't have to marry them or anything. We'll just go say hi." Mark followed her reluctantly. As they approached, the man stood and waved.

"Howdy!" he called.

Leanne waved back. "You guys been out here long?"

"Oh, a long time indeed," the man called. His companion remained seated, turned away from them. Mark understood how she felt.

Leanne drew closer to the couple. "I'm Leanne, and this is Mark,"

“Well, howdy, folks. It’s nice to see some other people around. I had a feeling someone would be showing up today. I’m Arthur, and this is my fiancé, Marina.”

For once, Leanne was at a loss for words. Sitting in the chair next to Arthur was a mass of driftwood, shell, bone, and seaweed. Bits and pieces of the sea’s discards had been arranged in the rough shape of a woman. Seaweed limbs were knotted to a fishbone torso. A large piece of driftwood loomed where her face should be, the eyes and mouth carved out and gaping. Shards of shell and sea glass decorated the effigy.

A glance at Arthur was not reassuring. His eyes were wide and insane, set in a thin, filthy face. He stared unblinking at Leanne.

Mark grabbed Leanne’s hand, tugging her away. “Well it’s very nice to meet you both. We won’t bother you further.”

The surprise in Leanne’s eyes was replaced with a dark amusement. “This is your fiancé?” she said, “This pile of garbage?” Mark was mortified, but Arthur didn’t seem bothered. He caressed Marina’s wooden face tenderly.

“It is indeed. She and I are meant for each other. It’s wonderful that you’re here, tonight is our wedding night. Will you both come?”

“Oh, we’d love to, but we have plans,” Mark said.

He tried to lead Leanne away but she walked slowly, laughing. “It sounds like a fabulous affair. I presume there will be dinner and a band? Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Leanne,” Mark hissed, “Don’t. Not right now.”

Arthur's smile didn't waver. Mark kept a firm grip on Leanne’s hand as they walked away. Once they were out of earshot, Mark’s anger spilled out. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What’s your problem?” Leanne spat, “He’s just some crazy guy, who cares?”

“You don’t know that. He might be dangerous. I want to get out of here.”

“Oh Mark, I’m sure it’s fine.”

Mark glanced back over his shoulder. He expected Arthur to be sitting in his chair in the distance, but he was only a few metres back, running through the sand. The sun reflected a beam of light from the large fishing knife clutched in his hand.

“Leanne, run!”

In his panic, Mark didn’t see the driftwood in front of him and stumbled over it, sprawling across the sand. Arthur squatted above him, still grinning wide. He was stronger than he looked, and he pulled Mark’s head back by the hair to expose his neck. The knife was sharp and quick, and the sand beneath them turned red.

Leanne didn't make it much further. Arthur was fast. There was a sudden pain and everything went mercifully black.

The moon was huge and red in the sky. The waves were loud in her ears. Her wrists ached, pinned above her. Arthur kneeled beneath her feet to kiss Marina's wooden face, murmuring something.

"Please, let me go, I'm so sorry."

"We've been waiting so long for this." Arthur was pale in the darkness. Waves licked Leanne's feet and Marina's seaweed limbs undulated in the water. The tide beneath her was shallow, but filled with life. Fish cavorted and danced through the cold water, nipping at her toes.

Arthur's breath was fishy as he kissed Leanne gently on the lips. She tried to turn away but Arthur cupped her chin to gaze into her eyes as he sliced through her throat. Blood spilled down her body and dribbled into Marina's gaping mouth. Marina twitched, and Leanne closed her eyes.

The ocean sang as Arthur and Marina danced.

SHE WONDERS

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

why are the doctors wearing that gear?
she wonders, staring at the cold white walls

if there's really nothing to fear
why are the doctors wearing that gear?
and why can't anyone visit her here?

since their most recent planet-fall
she's felt a little off, is all
but why are the doctors wearing that gear?
no answers, just cold white walls.

OWLMAN

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

Imagine a five-foot owl
with fiery red eyes perched
on the ramparts of your church.

Worse, imagine the creature
drawing a bead on you,
unfolding huge grey-feathered wings.

You swear Owlman's hooting your name;
your hair colour changes through
two shades of grey to white—

As if your essence were being
drawn up a straw of some teen's
swamp water mix of pop emotions.

Not Mothman, at least; it ain't
about to snag your boisterous beagle.
just—huff luff—glides over you.

East of intentions, west of of retrieval,
a bird man with twelve-foot wing span
who looks just like an owl.

No presence of mind to pull
your cell phone from your purse
to take a snap shot.

No time for that—only the chance
to drop your jaw and gawk
while blood runs back into your toes.

MAKE ME A MONSTER

by Jon Gauthier

(Previously unpublished)

The East End is a pit, bleak and boiling with filth. A grim and disease-filled wound that has been left to fester on London for far too long. Crooked, dirt-smearred faces peer at him with desperation as he trudges through the streets. They are joined by greying, up-turned palms and ragged pleas for scraps of bread. It is a sea of despair. But he ignores it all, completely immune to suffering now. It has been a constant his entire life—ever since the day he'd been created—and its presence is of little effect, no more noticeable than breathing or blinking.

He knows that another side of the city exists. One of polished brass and rich leather that sparkles in the midday sun. A place where great minds ponder meaningful issues, and bellies grow fat, and children live past infancy. A place that always floats just out of his reach. Oh, how he longs to be a part of it. To live among the men, women and children that bustle and scurry all around him on the odd occasion that he actually ventures away from the rank and greasy streets of Whitechapel. But no one wants him. No one ever even really sees him. He's become so good at hiding in the shadows that he is all but invisible now.

