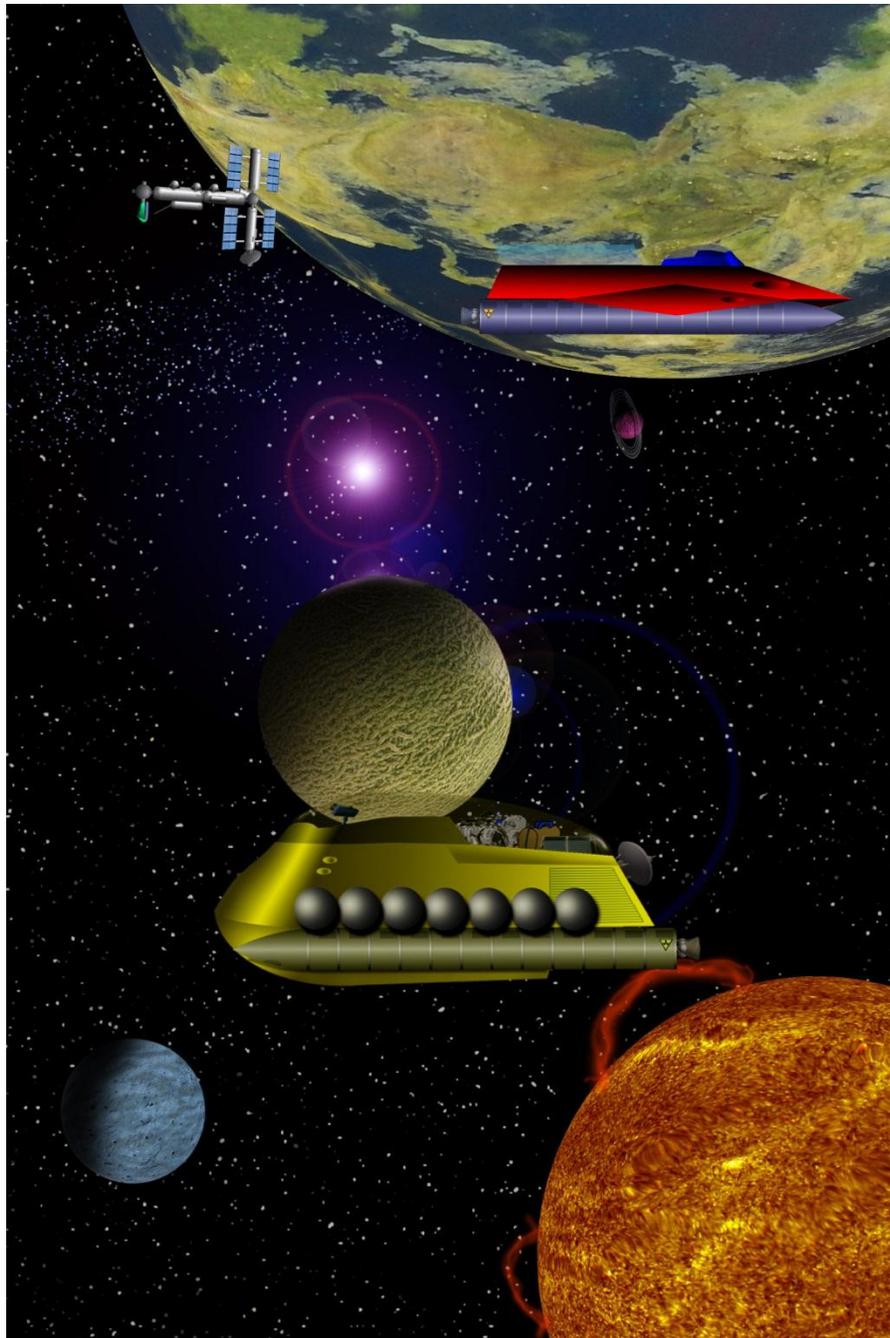


POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #5 – January/February 2018)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Issue #5 – January/February 2018 (Vol.3#1.WN#5)

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EDITORIAL

I charge readers nothing to download this zine. Even the ads are placed for free. I pay my contributors out of my modest pension income. Happy to do it. Promoting Canadian SpecFic is a heck of a hobby. Great fun.

But I certainly wouldn’t mind if readers chose to donate to my “cause” since that would help me publish more often.

You can do so either at < [GoFundMe](#) > or < [Patreon](#) >

Cheers! The Graeme

HAD A LIFE, DIDN'T LIKE IT, WENT BACK TO WATCHING STAR TREK

by Karl Johanson

(Previously unpublished)

There's nothing like a brand new classic Trek episode to get your mind off of a nasty divorce. So I talked to myself in another universe to see what might be available.

It's weird talking to myself on a video call, especially when the other me invariably has a better haircut.

The other me said, "Sorry about the divorce, man. If you need some ... comfort, some of the guys have compiled a database of what lines work well on the women many of us know." By "the guys," he meant multiple copies of me. "Hey, Marcie's single in your universe, isn't she? What you say is"

"Thanks. I think I need a break from relationships for a bit."

This is the first other me that I ever talked to. I always thought he should have a beard, because he's from a universe almost identical to mine. He managed to exploit a manufacturer's flaw in my computer to get a signal through to me. I thought it was just spam at first, but with step-by-step instructions and a lot of work, I had a reliable quantum computer that let me talk to myself in universes that some thought were only mathematical fantasies. I talked to a few other mes, but in practice I only talked to this one other version of myself. Switching channels/universes on computers requires a fair bit of higher math. Many of the mes in other universes are great at it, but I hit a tree branch while texting on my bike. The accident left me temporarily innumerate, and less outgoing. I've improved, but higher mathematics gives me a head ache now.

I told me, "I could go for watching some new original Trek episodes, though."

"You got it, man. I have two new versions of the Gary Seven mini-series from 1978, one of them starring Sigourney Weaver as Isis. There's one about a Gorn ship that's attacked by Romulans, but it's a bit avant-garde ... and sentimental. I have some episodes you've seen before, but they've computer inserted pants on all the women wearing skirts. I've got a copy of 'Omega Glory' with Martin Landau as Kirk Hey, one of us managed to get some copies of episodes from a world after it was hit by nuclear war."

“What? After? How did he get the episodes? I assume there were no broadcasts after the war. Unless it was a really limited war.”

“He just scanned the world, he didn’t talk to anyone there; the war happened before their tech got to the point where their computers could make use of the trans-universal entanglement effect. The war there was apocalyptic. Hundreds of cities looked like they’d been hit by photon torpedoes. To get the episodes he had to take extreme resolution 3D scans of some Beta tapes, then he got some coders to create a simulated Betamax to read the data off of the models of the tapes. He got some news footage the same way.”

“Nuclear war ... Heavy shit.”

“Yeah.”

“How are the episodes?”

“They diverged from stuff we already have from other universes part way through the twelfth season. It’s one of the series’ versions where Shatner quit at the end of season 3, and Kirk spends the next three seasons in Janice Lester’s body. A couple give ‘Spock’s Brain’ a run for their money on the lame-o-meter. The new aliens are awesome though. Designed by H.R. Giger and scary as the salt vampire. The Enterprise III goes after the aliens’ home planet in a three part episode. Ronald Reagan quoted Captain Rand from that episode, a day before the US nuked Russia. You *have* to see it.”

“My hot-air popcorn maker is standing by.”

“The one with Spock killing Kennedy to prevent nuclear war was good, if deadly ironic, considering the universe it’s from. He also plugs Kahless with the Mannlicher-Carcano.”

“Dude! Spoilers!”

“Yeah, sorry. At least I didn’t tell you the twist ending where Spock ... Um, I’ll let you watch it ... Oh, you were right; the guys were happy to get the animated episodes. Especially Larry Niven’s ‘Slaver Weapon.’ I grew up with them like you, so I figured everyone would think they were lame.”

“‘Slaver Weapon’ was the *only* one I really liked ... The Tribbles one was all right too.”

Funny to be embarrassed about talking about something with yourself, but if you can’t spill to yourself who can you talk to? I said, “This divorce is costing me. Financially ... and emotionally.”

“Rough, man.”

“Carol had sex with three of my cousins, during the wedding reception I found out a month later. The court denied my application for an annulment and now they’re saying I owe *her* for leaving.”

“Yow ... Who was it?”

“Dane, Myron and Phillip.”

“I never trusted those guys ... Hey, I have the tech to get you videos of the affairs. Should go over well in court.”

“It was only *one* affair. All three of them at the same time.” I could feel myself boiling mad and embarrassed at the same time.

Other me was good enough to not mention me going red. He did say, “Hey, just like happened to Kirk after his marriage in ‘The Peacekeepers of Martonia.’ You and Kirk have that in common. It wasn’t Klingons in your case, though.”

He got me the video of the affair surprisingly quickly. Just as he said, it looked like a video from a phone left on. The bottom of the frame was obscured by what looked like the pocket of a coat. I watched a little bit. This wasn’t a “made for TV scene” of people on a bed with sheets strategically obscuring all the non-G rated parts, this was heavy hard core stuff, well-lit and high resolution. Some stuff Carol and I had never done together. I got flustered at the thought of anyone else ever seeing this, and felt like I had a large cold rock in my stomach. But I thought about it. “Yeah, this video will sure help in court. Her lawyer is saying I left because *I’m* emotionally abusive.”

“Really rough man.”

“Dane and Phillip are married here. Maybe the video will get their wives to stop phoning me in the middle of the night and calling me a scum-bag for leaving Carol.”

“People are funny sometimes; it might make them *more* mad at you. You can afford a new number, and anything else you want, if you sell some of the episodes.”

“Yeah, about that. I know I said before I didn’t want to sell the episodes. You know, simple life and all. But even if I don’t wind up owing Carol a fortune for leaving *and* alimony, I’ll still have my legal bills. Plus, Carol saw five of my new episodes. She *hated* them, but that’s why her lawyer thinks this divorce is a lottery win. They’re hoping to get them in the settlement and sell them. I overheard the lawyer saying he thinks they could probably get half a million each for them. They want the episodes *and* money, so I was thinking of selling them first.”

Other me said, “The pattern for selling episodes is almost always the same in every universe. When you first start, you get hit by a shitstorm of lawsuits, by the actors, studios, even the writers listed in the credits. The lawsuits cost that person or company a fortune. You claim that the episodes were *created* in a quantum computer using a multitronic neural network pseudo AI. Don’t say

anything about alternate universes! New laws get written, then you can make serious money using an assumed name, or as another company. Usually you set up a company to fail, then you let that company go under, then open a new one after the legal tornado calms. Takes two to three years in most universes if you have good lawyers. When you set up a new company you barely have to advertise, because of all the news coverage and celebrity commentary and writers' blogs on the first wave. You come in with hundreds of new episodes, one or two a week, and you make wheelbarrows full of money and can afford royalties to the actors and writers and everyone else. You'll be rich enough to pay lawyers to deal with any lawsuits or government agencies that want your computer."

"One or two a week. I have more than enough to release one a day for five years."

A huge smile formed on his face. "Five-year mission!"

"Well, I appreciate the heads-up. But I'm tight on money now. Really tight. Can't afford to set up companies and such."

My other self said, "I'll send you the info on a banker who's a severe Trek Fan. She has it worse than us. She'll get you a loan for as much as you want, millions, if you invite her over to see a few episodes as collateral. Show her one of the ones where Uhuru gets married ... try the one where Spock cries at the end." He smiled again and said, "She also likes casual sex every few months *and* has a thing for brown-haired guys."

"Sure, give me her number. But I think I'll just go for the loan and not ... the other thing."

"This will make you a multi-millionaire. If you want to be a multi-*billionaire*, I can set you up with inventions and new medications. You'll still need a company to run drug trials to get them approved, even though we know they work. So much for a simple life, eh?"

An idea occurred to me. "Hey, does it all work out if someone *else* sells the first few episodes? You know, they take the brunt of the ion storm, then I sell the rest of them when things calm down?"

"Checking, give me a minute We're not sure, but the guys I just talked to agreed it's very likely that the first company still goes broke, and that you'll almost certainly make a fortune whether *they* fail or not. I'm happy to help you on it. You have someone in mind to take the fall?"

I smiled as the feeling like I had a rock in my stomach faded. "I can give up the five episodes in court without a fight, and let them take the fall. The episodes aren't my favourites anyway ... 'Harry Mudd for President,' 'Spock's

on Fire,' 'One Billion Quatloos,' 'The Riley Factor,' and 'The Price of Love.' If I give them those episodes, they might leave me alone for alimony and everything else. Especially if I threaten to post the affair video on line."

"Ha! You think like a lawyer."

"Hey, a little respect for my feelings here."

"Feelings? Come on, you aren't actually real. Neither is your universe. You're just a simulated construct in my quantum computer."

"Ha ha! Yeah, screw you too, buddy."



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Contents of issue 28:

Stories:

Dissonance, by Ron Friedman.

Hindsight by Hall Jameson.

Time Beasts by Barbara Davies.

Broken Dishes by J. Y. T. (Jennifer) Kennedy.

The Flight of the Osprey by Robert Dawson.

Wild Irish Rose by Julie Frost.

Fuchsia Thought by Corey J. White.

He Was So Old, by Lee Widener.

Poems:

Foreshadowing by Lisa Timpf.

More than Dreams Alone by John Grey.

See < [Neo-opsis Magazine](#) >

The cover of issue 28 is *Living in a Rock*, by Karl Johanson.

There is a write up on the 2017 convention [Tsukino Con](#) in Victoria, BC.

The Last Four Pages is the article *Women Leads in SF*, by Karl Johanson.

WITNESS

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

The tide comes in—
I see you playing on
the weed-slick rock,
your pale brown braids
turned dark and streaky
by the wafts of salty spray.

The tide comes in,
and still you seem so happy
to be building ramparts up
of long abandoned mussel shells,
and sun-dried crabs—
we can't leave yet.

The tide comes in
and swirls about your
castle walls, beleaguers them
like some invading army,
while you refortify and beg
for just a short while more.

The tide comes in
and while I watch and smile
at your simple game,
the thing within the water grins,
unlocks its jaw and drinks you in,
and leaves a pile of shells, and me—

I watch the tide go out.

THE VIRUS DREAMS

by Daniel Roy

(Previously unpublished)

It took all of Lieutenant-Commander Stonarch's self-control not to roll her eyes at the Keplerian ambassador's appearance. The man—for alien or no, he was clearly a man—looked in his early fifties, with lavender skin and dark, deep-set purple eyes. A series of ridges stretched like a miniature mountain range from the middle of his forehead to the tip of his nose. They gave the ambassador a look of perpetual startled disdain.

At least you gave them an interesting skin tone, Stonarch thought at the Custodian. *The Ursi looked like you held them by the feet and dipped them in beetroot juice.*

RELAX, JENNA, replied the Custodian over her neural weave. HE'LL DO JUST FINE AND YOU KNOW IT.

She glanced left and right at the men she had picked for Captain Curtis' security detail. As she met their eyes one by one, they all stiffened their spines and stared into space. All except Junior Officer Tarkan, who gave her a look of dismay.

One of my men just gave me a meaningful look, she thought at the Custodian.

MUST BE SOMETHING HE ATE.

Captain John Curtis stepped forward between Stonarch's men and approached the Keplerian ambassador. The lavender-faced alien brought his right fist to the palm of his left hand and bowed to the United Earth captain. Stonarch heard high-pitched gibberish, which her smart earring translated into her ear.

"Greetings and well wishes from the Keplerian Empire, Captain Curtis of Earth. I am Salafikto, envoy from Temujin the Third, Khan of the Known Universe and Ruler of all Stars."

The captain's gonna see right through this, you know, thought Stonarch. *He's not that stupid.*

WANNA BET, JENNA?

But before Stonarch could think her answer, Captain Curtis flashed his trademark boyish smile at the ambassador. Their eyes locked for much too long.

“Pleasure to meet you, ambassador,” Curtis said with a husky voice. “I look forward to our ... negotiations.”

This time Stonarch’s military discipline wasn’t enough: she rolled her eyes all the way to the back of her head.

* * *

The negotiations dragged on through the day cycle until the on-board computer dimmed the lights to signal evening. The ambassador withdrew to his suite after exchanging a secretive look with the captain. Whatever. Stonarch’s shift was over, and Curtis could get himself killed by an alien STD for all she cared.

You’re really slacking off, Custodian, thought Stonarch as she entered her room. She tossed her sidearm on a chair and threw herself backwards at her mattress. Her eyes lingered on the lotus-like curves of the Keplerian shuttle shimmering in starlight outside her viewport.

YOU REALIZE I CAN THINK CIRCLES AROUND YOUR ENTIRE SPECIES, RIGHT?

What’s a nine-figure IQ worth if you can’t be bothered to put it to use? The Keplerians are just Mongols with an interesting skin tone and a nose job.

JUNIOR OFFICER TARKAN’S OUTSIDE YOUR DOOR, BY THE WAY.

Stonarch jumped up from the bed just as the doorbell chime rang through her suite. “Come in!” she called out, reholstering her laser pistol and tugging at her shirt to smooth it out.

“Evening, Commander. I hope I’m not intruding.”

“You’re not, Lieutenant. Is something wrong? Have a seat.” She sat down on her couch and motioned Tarkan to a nearby chair.

“Nothing wrong, no,” said Tarkan as he sat down. “Just ... something I wanted to pick your brain about.”

She nodded, waiting.

“I’m friends with Ensign Coltane in the xenobiology department,” said Tarkan, frowning, “and she said something that puzzled me. You’ve been in deep space exploration longer than me, so I wondered ... Have you ever encountered a true alien?”

Stonarch thought of the Shadow Dancers and the Structural Void. She thought of the Eusphere and the Pattern. She had met none of them, but the Custodian had told her about some of the members of the Sentient League.

“I thought the Keplerians had pretty alien customs,” she said. “Their apanage system, for instance—”

“Yeah, see, that’s the problem. The ambassador called their leader ‘Khan.’ Now, the translator used the nearest human analog, I know, but what are the odds they would also have an apanage system? That’s a concept straight out of the Mongol Empire.”

I told you.

No answer. She leaned forward.

“What are you saying, Lieutenant?”

Tarkan gave a shrug. “Just that the alien civilizations we’ve met are remarkably similar to our own. I expected them to be, I don’t know, less *humanoid*, maybe.”

I’m trying really hard not to gloat right now.

I’M NOT WORRIED. YOU CAN HANDLE THIS.

An uncomfortable silence grew between them as Stonarch waited for further instructions from the AI. Tarkan glanced about, worried he had said too much.

Fuck this. Stonarch drew a deep breath.

“You’re right, you know. All the civilizations we meet are disturbingly similar to us, give or take a nose ridge or colorful skin tone. They have some quirky cultural variations, sure, but nothing that’s particularly exotic when compared to our own history. You’d expect alien civilizations to be so radically different from us that we’d have a hard time even recognizing them as sentient, much less communicate with them through a smart earring.”