A boy and girl sit on the stoop of his flat, foul and stench-ridden. They stroke a skeletal cat that is missing more fur than it has, and is pocked with angry red sores. He shoos them away, unable to ignore the looks of disgust that fall upon them as they catch a glimpse of his face.

"E's a ghoul!" the boy cries, his voice full of sludge and poison. He and the girl quickly gather the cat and scamper into the alley, shrieking with fear and amusement. With a sigh, he pulls a key from his pocket and unlocks the front door.

E's a ghoul ... It's a storm of angry hornets in his mind. Over the years—the decades—he's learned to ignore such words, their teeth being filed down to thin flakes. The pain they'd once caused is now dull and muted, a distant memory hiding deep within a foggy corner of his mind. Some days, though, the words still hurt. Some days, their bites were as sharp as ever. The creature steps into his home and falls back against the door, his massive body slamming it shut. He slides down to the floor and puts his face into his hands.

"After all this time, father," he whispers to no one. "All this time and I'm tormented still?" He begins to weep, letting the tears fall freely into his hands. The tears always help him feel better—feel human.

“Why?” It comes out in a torrent, its fury filling every corner of his dark and silent house. He knows that passersby would have surely heard him. They would turn their heads briefly, curious as to what commotion was going on in that small house where the large ugly man lived alone.

Man. The word—the very concept—is his greatest foe. A black goblin constantly clawing at him. Relentlessly taunting him with sharpened sticks and maniacal cackles. For 70 years he’s been beaten and battered by his pursuit of that word. Now, with a broken body and a rotting mind, he knows he is ready to accept defeat—to let the word escape him forever and allow himself to revert to what he knows in his heart he really is.

With a groan of old age and exhaustion, he rises to his feet and shambles to his writing desk. He’d built the desk himself—painstakingly crafted it over two months out of solid English oak. He’d measured, cut, and fitted each piece with almost manic precision, and polished the wood until it gleamed like marble. He’d put every ounce of effort and passion he had into the desk. It was as if he’d been channeling his father—a man whose obsession with being God had led to his very creation.

He’d tried to dismantle the memory of his father. Like constructing the desk, it had been a slow and meticulous process. From the moment the man had died, sick and terrified in the bowels of that frozen ship, all the way back to the very moment they’d first locked eyes—and he’d seen that flicker of terror that would become all too familiar as his life wore on—each memory had to be carefully erased, sanded away like the rough patches of an otherwise smooth wooden surface. But it had been a wasted endeavour. The harder he’d tried to destroy the memories, the stronger they’d become. So, he’d learned to live with them. Like his grisly stitched-together face and his crooked gait, the memories are things he simply has to bear—penance for his father’s blasphemous deeds.

He pulls a stack of envelopes from his breast pocket and sets them on the desk. After he’d fled Walton’s ship, he’d come to London and purchased a flat with the sizable sum of money he’d amassed in his travels. He took out a weekly advertisement in the *Western Mail*, offering his services as a composer of love letters and poems. Of all the things he’d yearned and searched for throughout his life, love had always been the most elusive, and the one subject he’s studied the most. His need for it kept him constantly ill, angry, and miserable, and the only way he could come close to knowing what it felt like was to become an expert in it. He’d studied every text he could find on the subject. Every book, poem and sonnet was committed to memory. With this knowledge, he is able to write gorgeous and heartfelt messages for all who ask, many of them recommending his services to

their friends and colleagues. It is a simple and thriving business that keeps him housed, fed, clothed, and, most importantly, occupied.

He removes his overcoat and settles into the worn leather chair, stirring up a sour waft of sweat and uncleanness.

And death.

His mind goes back. Back to the boy and the Clerval man. Back to his father's bride.

Back to Polly.

One month ago.

Only another few blocks and he'll be home. The silk sky and silver moon frown down at him as he stumbles through the night. His breath is foul with whiskey and vomit. He raises the half-empty bottle to his lips and takes another long warm swallow.

"Fancy a quick one, love?"

His eyes move to the source of the voice and he sees a woman on the other side of the street. She is leaning back against a brick wall, one side of her tattered dress pulled up high enough to reveal a broad, cream-coloured thigh. Heat stirs in his belly and loins. It's a sensation he's felt only a few times before, and, even then, those times are so far back in his youth that he can hardly recall them. He walks towards her, his face lowered to the street, hoping that the darkness will keep him hidden.

"Damn lodgin' 'ouse put me on the street," the woman says. He is only a few feet from her now, the bottle shaking in his hand.

"I got a jolly bonnet on an' everything, and they still don't let me in."

He stands before her in silence, awash in a jumble of childlike foolishness and incinerating desire.

"You got money or what?" Her voice is laced with impatience.

"I have," he says. His heart flutters and his face goes hot. He can't remember the last time he's spoken to a person. He reaches into his coat pocket and retrieves a few coins. As he hands them to her, their fingers touch, and fire consumes him. He is desperate to take hold of her. His heart and stomach tumble with excitement.

"They call me Polly," she says. "Why don't you let me get a look at you?" She reaches for his hood, meaning to pull it down.

"No," he cries, slapping her hands away. Though he can't see her face, he knows it's now twisted with confusion and apprehension. She lowers her hands.

“Now, now, love,” she says, her voice much smaller now. “You can ’ave it your way.”

She lifts her dress up higher and he can see between her legs. It’s the first time he’s ever seen this part of a woman. He begins to feel sick as she slides her other hand into the front of his trousers. She takes hold of him and he pushes her away immediately, a bestial grunt escaping his throat.

“What’s wrong with...” She stops speaking when he pulls down his hood and raises his eyes to meet hers.

“See me,” he whispers.