Tarkan’s mouth hung open. “Wh— But— Are you saying—“

YOU’RE TELLING HIM THE TRUTH? WOW. DO YOU KNOW HOW HARD IT IS TO SURPRISE A SUPER-INTELLIGENT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, JENNA? I’M SO PROUD OF YOU.

“We’re being contained, Lieutenant. No, herded. These civilizations are the fence posts drawn around our little corner of the Galaxy. They’ve been engineered. Built from scratch to keep us occupied. Their evolution has been accelerated and guided for this purpose.”

“But who—?”

ALL RIGHT, JENNA, YOU’VE HAD YOUR FUN.

“An artificial super-intelligence created by an alliance of Type III minds called the Sentient League.”

YOU KNOW, WHAT YOU’RE DOING WOULD BE TREASON IF IT WEREN’T SO RIDICULOUSLY FUTILE.

“It calls itself the Custodian,” she added. “Its brain is powered by a star made of superconducting smart plasma. I’d say we’re like ants next to it, but that’s off by a few orders of magnitude.”

NOW YOU’RE JUST STROKING MY EGO. PLEASE ... DO GO ON.

“But ...” Tarkan looked flustered and out of breath. “Why would an advanced civilization be afraid of us, Commander?”

AFRAID? OH PLEASE!

“The Custodian’s a fence, Lieutenant. See, to the Sentient League we’re a virus. Tiny, insignificant, sure. Left unchecked for a few million years, we’d spread throughout the Galaxy and obliterate everything else. And oh, the Galaxy *is* a vastly different place ... Life as we know it is just a tiny part of its immense variety. Some life forms dance in the sun spots of stars. Others emerge from a self-arranging structure of the quantum void. One is the sentient echo of a previous Big Bang. There’s even—”

TALK ABOUT THE IRRIDESCENCE AND I’LL QUARK-BOMB THIS SHIP RIGHT OUT OF ORBIT, JENNA.

“Anyway,” said Stonarch with a cough. Tarkan stared at her, skeptical and shocked at the same time.

“Why not just exterminate us, then?”

“That’s a lot harder than you think. You could bomb us back to the Stone Age, and sure that’d set us back a few thousand years. But some of us would survive. We’d be back.”

LIKE A VIRUS.

Stonarch shook her head. “No, it’s better to let us romp around space and meet these relatable aliens that are just different enough to appear alien, but close enough that we can employ familiar concepts like ‘commerce’ and ‘conflict’ with them.”

“How do you know this?”

“Simple,” said Stonarch. “I’m a Custodian agent.”

Lieutenant-Commander Stonarch had her pistol out before Tarkan realized what was happening. Her shot was close—close enough to singe Tarkan’s hair, but not enough to fry his brain. With a pang of pride, she watched the Lieutenant roll away from her and behind her kitchen counter.

YOU TRAIN THEM TOO WELL, JENNA. I TOLD YOU THESE GUYS SHOULD BE GLORIFIED CANNON FODDER.

Stonarch and Tarkan exchanged fire. Soon the smell of burnt plastic furniture filled Stonarch’s nostrils.

If a fire breaks out or Tarkan calls security ... Stonarch cringed as Tarkan's laser punched through her glass table.

PLEASE. AS IF I'D LET ANY COMM SIGNAL LEAVE THE ROOM.

Think you can help me with Tarkan?

SAY PLEASE.

Goddammit!

HAH! CLOSE ENOUGH.

Stonarch felt a tingle along the base of her spine. Numbness spread through her arms and legs as the Custodian hijacked her neural weave and took over her motor functions.

She stood straight up, raised her weapon, and aimed it square at Tarkan's position. Tarkan took the bait and fired a volley in her direction, missing her by an inch.

The Custodian's clean shot burnt a hole right in the middle of Tarkan's forehead.

That one's gonna be hard to explain, subvocalized Stonarch.

KEPLERIAN SPY. THEY HAVE A HISTORY OF CONVERTING ENEMIES TO THEIR CAUSE THROUGH USE OF MIND-ALTERING PHEROMONE COCKTAILS. OR SOMETHING.

Stonarch tapped her comm pin and addressed the security frequency. "Security incident at my quarters. Everything's under control. Send an armed guard and a body pickup crew." She was about to sign off, but then leaned into her comm pin again. "And no detonating my door like last time! I repeat, everything's under control."

Stonarch smoothed her uniform and stood at attention, waiting for the security detail to arrive.

JENNA? ONE QUESTION.

You wanna know why I told him? We both know he wasn't getting out alive anyway.

RIGHT. SO WHAT WAS THE POINT?

Maybe I was pissed off he was smart enough to almost figure it out yet dumb enough to come to me with it. Maybe I'm bursting with the secret and I needed to let it out.

OR MAYBE YOU WANTED TO JUDGE BY HIS REACTION IF HE WOULD HAVE EVENTUALLY FIGURED IT OUT ON HIS OWN.

That too.

AND?

She sighed. *He wasn't even close. But one day one of us will, Custodian. And maybe that one will be smart enough to avoid agents like me.*

ALWAYS THE OPTIMIST, JENNA.

I can dream, Custodian. That's what we do. We're smarter than you give us cred—

Stonarch's thought was interrupted by her suite's door imploding, throwing ash and debris all over her carpet. Three of her security team rolled into the room, yelling orders and swinging their guns around.

Captain Curtis stepped through the smoke, cracking a smile at her as he slung his laser rifle over his shoulder.

"Commander Stonarch. Thank goodness you're all right."

SORRY, YOU WERE SAYING?

Stonarch rolled her eyes.

BOATMAN

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

As above, so below
Between the crosses, row on row
Row, row, row your boat
Ee-i-ee-i-o

As above, so below
Life is but a dream
Back to my home, I dare not go
Gently down the stream

Between the crosses, row on row
How does your garden grow
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
Ee-i-ee-i-o

A MARTYRDOM OF FASHION-SLAVES

by Vincent Sakowski

(Previously published online at *fables.org*, Volume 4, Issue 2)

I smiled, drew in a deep breath through my nose and began:

“Do you, Daniel Martin Oakenfold-Sokalofsky-Ellingboe-Clinton-Ngo-Hammersmith-Jones-Schneider-Schulman-Knowles-Gendron-Uthe-Ruszkowski-Maxwell-Oryshak-Koch-Alatabi-Jeanneau-Webb-Runge-Rus-Kalyniuk-Chaban-Lee-Chamney-Marlowe,” I took another breath. “Schreiner-Kelly-Fitzpatrick-Moore-Knorr-Phoung-Wacker-Olzewski-Manske-Friesen-Nemanishen-Quiring-Prevost-Mierau-Scott-Banman-Dyck-Semchyshen-Graspy-Hamm-Thompson-Wiebe-Mcfadyen-Archer-Eaves-Kozak,” And another. I had hoped to make it to the end, but— “Berg-Billet-Chappell-Hungness-McDougal-Holt-Minty-Boeschen-Ogilvy-Slywka-Neale-Post—”

I paused, inhaled and gazed down warmly at the bride.

“Take you, Stephanie Rose Haugrud-Dahlseide-Anwender-Barber-Armbrust-McNab-Jorgenson-Davies-Voldeng-Pushkarenski-Sapieha-Young—”

“That’s Pushkarenko-Young-Sapieha.”

“Of course. My deepest apologies.” I turned my eyes up from the page before me and looked at them hopefully. “May I continue where I left off, or would you like me to begin again?”

Steph and Dan regarded each lovingly, briefly contemplating the question, and to my relief they nodded for me to go on. I think they were both simply amazed, and pleased, I had made it that far without any errors—not counting correct pronunciation, of course—so no need to restart.

They’ve been coming to my parish now for the last four or five years, but I still don’t know their last names. I don’t think I ever will, either. Not too much of a surprise when you consider each has 64. And they are to be the first of the 128s for me.

Being a minister, I get to forgo all that mess, and have people simply refer to me as Pastor Bob. Not that I have so many to begin with, in any case. Thankfully—all those generations ago—not everyone felt they had to keep *all* of their names regardless of how many there were. Two apiece was OK, I suppose; although some of the pairings sounded pretty silly—nothing compared to now, of course. But back then some of their kids met others with two, then two turned into four, four into eight, eight into sixteen, and so forth. But, like I said, not everyone carried on with all their names, so sometimes a

Two married an Eight, a Four with a Thirty-two. And in the cases of divorce or annulment ... well, don't get me started On the plus side, there are some rarities even today who only have one surname. Few can handle the ridicule and persecution however, so I don't run into them very often.

Japan seemed to cut to the chase during The Eights, and they switched over to a barcode tattoo, which either went on their hands or on their foreheads—all up to the individual, usually. But then some of *their* children didn't want to give up their families' barcodes so instead they combined the two: one in front of the other. And this tradition carried on throughout the Orient, and even spilled over onto some of the Fringe kids in Europe, and a few elsewhere. But it wasn't too prevalent in the West, as there weren't the facilities to handle them with ease—not that the Fringe wanted to be handled in any case. But back in the Orient, what they ended up with were all these bald people with these barcodes circling their skulls, or up and down their forearms.

It was a scanner's nightmare, even with a “START HERE” character clearly marked. All the time, people got dizzy and fell over from spinning in a circle. Old folks' tattoos degenerated and wrinkled making scanning almost impossible at times. So there were always massive line-ups and delays almost anywhere you went. There were rumors and complaints about the scanning batons irradiating people's brains, frying their skin, giving them cancer. Others were wrongly accused, arrested, and sometimes even executed, before their names were properly scanned—all due to someone starting to scan in the wrong spot or losing his place. Not too surprising though, tattooed folk are still around, more due to the government in some ways—they don't want go through all of the expense and red tape to change the system. And so it goes.

Meanwhile, almost everywhere else in the West people had ID cards with their names—however many there were—printed on a microscopic level. Obviously, more scanning problems, but the real problems occurred in simple introductions and interactions, like weddings, for example. Where a typo can mean you don't exist, or a missing name can mean you're wanted for murder. But still no one is really interested in returning to the “old ways.” Rather some make it even worse wanting to alternate their names with their partner's. Fortunately I was able to steer Steph and Dan away from that, and they agreed to have all of his names first, then all of hers.

The certificates and contracts all signed, I called Steph and Dan over before the congregation ... And so here we stand... the ceremony almost over ...

they look so happy ... the honeymoon almost upon them ... and I know they want to have children. 256s are on the horizon.

I just have to remember to breathe.

“I’d like to present to you Mr and Mrs Daniel and Stephanie Oakenfold-Sokalofsky-Ellingboe-Clinton-Ngo-Hammersmith-Jones—”

But I’m also glad that I’ll be too old to perform any more ceremonies by then.

ON THIS OUTLYING PLANET

by J. J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *Red Sky* (Edited by David Nell), Dreamscape Press, US. 2014).

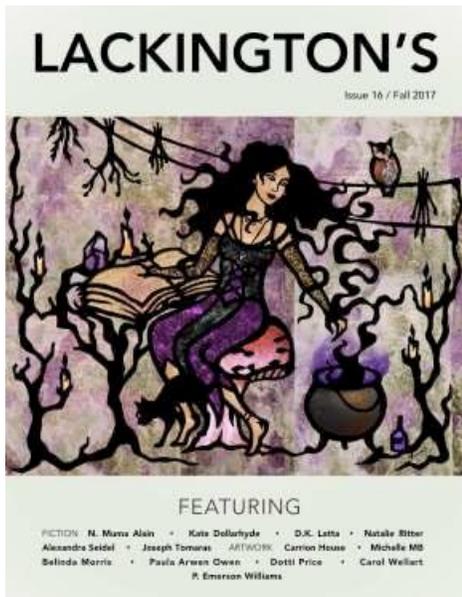
Here I am on this outlying planet
no name yet
but nameless things
especially planets
always irritate
and naming must be done
like breathing or complaining
about eternal things.

The trip wasn’t so bad
not like in sci-fi films.
Should I remove my spacesuit
breathe the air of this outlying planet?
It could be purer or worse
than my previous planet
but why take a chance
my spacesuit is state of the art
and I have a lifetime supply
of the best manufactured air
money can buy.

Maybe I won’t leave my spacecraft
maybe I will sit here
with my protective spacesuit

and look through the portal
at this outlying planet
no longer outlying
because I am finally here.

Maybe I will name it *Earth*
or *Imagination*
or leave it nameless
I am not sure yet
being new to space travel
and landing on outlying planets.



Once upon a time, a British bookseller named James Lackington made books affordable for nearly everyone. It was the late eighteenth century, literacy was on the rise, but books were still a luxury item for many Londoners. Lackington changed that by popularizing the cheap “remainder” and making a tidy profit for himself, in the bargain.

Lackington's is an online speculative fiction magazine. 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, setting, theme, atmosphere, or philosophy it seeks to describe.

Stylized prose can be sparse and simple, diamond-cut like the writing of Ursula K. Le Guin. It can be sumptuous like the writing of Oscar Wilde. It can be epic, archaic, experimental, mythic, rhythmic, and it can be quiet and subtle, too. Story and character are indispensable, but so is wordcraft. We trade in aesthetics, so

make us gasp with unexpected words and give us inventive voices, structures, and narratives. Many editors reject heavily stylized prose out of hand. We welcome it.

Contents of issue 16:

Cover by Paula Arwen Owen

Lamplighter's Eve, by Kate Dollarhyde

Original Order, by Natalie Ritter

A Summary of Menistarian Law, Composed for the Citizens of Olakia, in Response to Our Present Crisis by Dr. Clemons Indement, as received and translated by Joseph Tomaras

The Maiden's Path, by D.K. Latta

Yuck! Ogle, by N. Muma Alain

The Master of Hourglasses, by Alexandra Seidel

See < [Lackington's Magazine](#) >

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

by Lee F. Patrick

(Previously unpublished)

It was a Dark and Stormy Night.

Well, not really. It was actually a sunny Tuesday afternoon in mid-June. Maybe a couple of clouds, but ...

It was a Day Filled with Portents.

Um, not that either.

Trying to come up with a hook to describe the most important visit the Earth had gotten since the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs that wasn't as banal and theatrically dull as it actually was is impossible. I'll leave it to the tabloids and conspiracy magazines. I hope they're up for it.

So, here's what happened. Really. Nothing but the truth, though most people don't want to believe it.

My name is Jasper Morton and I'm a photographer. I was on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon that week, mostly on holiday, but taking shots of interesting people and rock formations for the Parks website upgrade. I was sitting in the North Rim Visitor Center after hiking out to Bright Angel Point when it, I mean *It*, happened. Iced tea helps rehydrate me so I had a tall cold one by my elbow. It was June, so it gets hot enough to make you sweat early in the day and far into the evening. I was paging through the shots on my digital SLR, deleting the ones that were out of focus, contained tourists who hadn't signed waivers, or had bad composition. Digital sure had film beat for the ease of sorting out the dreck. Don't know how photographers coped back in the old days.

I had a seat near the window but someone else spotted *It* first, a couple with manic kids in tow whining because of the exercise of walking a mile along the canyon rim. They wanted their electronic games and the parents seemed to have left them in the motel. Or back home. It doesn't matter. *It* did. Does.

The ship was huge, maybe a half-mile across, but it, *It*, floated serenely along in the middle of the canyon. It was a classic UFO, with the disk, a central bump and no discernible engines. However, the disk didn't spin and there wasn't much in the way of flashing lights. My camera was up and focused before I consciously realized what I was seeing. At first I thought hoax, but, *It* was there.

Everything that could capture an image was directed at the ship, from cell phones to digital cameras and the odd camcorder. I remember thinking that it would be hard for any Suit to prove this a hoax. Not with at least 20 different versions of the same thing and none of us with any connections to each other beyond that we happened to be at the Visitor Center at the same time.

We later learned that it had first been seen by some mostly-drunk college students on a houseboat near South Bay, over near the Utah border where the river goes into Lake Mead. Fortunately for my bank balance, no one there had cell coverage or a sat phone. They forgot about the radio in the boat until it was too late. The ship had come down so quietly that they hadn't noticed it until it was hovering at the entrance to the Canyon.

We went outside and followed the progress of the ship along the canyon. I pulled out my binoculars and saw a similar procession on the South Rim, twelve miles or so away from us. They had more trails there, so would be able to follow it easier. I had a sudden flash of brilliance, stopped to let everyone pass me so they wouldn't see or hear what I was doing, then linked my phone and camera and dialed the CNN news desk, crossing my fingers that *we* had cell coverage.

At first they didn't believe me, then they saw the shots I downloaded. Twenty thousand dollars per shot and we went live with the first interview about the ship through my cell phone. Sure everyone else screamed later, insisting they'd seen it before I did, but after that first hour, everybody in the world had seen *my* pictures. The Pulitzer committee agreed. The others were lucky to get a mention in their local news show. I was suitably modest at the award ceremony. My speech is on-line on my website, in case you want to hear it.

Anyway, the Air Force had jets overhead about 20 minutes later, hovering around high up, not wanting to spook the ship, but keeping an eye on it. *It* hadn't done anything, just continued to cruise very slowly down the canyon, taking occasional dips to get close ups of interesting formations, I figured. What any tourists would do with such magnificent scenery to look at. There weren't any obvious cameras or sensory thingies on the hull, but if they'd figured out how to get from one planetary system to another, surely they'd figured out how to do something simple like look outside.

I was still on the phone with CNN, and the ship was getting out of sight, so I hopped onto my motorcycle and started up the canyon after them. The North Rim was less developed than the South, but the size of the ship made it fairly easy to keep in sight. I headed out on the Cape Royal Trail, hoping that it wouldn't get too far out of sight and wondering what I'd do if it kept heading east toward Lake Powell. There wasn't much in the way of roads or even trails that went along that part of the rim. To get to the South Rim I'd need a helicopter. Didn't see any so I kept on going.

When the ship landed on the Walhalla Plateau, I almost stopped breathing. Landing legs came out, six of them, supporting the disk. No sign of doors or ladders or any way to get in or out were visible. I kept shooting occasional shots, different angles, shots of other people taking pictures of the ship. All just to give the news people updates (and increase the size of my check) but nothing changed for more than an hour.

That's when the Forces and the politicians started arriving. I chronicled that for CNN, until they got their own cameras on site, and then did interviews with anyone who'd sign a contract with me.

The Forces had everything but a brass band there, all offloaded from what seemed to be a never ending stream of five-ton trucks. Personally I figured they had everything in Area 52 (who'd look next door to Area 51 for the super-secret stuff?) and that wasn't very far away. I could visualize some guy waiting at a desk deep underground, staring at a phone that no one thought would ever ring. Well, it had—and the Forces had all the gear they'd ever thought they'd need for a peaceful alien contact. Maybe some other poor sap had the un-peaceful contact gear standing by just out of sight and his finger on a button waiting for word from POTUS. My comments on CNN to that effect got a guffaw from the news anchor and raised their ratings by several percent after they reran that part of my interview a couple of times.

Nothing happened except more people arrived and started taking their own pictures. It got dark and the military fellows got some generators and floodlights going. The civilians like me milled around, watching the ship. *It* did nothing. Maybe they'd gone to bed early. That got another blip in ratings from CNN.

Nothing happened. The coffee service came on line. It tasted horrible but it was hot and had caffeine. We drank it by the gallon. Black. The temperature started to dive toward freezing and blankets came out of one of the trucks

toward the back. I blessed the unknown clerk who'd had to assemble all this stuff and almost forgave him for the horrible coffee. Maybe the beans had been tossed into the boxes when they had been packed who knew how long ago and never replaced. The MRE's weren't as bad as I feared. I got another cup of coffee and found a piece of dirt with not too many rocks, to huddle in my blanket and keep an eye on the ship. My mind kept working. First, I downloaded everything I had onto my computer and to my website's secret folder ... in case. I checked in my motorcycle pack and found my chargers and went over to the trucks and managed to sweet-talk the Army fellows into more coffee and to plug in my equipment so I could record tomorrow's events.

It was not quite dawn when *something happened*.

Darn, I was trying to keep the melodrama down but that's the literal truth. At least I didn't put the whole sentence in italics. That would have been melodramatic. However, something did happen and it was before dawn that it happened. So there. I *can* be precise when it matters.

The ship lifted off, still completely silent, tucked its legs into the bottom of the hull, and drifted out into the middle of the Canyon. There it hovered as the sun rose. You could imagine all the beings on board crowded against the viewscreens. There weren't any windows, at least nothing visible. I don't think I'd mentioned that bit before. All the beings in there watched the sun rise over the Canyon. That made the aliens more like us—thousands of people visit the Grand Canyon each year to do the same thing. Too bad the Canyon was part of the national park system. Any corporation would be faint with joy at the thought of all those tourist dollars that would be streaming into the local economy. From what I knew of the NPS rangers, they were already planning on putting up fences and warnings and then they'd have to rescue the thousands of idiots who did stupid things anyway and gotten themselves into untenable situations. Maybe I'd donate a couple of pictures worth of money to them to get the fence started. They'd made my fortune and it would also help against the income taxes I saw in my future.

After sunrise, the ship continued its meander up the Canyon and the Forces people humped all the gear they un-humped the day before back into the trucks and everyone followed along as the ship moved.

Eventually the ship reached the end of the Canyon near Lake Powell and rose into the sky. Few of us managed to see it as we just couldn't follow on the ground fast enough to keep up. CNN had brought a helicopter in by that point

and it was full of cameras pointed in all directions and one reporter to tell us what we were seeing. The Forces had helicopters too and they were full of machinery that beeped, men who stared at screens and guards who had no sense of humor and very large guns. They wouldn't give me a lift. Even with a bribe. Funds to informants: another way to lower my tax bill.

The jets tried to keep pace with the ship as it rose into the sky near Lake Powell and got left behind. According to NASA, the ship just headed out of the atmosphere, then they lost tracking when it reached about the asteroid belt. They tried to orient Hubble to see if it looked different in space but it was moving too fast. By the time they started to shift the telescope it, *It*, was gone.

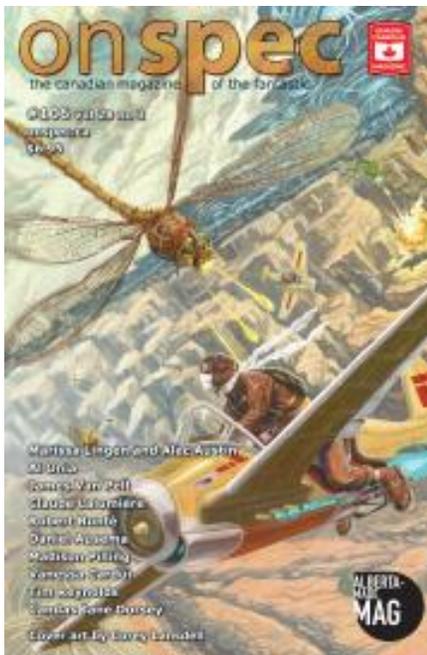
Everyone kept on station (*aka* the North Rim Visitor Center) for a few days then most of the civilians started for home. The army trucks loaded and pulled out a day later. There wasn't any point for a journalist to remain unless they wanted to interview the alien groupies who'd started to arrive and annoy the NPS rangers with their signs about the Space Brothers and requests to be beamed up. None of the networks wanted much of their enthusiasm but it made some decent filler. Somebody from a store in Roswell showed up with the contents of their back room early the morning the ship left and sold out quickly.

No one really knew what to make of the visit. That phrase got capitalized a lot in the media. If you said it, it got special emphasis—***The Visit***. All the religious groups claimed one thing or another about it but no one was absolutely sure that the aliens had realized that Earth had (semi, to my way of thinking) sentient inhabitants, even with the fighter jets playing escort. At least the SETI people were vindicated—there was now absolute proof that we weren't alone in the universe. Their funding and donations skyrocketed. Sorry about the pun. No, not really that sorry. I donated some money to them as well. Charities are wonderful things for lowering taxes!

All in all, this would have been a far more exciting story if we'd needed the un-peaceful alien contact kit. Would I have survived if that ship had been something other than a tour bus that came to visit? Likely not. But fighting aliens probably wouldn't have come to the Canyon in the first place, so it might have been a safe place to hide out when the missiles or whatever started to fall. New York, Washington. Big cities. Those were targets for the unfriendly sorts of aliens. Who knows what else they wanted? None of us common folk do but many keep speculating.

I'll bet there are rooms full of people in hidden bunkers all over the world trying to figure out how we can actually attract their attention and *if* we should. There *is* the un-peaceful alien kit to think about.

This is Jasper Morton, on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, as baffled as the rest of humanity and heading home tomorrow. Try to get some sleep. Maybe they'll come back and watch the sunrise again sometime. It could become a regular show. And maybe, someday, they'll open the doors and say hello.



In 1989, a small group of Edmonton writers formed The Copper Pig Writers Society in order to fill a niche in Canada—a paying market for English SF.

SF with a uniquely Canadian Perspective.

After selling out our initial print run of a test issue filled with stories sent to us by invitation, we began receiving inquiries as to when the “next one” would appear. That was a very long time ago. Editors have come and gone, and we are proud that some of them have made significant contributions to Canada’s literary scene, by becoming novelists.

Our little quarterly journal, *On Spec* adheres to a strong mandate that has served us well over the years. We discover and showcase quality works by predominantly Canadian writers and artists, in the genre we call “Fantastic” literature. We foster the growth of emerging writers in this genre, by offering support and direction through constructive criticism, education, mentoring, and manuscript development. We try to publish as many new writers as

possible, alongside works by established writers, and we also endeavour to support these writings with innovative cover art for every mind-bending and emotion-provoking issue!

We love to get to as many events as we can, and you can often find an *On Spec* table in the Dealer room of your regional or national convention (come by the table and say “Hi”). If you’re interested in having *On Spec* come to your event, please contact us at onspec@onspec.ca with the details.

Contents of issue 106:

Features new fiction from: Marissa Lingen & Alec Austin, Al Onia, James Van Pelt, Claude Lalumière, and Robert Runté.

Poetry from: Daniel Ausema.

Non-Fiction from: Madison Pilling, Vanessa Cardui, Timothy Reynolds, and Candace Jane Dorsey.

Cover art by Corey Lansdell

See < [On Spec Magazine](#) >

THE TRUTH ABOUT OUR KITH AND KIND

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

Zip! Zap! Zoodle!—
Run this thought through yer noodle:
U.F.O.s are time machines,
not just ships and saucers
teleporting intergalactic tossers.

As the cartoonist of Pogo put it,
“We’ve seen the enemy,
and the enemy is us.” That’s right!
Aliens are humans; we’re the
time-trapped geeks and creatures.

The fact that most of us don’t
bite the heads off chickens don’t mean
we’re civilized. We’d as soon lay
a rifle across our knees as set a table
for any space aliens—green or grey.

We’re lookin’ at ourselves, you see.
What we might turn out to be
after some forgone apocalypse.
So we got no lips or hips—big deal!
We can’t swap spit some other way?

All some of us do is put fish hooks
through our lips anyway. Whaddaya say?
Time to get hip to the funk house truth
of our kith and kind? We’re way behind
ourselves. Homo S II chips have been declined.

SHIPPING ERROR

by Robert Dawson

(Previously published in *Perihelion* in August 2015)

Jeanette's candy-apple red mobility scooter rolled up to the checkout. "Hi, Amanda!" Jeanette said, and started to transfer groceries from the scooter's basket to the conveyor belt. The smooth cans were so hard to grip with her arthritic fingers.

"Hi, there! Whatcha got today?" Amanda scanned the first few items. "Hey, this can's got no bar code." She turned it over and over. "Any idea what it is?" The side of the can showed a lush picture of a tropical beach at dusk, a white full moon setting beside an apricot-gold sun over what might be palm trees, and several lines of unfamiliar white letters. There was not a word of English anywhere on the can.

"Not a clue, but there's a big stack of them over by the ethnic food shelves."

"*Price check, Lane 4!*" She put the microphone down. "But you want to buy it anyhow?"

"Oh, I always like to try mystery items. I find some really tasty things that way. I know I'll never get to any of those exotic places"—she gestured at the picture on the can—"but at least I can try the food."

"Sooner you than me."

The manager bustled up, his white chef's jacket spotless as always. He looked past Jeanette at the offending can in Amanda's hand. "Forty-nine cents. Clearance."

Before he could disappear, Jeanette put her hand on his arm. Her fingernails, painted to match her scooter, were like crimson cherries against the white fabric. "Do *you* know what's in that can?"

He seemed to notice her for the first time. "I'm afraid I don't. It's not meant to get through Customs without an English-language ingredient list sticker, but I guess somebody forgot. Anyhow, our supplier dropped off nine cases that I never ordered, and didn't want to be paid or take them back, so I figured I might as well try to sell them.

"Really?"

"It happens sometimes. Last year we got two dozen durians. Big spiky things with a weird smell. We only sold one."

“I know. I bought it.” The produce manager had tried to dissuade her, but she’d insisted.

“And ...?”

“It was delicious.”

There was something subtly different in the way he was looking at her. Surprise? Maybe even respect?

Chetakiki wriggled uncomfortably, under the stern gaze of the alpha. “N-no, Mother-of-Many, I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary,” zhie said. “Everything seemed normal when I put it into the transporter.”

“Well, that pallet of *kshmera* preserves never arrived at Triskaleron Twicethree-and-One. We’ve had to ship a replacement.” The alpha raised her thorax and waved her six front legs in a gesture of exasperation.

“I-I’m sorry,” zhie said, in a voice like crumpling leaves.

“Sorry won’t replace the goods, will it, worker? I’m putting you on four ninthdays of unpaid overtime, to make up.”

“Th-thank you, Mother-of-Many.”

With a label like that, Jeanette thought, the can just had to contain some kind of dessert. Fruit or pudding, something of that sort. She was confident enough in her intuition that she didn’t even open the can to check until after her main course: half a can of chicken curry, rice, and edamame. Frozen edamame had been half-price last month.

The can, almost as wide as it was high, was surprisingly resistant to the electric opener, though the metal proved to be eggshell-thin. The magnet wouldn’t grip it, and the cutter skidded. Eventually the can was cut most of the way around. She levered the top back, using the handle of her spoon in case the edge was sharp. The effort hurt her knuckles, until she got the spoon bowl nestled into the palm of her hand, and it went more easily. She smiled grimly. Living with arthritis was all about technique.

The substance inside gleamed a pretty pink. She took a small spoonful and sniffed: a delicate tropical fruit scent. Her mouth watered; she slowly, teasingly, put the spoon to her lips.

It didn’t taste pink. There were bright hints of tangerine, a suave suggestion of melon, and—lychee? Texture like jelly, but firmer to the teeth. She spooned a disciplined half-can into her bowl and ate, savoring every bite.

When it was all gone, she lit her prescribed evening joint. (“Not before dinner,” the doctor had said. “Nothing wrong with your appetite. And I wish half my patients ate as healthily as you do.”) She picked up the half-empty can and studied it carefully. Something not right. The full moon. How could it be there next to the sun? Artistic license, somebody could lose points on their artistic license ... She snickered, then put Saran Wrap over the top of the can, rolled over to the fridge and put it away, quickly, before she was tempted to finish it off.

“*Chetakiki!* Get your useless cloaca over here!”

“Y-yes, Mother-of-Many.”

“Do you have *any* idea where that pallet went?”

“N-no. But I’ve worked that loss off already.”

“You’ve worked off the replacement price, you useless worm. But there’s a registered debt that’s come up connected with that shipment, worth more than an eightyoneday’s labour—and the nonperformance punishment begins after one more nineday. And *I* have no intention of working in the egg-munching boron mines. Now *where is that pallet?*”

Every primitive instinct in Chetakiki’s body told zher to roll up and protect zheir vulnerable ventral surfaces inside zheir thoracic plates. But social conditioning forced zher to stay unrolled. “M-Mother-of-Many, I do not know. But I will find out.”

“Make it happen, worker.” The alpha stalked off, her eighteen legs moving in elegant waves along her body.

Jeanette’s next shopping trip was three days later. The sun was shining outside, and her arthritis medication seemed to be working particularly well. She smiled as she put her jacket on and pulled up the zipper with only minor twinges. It was shaping up to be a *good* day. For a moment she even wondered about dusting off her walker, but the thought of actually carrying her groceries back in its basket daunted her.

When she got to the store, she steered straight to the stack of cans. The heap was lower now; she wasn’t the only adventurous one. She put a whole pack of nine, three by three, stuck invisibly together at the factory in some clever way, into her basket; and began to pick up a second pack. But she was

going to need basket space for cereal, milk, and a few other necessary items; so, reluctantly, she put it back.

For a threeday, Chetakiki had been going over the record files of the pallet transporter. The designers had not thought to timestamp the entries; so zhie was reduced to trying to remember what orders had gone before and after. Those chlorated mudfish tails had surely been shipped the day before. But what about the gephon moss? Had there been one shipment of that or two that day, and had they both gone to the same destination? For a whole ninth of a twentyseventhday, zhie rolled up and trembled. Then zhie resolutely unrolled and continued the investigation.

That weekend Jeanette's son Daniel came to visit. It was a long drive, but he made the trip most weeks, even though his job as an engineer kept him so busy. He brought her a big box of groceries, exotic foods as well as the basics. The Thai store near his house often had nice surprises.

"You're looking well, Mother!" he said. "You're even walking around." He sniffed. "That dope must be helping. Still seems weird to have your place smelling like Mu Iota on Saturday night."

She grinned. "The way things are going, it may not smell like this for much longer. I've been feeling so much better this week, the doctor may cut me off!" she said. "Did you see I trimmed the roses?" She picked up one of her four remaining cans. "Here, you've been overseas a lot. Recognize this alphabet?"

"Not at all." He stared at the can. "That's odd."

"What?"

"That looks like titanium. Nobody makes cans out of titanium. Must be some sort of anti-corrosion coating."

"Do you know anywhere I could find out what those letters are?"

"Google 'Unicode' and go to their website. You'll need a few hours to look through them all, there's no good way to look up a symbol. But they're all there."

That evening, after Daniel had left, she sat at the computer, lit her evening joint, and found the website. For hours she searched, but didn't find those odd, loopy characters anywhere. Some Burmese characters looked a bit similar, and that Bengali one ... But nothing really matched. Around midnight she gave up and went to bed.

There it was.

That was the record, Chetakiki was sure of it. Those were the two digits that must have been transposed. And—shame and dishonour!—that was zheir mark on the record, the scan of zheir own pedipalp. For a moment zhie considered fissioning. Zheir memory of this terrible day would be erased, and the two workers into whom zhie split would be held blameless, even after their brains regrew.

But that was the coward's way out. Chetakiki prepared the shipping error report, and set off to deliver it. Every one of zheir legs seemed to drag in slime as zhie slunk along the tunnel toward the alpha's cell.

Jeanette was walking today, really and truly walking to the store, without even a walker, for the first time in years. But how long would this new freedom last?

“You really don't have any more cans?” she asked the manager. “Not even a few? You've checked?”

“I'm sorry. I asked my supplier, but she said she wasn't expecting any more. It's a shame, several other customers loved it too. You never did find out where it came from, did you?”

“Sorry, I never did. Are you allowed to give me your supplier's phone number?”

“Not really, but I suppose I could bend a rule. For a customer like yourself.” He took a pencil and a scrap of paper from the pocket of his white jacket.

“I'm sorry, I can't help you.” The woman on the phone sounded genuinely regretful. “We only received one pallet of those cans. It wasn't in the order, there was no mention of it in the invoice, and we couldn't find anywhere to send it back to, so we passed them on to our retailers. We thought somebody might recognize the product. But I don't suppose we'll ever know now.”

Jeanette looked at the empty titanium can, the unknown letters, and what must surely be twin suns setting together, gold and silver, over an unimaginably distant alien sea. “No. I don't suppose we ever will.” Was it her imagination, or were her fingers already beginning to ache again?

“I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help you.”

“Just in case you do find out—can I give you my phone number?” Jeanette asked.

“Thank you, worker,” said the alpha. “Your diligence has been honorable. Tracing the individual purchaser through so many transfers was—impressive.”

“I was fortunate, Mother-of-Many. The personal identifier was on file for that one purchaser. Had it been any other, the tunnel would have ended in a wall.”

“Diligence is the egg, fortune the hatchling. You have earned the right to make good the obligation in person.”

Chetakiki would rather have crawled away and forgotten the entire affair. But this was clearly an order, framed in the language mode of politeness-to-underlings though it might be. “Y-Your wish is my instinct, Mother-of-Many.”

“Report immediately to the Education Cells for language training.”

Chetakiki rippled. Zhie had only been to Education twice in zheir life. It was a privilege rarely granted to workers, but each time had led to good things. Zhie made zheir obeisance and scuttled away as fast as zheir decently could.

A threeday later, Chetakiki’s brain fizzed with excitement and newly-implanted knowledge. It was as much as zheir could do to stand still for zheir briefing.

“You understand your instructions, worker?” the alpha said. “You are to accompany this shipment to its destination. Ensure that it is properly delivered, and give official greetings to the recipient. If you perform this as well as you performed the trace, you may expect more duties of this type in future.”

Chetakiki rippled. Zhie climbed into the transporter, rehearsing zheir lines, feeling the strange soft noises of the alien language on zheir vocal membrane.