Her eyes and mouth go wide. “Lord in ’eaven.”

And then she’s screaming and he’s suddenly brought back to his childhood. He thinks of the family in the cottage—their names now long forgotten—and the fear and hatred that consumed them the day they burst through the door and saw him.

“Someone ’elp! ‘E’s a freak. ‘E’s got the leprosy!”

He smashes the bottle across her temple, desperate to stop her screaming. She’s on the ground in an instant, her eyes glazing over and her scream now dissolved to a low moan. He kneels beside her, the neck of the broken bottle still in his hand, and draws the shattered end across her stomach, and then again across her throat.

It all comes back to him. All the ones from his youth. He hasn’t killed anyone since them. But now, in this moment, a familiar feeling of calm envelopes him like warm bathwater. A deep and ancient part of his mind knows that this is his true calling. He stares into her glassy eyes, feeling the blood pool at his knees.

Suddenly, there’s a boisterous cry from the other end of the alley—drunks on their way from a public house. He quickly gathers all the pieces of broken glass he can find and dashes into the darkness, a smile now painted onto his face for the first time in decades.

He takes hold of a gleaming brass knob and slides open the top desk drawer. The motion is fluid and silent and infuses him with a deep satisfaction. He slips a blank sheet of correspondence paper from the top of a neatly piled stack. He sets it on the surface of the desk and closes the drawer, reveling again in the butter-like smoothness of the mechanism.

She’d been the first. The newspapers had said her name was Mary Nichols—though she’d called herself Polly—and that she had been mutilated. He’d become angry upon reading that embellishment. He’d only cut her twice—hardly enough to be considered a mutilation. The newspapers had also said the police were

investigating a potential suspect who was being called Leather Apron. He doesn't know how or why this connection had been made, but it doesn't matter. They will all know who he is soon enough.

Three weeks ago.

She's so much like Mary, reeking of sweat and male foulness. Her clothes worn and dull. Her face a mess of gaudy powders partially concealing dark bruises. Hood raised, eyes fixed on the cobblestone, he approaches her.

"I'm off duty for the night," she says, her voice dull with irritation and exhaustion.

Then there's a flash of moonlight upon hungry steel and what follows is like a dream. He's through her throat in an instant. Blood erupts from the furrow and spills down her neck and chest like an unfolding curtain. Her eyes go wide with surprise and horror and he raises his own eyes to them. He clutches a handful of her hair and pulls her face to his.

"See me," he says.

Her response is watery and incomprehensible, garbled by desperate chokes and gasps. She paws at her slashed throat. When it's finally over, he lowers her to the street and sets to work with his knife—slicing, shredding, tearing.

Ripping.

When he slinks back into the night, she's a macabre tableaux laid upon a red and black pool. Stomach flayed. Innards draped across her shoulders. Pieces missing altogether.

Her name had been Annie, and the response to her murder had been instant and uproarious. The public was terrified. The police were furious. The newspapers were frantic. Everyone was searching for Leather Apron, desperate to find him before another killing could occur.

He picks up his fountain pen, noticing almost instantly that it is much heavier than the knife that sits to his left, cleaned, recently honed, and waiting. Pieces of Annie float in jars of formaldehyde to his right—the beginnings of a collection. Maybe, from somewhere in the afterlife, his father will see his newly discovered passion and finally accept him as his son.

'E's a ghoul!

He is now. And he'll go out again in a couple of days. Then again. He'll do it again and again and soon all of England—no, the world—will come to know his new name.

The love letters can wait, he decides. He'll write a different letter first.

He presses the tip of the pen to the paper and watches as the ink begins to seep into the fiber like a bloodstain on a sheet. Then, with jagged strokes, he etches out the first two words:

Dear Boss

A FRIGHTENING METAPHYSICAL PUZZLE

by J.J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *Illumen*)

When confronted by the stranger
demanding answers or else
a fate worse than death
is it better to be philosophical or practical
honest or deceptive?

The stranger, I should add,
is unearthly and sinister
with a gunlike apparatus
you don't recognize
but assume is as functional
as any worldly weapon.

The questions, of course,
strain your intellectual grasp
and life-time of this-planet experience,
questions that even astute theologians
and proficient game-show contestants
would have difficulty with.

Trembling, you answer question
after question, adrenaline somehow
conjuring up knowledge and wisdom
stumble on the tenth one
a frightening metaphysical puzzle
and pray that the gunlike apparatus
isn't loaded.

BLOODTHIRST

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

I held your heart in my hands
still beating, warm, more alive
than you had been for a long while

I watched the Aztecs dance across the plain
seeding your blood throughout the maize
you will grow here, forever young, renewal

You satiate a hunger for life, become immortal
enriched, you have saved many lives with one
yes I sacrificed you for the greater good

I will live to tell your tale

LINES FOUND IN NYARLATHOTEP'S NOTEBOOK

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

I use what means are needed
for the time and for the place,
a thousand little changes,
in my costume, name, and face.
But human minds are simple
and they bend to ancient will,
or break in blazing torment,
as my creatures drink their fill.
Weakened, first by science,
with its shining hopes and dreams,
then flayed by rotting horrors,
oozing trails of pus, and screams.

SHADOW MAN

by Matthew Hughes

(Previously published in SF&F)

For as long as he could remember, Damien Bonnespine knew somebody was there, watching him.

Not all the time. There were long spells between the moments when he would feel the shiver across his shoulders that made his neck hairs stand up. But eventually it would happen again and he'd know they were back. Then for the next few minutes he'd feel them watching him.