Was that a knock? Jeanette took one last toke and put out her afternoon joint. The pains were definitely coming back; it didn’t look as though there was any question of having to give the marijuana up after all. She smiled, wryly, and stood up: at least she was going to enjoy the luxury of walking for as long as she could. She reached the door and turned the handle.

Outside sat a giant centipede, a meter and a half long, on top of a large blue cube. In one front claw it held what appeared to be a walkie-talkie.

Shouldn't it be a hookah? She put her hand to her mouth to hide a giggle. The doctor had told her that marijuana couldn't cause hallucinations. *Hah! Wait till I tell her!*

"Mother-of-Many Jeanette Trask?" the centipede asked.

"I'm Jeanette Trask." *Mother of many, my ass!* She repressed another giggle. *Damn, this stuff must be strong!* "And who, may I ask, are you?" The accidental rhyme almost set her off again.

"My name is Chetakiki. Do you have a *kshmera* preserve can with production number two-two-zero, one-one-two, two-zero-one, zero-one-zero?" Zhie looked at the walkie-talkie; a yellow light was flashing urgently.

"You mean the ones the store ran out of? Well, they weren't steel or aluminum, and non-recyclable trash isn't till Tuesday. Hang on." She walked back to the kitchen, still expecting to wake up at any moment. She returned to the door a few minutes later, bearing a plastic grocery bag of empty titanium cans. "Would it be one of these?"

Chetakiki rummaged through the bag, holding the walkie-talkie close to each can in turn. At one can the light turned blue. "Yes, this is the winning can! Jeanette Trask, I'm pleased to tell you that you've won a twentysevenday trip to the fabled *kshmera* farms of Charikida Three-and-One, all expenses paid. And, of course, a lifetime supply of our famous *kshmera* preserve! Your first seventwentyineday supply is here." Zhie gestured downwards at the cube.

"Really? That's wonderful!" Jeanette said, trying to stay calm. If she let her feelings show right now, she was sure she'd make a real exhibition of herself. "Thank you! Do you, um, have time for a cup of tea?"

"I have never had tea. I have, ah, heard of it. I would very much like to try it."

"Orange Pekoe, Earl Grey, or jasmine? Or I've got some mango ginger ..."

She stepped to one side and beckoned for her guest to enter.

BUNDORAN PRESS is now open to novel submissions on a limited basis. We will accept query letters only for SCIENCE FICTION novels by Canadian citizens or permanent residents.

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For submission guidelines see < [Bundoran Press Quidelines](#) >

Email your query to < [Answers](#) >

THE ENLIGHTENED

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

She was the White
 blissful as light unsullied by dawn
 undaunted by a turning age
 when miracles were birthed
years unblemished by history
apple blossoms falling through the air

She fought for a tranquil soil
with charity, an open heart
where saints feared to meddle

Guenavar, his queen, steadfast, unbreachable
she had no chance, treading mankind's world
confronting herself and a man whose devotion
threw temptation at her every stepfall

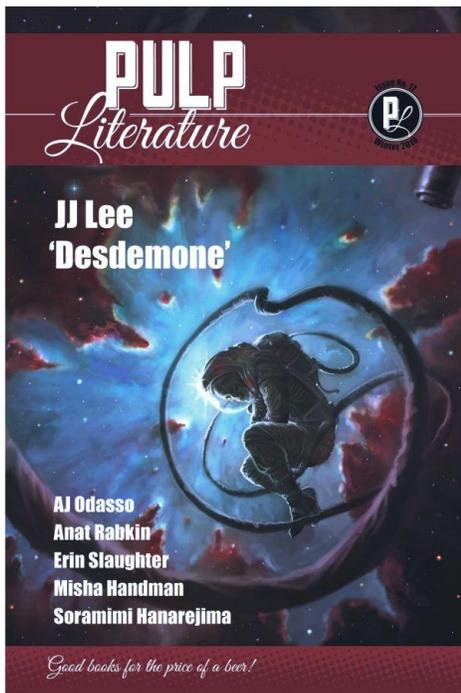
And the other

She was the Fey
 black as night caressed by stars
 twinkling shadows of an older age
 when light and dark were married
eons made of mystery
vines twining from the crypt

She rioted for chaotic whim
everchanging, growing terrain
containing capricious gods

Morgause, sister, opposing, unreachable
she grasped a task beyond her vision
defying reason, sure to be scorned
for baring all faults, even his

He was the sun about which
they revolved
resolving little
In the face of his duality
balanced by opposites
he burned to a husk
between flesh and soul



What do we want to read?

We love genre. Science Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery, History, Thriller or Chiller: we read it all, as long as it's well written.

We love literary fiction. Beautiful prose, soul-searching themes, and powerful and complex character development are all part of the stories we like.

We believe that genre fiction IS literary. Our goal is to publish writing that breaks out of the bookshelf boundaries, defies genre, surprises, and delights.

Our mandate

Rather than limit ourselves to a single genre or fiction format, we pick from two specific segments: exceptional emerging talent, and established writers and artists who wish to break out of their genre confines.

Pulp Literature magazine contains short stories, novellas, novel and graphic novel excerpts, illustrations and graphic shorts. Think of it as a wine-tasting ... or a pub crawl ... where you'll experience new flavours and rediscover old favourites.

Content of issue 17:

Cover: *Patron Saint of the Inevitable Death of the Universe* by Britt-Lise Newman

Features stories:

Desdemone by JJ Lee.

One Safe Place by Erin Slaughter.

We Come Back Different by Aj Odassa.

Embers by Misha Handman.

For the Love of Grey by Anat Rabkin.

Lineman by Susan Pieter.

Theft of Confidence by Soramimi Hanarejima.

Poetry:

Devonian by Emily Osbourne.

Tatoo by John Davies.

You don't know your life anyway by Kelli Allen.

Sea Changes by Matilda Berke.

See < [Pulp Literature Magazine](#) >

THE HOUSE OF MY DREAMS

by Nestor Delfino

(Previously unpublished)

I normally don't get up early on Sundays, but my headache was intolerable. I got a Tylenol from the night table, and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. The house shook suddenly. Startled, I opened the blinds.

A tree went by, then a telephone post; another tree; a school; a convenience store; a Service Ontario office. Liz was trying to wake me up for sure: I must've been screaming in my sleep.

But she didn't wake me.

The shaking stopped, and I heard honking and swearing; I opened the window. The driver of a bus was yelling insults at the driver of a flatbed—which was the vehicle our house was on. “You cut me off! Get a license, idiot!”

“Liz!” I yelled, “Liz, Liz, Liz!”

Traffic started moving. The flatbed revved up its engine, and diesel smoke got in. Holding on to the countertop, I managed to close the window.

The ugly picture of the CN Tower that hung in the hallway fell off, hit the baseboard, and broke its expensive frame in two. But it wasn't the CN Tower, it was a log cabin. Strange. Had Liz switched it?

“My god!” Liz said, coming out of the bedroom. “The CN Tower!”

The truck changed lanes, and the house shifted to the right. Liz stumbled into the bedroom, landing on the bed.

“Honey! Are you ok?” I said, crawling after her.

“Of course not! What happened to the CN Tower?”

“Who gives a rat's ass about the CN Tower?” I scoffed. “What about the house?”

“What about it?”

“Can't you feel it moving?”

“Oh ... I thought you were doing something in the lab. Wait! What do you mean, 'moving?'”

“Moving! Changing physical location! We're on a flatbed truck, going God knows where!”

She looked at me funny, but then she opened the curtains. Our bedroom *usually* faces a conservation area, but now we caught a glimpse of a McDucklings' sign passing by.

“Oh-my-god-oh-my-god-oh-my-god!” she said. “How are we going to take Jimmy trick-or-treating tonight?”

“I’m calling the cops!” The phone didn’t work. “Quick! Give me your cellphone!”

Dead battery.

“Shit! You always forget to plug it! It’s never ready for emergencies!”

“Well,” she said from the shaking bed, arms crossed: “What about *your* cellphone?”

Getting to the lab was hazardous and painful: two bumps in the head and a bloody nose—our chauffeur drove like a maniac. My dream-inducing prototype was on the floor, and not in one piece. Yeah, *that* prototype, for tomorrow’s experiment at the U of T!

Ah! But I found my cellphone on the desk. Dead battery. I had forgotten to plug it in last night.

“Did you call the cops?” Liz said.

“No—”

The driver hit the brakes and made me dive into the closet. An old hockey puck I had been looking for got lodged in my eye socket.

“We stopped!” Liz said.

A pile of stuff buried me. Some gooey substance got in my mouth. I didn’t know if it was toxic, or just nasty; possibly both. Not important. I tried not to swallow any of it.

“You’re always messing around with old stuff!” Liz said. “I told you to get rid of this garbage, but nooo, you had to keep your school mementos forever!”

I slithered out of the closet, took the puck out of my eye, and went to the bathroom. I stuck a couple of cotton swabs in my bleeding nose. “Let’s find out what’s going on!” I said.

The midmorning sun warmed my pajamas, and I suspect that my attire had something to do with the puzzled look on the US Customs officer’s face.

“Passport?” he said.

“I-I-um ... Liz, could you bring the passports?”

“They’re in the filing cabinet, dear.”

“So?” I said, keeping a smiling face to the officer, “Can you bring them, *please?*” Always use the magic word.

“Where do you think the filing cabinet is?” Liz said.

What was her problem? “Excuse me,” I said to the officer, “I’ll go down to the basement to get them.”

Except there was no basement on the flatbed. The driver had left it behind, along with our passports, wedding pictures, and the lotto 6/49 tickets.

The guy in uniform lost his patience: “Sir! Get properly dressed, and come with me!”

Two-hour wait. Not my idea of a Sunday morning. At least I found a washroom while Liz kept our spot in the line. The swabs were still stuck to my nostrils and I looked like a catfish.

“What are we going to do now?” Liz said, showing me the entry permits they had issued us.

“I’ll tell you: I’m gonna track down the driver and find out what the hell is going on!”

Parked near the customs building, the truck blasted some hideous music. It sounded like rap, although it could have been Beethoven’s Fifth—I don’t have a musical ear. I banged on the driver’s door like a berserk gorilla. When the Rastafarian-looking guy lowered the window, a cacophony assaulted me.

“Turn it off!” I yelled.

“Wha’?” he said, cupping his hand to his ear.

“Turn off the goddamn radio!”

“Ain’t no radio, man, it’s mp3!”

“Turn it off and get down here before I kill you!”

That did the trick. He unplugged his electronics, and jumped out. But before I could speak he put his hands to his mouth and started beatboxing: Boom-chakaboom-boom-boom, chakaboom-boom-boom!

I attempted to grab him, but he was just too fast; he danced in circles around me, driving me crazy with his beatboxing. Like in my soccer days, I threw a tackle—one that would’ve meant a red card back then.

I shook him. “Hey! Who the hell are you? Why did you steal my home?”

“Violence not required, man.”

“Speak up!” I said, wiggling my fist near his face.

“I’m just a driver, man. We’re not far, only a couple hours to get to da contest.”

“What contest?”

“The ‘Prettiest Home in da Northeast,’ man! You live under a rock?”

I felt dizzy. High blood pressure, in all likelihood. “What-how-where’s my basement?”

Liz got a hold of me. “You’re about to faint!” she said. “Come in the house and I’ll get you a glass of water. The fridge has moved to the living room and spilled everything on the carpet, so there’s nothing to eat, but there’s still water coming out of the faucets.”

She convinced me to lie down on the living room sofa. And I specify “living room”, because now the sofa was in the kitchen. I had just turned it right-side up when the doorbell rang.

“Who could it be at this hour?” Liz said.

The bell rang five more times. Upset, I opened the door. Two chunky ladies, one black, the other white, half-smiled and said, “Have you found Jesus?”

At that moment our trusty driver hit the gas and the flatbed took off like the last space shuttle. The black lady grabbed a hold of my mailbox where she had just dropped some flyers about the Jehovah Witnesses and a few about McDucklings’, but it ripped out of the wall. Both women rolled off the edge of the flatbed into the parking lot and smashed against a light post.

“I just found Jesus!” I shouted with a smile. I know I should’ve felt bad about it, but what the heck: Canada Post was going to stop door-to-door deliveries anyway.

We arrived at 1:55 PM to a place that looked like a hippies’ convention. Flower arrangements hanged from trees, there was orange grass, and a bunch of houses were arranged in a circle around a two-story wooden building. People dressed in white robes held hands.

Our driver pulled up at the last empty lot and dropped our home, completing the circle. Then he took off, fishtailing down the road before I had a chance to strangle him.

“You!” I said to the nearest hippie. The bearded, apostle-looking zombie turned to me.

“Welcome, brother! Welcome to the Contest!”

“Who’s in charge here? Take me to your leader!”

“The Reverend is busy,” the stoner said.

I pulled his beard so high that he had to stand on his toes. “Listen carefully,” I whispered into his ear. “Call that god dammed Reverend this very instant, or you’ll never have to shave again.”

“Oh, Reverend,” the hippie called out, “here, Reverend, this brother requests your presence!” He waved to a fat man who wore a white Mumu adorned with pink flowers and golden rivets. A see-through plastic Napoleon’s

hat didn't hide his baldness much. He had his arms across his belly, his hands tucked inside his sleeves. He waddled over.

"Welcome," he said. "What is your name?"

"Ingolf Huck," I replied.

"Pleasure to meet you, um, Ingolf. I'm Reverend Harper." He rubbed his hands and looked at the sky.

This had gone on long enough and my patience was threading thin. "Are you the boss?" I asked.

"Why, yes, my dear Ingolf. How can I help you?"

Let's see now ... How could I express my rage, my confusion, my sudden urge to sacrifice the brother and the Reverend and set fire to the flowers and the trees and all the houses next to mine? It took considerable brain power to craft my query.

"Listen, you bastard! What the hell is happening? I'm gonna call the cops! Charge you with kidnapping and property theft!"

I grabbed my cellphone, but the battery was still dead.

"Um," I said, "Is there a phone I can use?"

"Of course, of course, in the office. But you must be dying to know about the Contest! Oh, is that adorable lady with you? Come, please!"

The "office" was the wooden building surrounded by the pot-smoking, dressed-in-robos assholes. Their glorious guru took us the long way, visiting every house along the perimeter. On each driveway a canvas on a frame was set up, behind which short, rumped-looking figures sat on three-legged stools and painted. Very strange. Whenever I walked around to see their faces, they always managed to keep their backs to me. Creepy dudes. They wore identical painter's hats and paint-stained black capes.

"Painting every home, folks," the reverend said. "For the 'Prettiest Home in the Northeast' contest, of course. Heard of it?"

The look on my face answered his question.

"Oh, never mind," he said in a shaky voice. "After the houses are returned these paintings will be displayed in our gallery forever!"

My house had transformed. Instead of a bungalow it had turned into a log cabin. The sign on the screen door was still there, though: "No religious business here. Have a nice day and go church yourself."

I looked at the painting on the easel. Was I seeing all right? Had I hit my head? Had I gone mad? It depicted the goddamn CN Tower! I kicked the

frame, ripped the palette from the creep's hands—who still kept his back to me somehow—and jumped on the canvas until it was completely destroyed.

“Take me to the office NOW!” I yelled at fat Harper.

It didn't look like an office at all, more like one of those roadside restaurants where you find barrels, pots, cast-iron skillets, and balls made out of wooden threads. It was packed, but not with hippies. Tourists. Buying shit, taking selfies.

“Where's your phone?” I said to the man behind the counter, who was reading a Popular Mechanics magazine from 1984. He looked up and gave me his index finger to indicate I should wait.

I calmed down, thinking what I would report to the police. Hopefully the cops would suggest a lawyer from the States; lawyers in Toronto were expensive.

The man was still reading.

There was a bubble-gum vending machine with a gigantic glass ball on top. It required twenty-five cents. Cheaper than in Canada. I found a Canadian quarter in my pocket. Screw them! This would be my little revenge. I put it in and rotated the knob.

Nothing happened.

Upset, I kicked the thing ... and the gates of hell opened. The glass ball split like the roof of an observatory, and the bubble gum exploded like popcorn. Within seconds, the place was inundated in bubble gum. I saw the man with the magazine holding it higher and higher above the sticky sea, until he was overwhelmed.

“Liz!” I called out when the gum reached my neck. “I'm drowning!”

I woke up drenched in sweat. What a nightmare! But it was kind of funny, though. Funny in an absurd way. My head was killing me! Where did Huck leave the painkillers? He was sleeping like a baby and drooling all over my hair. So cute! Where was my cellphone? This called for a picture!

I felt light-headed all of a sudden, as if I was walking on clouds. Did the floor just move? We had quite a few drinks last night when the Smiths came over, after Huck switched on his nerdy dream-inducer prototype and absolutely nothing had happened. What a good laugh at his expense! Yeah, that was it; too much booze.

I paused to admire my beloved CN Tower. But it wasn't there! Did Huck switch it? Where did this log cabin image come from? I told him a million times to leave my favorite painting alone!

The house shook. Scared, I bumped into the picture; it fell down and the frame broke in two. What was that vibration? It didn't feel like an earthquake; it was like ... like ...

I tumbled my way to the window, and then I remembered that strange sensation. It was crazy, of course, the same thing I felt during a turbulence.

While crossing the Atlantic.

In one swift move, I opened the curtains. The sun was shining, and there wasn't a single cloud up in the blue sky. But there were clouds though, lots of them.

Below.

The vibrations became stronger, and suddenly, I was floating. The house was falling! Gahhh!

"Liz! Liz! Liz! Wake up, honey!" Huck said, shaking me. I opened my eyes, but some intense lights blinded me. He helped me sit up in the bed. No, not a bed: a gurney. As Huck undid the restraints, the room broke into an ovation. No, not a room: an auditorium.

Of course! The dream-inducer experiment at the U of T!

Huck lifted my right arm as if I was a victorious boxer. The clapping became louder, and I smiled at the crowd.

"Let's go home," I told Huck. "This experiment was harder than I anticipated!"

He smiled, and removed Jimmy from his gurney. For some reason, our son looked happy—maybe he was already thinking about tonight's trick-or-treating. We walked out of the auditorium amidst thundering applause. If this didn't get Huck his grant, I don't know what would.

My mood improved on the way home. We laughed at the absurd situations the prototype had injected into our shared dream. Reverend Harper! I almost peed myself.

I couldn't wait to get home, forget about the experiment, and go trick-or-treating with Jimmy. The darling was already fumbling about with his Halloween costume in the back seat.

"That's one thing that didn't go according to plan," Huck said, inconspicuously pointing back at Jimmy.

He was right. Jimmy hadn't been in our shared dream. Maybe the prototype didn't work on ten-year-olds. Maybe Huck had rushed the experiment. Odd that Huck's assistants reported that Jimmy's gurney had briefly levitated, which was something nobody could explain.

We turned the corner of Orion Crescent, and to my surprise, I saw two police cruisers, a fire truck, and an ambulance right outside our driveway. Jimmy was still playing with his costume, so we left him in the car.

We squeezed through the crowd to take a look.

"My god!" Huck said.

An earthquake? No, it couldn't be, the other houses were fine. It looked as if our bungalow had been picked up, twisted in the air, and then dropped. The main entrance faced the side yard, and there was a large crack all along the foundation.

This couldn't be a coincidence; something had gone horribly wrong with the experiment. I ran back to the car to get Jimmy.

He wasn't there.

Then I saw the most bizarre thing, right in the middle of our driveway: a short man, sitting on a three-legged stool, painting something on a canvas.

The CN Tower.

I couldn't see his face because his back was to us. But that wasn't the scary part; what made me cry out in horror was what the little man was wearing.

Jimmy's Dracula costume.

AUGUR MAGAZINE is OPEN to submissions from February 1 - February 28, 2018.

We are excited by writing that is difficult to classify—whether specifically speculative, substantially surreal, or slightly strange. We're interested in realist pieces that verge on the dreamlike or surreal; speculative stories that are almost realist; and, on top of that, any form of literary fantasy/science fiction/speculative fiction. Augur makes room for writing from uncommon perspectives, and brings together the often disparate realms of literary and genre fiction.

Our goal is to publish at least 75% Canadian and Indigenous content, offering new opportunities to the rich communities of speculative fiction writers in the North. And, more importantly, we're committed to featuring intersectional narratives as represented by characters, storytelling, and, in particular, author representation.

We pay \$0.02 cents (CAD) per word for short fiction (1250+ words), and a flat fee of \$25.00 per flash fiction piece (Under 1250 words). We pay \$20.00 CAD per poem.

See < [Augur Magazine](#) >

FOR LEONARD

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

you once told a dear friend
about the silver birds in Vulcan's skies
and a world filled with tomorrows

tomorrow will come no more, for you,
not in this form,
and yet
we remain grateful
for the special moments
the humour conveyed
in an arched eyebrow or an arch expression
the split fingered salute
and the way you caused us to ponder
the yin and yang of one and many

for performing such a
difficult, balanced, and beautiful dance
between logic and emotion
between human and other
and

for showing us it was OK to be
different

ALCHEMY AND ARTIFACTS (TESSERACTS TWENTY-TWO) is OPEN for submissions from January 15, 2018 - May 15, 2018.

It is an anthology of short fiction which examines the magic behind the history, the myths arising from the artifacts, the mysteries missed (or dismissed), but which lie at the root of world events. The editors want tales that explore laws magical as well as physical, the manipulation of reality in the past, resulting in the present. History, sorcery, alchemy, mystery. All with the sense of 'what if?'

For guidelines see: < [Tesseracts 22](#) >

TOURING TEST

by Holly Schofield

(Originally Published in AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review, July 2013 under the title "Off-Campus Housing.")

I pulled over onto the shoulder of Highway 16 and opened my door for the hitchhiker. Sweat from the summer heat ran down his face as he pulled the door closed. His grubby jeans were shoved carelessly into rubber boots that reeked of manure. Just the sort of person I wanted.

"I just need to get to Township Road 255. Got my combine in the field. Hoping to get in a full day's harvest," he said after thanking me and settling into the ripped passenger seat. I put the old Impala in gear and pulled back onto the highway.

"Well, happy to give you a ride. You're probably the only verbal interaction I'm going to get today," I said, aiming for simultaneously off-the-cuff and nerdy.

The stranger took off his Viterra Feed cap and scratched his forehead where the farmer's tan ended. "Name's Rick, pleased to meet you."

He was in his thirties, crinkles beginning to form around his eyes, his wind-reddened skin contrasting with his short blonde hair and day's stubble. The perfect stereotype of a Saskatchewan farmer. I kept my doubts to myself.

I saw him take in my ponytail, beard stubble, jeans, and Nietzsche tattoo. I may have somewhat overshot "typical grad student."

I told him I was a South American exchange student doing my sociology thesis on Ukrainian descendants in Canada, on my way to Regina to see a friend. Some of it was even true.

He didn't seem bothered by my casual questions about religion, diet, farming equipment tech level, and relationships. He gave very typical answers. Even when we discussed wheat strains, he showed just the right amount of knowledge.

He spelled out his surname and I scribbled it as I drove, making sure to get the correct number of Y's.

We shared a chuckle over his major source of income. Government crop subsidies are good for a laugh in farming communities everywhere, I think.

We turned in unison as a red-tailed hawk did a dive-and-cover into the wind-scoured grass beside the highway.

"Poor mouse," I said, testing him.

“Well aimed,” he replied, as suited a farmer who dealt daily with minor deaths. He may have shuddered though. My attention was diverted as a truck passed us, the first vehicle in over an hour.

Township 255 was a narrow gravel road lined with Lombardy poplars. Our dust plume hung behind us like a contrail. “Just a klick down the road,” he said, “Hope you don't mind.”

“Thanks so much,” Rick said, closing the car door with just the right effort and use of musculature. I did a three-point turn as he walked over to the huge green John Deere combine, each wheel the height of a man. The uncut hay gleamed in the field behind him. He climbed up the ladder into the driver's seat, gave me a “see ya later” kind of wave and began some kind of maintenance routine.

I parked the car behind the next slight rise. The poplars, tall and dense with a summer's growth, made good camouflage. I unfolded my nine-foot frame from its human-sized compression and flexed my secondary ears. Man, that felt good.

I loped behind the poplars, silent and swift. Rick had gotten down from the combine and was fiddling with the wheel hub. As the hub opened into an airlock, I pumped my arm in triumph, just like a human. Damn, could I spot them or what! Fourth one today!

Rick entered and continued on through the inner lock. I got a glimpse of a Class Five spaceship dashboard before he closed it behind him.

A Gliesian from out Andromeda way, without a doubt. His only mistake had been hitching a ride without a farmhouse in sight.

The Impala's seat had grown warm in the sun. I recompressed myself and adjusted my internal thermostat.

As I put the car into first and headed back for another tour of the highways, I gave a sigh of satisfaction. Just a few more hitchhikers and I would have enough data for my thesis.

The University of Galactic Sociology (Vega campus) had already approved my topic: “Niche Influx of Aliens: A study of the Acculturation Patterns and Coping Skills of Non-Terran Crop Researchers in Rural Canada, Terra.”

DZUNKWA

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

Dzunkwa, we were wrong
to seek your treasures,
to creep up, bags in hand,
our childish giggles stifled by our fear,
to steal those gifts you hide
from mortal men.

We were wrong—we all
admit our foolish, greedy choices,
though our tears, and through
the rough and sweat-stained
fabric of the sacks (our own)
you stuffed us into.

Your stench seeps inward
through the tight stitched seams,
and causes us to retch, and cough, and gag,
though not so much as knowledge of
what you will do to us
when you wish food.

Please, go to sleep,
and dream of fatter, sweeter meat,
while we slice our way outwards and,
we hope, set you afire, to burn to
swarms of darting, insect ash,
still seeking blood.

DAMNED CAT

by Tonya Liburd

(Previously unpublished)

I'm sitting in a colonial-style architecture restaurant near the Hyatt Regency, on the water by the Cipriani Boulevard strip, my view looking past the bar to outside.

I'm also bored. Once upon a time when I was a young girl, my being bored spelled trouble, because I would alleviate my boredom by stealing, or satiate my curiosity by sneaking into where I shouldn't. I lived outside the city then, and there were lots of mangoes—my favourite—on trees in other people's yards, among other fruit trees, to thief. I wasn't exactly the wrong crowd, but I was pretty close.

Once upon a time.

I'd grown up, but not necessarily grown out of that mentality. Some of it was still in me.

Probably partly because my curiosity worked in my favour, when it came to men. Indian men, Chinese men, black, white ... it didn't matter. But this was Trinidad; race didn't exactly matter to anybody.

My curiosity was piqued now. By a gorgeous black man. Sitting at the bar. Where'd he come from? Probably came in while I was lost in thought.

He'll notice me noticing him soon enough.

Then the fun'll start.

There. And here he comes.

He sat down at my table. What gorgeous eyes. Golden brown, bright. Probably has a white great-grandmother. Probably two, to have it last this long down the line to have eyes like that.

"I feelin' you starin' at the back of my head," he said mischievously.

"Oh, yeah?" I grinned.

"Yes." He sits back, grinning himself. He indicated my glass. "Your drink's done."

"So it is," I say.

"Want another drink?"

"Yes, thank you." I mimicked a polite little school girl.

He chuckled heartily. "I'm John," he said.

"Evelyn," I said.

"I getting' one for you, and me." He rose and headed to the bar.

I sat back, watching him walk in his white knee-length shorts and red shirt. Nice, tight hopsbread-bottom. He leaned on the polished wood of the bar, paler than his skin, making his order.

This should be fun.

He walked back to me, past the wooden chairs, with a cool sea breeze that blew in from outside, penetrating the warm cosy red and wood-paneled interior of the restaurant all the way to the back, where we sat. "So," I said, taking my drink in hand, "what do you do for a living?"

He leaned forward on his elbows, the light from the mosaic glass lampshade on his smooth, shaved head. "Anthropology," he said. "I study folklore and religion. Right now I'm focusing on Caribbean folk religions."

"Oh, really? That's interesting."

"Yeah. We don't have gods and goddesses and deities like we used to, now we just have celebrities."

I made a noise in agreement, taking a sip of my drink.

He laughed, a wonderful sound. "Oh," he said eagerly, grinning from ear to ear, "speaking of celebrities ... and I think I'm *really* late with this ... yuh see Jamie Foxx doin' 'Can I Be Your Tennis Ball?' serenading Serena Williams? He was hostin' the ESPYs."

"Oh God, yes, I see dat," I said, grinning widely myself. "Jamie Foxx is a jackass."

We shared a laugh. "Can I Be Your Tennis Ball?" he sang with a flourish of his hands; I could tell they were dexterous, even with that little movement.

"So," he said, "what do you do?"

I shrugged. "I work at an insurance company. Do you travel to do what you do?"

"Yeah. Travelled a lot of places, doing research. Lots of papers, lots of books."

"You must have a big library," I said.

"Never big enough."

We talked about some other things then. We got tipsy.

Then at one point, he looked at me with a somewhat strange expression, lips apart, eyebrows slightly raised. With those eyes.

"Let's get out of here."

"Yes, lets."

His apartment building was nice, a bit nicer than mine, I'll give him that.

Nice lobby, music playing as I followed him to the elevator. Then we were at his door, his keys jingling. It opened to a white-walled corridor, an open door on the right. Then I heard his sharp intake of breath.

“Oh *shit*, nuh ...!” I heard him mutter under his breath and he ran ahead to the door, slamming it shut. The look on his face as he turned around was uncharacteristic for what I knew of him: vulnerable, shaken.

That was curious, an overreaction even, in my opinion, and it piqued my curiosity. It was just a room ... right?

He quickly put on a smile, and laughed. The personality I knew was back on. “Yeah, heh, sorry,” he said, coming back to me. “Dat room is ... not for public consumption. Private.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask about this room, but I smiled gracefully instead. As we passed the door, I got the scent of myrrh. I knew that some Africans liked to place myrrh on their stoves to add fragrance to their homes. I asked if he had African in his family. “We all have African in our family,” he said, ending the subject.

We kept on walking. “That’s the bedroom,” he said, indicating the open door to the left as we passed. Well appointed. Tidy. I didn’t know what to expect, after what had just happened.

We entered the living room. Stronger here, but faint even as we passed through the corridors, was the scent of incense. “Take a seat,” he said, indicating spacious couches. I headed to one.

He remained standing, watching me for a moment.

“I wanna cool off after bein’ outside,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt. “You min’ if I take mih shirt off ...?”

I stared openly at the toned musculature, the six pack, the tight, gleaming brown skin.

“Nah, is arrite,” I said, grinning widely.

He grinned back. Then he threw his head back; I imagined that’s how he looked in the throes of lovemaking. “Aah, yes, air conditionin’!”

“Yes, yes,” I said, my mind on other things entirely.

He clapped his hands together, rubbed them happily, then headed to his liquor cabinet.

He opened a bottle of expensive foreign whiskey. I was having a good time—with his AC running at just the right temperature and good whisky flowing. We must have talked about something then, but I don’t remember what. Many things had somehow become less important for me, because, somehow, a good portion of my interest had become fixated on the mystery of

the other room.

An hour perhaps passed like this, definitely two; we were getting drunker by the minute.

“What’s in that room?” I asked him, laughing. “A corpse you forget about an’ remember just in time to close the door before we pass it?”

“Oh, come on, man,” he said, laughing, dismissive. “No.”

“Oh I know! De room smell like crack an’ it have crack and weed and crack pipes all over de place.” I pulled an alcohol-fueled wicked grin.

“No, man, no!”

“Ok, den. Ghosts, ghosts guardin’ de books. An’ if I go in ‘dere they wake up an attack mih.”

“... gyal ...”

“Arrite, arrite.”

“Jus’ drop it.”

Some part of me, not yet swimming in liqueur, realized I had gone too far. I nodded my head, albeit clumsily.

“But ...” he lifted a finger. “Speaking of.” He got up, headed to and walked into the forbidden room. He emerged holding some loose papers in his hands. “I have something I’d like to read to you.”

“Oh, really?” I said, all smiles, reclining in the couch.

“Interested?”

“Yes!”

He plopped down before me, arms resting on the back of the couch. He began to read about a man and a woman who met at a local restaurant, started off talking by saying what they did for a living and ended up going to the man’s place. He described that the woman was wearing, what the man was wearing, that the man had asked if it was okay to take his shirt off. My eyebrow raised.

“Let me see that.” I took the papers from him.

It read just as he’d said. Okay. A nice trick for the ladies; this was new.

“Continue.”

He read on and moved closer to me, almost touching me. He described, in exquisite detail, the two’s lovemaking, never taking his eyes off me. My lips parting, I began to feel warm; I could feel my juices start to flow.

Then he talked of the woman stealing in the middle of the night to the forbidden room.

“... At first she couldn’t see the words on the page, then they coalesced and she could make out the words. She screamed.”

He looked up from his papers, a smile on his face. “Like it?”

“Interesting ending. You read this to all the girls?” I swirled the remnants of my drink, and finished the glass. It burned on the way down, a hot snake heading to my gut.

He smiled, and brought his face near mine, traced the contours of my face with his lips, then devoured me with his kiss. I devoured him back.

He picked me up and took me to the bedroom.

We went at it hard, passionately. At one point we were straining against each other, half off his bed, clawing towards ecstasy.

He pulled me to him, grinding himself into me, pounding away for all he was worth, and I wrapped myself around him, my back arching as we neared climax after climax.

It was a good night. And the fact that we’d performed every sordid act he’d written in his story added an odd spice to our lovemaking.

I woke up early, after four. It was still dark outside and I was dehydrated. I went to the kitchen and opened the fridge to get something to drink.

Heading back, I stopped in the hallway, thinking, looking at the forbidden door.

I decided. Just to quietly make fun, to see what silliness he was hiding; a messy room, perhaps. I headed straight for it.

It wasn’t locked; I was surprised. I felt along the wall for a light switch, and flicked it on. It illuminated a room that surpassed the description in John’s story.

Books lined the wall across from the door where I stood; spidery writing glowed through the dust gathered on some of their spines. Glass bottles and jars of various colours and fascinating designs stood on smaller tables around the corners of the room, the bright-coloured contents of some bubbling and boiling with hidden power.

In the middle of the room was a table with a central carved wooden leg, ending with four toes with sharp nails to support it. The top of the table was smooth glass, engraved with strange symbols; a few books sat upon it. Scattered upon its surface were various objects, curious and lovely.

As surprising as all this was, that wasn’t what mesmerized me as my eyes went about the room.

Among the various tomes with their varied bindings lining the opposite wall—some looking old and dusty, never used, some looking fresher—was one that caught my eye, riveted me.

Entranced, I finally moved from my spot before the door, and headed

toward it.

I did stop to take in the table though. It was truly fascinating, like nothing I had ever seen. But something drew my attention even more.

I walked past the table and stopped before the book. While others on the shelves had vivid bindings, and some even seem to threaten to freeze the fingers if touched—mist draped off of the covers, falling through the air—this particular thick tome seemed *alive*; the ... leather ...? cover, polished to gleaming, seemed more vibrant than anything else in the room, almost to the point of breathing. My fingers ached to hold it.

So I did. Eagerly, I took it off the shelf. I turned it around in my hands; the embossing on the covers seemed to change with however I held it.

I opened it.

I looked at the pages to see what they read. My vision swam; I couldn't make out what the words were. When I was able to see the pages clearly, I still couldn't make out the words. Then I thought I saw something. When the words coalesced, they *literally* slid off the page; I tried to let go of the book, but I couldn't; the words spidered their way all over, *into*, my hands.

Pain.

I screamed; air left me, with no sound, silent, hoarse.

This part wasn't in John's story. When it was all done, when all the words had crawled off the thick tome's pages, I was finally able to let go.

The book landed heavily, consumed, on the floor.

I looked down, in horror, at my hands. They were painfully stiffened, clawed, with the effect of god-knows-what magical words.

Oh God. Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh ...

Then my thoughts went to John.

I wasn't supposed to be in here. Or maybe ... *I was*? Yes or no, what will he do to me?

A chill crept over me that not even the coming Trinidadian sun could probably dispel.

I ran out of that room.

Then stopped, cold, at the entrance to his.

There he lay, asleep, the sheets barely covering him, one muscular leg completely showing. His toned chest rose and fell evenly, the moonlight falling on his chestnut skin.

I looked from him to my discoloured, clawed, aching hands.

Wincing with pain, biting my lip, holding back tears, I picked up my things, dressed myself, forgoing putting on my bra—that was too painful an

endeavour. I checked the living room for the last of anything of mine, and hurried out the door.

I could not put it off any longer. I'd missed as many days as I could off of work. I'd avoided friends. I'd even tracked down an Obeah woman, and when I'd shown her my hands, she'd slammed her door right in my face.

There was no one else who could get the words off my warped hands, now hastily covered with gloves.

I had to go back to him. It was a big risk. I had no idea how he'd react to seeing me. If he would help me at all. If he would kill me.

I was sick to my stomach. The Gravol I'd taken didn't help much.

Painfully, one last time, I opened the piece of paper I'd brought with me; I didn't even trust myself with remembering what I'd planned to say, so I'd—with great effort—written it down.

I didn't have to press his buzzer, someone was entering his building as I approached the lobby; maybe luck was on my side.

In front of his door, I took a great breath and put the paper away. Then, raising one hand, wincing from the pain, I knocked.

I didn't have to wait long. He opened the door.

"Oh, it's *you*," he said.

All the words I had planned went right out the window. "I ... I'm sorry ..."