He couldn't see them, and he always thought of them as a crowd of shadow men—no faces, no details, just vague silhouettes with shaded eyes turned his way. When he was little it had creeped him out, but nothing bad ever came of it. He didn't feel threatened, just watched.

When he was nine he told the mom. She gave him the same scared but careful look he already recognized, even back then, as a signal that some of the thoughts that slowly bubbled up to break at the surface of his mind were best kept unsaid. Thoughts about pain and how animals squirmed and yelped when things happened to them. How interesting it would be to know if people squirmed and yelped like that.

When Damien was fifteen, the mom found the cat trap and the stuff he kept in a box way back in the crawl space under the house. She took him to a doctor. There were machines and needles and stupid pictures he had to look at and talk about, but some of the doctor's other pictures were way cool—dead people, and some who were not dead yet, but were opened up like the cats, showing slick red meat and yellowy bones.

One time, while he was looking at the pictures and talking about them, he felt the familiar chill across his shoulders and the tickle of hairs lifting. The doctor must have seen something in Damien's face because he said, "What are you thinking now?"

Damien told him. The man made notes on his pad and asked a lot more questions. "Were there voices? Do the voices want you to do things?"

Damien said there were no voices but he didn't think the doctor believed him. They made him take pills that filled his head with cold, silent noise. He couldn't think and sometimes when he tried to talk the words got lost for a while. He stopped going to school but the mom got him lessons from the school board to do at home and a computer that connected to a tutor. But one day he was so

interested in a picture he had found on the Internet that he didn't hear her come in until she was looking over his shoulder. She took the machine away.

Now, at eighteen, Damien Bonnespine used the public library's computers to look at pictures. His interest had broadened and he read about interesting people: Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, Richard Ramirez, Frank Spisak. He was living in an abandoned butcher's shop near the cement plant. Some other kids slept in the rooms upstairs but they let Damien have the downstairs all to himself. He had stopped taking the pills and now his head was hot and busy again.

It was morning and Damien was thinking about the new girl who had come back to the squat with the others yesterday. She was only thirteen and her button nose and slanted, almond-shaped eyes reminded him of a cat. He was sitting on the old counter top, the wood scarred with cuts and scratches, letting his thoughts circle the girl when he felt the familiar shivery prickle.

He paid no attention, concentrated on the pictures in his head. Then he caught a flutter of motion to one side. He didn't turn toward it, just let his head drift a little in that direction until, from the corner of his eye, he saw the shadow man.

It was like seeing something on TV when thunderstorms screwed up the reception: a man shape, dark but without detail of features or clothing, speckled with dots that flickered and flashed. Damien turned his head an inch more and saw that the staticky man was not watching him now. He was bent over, poking at something where his waist would be.

The years of catching cats had made Damien very fast. He set himself, inhaled a long, deep breath—then, as he let it out, he threw himself from the counter top and crossed the room with one long stride and a flying leap.

His outstretched hands sank into the dots and sparks and met cloth-covered flesh beneath. The man squawked and tried to pull free but Damien yanked the shadow man toward him while shooting his head forward like a striking snake so that his forehead connected hard where the watcher's face should be. He felt bone snap and heard a gargly yelp.

The man was not big but Damien was. He lifted the watcher off his feet and slammed him against the door of the long-gone butcher's walk-in cooler, did it again and again until the body flopped loose in his grip.

He let it slide to the floor. It was still flickering and winking but that was the only movement. Damien reached into the static and felt around the waist where the man had been poking. He found a belt with a row of studs on it, traced his fingers along its length to a clasp. He undid the fastener and pulled the belt free.

Now his hand was encased in a blur of light and dark. Damien felt for the studs, pressed them singly and in combinations, but the effect didn't change.

Then the belt gave a hiss that became a hum that grew louder before it abruptly stopped. The sparks and shadows disappeared and Damien could see his hand again. It was holding a strip of metallic fabric set with a panel of buttons. From the panel came a smell of fire and ozone.

Damien poked at the controls some more but the thing was dead. He turned his attention back to its owner and saw a small man with a sharp-featured face that put Damien in mind of a ferret. He had been pretty bald for someone so young but Damien could tell from the interesting angle of his neck that he wouldn't have to worry about getting any older.

The body was wearing a one-piece jumpsuit with a peculiar fastening system down the front. There were pockets but nothing interesting in them. Tied to one wrist by a looped cord was a small, flat oblong of metal about half the size of a cigarette pack.

Damien freed the object and examined it. He identified what looked to be a lens and next to it a pinpoint microphone. There were controls etched into the side and the upper surface. He touched them. At first nothing happened, then suddenly a screen appeared in the air, crowded with symbols and icons. There was writing, too, but Damien couldn't read it. It looked vaguely Chinese.

Damien reached out a finger to one of the icons. Dozens of thumbnail images flooded the scene, and when he touched one of the miniatures it expanded to fill the viewing space and the figures in it began to move.

Damien recognized the scene: the attic in Gacy's house. He'd seen a TV movie about it but they hadn't shown anything interesting. But now, as he watched, he understood. This wasn't a movie. This was real.

He found how to minimize the image and touched another of the main screen's icons. He watched, fascinated, for a few moments. That was Dahmer's kitchen. There he was at the stove, humming. Another selection and Damien was watching Bundy creeping into a darkened bedroom. Then a man he didn't recognize, in a city where the cars flew, and another in some place where the sky was red.

He ran through the entire menu, sampling, mentally marking the ones he wanted to come back to first. Until an image brought a sharp intake of breath: the cramped space beneath his mother's house, a figure lit by a flashlight kneeling in the back corner, putting on his heavy gloves to lift a spitting, struggling tabby out of the trap.