"Yuh sorry what?" He *steupsed*, a sharp, cutting sucking of his teeth.

"I went into your room ... and touched a book ..."

"What it is ah say? Not dat the room is private, not for public consumption? An' yuh comin' now, askin' me for help?"

"Because you're the only one who can help—"

"And thank *you*," he said, pointing with one finger, "for helping me to get rid of that book. Is a dangerous book, eh, and not worth the effort to keep it around. You were quite," and he chuckled, "*handy*. Good luck with getting rid of that. I know *I* wouldn't touch you with a 10-foot pole."

I scowled. "You blasted—"

He broke out into peals of laughter. My eyes widened in fear at that laugh; my skin broke out into goose bumps. Then he stopped, the humour dropping out of his expression completely. That was the first time I got an inkling, a taste, of the kind of person that would own such a room, the deathly serious power behind the man. I stepped back.

"Honestly, though," he said, in a tone of one confiding something. "We

could have had a good time, you and I. And in a way I *did* warn you. But yuh didn't listen. Is like a stick break in yuh ears."

I felt like someone had punched me. He really wasn't going to help me, at all.

He smiled at me. "Curiosity killed de cat, eh?"

I stood, frozen, afraid to speak.

He *steupsed* long, his smile widening.

"Yuh is a cat. Damn cat."

And with that, he closed the door.

Once upon a time, there was a woman named Evelyn. She used to be fas', she used to thief.

Once upon a time.

When she grow up, she was curious, and good with men, but she never settle down. And one day she meet this man and she was curious, and now it look like for the rest of her life she goin' pay for it.

Once upon a time when she was small her hands used to serve her well.

Once upon a time.

Now, I'm back to where all this had started, the same restaurant, the toiling ceiling fan seeming to complain about the number of people it has to serve. Still my favourite place to unwind, especially since I need more unwinding as of late.

I looked down at my hands. My gnarled, discoloured hands, where sometimes, I swear I could see magical symbols, sigils, spidery words in faint gold upon my skin.

This makes me an outcast of sorts in the Christian, god-fearing society Trinidad is. Trinidad is not Nicki Minaj and Rihanna. People heading sermons in church complain about them down here in the Caribbean.

People will be afraid to deal with me. Yet others may not want to deal with me, thinking I have learned my lesson, keeping their distance because of the how and why.

People of magic, people like John, will be reluctant to help me, if they help me at all. I mean, I have an entire book of magic in my hands. And I don't even know *what* book. Whatever they do may backfire.

I will always be obvious wearing gloves in this hot weather. In this country.

It's a permanent mark.

I'm a pariah.

So now, painfully, I reach with one hand, to pick up my drink, the words ricocheting around in my head.

Curiosity killed the cat.

Yuh is a cat.

Yu's a damned cat.

Yuh damned cat.

Damned cat. Damned cat. Damned cat ...

PAY IT FORWARD

by Andrew J. Lucas

(Previously unpublished)

Vibrations at certain distinct frequencies
access higher tenuous dimensions.
Every shipment rising and falling
through differing planes of reality.
Each package presumed to tele-locate
from here to there.
There to here and back, dragged,
back from the potential infinity of universes.
Our ships skip across these falling lower, slower,
on target, on schedule, on time.
Can we assume the package sent
is the same package received?
Or a gift from the fringe of a parallel universe
like our own in every detail?
How can we know?
How can we be sure?
Or are we dependent
upon the kindness of strangers?

THE LUCK OF CHARLES HARCOURT

by Robert Runté

(Previously published in *On Spec Magazine*, Vol 1. #1, July, 1989)

I should have realized from the first that Charles Harcourt had a charmed life, but that first day I was thinking more about Ed Ferguson than I was about Charlie.

I was coming back from the file room when I heard Ed shouting in Mr. Petrie's office. You could hear Mr. Petrie raising his voice too, but by the time I realized what was happening, it was already too late. Ed came storming out shouting that he quit, that Petrie was a weasel and that the rest of us were fools to work for him. He emptied out his desk, making a big production out of it, slamming drawers and hurling insults at Mr. Petrie. Mr. Petrie just stood his ground and took it because there was little else he could do. You could see he was furious but there was no point in ordering Ed to get out since that was obviously his own intention. At the door Ed got really nasty, saying how Mr. Petrie even cheated on his mistress, which we all knew well enough, but were shocked just the same to hear it said out loud. It was the most emotional scene I ever remember seeing in any office in which I've worked. We all stood there staring at the office door long after Ed Ferguson had slammed it closed on his career.

We were still transfixed with embarrassment and emotion when Charles Harcourt walked in through the same door. I think we half expected it to be Ed coming back to take another shot at Petrie, or maybe to apologize, and the entrance of this stranger broke the spell. As we turned away to busy ourselves shuffling papers or pretending to hunt for something in our desks, I heard Harcourt ask the receptionist if there were any openings in the company. Mr. Petrie turned back from his office and called out for the receptionist to "Send that man in to see me!" Within the hour, Charles Harcourt was installed at Ed Ferguson's desk.

I don't think Charlie had any really close friends, but we all got along pretty well in the office and we'd often do things together as a group after work. As time went on we all started to notice that Charlie had this phenomenal good luck. I mean, sometimes it would be big things like his being in the right place at the right time to get the job with the company, but mostly it was trivial stuff.

Like a bunch of us would go over to the bank on our lunch hour, and there would be these horrendous lineups. Ever since they put in those instant cash machines, the bank has cut the number of real tellers in half, and it's just unbelievable during the lunch hour rush. We had this running joke in the office that no matter which lineup you got in, it always turned out to be the slowest moving line. Except for Charlie. Charlie would get in a line with ten people in front of him, when the lineup would suddenly melt away. People would realize that they had forgotten their bank book, or that they had filled in their deposit slip wrong, or that the cheque they had intended to cash was dated tomorrow, or that they should have been in the lineup for new accounts over at the other desk. And Charlie would be there at the teller's window while the rest of us were still nine or ten people back in another line. We soon learned to line up behind Charlie.

Or if we went out to the mall or a theatre after work—it could be the Christmas rush or the most popular play in town—Charlie would always find a parking spot right next to the door. He'd just be driving up when somebody would pull out of the lot, leaving the perfect parking place right in front of Charlie's bumper. Every time.

Same thing if there was ever any kind of office draw or pool going. At first people would kind of pressure Charlie into buying tickets because we figured that everyone should participate, but we slowly learned that Charlie would always win. If it was the sort of thing you could share, like a bottle of wine or something, Charlie always made a point of sharing it with the rest of the office, so you couldn't get sore about it—but it still took all the fun out of office pools, knowing ahead of time who was going to win. And it was no good getting him to buy a bunch of tickets on the principle that as long as he was going to win anyway he might as well contribute more, because he'd simply win second and third prize too.

And you couldn't trick his luck either. Once we tried having an "honorary" first prize of a stack of memo pads and saved the real prize for second place. We'd didn't even tell Charlie what the prizes were, but of course that time he came in second on the pool. It was weird. Eventually, we all just lost interest in organizing anything for the office.

It was the same with dates. Charlie, Norm Wilson and I used to go to one of those photo dating services every once in a while and triple-date. We never expected too much, but it was better than singles' bars, and you never know. But of course we soon realized that we did know: Charlie always got the really hot number for his date. I mean, we'd all pick the date we wanted from the

photo album but ours would turn out to be losers for one reason or another, and his would always turn out to be fantastic. Norm tried switching with Charlie a couple of times after Charlie had made his choice but before he had actually asked for the date, but it didn't work. It just meant that Norm's original choice turned out to be the better one after all. Norm even tried purposely picking a real dog one time to switch with Charlie, only she turned out to be really smart and funny and exactly the kind of woman you've always wanted to meet.

Naturally we all kidded Charlie about it, and he would just look embarrassed and pooh-pooh the whole thing and say how it was all in our heads. I remember one time in the cafeteria, Charlie was standing there trying to tell us that we were making this whole "luck" thing up just to bug him, until we noticed that the cashier had given him \$15 change for a ten dollar bill.

Sometimes he'd get really mad about it, like when a bunch of us wanted him to go in with us on a "Lotoluck Bonus Draw" ticket. He told us that lotteries were "a tax on the stupid" and that he thought they were immoral. When we pushed him a little he started yelling about how we were blowing the whole thing out of proportion, how he was sick of these jokes about his "good luck," and how we would knock it off if we were his friends. I'm embarrassed to admit that Norm kept insisting. Norm said that as our friend Charlie should be willing to share a little of his luck with us. Charlie just went nuts. He shouted at us that we weren't his friends at all since we were just interested in exploiting him, and to stop it once and for all, or else! He didn't get to say "or else what" because Mr. Petrie came out of his office to see what all the shouting was about. We all slunk back to our desks. We ended up buying the ticket by ourselves, but of course we just lost.

We didn't bring it up again for a long time after that, though it was always implicit. People would ask Charlie if he was going to the bank at lunch or if he was thinking of driving over to the mall after work, before making their own plans. You tried not to be obvious about it, but I guess we all exploited Charlie's luck in small ways.

Then one day, Mr. Petrie's brother-in-law came over to pressure Mr. Petrie into buying some tickets from their lodge. Petrie didn't want the tickets, and he never got along well with his brother-in-law, so he was pretty put out that he had to buy a whole booklet full of tickets to get rid of the guy. Then the brother-in-law made the mistake of joking how Petrie had wasted his money, because he himself had bought ten booklets and fully intended to win. Petrie was sufficiently petty to sic the poor bastard onto Charlie, just to make sure

his brother-in-law lost. Charlie didn't want to buy a ticket either, but of course Mr. Petrie was his boss, so what could he do? Ten weeks later he was duly informed that he had won an all-expense-paid trip for two to the opening night of "The Play's the Thing" in New York.

As usual, Charlie tried to give the tickets away, but without success. He offered them to me, but as luck would have it, they were for the same weekend as my brother's wedding. He offered them to Norm, but Norm had finally set up a date with that woman from the dating club. After months of trying to get her to forgive him for ever having hinted she was unattractive, Norm didn't want to blow his chances now by postponing it even for a week; and she flatly refused to fly to New York for the weekend on a first date. Charlie offered the tickets to Mr. Petrie, who was tempted since it would greatly annoy his brother-in-law, but his daughter was graduating that weekend, and family came first. Charlie offered to pass them on to Mr. Petrie's brother-in-law, not realizing how things stood, and Mr. Petrie made it clear that he thought Charlie should use those tickets himself, or else.

So like it or not, Charlie was stuck with the tickets. He was, as he confided to me one night, terrified at the prospect.

This was a little hard for me to grasp at first, but I gradually came to understand that Charlie lived in superstitious dread of his own phenomenal luck. Most of the time he simply refused to acknowledge that there was anything unusual happening. He was generally able to dismiss any particular incident with a perfectly rational explanation. After all, it is inevitable that some lineups will move faster than others, and even the best parking spots have to come empty sometimes. Someone was bound to have taken Ed Ferguson's job, just as Charlie was bound to find one sooner or later, so there was nothing unnatural or mystical about bringing the job and Charlie together. And yet, in his darker moments, Charlie had to admit that he had always had unusually good luck.

"I'm still young," he told me, crying into his beer, "but I'm using up all my luck at once! I wouldn't mind waiting in line sometimes or parking at the far edge of the lot, but I can't control it. I try to hang onto it until I really need it, until I'm in a life or death situation and need all the luck I can get, but you can't conserve it. I try to hold onto it, I try not to be so lucky, but I can feel it leaking out, draining away, drying up. I hate when I win something because it means I'm that much closer to running out."

"That's silly," I'd told him. "I'd think it would be great getting all those breaks all the time. I'd love to be as lucky as you are!"

“But don’t you see,” he said, “I’m using it up too fast! I’m wasting it on things that don’t matter. Then when I need it, it will be gone!”

“Then the sensible thing to do,” I argued, “would to have a go at some big things now while you still can. Like the ‘Lotoluck Bonus Draw.’ Why don’t you and I split a ticket—”

“No, no, no!” he shouted. “If you win big, you lose big too! It all has to balance in the end. There’s nothing special about me. I don’t deserve more than anybody else. Don’t you see, if I keep winning like this it just means I’m getting my share of good all at once instead of in installments like everybody else. But then I’ll have to take the bad all at once too, forever and ever, instead of mixed in with the good like other people.”

“Yeah, but if you have the 10 million dollars, you can get through an awful lot of bad luck. A couple of major lotteries and you’re fixed for life, no matter what happens after.” I confess to a certain self-interest here, as I still had hopes of his going halves on a ticket.

“Someday I’m going to win something big and it’s going to use up all the luck I have left. Then no matter how much I win or how hard I try to stay safe, that will be the end.”

“Rubbish,” I told him. But I began to see why he refused to play lotteries, and why he always tried to get rid of anything he won, and why he was so terrified about the trip to New York.

When he failed to give the tickets away he started to fear that this was *it*. After all, he normally should have been lucky enough to find someone who wanted them right away. So he tried to hide from his doom by ignoring the tickets. He made a blind date for that weekend and went out as if he had nowhere better to go. When he and his date went back to his place, they found a limousine waiting. He hadn’t read the contest fine print which explained about the pickup and delivery service. His date was thrilled.

Embarrassed and fatalistic, he allowed himself to be bundled off to New York. He kept a nervous watch on events to see if his luck was still holding or whether things would start to go wrong. It was difficult to tell, however, since the contest organizers had put a lot of effort into seeing that everything went smoothly. The lack of airline delays, the quick limousine ride to the hotel, and the efficient manner in which the desk clerk switched them to a two-bedroom suite, were perhaps more indicative of the publicist’s professionalism than Charlie’s luck. Similarly, the next day’s tour of art galleries and museums, the fine supper at the contest representative’s favorite restaurant, and the best seats the theatre had to offer for what turned out to be a terrific play, could all

be interpreted as part of the one big win which would shortly exhaust his supply of luck.

Nevertheless, Charlie started to relax. Things were going well, even with Julie, his date. Since he had clearly met her *after* winning the trip, Julie could not be considered as part of the same piece of luck. His luck therefore seemed to be holding. It was only the nagging knowledge that he had been unable to avoid the trip to New York that suggested that the Fates had something special in store for him.

On the way back to the hotel, however, his driver left the freeway for a shortcut only to have the limousine break down in an unsavoury section of town. The driver apologized profusely, the more so for seeing Charlie's stricken face, and ran off seeking a service station.

No sooner was the driver out of sight than a dozen bikers roared up and surrounded the car. As Charlie told me later, he knew then that this was the end. It was obvious that the Fates had manoeuvred him into this ridiculous position and there was, therefore, no point in trying to avoid his doom. Determined to face death with dignity and courage—and incidentally to protect Julie who stayed hidden in the limo—Charlie left the relative safety of the car to confront the gang. Charlie was a little vague on what transpired next, but the end result was Charlie sprawled on the pavement with a serious knife wound while the gang sped off into the night. Charlie was, of course, unconscious thereafter, but Julie eventually got him to the hospital.

Charlie didn't have any next of kin, and the only phone number they could find in his wallet was for the office, so Monday morning Julie called me from Charlie's bedside. After I got the whole story, I tried to impress upon Julie how important it was that she convince Charlie that his luck was still holding out. After all, he was still alive where he might well have been dead, and that was pretty lucky if you looked at it that way. Julie didn't seem to see what I was on about, but she did say that Charlie had been cursing his rotten luck all night. As it happened, the doctor came in to see Charlie while I was still on the line so I got to hear the diagnosis myself.

"It's the damndest thing," said the Doctor. "When I started to close the wound I spotted some dark spots I took to be debris or dirt from the knife, but when I enlarged the incision I discovered a very nasty tumor. Another six months and it might well have been inoperable. It's a one in a million fluke, but if the knife hadn't gone in exactly at that one spot at that one particular angle, I never would have seen it, and it would have gone undetected until

much too late. Ironic as it may seem, Mr. Harcourt, your would-be assailant saved your life.”

“My god,” said Julie, “You *are* lucky!”

“Damn!” said Charlie.

DISRUPTING CHRONOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

by J. J. Steinfeld

(Previously published online in *Wax Poetry and Art* (Canada))

Blocking my way on the hiking trail
there was a nasty twice human-sized beast,
its huge claws and sharp teeth gleaming,
growling forth it has a question to ask:
“What is imagination?”

“Leave me alone, please, I have a morning walk
a little escape from the humdrum and everyday,”
I say with as much politeness as trepidation
but the growling increases,
the claws seeming to get larger,
the teeth sharper
and I blurt out:
“How should I know?”

“If you know what’s good for you
you better answer,” the beast threatens,
showing off claws and teeth
like a formidable, incomparable model
stopped on the runway.

“Why do you have five clawed paws
and precisely a hundred teeth
as sharp as sharpness personified?” I ask.
“I asked you first, silly little human,”
the nasty twice human-sized beast continued
and growled it had over two-hundred teeth.

Again and again, “What is imagination?”
question as threat to mortality
as prelude to annihilation.
Trembling, I said “Look at the clouds
there’s a flightless bird long thought extinct
disrupting chronology and definitions.”
The nasty twice human-sized beast looked up
and I ran past its growling,
huge-clawed, sharp-toothed form
and down the hiking trail
as if my life depended on it
on what had become a most
wondrous cloudless morning.

CREATIVE INK FESTIVAL

May 18-20th, 2018

My name is Sandra Wickham and I’m a writer. For eleven years I promoted one of the biggest bodybuilding and fitness competitions in the country because I was passionate about competing and the sport and wanted to share that passion with others while helping the sport to grow. I’m just as passionate about the literary and arts world and want to promote an event to share that passion. I’ll do my best to produce a great event that people will love. I’m not doing it all on my own, however. I have to thank Randy McCharles of When Words Collide for his help and inspiration in getting this festival started. There is such great support in the community for which I am grateful and many people have been helping me behind the scenes. I’ll also be recruiting volunteers to help the festival run as smoothly as possible!

The festival will be a mix of what you'd find at a conference and a convention. There will be panels with several people discussing topics, single person presentations, and a banquet with keynote speech. We will also have readings by authors, displays by artists, an expo of people selling their goodies (books, art, etc), pitch ideas to editor sessions, Blue Pencil sessions where writers can get feedback on their writing from professionals, as well Kaffeeklatches where you get to sit down with one of our Guests of Honour to have coffee and chat in a more intimate setting (numbers will be limited to keep the groups small). Expect to come into a warm, welcoming and fun environment, while you learn more about your craft, network with people in the industry and make new connections!

The Creative Ink Festival will take place at the Delta Burnaby Hotel and Conference Centre, 4331 Dominion Street Burnaby, B.C.

See < [Creative Ink Festival](#) >

IT'S JUST DEAD WOOD

By Phil Wolters

(Previously unpublished)

Alberta Parks needs to post better signage.