He watched his juvenile self, reliving the memory. Then he canceled the image and chose another: looking at the pictures in the doctor's office; then the time with the stray mongrel and the propane torch.

But there were pictures he didn't remember, couldn't have remembered. They showed a Damien grown into his twenties, into his thirties, showed him in places he'd never been, with people he hadn't met yet.

He turned his eyes from the screen and regarded the body slumped against the grimy wall. Damien had never known what people meant when they said they regretted things they'd done. Now he almost understood.

He wished he could talk to the man. They had had a lot in common. As he dragged him into the cooler, Damien felt that it had been—he sought for the right word, then found it—an *unfortunate* way to treat his first fan.

He turned back to the images of the future Damien, watched the way he did things, how he controlled the situations. He thought again about the girl with the cat's eyes and began to make some mental notes.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

From: **Holly Schofield** – (04 Nov 2016)

Issue #3 is awesome! Proud to be in it!

The Graeme: Thank you. Your fans can look forward to your story Touring Test which will appear in the upcoming 5th issue circa November/December this year.

From: **Darren Ridgley** – (04 Nov 2016)

Thanks Graeme, I've pushed the link on Twitter and Facebook! Issue (#3) looks great.

I was reading over the opening editorial and just had a question: are you now taking submissions from people who are a little more established? I know another writer in the city quite well, who isn't a pro but has had work picked up in a number of smaller outlets. Because of that I didn't think he'd be eligible to submit to PB under the terms as I understood them, but is that not the case anymore?

The Graeme: For some reason I always find it difficult to write exactly what I mean to convey. Hence the editorial perhaps not comprehensive or clear enough.

Roughly in order of priorities:

It's a given I'm after Canadian authors.

Ideally, I'd like as many as possible to be beginners making their first sale.

But I accept original stories from beginning writers who've already published but are still in the early stages of their writing career.

I will accept original stories from not-quite established authors who are approaching pro-status.

I will accept original stories from the occasional pro.

And, depending on available space, not to mention quality of story, I will contemplate accepting reprints by all of the above.

In sum, I have my priorities and preferences in the back of my mind, but I will at least consider accepting originals and reprints from any Canadian writer.

So, no problem in receiving a submission from your friend. Then it's simply a question of whether I like it enough to want to publish it.

However, your friend will need to wait till I re-open my submissions window. Since the next issue is full up, I won't be doing that till November this year. On the other hand, this gives your friend time to write a really superb story. Not to mention I will be open to seeing more from you!

From: **Gregg Chamberlain** - (03 Feb 2017)

That is just such a beautiful cover (#3). Cannot wait to read the contents. Will get me some more donations to the GoFundMe as soon as I can.

The Graeme: Thank you! Every donation helps Polar Borealis continue to appear.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Colleen Anderson

My poetry has been twice nominated for the Aurora Award, the Rhysling, and won second place in the Crucible and Rannu competitions. I have co-edited two anthologies and will be editing a third this year. Some new and forthcoming poems are in *Devolution Z*, *The Future Fire*, *Eternal Haunted Summer* and *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*. My speculative poetry collection *Ancient Tales, Grand Deaths and Past Lives* is available through Kelp Queen Press.

Michael John Bertrand

A Year in Solitary is Michael's third story sale. His self-published novel *The Scattered Man* is available on Amazon.

Chris Campeau

Chris is an Ottawa, Canada-based writer and lover of all things horror and strange. His short fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Spine Online*, *Deadman's Tome*, and *Polar Borealis*. His first children's book, *The Vampire Who Had No Fangs*, is available via Amazon.

www.chriscampeau.com

Jeremy A. Cook

A freelance bard, he composes fiction and song from his lonely basement in the dying hamlet of Harris, Saskatchewan. He emerges to care for his growing family, and play fiddle with his Celtic band, The Residuals.

His published fiction can be read in the 13th issue of *Dark Recesses Magazine*, and the anthologies *Black Chaos: Tales of the Zombie* and *Alternate Hilarities: Vampires Suck*.

Jonathan Cresswell-Jones

Jonathan Cresswell-Jones lives and works in Toronto, Ontario, as a graphic designer, with short works published in *On Spec* and the anthology *Ring of Fire*.

S.L. Dixon

Former homeless hitchhiker and high school dropout, S.L. Dixon grew up in Southern Ontario, Canada; and his short stories have appeared in magazines, digests, literary journals and anthologies from around the world. He's married, has a cat and currently resides in a small coastal community in British Columbia, Canada. His third novel, *Truro Trap*, was released by Black Rose in May of this year.

An HWA member, he has published 37 short stories in the last 3 years (*Starburst Magazine*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *SQ Mag*, *Perpetual Motion Machine*, *The Wicked Library*, etc.) and a handful more due for release in the coming months.

www.sldixon.ca

@SLDixonWriter

Jon Gauthier

Jon Gauthier is a horror and science fiction author whose work has appeared in *DarkFuse Magazine* and *Mythic Magazine*.

He currently lives in Ottawa, Ontario, with his wife, daughter, and dozens of unfinished and uncooperative stories.

www.jgauthier.ca

twitter.com/JAGaut

Readers take note: The last line of the story *To Make a Monster*, “Dear Boss”, was the opening of a letter to the London Press wherein a certain notorious serial killer first referred to himself as “Jack the Ripper.”

Jason M. Harley

Jason M. Harley is a professor of educational technology and psychology. He spends his days hopping between university labs and lectures and his nights hopping between fictional worlds. Sometimes it’s tricky to tell where his days end and his nights begin, however, given the nature of his research.

His fiction has previously appeared in or is forthcoming from *Tesseract Twenty-one*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Every Day Fiction*, *SQ Mag*, and *101 Words*. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta with his partner.