Tom Woods and Mary Simmonds were a young couple in love. Newly engaged after a couple of years of dating and one of living together, they were celebrating the start of another glorious Alberta summer by going camping at one of the many provincial parks located just in the foothills of the Rockies. They had loaded up the car with all the gear they'd need for a romantic outdoor getaway and headed out on a Friday afternoon.

Things started out beautifully. The site they'd reserved online was everything that they might have hoped for. The only thing separating them from the crisp, cool mountain lake was a thin strand of trees. Although there were other people camping nearby, the sites were spread out well enough that Tom and Mary still felt a sense of privacy and seclusion. The sun was bright and cheery, but a cool breeze off the lake kept the temperature nice and mild.

The young couple had their tent pitched and their tarp up in no time flat. The first thing they did with the freshly pitched tent was to put it to good use in the most enjoyable way possible, and once that was done they both felt so full of joy that they could barely stand it, and they busted out a few beers and set to building a fire.

Tom had bought two bags of firewood from a gas station before they left the city, and both he and Mary were experienced fire starters. They used bags and napkins from the fast food they'd picked up on the way out to get things started, then used some twigs and branches that Mary had gathered as kindling, getting a small, hot blaze going before adding the first of their purchased logs. They were still in this early stage of fire construction when the park ranger rolled up for the first time.

"Hello folks," he called, stepping out of his green and white Alberta Parks truck.

"Hello, sir," answered Tom, "What can we do for you?"

"Oh, I'm just checking in to make sure everybody's doing all right." He gestured to the well-put together campsite. "Looks like you're getting along just fine."

"You bet," answered Tom. Mary was always just a little bit shy while talking to strangers.

“Well that’s good, then.”

He gave a little wave and started to walk back towards his truck, but at the last second he turned and spoke to the couple again.

“I just want to make sure, and I feel a little silly asking this, that you’ve got all your own firewood.”

Tom gestured at the stack of wood that they’d brought with them.

“Good, good. A lot of people come in and they don’t bring any wood with them. They think they can just pick it up off the ground. But we really don’t encourage that. It’s actually a park rule that people only burn what they bring in.”

“Is that right?” asked Tom, “I didn’t know. We used a bunch of twigs and stuff to get the fire going. Is that against the rules?”

Mary really wished that Tom hadn’t mentioned that, and she wanted the conversation to end. She gave Tom a look intended to convey this message, but he managed to miss it entirely.

“It’s against the rules. I could give you a ticket for it, but I’d have to be a real asshole.”

Tom and Mary both chuckled.

“There’s a whole lot of tiny animals, insects and worms, and microorganisms and stuff, which depend on that dead wood to survive, and we need those tiny animals to have healthy ecosystems. Healthy populations of tiny things mean healthy populations of bigger things.”

“The food chain,” Tom interrupted.

“Damn straight,” replied the ranger.

“Well, thanks. I’ll remember that going forward.”

“Hope you do. Sorry for the little lecture, but when critters wind up being burned I have to give out a big heap of tickets.”

The ranger got back in his truck and drove away, and Tom and Mary got back to enjoying their camping trip.

Dusk turned to night, and the young couple drank another beer each, and then another, and another, and then they lost count. They talked and laughed and sang and kissed, and all the while the fire burned. It was a magical evening, the kind that people spend their whole lives wishing for.

At a little bit after midnight they noticed their wood pile was getting severely depleted. Even though they remembered the ranger’s warning, and even though they recognized they shouldn’t mess up the natural environment that they had traveled so far to enjoy, Tom and Mary didn’t want to see their night around the campfire cut short either.

And so, with Mary continuing to enjoy her place beside the blaze, a slightly drunken Tom stumbled out into the trees to pick up what he could to burn. Turned out there was a lot to find. Whether it was because the rangers were doing such a good job getting the word out or because it was so early in the season that the forest floor hadn't had a chance to be picked clean yet, Tom found an abundance of usable fuel right next to their campsite.

Some of the logs had bugs on them when Tom picked them up. There were also beetles and worms and spiders, none of them pleased to have their homes so abruptly moved, but Tom wasn't worried about it.

Mary would have worried. Mary hated bugs. The thought of picking up a log and having her finger brush up against a big black beetle was enough to make her shudder. The thought of accidentally disturbing a wolf spider was enough to give her nightmares. It was just as well that Mary stayed by the fire.

No sooner had Tom stacked up a big pile of wood gathered from the nearby bush he spotted headlights coming down the road. Of course it was the park ranger, and of course he stopped his truck to get out and talk to them again.

"Hello folks," he called, accidentally shining his flashlight in Mary's face. "Sorry about that," he said as he noticed her cringe away. "I wanted to come by one last time to make sure you folks are doing all right. To make sure you don't need anything. And to remind you of what I told you last time."

The ranger gestured toward the pile of wood that Tom had gathered. Tom cringed.

"We haven't burned any of it yet," Tom said.

The ranger laughed, but only a little.

"I had a feeling you two would do this. I know it doesn't seem like a big deal, compared to disturbing people by screaming or firing off guns or anything like that, but I'm still obligated to give you a ticket."

"Don't do that," Tom said, hoping to reason with the man. "I swear we won't burn anything I picked up. We'll just use the last little bit of what we brought and call it a night."

Maybe the ranger believed him, or maybe he just wanted to do something nice for a young couple, but he left without writing a ticket. However he did have some parting words:

"Last warning. If you burn the wood in that pile, especially after promising you wouldn't, there will be consequences. Bad consequences."

It seemed kind of harsh, but Tom and Mary took it in stride. They assured the ranger that they had learned their lesson and cheerfully waved goodbye as he made his way back to his truck.

No sooner had the Parks truck's taillights disappeared down the gravel road when Tom began to add the wild wood to the fire.

"What the hell?" Mary asked, laughing.

"It's not like he's going to come back," Tom said. "If he does we'll just say that we threw the branches back into the woods. He won't be able to prove anything."

Despite the warning that there would be consequences, or maybe because of it, Tom and Mary giggled as they threw their ill-gotten wood onto the blaze. They drank steadily and as midnight turned to one and one turned to two, they became thoroughly hammered. Finally, at around 2:30 a.m. with the recently-gathered wood all gone and a significant dent made in the weekend's supply of beer, Mary made the decision it was time to turn in.

They headed into the tent, and despite the fact that they were now both sleepy, drunk, smoky, and dirty, they mustered another bout of clumsy lovemaking. They were camping, after all. Within moments of finishing they were asleep, naked, wrapped in unzipped sleeping bags and each other's arms.

When they woke again, it was still dark. Mary was the first to wake, and when she opened her eyes there was nothing to see. She could vaguely make out the shape of the tent around them, and sensed rather than saw Tom's naked body lying next to her. He felt warm, so she snuggled up to the body heat radiating off of him.

There was a smoky smell in the air. Mary assumed that it was from the campfire, either brought in on their clothes or still coming off the smoldering coals outside, or both. On balance it was a nice moment.

It wasn't long, though, before the sensation of Tom's body heat flipped from generally pleasant to thoroughly annoying. Even on an early summer night that had cooled considerably since the sun went down, Mary felt like she was roasting with all of that warmth pushed so tightly against her. She squeezed her arms from their snuggly position and used them to give Tom a little push so she could escape his body heat.

Mary was shocked to discover as her hand made contact that Tom wasn't just warm, he was hot. It was like touching the element on the stove. Mary put her fingers into her mouth to try to soothe them, but they still hurt. Something was not right.

"Tom!" she called, trying to wake him up. She didn't want to touch his body for fear of getting that burning sensation again. "Tom! Wake up!"

"Huh? Wha?" Tom muttered, starting to slowly rouse.

"Tom, I think you're burning!"

Mary could see now that he was. The heat was coming off him in waves, filling the tent with a warmth like the inside of a car with the windows rolled up on a very hot day. In addition, and Mary could hardly believe this, she could see tiny puffs of smoke rising off his body.

“Tom! Wake up! You’re on fire!”

Tom had never been a quick riser, and that wasn’t about to change while he was still drunk and exhausted, but after a lot of urgent shouting on Mary’s part he finally clued in to the situation, and the two of them managed to unzip the tent and escape into the cool night air.

By the time they made it outside Mary was beginning to smoke as well, feeling the heat radiating out from her own body the way she had first felt it come from Tom just moments before.

“To the lake!” yelled Tom. “Get into the lake to put ourselves out!”

He was off like a shot, and Mary was right behind him. The lake was only a few dozen metres away, just past a small row of spruce, but it was still too far. Tom’s body burst into flames before he left the campsite and was nothing but crumbling ashes by the time his body dropped to the water’s edge.

Mary might have made it if she hadn’t stopped to look, if she had just pushed on into the lake and submerged before she too become engulfed in flames. But she couldn’t do that. She couldn’t abandon Tom.

By sunrise all that remained of the young couple were two small piles of ashes along the water’s edge, piles growing smaller with every gust of wind whipping off the lake.

At 6:00 a.m. the park ranger rolled up in his truck, climbed out, and surveyed the site where he’d repeatedly warned the young couple not to burn any wild wood. He shook his head at the site of the fire pit, still smoldering with a tiny remaining fragment of a tree branch sticking out. He peeked inside their empty tent and his last hopes and doubts left his mind. The two piles of ash he discovered on the beach confirmed what he already knew: the kids hadn’t obeyed him.

“I warned them,” he said out loud to nobody. “I told them there’d be consequences. Why didn’t they listen?”

He scuffed his boot in the ashes, mixing them with dry sand till only the sand was visible. “I should have just written them a ticket.”

SHADOW PEOPLE

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

Shadow people are ethereal
or dense black silhouette folk.
Mostly they don't have facial features
or, if they do, that's all you see.

They show up in your doorways
or at the foot of your bed.
Most of 'em mean you no harm;
don't even know that they're dead.

They're not zombies; ain't after brains.
They just died in tragic circumstances.
Maybe didn't see death coming
and don't know where they are.

They're like Alzheimer patients
who just wanna go home;
just wanna make a new friend,
get their bearings before they disappear.

They need human contact. Someone
to say it's o.k.; you're in a bodiless state.
You can go to the next plane.
Family and friends are waiting.

They don't misbehave like poltergeists.
They don't bust up plates or rearrange
the furniture or pinch prize possessions.
They're not incubi or succubi.

Ain't pencil-neck geek tossers
who want to abduct you from your bed

beam you up to some hovering saucer.
Ain't into designing hybrid offspring.

They just wanna know why and where
the plane crashed when they were asleep.
Wanna know who's sleeping in their bed
when it ain't Goldilocks or any three bears

they might have known before Yogi
or Gentle Ben appeared on the scene.
A time and place where the land was
still all lakes and trees. Folks camped here!

So next time, don't freak out when
you can't scream; can't move,
approve or disapprove, or prove
or disprove the evidence of your senses.

Let the shadow person take your hand
or the hem of your T-shirt or nightgown.
Gently show him—or her—downstairs,
out the door to the nearest shadow port.

S/he may come back to watch you breathe,
to see how adulthood agrees with you.
By then, you'll be old friends, trust me.
Slice the cake; put on a cup of tea.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE August 10 – 12, 2018.

When Words Collide is an annual non-profit festival designed to bring readers and writers together in a celebration of the written word. Up to 10 tracks of programming, beginning at 1 PM on Friday and running through 5 PM Sunday, offer informational, educational, and social activities covering a wide spectrum of literature including Mystery, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Romance, Historical, Literary, Script-writing, Poetry, Comics, and Non-fiction. Roughly 650 readers, writers, editors, publishers, agents, and artists attend with over 200 presenters in our program.

The Delta Calgary South Hotel is located on Southland Drive in Calgary, Alberta.

See < [When Words Collide](#) >

STEERS

By Jonathan Cresswell-Jones

(Previously unpublished)

Ralston stared into the dual eyepieces pressed against his forehead, viewing his private world fifty thousand times as large as the dreary clinic's workroom outside. The human egg cell was the size of a swimming pool, and inserting a needle into it, a few microns in diameter, felt like driving a bulldozer up to the pool with a streetlight pole welded to its blade—and lifting a leaf off the water with it. You needed skill to perform a denucleation, and patience; but this was *his* turf, an enclave within the Enclave.

“Come on, baby,” Ralston crooned. The micropipette needle twitched under his practiced fingertips, a sharp blued-steel pipe nuzzling soft membranes. The shower cap pinched a line of sweat above his eyebrows as he frowned. “You *know* you want it. C'mon, c'mon ...”

“Talking to yourself again?” Tracy wore those nursing shoes that didn't make a sound; fancied herself a medico, after only two years at Arahamji Clinic as an assistant embryologist. “You're finally losing it. 'Bout time.”

Ralston didn't blink, and his hands didn't twitch; they never did. Sliding through the membranes now, easing into that nice mushy core ... “I'm God in stereo, here, and hung like a Trojan Horse.”

“You're an eggbeater who washed out of med school, Ralston, and you make less money than I do.” A locker door slammed in the room; in his world, the needle tip brushed the egg's nucleus.

“Nah, I think of it more like steers on the killing floor. Put that gun to their foreheads; pull the trigger, goodbye Bossy” He reached right, touched a key, and the cell's nucleus imploded as the needle sucked it away. “Hello, hamburger.”

“Whatever props up your limited self-esteem, guy. I'm gone; some of us finish on time.” Tracy was a vegan, but she'd gotten too used to his baiting to provide amusement any more. The workroom's camera caught everything, of course, and technically he'd broken three anti-harassment laws already, but those laws carried no more real weight than the ones against human cloning.

“Some of us just work harder,” said Ralston to the bench. The hall door, closing, hissed in reply.

And some *did* get paid less. Technically.

Ralston continued to work—two more denucleations, a sperm aspiration, and a blastocyst transfer—until all the other staff had trickled out, even Arahamji; everyone gone home except hard-working Ralston. He stretched, yawned, and got up to sidle over to his own locker. No personal calls on the clinic hardline; he slipped his phone out of his jacket, dialed a careful wrong number, and replaced it.

Both cameras stopped working; the one they all knew about, and the one Dr. Arahamji thought they didn't. Instead, they began to record imaging of Ralston chatting, while he walked towards the incubator alcove to start what *really* paid the bills.

Eleven jobs so far, and a good match had just come in yesterday for job number twelve. *Eckhart*, said the label on the petri dish he eased out of Number Two incubator. He scanned the bar code at a desk terminal to confirm; two faces appeared on the display as their OSHP22 codes linked into the main citizen database. Mister and Missus Eckhart: both square Caucasian faces—in Toronto, hah!—blonde hair, blue eyes, types AB and O. He was a stockbroker, she did physical rehab for job stress. Good, steady incomes. They'd make wonderful parents. You could just see it in their faces. He fitted a fresh micropipette needle, and cracked open the dish.

Mrs. Eckhart was an easy lay; twenty minutes' work and he had three eggs denucleated. Whites with no yolks. Ralston stretched again, lacing his knuckles overhead, then removed another dish from the back of the incubator. This one's label was pure fiction; what it held was being warmed up from freezing, not a long-term control sample, and it went in just as easily as the nuclei had gone out.

Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Another hour, and three eggs renucleated with someone else's genetic material that would produce ... someone else. *Three o'clock, Mrs. Eckhart, and do you know where your children are?* Ralston knew where six thousand American dollars was: in his account by tomorrow. All he knew about his second employer was that he almost certainly had blonde hair and blue eyes, and he paid on time.

Three weeks ago, Ralston had finally figured out *why* he paid. Now there was going to be a bonus.

The elevator groaned complaints of its age the whole way down to Parking. Original to East General Hospital, it soldiered on long after the building around it was sold piecemeal, chopped into private clinics like the surgery it had once specialized in, divided and subdivided. East General had held out longer than most, hoping for vat-organ transplant technology to revitalize their

finances—but sadly snuffed by the last Medical Solvency bill. Now the elevator passed floors of chop shops, fertility clinics, Botox palaces, and gene-tinkers who'd dry walled off a cubby and paid kickbacks to the floor lord for refrigeration space. The Enclave was a land of opportunity, and customers didn't mind a little peeling paint.

Ralston's BMW wrapped him in quiet luxury, spiraled him upward. Bums scattered from the opening garage door and headlight glare. University Avenue's street-medicine kiosks squatted in twilight drizzle, four rambling rows of them along sidewalks and median, the old hospitals behind frowning down in disgust at the wet strobes of neon. Jealous; most hadn't balanced their books since the Chretien era. Ancient history now, with the stained facades to show it.

Cursing as idiot pedestrians skittered under umbrellas, Ralston crept south past the U.S. Consulate, the egg that had spawned the Enclave around it: not quite Canada or States, but a fertile cross between them. Hotels bulged with medical tourists from countries where IVF or ICSI spelled *immoral*. But the foreigners, even the revivalist Yanks, all spoke money, and somebody had to keep Toronto solvent besides the hookers six blocks east. Ralston grinned through his streaming driver's window. Some of them spoke it better than others ...

The Queen Street checkpoint passed him out, down to westbound Lakeshore with a spatter of rain on his sleeve. Culture jammers had climbed one of the OffSpring.com billboards overnight to vandalize it; spray paint wandered in test-tube shapes around the smiling man and woman cradling their bundle of joy. NO HUMAN XEROXES FOR PROFIT, he deciphered before it swept by.

Idiots. Cloning and infertility treatment weren't even the same thing, and cloning was a bogeyman. Did they think that *twins* were Corporate Evil too? Same brand of kooks that had branded vat organs as unnatural because they were Grown Outside The Body. Not that the idea had worked out in the long run anyway, but granola types would be better off using science to breed back some whales, not squealing about it.

Eight more jobs to go. The first four alone had paid for the Beemer—although he'd avoided any other obvious indulgences, and was careful to moan about the leasing charges killing him. If he'd guessed right, then with what he'd hidden in a safe-deposit box last month to back him up, he'd be able to afford an all-wheel Koenig before he was done, and the potholes grumbling

underneath him would disappear entirely. Life without potholes, checkpoints, bitchy coworkers, or smiling to curry-breath Arahamji.

Ralston's Etobicoke burg mostly housed telecommuter galley slaves and thought-commers; no real money, and its checkpoints were as perfunctory as the Enclave's. He disarmed the house and entered from the garage, dropped his coat in the hall, socketed his phone in a wall sleeve to recharge and update. He scratched at the uniform scrub shirt for a moment, thinking about a shower, then shrugged and turned toward the study. In two hours he'd send his notification that Job Twelve was complete, and there was another Laurel & Hardy flick to download—

He stopped in the study doorway. "Who the hell are you?"

The figure seated at his desk leaned forward and silently gestured him in—with its left hand. The right held a pistol. Ralston swallowed over the abrupt sourness in his gut, and took two slow steps forward, halting when the figure lifted its palm.