You can check out his fiction and research on

<https://sites.google.com/site/jasonmharley/>

On Twitter @JasonHarley07.

Maria Haskins

My name is Maria Haskins, and I'm a Swedish-Canadian writer and translator. I was born and grew up in Sweden, and debuted as a writer there, but have been living in Canada (just outside Vancouver) since the 1990s.

My most recently published story appeared in *Flash Fiction Online* in the September, 2016 issue.

Matthew Hughes

Matthew Hughes writes science-fantasy and space opera, often in a Jack Vance mode. Booklist has called him Vance's "heir apparent."

His latest works are: *A Wizard's Henchman* (novel) and *Epiphanies* (novella), both from PS Publishing.

His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Postscripts*, *Lightspeed*, and *Interzone*, and bespoke anthologies including *Songs of the Dying Earth*, *Rogues*, *Old Mars*, and *Old Venus*, all edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois.

He has won the Canadian equivalent of the Edgar, and been shortlisted for the Aurora, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, Endeavour (twice), A.E. Van Vogt, and Derringer Awards.

He is now self-publishing his backlist as ebooks and POD paperbacks at bookstore:

<http://www.matthewhughes.org/welcome-to-the-archonate-bookstore/>

He spent more than thirty years as one of Canada's leading speechwriters for political leaders and corporate executives. Since 2007, he has been traveling the world as an itinerant housesitter, has lived in twelve countries, and has no fixed address.

Web page: <http://www.matthewhughes.org>

Jordan King-Lacroix

My name is Jordan King-Lacroix, an author and poet who originally hails from Montreal, Canada. I studied my Bachelor of Arts at McGill University, and have also achieved a Masters of Creative Writing. I have had short stories and poetry published in *Adventures of Mystery and Intrigue (Vol 1 & 2)*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria*, and *Paper Lens*. I also write political satire, opinion, and feature articles for *The Big Smoke*.

William Lewis

I am a recent graduate of Brandon University in Brandon, Manitoba, now holding two degrees! ... and no job. I grew up on a small farm in rural Manitoba, and would say that the seclusion offered by living miles away from the nearest neighbour sparked my love for imagination. I currently live in a small apartment with my fiancée (soon to be wife), our cat Bella, our guinea pig Lewylyn and an assortment of ghosts, demons, and eldritch horrors that reside within my skull. I am an unpublished author looking for that first big break!

Tonya Liburd

My fiction has been long listed in the 2015 Carter V. Cooper(Vanderbilt) / *Exile* Short Fiction Competition. I have short stories in the anthology *Postscripts to Darkness 6*, *Expanded Horizons* and forthcoming from *Polar Borealis*, and the *Uncommon Minds* Anthology. My creative nonfiction can be found in *The Malahat Review*, and in the *Mosaics: Independent Women* Anthology. My poetry has landed a prize-winning fourth place in *Ve'ahavta's* Creative Writing Competition; and can also be found in *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, and in the Winter 2017 issue of *Space and Time Magazine*. My Twitter-microfiction has been published by *@7x20 Magazine*, who also featured my microfiction for the week of March 28th, 2016. I also have microfiction from *Grievous Angel* (Urban Fantasist).

My genre experience includes co-running *Abyss & Apex Magazine* for over two years now. I have been a juror for the Speculative Fiction Foundation. I was a reader for the Friends of the Merrill 2015 Short Story Contest, and for the 2016 Sunburst Award's new Short Story Award. I am also on the Administrative Committee of the Sunburst Society, which organizes the Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic. I am also a member of the Horror Writers' Association and the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

You can find my blogging at <http://Spiderlilly.com> or on Twitter at *@somesillywowzer*.

Mario Lowther

My genre and literary short fiction has been a *Glimmer Train* New Writers Top 25 Finalist, and has led off or appeared in *Imaginarium*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Mystic Signals*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, and *Remarkable Doorways*. I live and write on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia.

Selena Martens

I have had poetry published previously in *Strange Horizons* and *Illumen Magazine*.

Jenni Merrifield

Jenni Merrifield is a UX/UI Design Specialist by trade and a “prototypical geek” by pastime (she reads science fiction and fantasy, plays tabletop board games and RPGs, wears cosplay & even helps organize and run a few of the Vancouver BC area fan-organized sci-fi/fantasy conventions). She considers herself to be a Ravenclaw, a Jedi Padawan, a Wizard (Enchanter), a Browncoat and a Captain in the Grayson Space Navy, depending on which fandom she’s currently playing in. She is currently the President of the West Coast Science Fiction Association (WCSFA), the parent non-profit organization that hosts VCON, Vancouver’s oldest general science fiction, fantasy and gaming convention.

Coming from a family full of academics and artists, Jenni was always encouraged and inspired to be both artistic and to follow her love of science, technology, engineering and math. In the end, she completed two undergraduate degrees—a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies (art, architecture, history, and literature of ancient Rome and Greece) and a Bachelor of Applied Science in Computer Electrical Engineering—and now uses her creative and technological skills together to design applications that people can use easily and efficiently.

On a more personal note, Jenni lives in Port Moody, BC with her husband of 22 years, her 18-year-old son, and two Devon Rex cats. She wishes she had more time available to do more art “just for the fun of it” than she currently does, and hopes you enjoy her illustration of “Matrissa the Enchantress.”

Aaron Miller

I'm from Kitchener, Ontario. I have never published any work of fiction but I love to write and to tell stories (mainly stories of the macabre) it is my passion and I dream of having my stories published and shared.

Matt Moore

I am a Canadian citizen whose short fiction, poetry and columns have appeared in markets like *On Spec*, *AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review*, *Jamais Vu*, *Cast Macabre*, and the Tesseract anthologies. I'm a five-time Aurora Award finalist, Friends of the Merril finalist, frequent panelist and presenter, and Chair of the Ottawa Chiaroscuro Reading Series.

Lena Ng

Lena Ng is a writer living with her husband in Toronto, Ontario. She has been published in several anthologies and magazines including: *Just Desserts* (WolfSinger Publications), a revenge-themed anthology; *World Unknown Review III* (Editor L.S. Engler) in December 2016 with an accompanying author interview on the website slated for August 2017; *Devolution Z*, Jan 2017 edition, a Canadian horror magazine; and *Monsters Among Us* (Bloody Kisses Press) published Feb 2017. She has also self-published a collection of horror/fantasy short stories titled *Under an Autumn Moon*, available as an ebook on Amazon.

Lee F. Patrick

Lee F. Patrick is a Calgary, Alberta writer of fantasy and science fiction, and sometime poet. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee has been interested in the stories and poems from Celtic history. The poetic format of three lines that are very similar and one that breaks the pattern was intriguing and it is used in this dark poem. *Shadows in the Mist* is about making boasts that should never be made.

Lee recently had a short story *The Fire Mage* published in *Enigma Front: Burnt* by Analemma Press. It is available in print and e-book through Amazon.

David Perlmutter

David Perlmutter is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The holder of an MA degree from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and a lifelong animation fan, he has published short fiction in a variety of genres for various magazines and anthologies, as well as essays on his favorite topics for similar publishers. He is the author of *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation* (McFarland and Co.), *The*

Singular Adventures Of Jefferson Ball (Chupa Cabra House), *The Pups* (Booklocker.com), *Certain Private Conversations and Other Stories* (Aurora Publishing), *Orthicon; or, the History of a Bad Idea* (Linkville Press, forthcoming) and *Nothing About Us Without Us: The Adventures of the Cartoon Republican Army* (Dreaming Big Productions, forthcoming.)

Betty Rocksteady

Betty Rocksteady is your everyday Canadian oddball. Her short weird fiction has been published by a variety of magazines and anthologies, including *DOA III*, *Turn To Ash*, and *Eternal Frankenstein*. *Like Jagged Teeth* is her newest novella, published by Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing. Find out more, and check out her pen and ink art at www.bettyrocksteady.com.

Vincent Sakowski

Vincent W. Sakowski's *Blender Ventures* have appeared around the world in a variety of formats, including in print, online, on the radio, and in live theatre. Some of his works include the anti-epic novel of the surreal: *Some Things Are Better Left Unplugged*, and the short fiction collection: *Misadventures in a Thumbnail Universe*. Vincent lives and writes in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with his wife and son, where he was born and raised.

Lynne Sargent

Lynne Sargent is a circus artist, and cyborg-enthusiast based in the Hamilton, Ontario area. She holds an MA in philosophy from McMaster University, specializing in bioethics. She is a lover of all things fey, strange, and bloody. She is a novice writer, specializing in poetry and fairytales. You can find more of her work at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com

David F. Shultz

David writes from Toronto, Ontario, where he also works as a teacher.

J.J. Steinfeld

Fiction writer, poet, 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 eighteen books, including *Disturbing Identities* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *Would You Hide Me?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *Misshapenness* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), *Word Burials* (Novel and Stories, Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink), *Identity Dreams and Memory Sounds* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), *Madhouses in Heaven, Castles in Hell* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), and *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over fifty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

Richard Stevenson

I've recently retired from a thirty-year teaching gig at Lethbridge College and have published thirty books in that time, including *Why Were All The Werewolves Men?* (Thistledown Press, 1994), *Nothing Definite Yeti* (Ekstasis Editions, 1999), and *Take Me To Your Leader!* (Bayeaux Arts. Inc., 2003). and most recently, two collections of haikai poetry: *Fruit Wedge Moon* (Hidden Brook Press, 2015) and *The Heiligen Effect* (Ekstasis Editions, 2015). Since retirement, *Rock, Scissors, Paper: The Clifford Olson Murders*, a long poem sequence, has been released from Dreaming Big Publications in the US, and *A Gaggle of Geese, haikai poems and sequences*, has been released from Alba Publications in the UK.

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Marcie is an Aurora Award-winning poet/writer who lives on the West coast of Canada with her family and various animals, both domesticated and not. Her work has appeared in such magazines as *On Spec*, *Weird Tales*, *Talebones*, *Strange Horizons*, *Mythic Delerium*, *Aeon*, and *Illumen*, as well as in various anthologies and online publications. Marcie's first poetry collection, *Sometimes While Dreaming*, is available through Sam's Dot Publishing.

Mike Thorn

My fiction was recently published in the anthology *Creepy Campfire Stories (for Grownups)*, and will soon appear in *Turn to Ash* and *Straylight Literary Magazine*. My nonfiction work will also be printed in the upcoming volume of *Thinking Horror*. My debut short fiction collection, *Darkest Hours* will appear in October.

Lisa Timpf

Lisa Timpf is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in a variety of venues, including *Eye to the Telescope*, *Star*Line*, *The Martian Wave*, *New Myths*, *Outposts of Beyond*, and *Scifaikuest*, as well as three *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies. When not writing, Timpf enjoys bird- and butterfly-watching, golfing, and organic gardening.

G.W. Thomas

G.W. Thomas has appeared in over 400 different books, magazines, and podcasts including *Writer's Digest*, *The Armchair Detective*, and *Pseudopod* website. Along with M. D. Jackson he publishes the newly revived *Darkworlds Quarterly Magazine*.

You can check out his artwork at www.gwthomas.org/gallery.htm

Taral Wayne

Taral is better known behind a keyboard or drawing board than at the front of a room talking, but once started can talk about a wide variety of subjects—his experiences from over 40 years in fandom, his 11 Hugo nominations for best fanartist, his Rotsler Award, or his unimpressive career as a magazine illustrator and comic book artist. He can bore on the topics of animation, *Fraggles*, fossils, and planetology. Also about his numerous off-beat jobs, and hobbies ranging from model building to die-cast cars, to ancient Roman coins. He can even—under pressure—talk about science fiction.

For a gallery of his art

-- <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/saara/>

-- <http://taralwayne.deviantart.com/>

To download his fanzines

-- <http://efanzines.com/Taral/index.htm>

-- <http://fanac.org/fanzines/BrokenToys/>

Walt Wentz

Walt Wentz is 75 years old and isn't dead yet (gag stolen from Terry Pratchett, who, sadly, is).

Wentz has lived most of his life in western Oregon, supposedly because it is the most beautiful and clement state in the union, more plausibly because of sheer inertia. He began reading omnivorously at the age of six, his favorite authors (the only books in the house) being Raymond Chandler and Frank Yerby. Predictably, his first school compositions, combining tough-detective action and bodice-ripper historical drama, were regarded askance by his teachers.

After a stint in the US Air Force as the Strategic Air Command's worst radar mechanic, Wentz worked as a Forest Service fire lookout in the summers and went to college on the GI Bill in the off seasons, spending nine blissful years at the University of Oregon, taking and neglecting any classes that took his fancy, until Uncle finally pulled the plug.

As an impoverished unemployed graduate, Wentz naturally got married and took up a responsible position as janitor at a local YMCA. With the impending arrival of his first child, that job's salary proving insufficient, he toured the state looking for some position as editor of a major metropolitan newspaper. Disappointed in this, he stumbled by accident into a job as associate editor for a small regional magazine, where, predictably, he remained for 27 years, writing, editing, proofreading, photographing, laying out pages, through five major changes in publishing technology. One of his duties was encouraging and instructing stringers and freelancers who sent in stories that somehow, in most cases, never improved.

After a divorce, Wentz hung on at the magazine for three more years, until with the arrival of Social Security, he bade a fond farewell and departed at speed. At present, he vegetates among huge drifts of books, comics, manga, movies and neglected mail. He still writes and proofreads, forever intending to turn out whatever major opus occurs to him at the moment, but somehow never finishing it.

Dean Wirth

Dean Wirth's influences include Lovecraft, Mary Shelly and Warren Magazine (artists and writers). He is married and lives in Alberta, Canada, with three dogs

(Buster, Hunter and Kiwi), Hedgehogs, Box Turtles and a Uromastyx. He is quite sane thanks for asking.

CONTENTS OF NEXT ISSUE (#5)

Polar Borealis #5 is scheduled to come out November/December 2017.

Contents will include the short stories:

Shipping Error – by Robert Dawson

Shoes – by Colleen Anderson

The Virus Dreams – by Daniel Roy

The Luck of Charles Harcourt – by Robert Runté

It was a Dark and Stormy Night – by Lee F. Patrick

Had a Life, Didn't Like it, Went Back to Watching Star Trek – by Karl Johanson

Touring Test – by Holly Schofield

It's Just Dead Wood – by Phil Wolters

Quietly into the Night – by Kurt Kirchmeier

The House of my Dreams – by Nestor Delfino

Kill Switch – by Paul Alex Gray

Steers – by Jonathan Cresswell-Jones

A Martyrdom of Fashion-Slaves – by Vincent Sakowski

And a whole bunch of poems.

Cover by Jean-Pierre Normand

FINAL WORDS

by R. Graeme Cameron

This and all the previous issues reflect my eclectic editorial tastes. How to explain them?

I experienced an epiphany on pondering this. There's a very simple way of illustrating what I am up to.

Imagine that Polar Borealis is a small, independent record company operating in the early 1960s. What sort of records am I inclined to release?

Mostly what are now termed “Golden Oldies”, including examples of Rock-a-Billy in homage to Rock’s roots.

Oddly, perhaps, I occasionally reach back into the distant past and release a Gregorian chant or two.

Then again, I’m not afraid to publish the latest experimental Jazz, if a suitable demo comes my way.

And if a major orchestra offers to record classical music, I’m more than happy to oblige.

On the other hand, I can’t resist releasing “gimmick” records like “The Purple People Eater” or “The Monster Mash”.

Is this a formula for success? I like to think so. Something for everybody.

My basic formula? I publish what I like. That’s it in a nutshell.

VOTE FOR THE AURORA AWARDS!

Go to [Aurora Awards](#) to join and/or download voter’s package of nominated works / vote, and [Hal-Con](#) for this year’s host convention.

Voting for the 2017 Aurora Awards is now open for CSFFA members. You have until midnight, EDT on September 2nd, 2017 to cast your ballot. (Note: only Canadians may vote.)

2017 Voter’s Package of nominated works.

This year’s voters’ package of the nominated works is now open to all paid CSFFA members and is available to download. Please note: The Best of the Decade and the Fan Organizational download links are above the other categories.

Here’s a link to what is in this year’s [voters’ package](#) and a link to [our download page](#). The works provided by our nominees and their publishers are for CSFFA members only.

2017 Aurora Awards Ballot

Voting has begun and will end on September 2nd.

Click here to open this year’s ballot. [2017 Aurora Awards Ballot](#)