Masked in gray fabric, gray gloves. Not separate—an isolation suit. He'd seen spies and crooks wearing them on TV shows; they trapped fibres and skin flakes. Presumably this meant they actually worked.

Nothing had been disturbed in the study; this wasn't a burglar. "Well. Uh, I was expecting to meet you, but not for a while yet." He tried to laugh, but it didn't come out right. "Was there a ... problem with any of the work?"

A gloved hand dipped into a pocket; a safe-deposit key clinked on the desk. It looked familiar.

Ralston sucked a breath. "Look, don't get the wrong idea about that—the sample and the note. It was just an insurance policy. What I was going to do was—was to ask for a kind of a raise, if you follow me. Nothing crazy. And I'd do more work to earn it, too. You see, you're going to want someone to keep an eye on the product, and to, y'know, *collect* it."

It was purely unnerving, the way he didn't say anything. "I mean, I don't have any problems with it myself. I just figured it out last month. Did I go to the cops? Huh? Did I start pushing you for more money? No, this is a *long* term thing." Ralston realized his voice was rising, and took a couple of slow breaths. "Long term. Fifteen, twenty years. The fewer people who know, the better."

Shit. "Fewer for you to approach, that is. Every one's a risk. Me, I don't care about the steers. That's what I'm calling them—steers. Like the Eckharts' kid, if it takes. Your kid—*you*, really, a perfect tissue match. It takes a village to raise a child, right? Takes a body to raise an organ. It's just pulp, if it's grown

in a vat. Say that you're seventy now—they'll be ready when you're eighty-five or ninety, then. Easy to find them here, with the citizen database. People disappear all the time." He swallowed that sour taste again. This wasn't TV; if the guy let him talk like this, it wasn't just to waste time—he was listening. "But you need to lay down another batch every few years, man. They're not all going to grow up vegans like friggin' Tracy there. They'll smoke, and drink, and walk in front of buses. They won't all be prime, and where will you be in forty years when your liver goes out, and you need fifteen years to grow a good one? Twenty steers just isn't enough to make sure."

"Twelve," said an old man's dry voice behind the mask.

"But—you wanted twenty."

"Twelve. You finished today." The figure got up, moving slowly – like an old man moved, not menacingly, but the pistol looked steady enough. "Sit down at the desk."

"Okay, so you told a little lie, you had insurance too. You didn't need it, though." Ralston sidled around the opposite side of his desk from the intruder, and sat, pulling his mouth into a smile. "But you need to hire me on, man. You can't afford a lot of employees—hell, you're here yourself! You're not *that* rich. What, did you work in a vat-organs company before they collapsed? Did you *own* one? I can do everything. I can even be an OR nurse—you know I went to med school for two years? I don't want to work at that piss-ant clinic all my—"

The desk phone bleated; Ralston jumped. A gray glove closed on the receiver and lifted it; there was a black box already clipped to it, bigger than the usual privacy filter. Breath stirred the gray mask, but the voice that said "What?" was Ralston's own.

Come to that, it was his own handgun pointing at him; the top drawer was askew.

"Yes, Dr. Arahamji? What files? No, I don't ... *Embezzled?* That's bullshit. I don't care what any files show, it's a goddamn lie, and I leased that car on credit, and, and—"

Ralston stared. *You finished today.*

"—just—no, wait. We can—Jesus, don't do this, sir. Listen, I'll pay it back—"

There was a garage camera in his house. It would show just what it was told to, like the two at work: no gray figure slinking in, slinking out. Just himself coming home. Not leaving.

"I never said that word, sir, not about *you*. She's lying, that bitch is *lying*."

Strange, hearing his own voice copied like this. He really didn't like the way it sounded: whining, cajoling, desperate now. A loser's voice. Had it always sounded like that?

"I'm not going to jail. I'm not! You bastard, are you happy now? I was your best worker. I was going to be a doctor ... *You people* always screw us! And tell Tracy to screw herself too!"

The receiver clicked gently back onto the phone. Ralston closed his eyes, then opened them slowly at the cold touch of metal on his forehead, seeing the foreshortened blue steel of an enormous needle on a killing floor, and the needle spoke his name.

KEEPING TIME

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

Breathe in and
the short wax candle
flame flickers.

Death sharpens his scythe.
Death sharpens
his scythe. Death
sharpens his scythe.

Your heart beats and
you can hear it like
the steady ticking of
a grandfather clock.

And death sharpens his scythe.
Death sharpens his
scythe. Death
sharpens his scythe.

QUIETLY INTO THE NIGHT

By Kurt Kirchmeier

(Previously unpublished)

The few who remain are changing. I've been observing them from the safety of a seventh floor balcony, through a telescope meant for the heavens trained groundward.

They huddle in increasing numbers around fire barrels, alternately warming their hands and examining their awful lesions, refraining from speech entirely. It's unsettling, this silent communion, perversely reminiscent of the quiet congregations of my past, the modest Sunday masses who sat patiently waiting for my sermons.

I think it's safe to say that those below me have not come for prayer. They do, however, appear to be waiting for something.

"How's the view today?" Casey asks from inside our darkened apartment. "Rarefied?" We haven't electricity anymore, just a dwindling supply of votive candles.

"Hardly," I tell her.

Physical change appears limited to the purplish lesions, though I've noticed among the gathered a general itchiness of the scalp as well. While I can't say for certain what these symptoms indicate, it seems logical to assume they're a fresh extension of the old, a mutated strain of the abominable sickness that took so many.

I step back from the telescope and look out over a city reduced to ruin, so much of the infrastructure consumed by fire.

Not even my church was safe from the chaos that erupted in the days following the first wave of deaths, although thankfully the pews were empty the night the windows shattered inward one by one, a rain of stained glass and thrown stones, a sound at once fragile and violent. And then the place burned, the weight of the falling cathedral beams sending such vibrations through the pavement that I felt them through my feet from fifty yards away, where I stood helplessly watching. It was like the collapse of civilization itself, that vibration.

As is always the case when memories stir, I find myself reaching up to finger my cross. It's habitual.

I'm still of the opinion that scientific experimentation is to blame for the brutal pandemic, that mortal tinkering—of the militaristic variety, no doubt—set the horrible chain of events in motion. Casey, however, believes otherwise.

Where I cite custom pathogens and nano-scale delivery systems as possible culprits, Casey instead twists passages from Revelation.

A man of God who points the finger at science and a woman of technology who incriminates the divine; a strange partnership to be sure, and one made stranger still by the fact that the ghosts who populate this city-turned-mausoleum now require a union of our contrary faiths.

“Ready to go?” Casey asks. She never bothers to look through the telescope herself. She says it’s a form of self-torture, as nothing ever improves, only deteriorates further. The writing’s on the wall, she says; magnifying the words won’t change them. Everything she does now is out of an enduring sense of obligation, and perhaps out of love for me. Hope is a relic of the past, she says.

I join her in the apartment, where she methodically double-checks her gear while I dutifully pocket my leather-bound bible—necessary preparations both, for soon we’ll be searching the city’s shadows for hangers-on, spirits unwilling or incapable of letting go. Casey finds them and I free them. It’s what we do.

Lest an unfortunate reflection betray me, I conceal my shimmery cross under my shirt. It’s an act of caution, of common sense, and yet I can’t help but feel that it’s also an act of faithlessness. As a priest, I should wear it proudly and trust in the Lord.

Casey puts on a pair of wool gloves and a thick black toque. “Hospital today?” she asks.

We’ve been putting it off for a while, mostly out of fear of lingering microbes, but also out of worry that we’ll be overwhelmed. Restless spirits are plentiful enough in warehouses and office buildings and such; we can only imagine how numerous they’ll be in a hospital. But if not tonight, then when?

“Very well,” I say. “Best take an extra pack, though.” The last thing we need is for her batteries to die prematurely.

She pats a bulging pocket in her cargo pants. “One step ahead of you,” she says. She treats me to a rare smile, but the melancholy that lives beneath never leaves her eyes. It abides like a secret too painful to share.

We leave by the back stairs, exit into a shadowed alleyway. Casey takes point on account of her superior night vision, and even though I know we’re safer this way, hardwired male protectiveness causes me to grit my teeth. I should be walking lead.

We’re greeted by the now-familiar sounds of settling rubble and tinkling glass, with here and there a metallic clatter. Caution breeds hesitation, measured footfalls that insure for a long night ahead. As real as the threat of physical violence is, I’m vastly more concerned with the threat of contracting

whatever it is that's causing the purplish lesions, the itchiness.

Not for the first time, I wonder why Casey and I have been spared this new affliction. I wonder also at our unlikely joining—a ghost hunter and a priest; strange that fate should bring us together.

Casey halts at a corner to check if it's clear, her stealthy movements more in keeping with a cat burglar on the prowl than the forty-something executive assistant she'd been when the first wave of sickness began to spread across the continent. Ghost hunting had only been a hobby.

I pause and wait, noticing that the ash on the ground is thicker here. For this I'm glad, as it'll act as a muffler for our footsteps. Of course, it might also muffle the footsteps of others. I glance back over my shoulder and confirm that the two of us are, in fact, alone, after which Casey motions for me to follow.

We get maybe twenty feet down the new alleyway when two silhouettes materialize from a doorway just a short way ahead.

Casey and I move as one, a synchronized slide into the shadow of a dumpster, where we crouch and wait, me with held breath and a pounding heart, Casey with a curious calmness. Contact is what I fear most, but even proximity carries its risks; a cough, a sneeze, a simple breath could be our undoing.

Did they see us? I wonder. Or were they facing the other way? For a moment I simply can't tell, but then the silhouettes start walking, not away from us, but towards us, their strides quick and purposeful.

"Run!" I whisper to Casey. "I'll follow you."

If one of us is to be caught, I'd rather it be me than her.

"Nuh-uh," Casey replies, her voice even. "Not this time."

She reaches down to one of the pockets in her cargo pants and withdraws something, but it isn't until she stands up and steps out into the moonlight that I see what it is. I catch a reflection off the dark metal at the same moment I hear the hammer being cocked. The small sound carries in the still of the night.

The two figures halt abruptly.

"Smart move," Casey tells them. "Carry on now. Slowly, though, hands high." Her voice is admirably steady.

The strangers comply without argument, but as they pass I can see that they're smiling, that they're looking at us not with fear of being shot, but with a strange sort of amusement, like they know something that Casey and I don't. Their lesions are dark and many, like patches growing together, forming a new kind of skin.

“Soon,” one of them tells us, his voice the hiss of a snake. “Ssssssoooooon.” They continue on as if called by a summons.

We watch them round the corner out of sight, at which point my racing pulse begins to slow. I turn to Casey.

“I found it on our last outing,” she tells me, putting the gun away now. “I figured you wouldn’t approve.”

“I don’t,” I tell her, even though I know that it might have just saved us.

She shrugs. “Tough shit. We’re a package now.” She pats her pocket and smiles, then turns and heads off down the alleyway. “C’mon,” she says over her shoulder. “Duty calls.”

She’s right; we still have a long night ahead of us. I sigh and follow her lead.

Thirty minutes finds us at our destination. Casey begins taking temperature and electromagnetic readings at once, and quickly establishes a lead.

“Here,” she says, “I’m getting something.”

She needn’t have told me, though, for I can feel an icy draft on my skin, brushing against me like a curious dog. I bring my bible to bear and address the spirit directly—the usual utterances: you no longer belong here; go towards the light; be with God. Practiced words, but no less imperative for all their repetition.

Casey remains silent throughout, her eyes downcast. Though God might still reside in her heart (or so I choose to believe), she’s all but banished Him from her tongue.

“Normal now,” she says at length, referring to her readings.

No brilliant light, no angel song, just darkness and silence and a slight increase in the temperature of the surrounding air. This is our reward, and on this night our reward is plentiful. We find and free seven spirits within the hour, and we’ve scarcely walked a third of the corridors. It’s almost as if the ghosts are seeking us out rather than the other way around.

By the time we return to the street, more than three hours have elapsed. I’m hungry and cold and exhausted, and want only to get back to the apartment, but Casey lingers.

“Twenty-two ghosts,” she says to me, crossing her arms and dealing me the look of a riddle-master who’s grown weary of her pupil’s lack of deduction skills.

“Twenty-two,” she repeats, “and all of them as passive as newborn puppies.” The moon hangs low in the sky behind her, a baleful orange eye that

refuses to blink. Ash everywhere. So much ash.

I'm not really sure what she's building up to, but I have to agree with what she's said so far. "Passive, yes," I say. "So?"

"So where are all the malevolent ghosts?" she asks me. "The wicked spirits? Why are the ones we find always so willing, so meek?"

Such an obvious question and yet it's one that's eluded me up until now. The lack of malign spirits is indeed curious, but surely they must be here somewhere, mustn't they?

"What are you implying?" I say.

She sighs deeply and looks at me in a way that makes it plain she's been anticipating this moment for a while, that she's been readying herself to be the bearer of bad tidings.

"It's time to come to terms with it, Lenyn. Your God picked his battle and lost. The reason there aren't any malevolent ghosts is because only the good were lost."

I shake my head. "No, it can't be. The Rapture requires the presence of Christ and the spirits of the saints."

"Yeah, well, I guess things aren't playing out like they were supposed to."

I turn away. "No, I don't believe it. I won't. And besides, it can't be only the good who were lost because you're here and I'm here and—"

"—and we're alone," Casey cuts in. "We're alone."

The wind blows a mournful note through the empty streets.

I shake my head a second time, but deep down the questions churn. Could it really be that only the good fell victim, and that Casey and I survived them simply to help them pass on? Might the two of us be the Lord's last gambit, His only means by which to call the souls of His children home? On the one hand, it seems ludicrous, while on the other, it makes a perfect sort of sense. A ghost-hunter and a priest. Perhaps it isn't so strange, after all.

Casey gives me a one-shouldered shrug. "Hey, you don't have to take my word for it. You'll see it for yourself soon enough." Through the telescope, she means; the writing on the wall revealed to me through a lens.

We speak not a word for a full three miles, and when we climb the stairs to our apartment, I'm overcome by a sense of dire conclusion, of wrongful end.

I approach the balcony in a sort of dream-state and pause there for a long time, the darkness of the night enveloping me. Eventually I step forward to peer through the telescope, through the instrument meant for the heavens trained groundward.

It's a crystallizing moment, and one in which my heart undergoes a

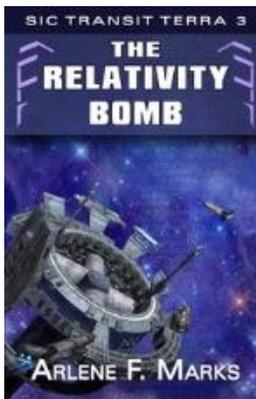
crystallization of its own, a sensation as of instant freezing and subsequent shattering.

I know now what's causing the itchiness: tiny nubs of bone protruding from the scalp.

I know also why they've congregated here, as well as what, or rather who, they're waiting for.

I can see it so clearly in my mind's eye, the imminent future, all of them collapsing to their knees before their master. At once, their lesions will harden, their skin become bruise-coloured scales. And behind them the fires will rage and spill from their barrels, a backdrop for chaos' reign.

I reach up to finger my cross, while behind me the last of the votive candles gutters and dies.



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Finally, an old enemy switches sides, bringing with him information that fills in the gaps and, if true, could rewrite the very definition of Humanity.

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Born and raised in Toronto, Arlene F. Marks began writing stories at the age of six and can't seem to stop. Although she's been published in multiple genres, her first love has always been speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in H.P. Lovecraft's *Magazine of Horror*, *Onder Magazine*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Her science fantasy novel, *The Accidental God*, was nominated for the 2015 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour. Arlene lives with her husband on Nottawasaga Bay but spends an inordinate amount of time in the Sic Transit Terra Universe.

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GHOST PLANET

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

you'd never guess this planet
bustled, once, with commerce
customers furred, feathered, scaled and skinned
perusing merchandise
with three keen eyes
or fewer, as the case might be,
haggling over prices
as they extended hand, paw, or hoof
to examine the wares

now, though, the superstations
have supplanted this type of
marketplace world
and the streets lie bare and barren
waiting
for the forest to close in
for implacable roots to crack
the plastacrete, the glassphalt,
for nature's slow green forgetfulness
to creep in until
even the ghosts of memories
disappear.

CREATIVE INK FESTIVAL FLASH FICTION CONTEST - January 31st to March 31, 2018

You must be a passholder for the 2018 Creative Ink Festival to submit. Theme: "Ignite." 1,000 words in length or less. One per entrant. Must be original. All entries will be read blind. Before you submit, please remove your name and any other identifying information from your manuscript. Winner will be announced at the festival on Saturday, May 19th and will be published in Pulp Literature Magazine.

If you have any questions regarding the 2018 Creative Ink Flash Fiction contest, please reach out to < [Flash Fiction Contest](#) > There is no fee to enter.

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KILL SWITCH

By Paul Alex Gray

(Previously unpublished)

He won't be the first man I've killed.

Through the dim passage we walk, leaving an undying trail of ice. Turning my infralight back casts a blur of reflections, tumbling to the doorway through which we came.

Outside it's blowing one hell of a gale. A super-low raced us up the Atlantic and is now dumping snow all over the miserable rock island Hvyllankarssen. There had been no light to help us, no twinkling stars or winter moon.

We struggled to find the entrance, half buried in ice.

"Be on guard," growls Hawker.

Walking a few steps ahead, he carries his carbine as if expecting sentinels to leap out at us. It doesn't surprise me. I put up with two hours of his paranoia on the sub-orbital flight over from Aurora. It was a risky journey. What we were sent to do wasn't exactly *in-alignment* with the directives of the New Federated States. What we were going to do, in fact, could be easily described as treason. Perhaps even genocide.

Our fastjet had taken off silently, early on a freezing morning, from a secret airbase. We couldn't risk comms, so it had been a fully autonomous vehicle. No pilots. Ironic, really.

As snow fell we'd slid along the short runway and flown low over the mountains before waiting for the precise moment to blast up into orbit. After the excitement of launch there had been little else to do but wait. Hawker found that the perfect excuse to "catch up."

I'd met him years ago when we were cadets assigned to monitor a rally in Chicago. Even then his zealousness for the burgeoning *Tru* philosophy had shone; in the way he'd sneered at the digital twang of the voices on the megaphones, the optimistic songs the people sang, the not-fully-human movements of the *Super-Sents* in the crowd.

He'd glanced at me across the chamber of the fast jet, deep brown eyes above a ruddy beard.

"I mean, can you remember those rallies? They're worse now. Goddamn Supers calling to change the charter. *Human AND Augmented rights.*"

He had been fiddling with his carbine.

“Things ain’t even alive. I don’t recall them prioritizing *our* lives when we needed it. We’re meant to sacrifice our rights. For what. For machines?”

He hadn’t wanted an answer.

I was a little curious to know where his thinking went, to hear his argument. I’d heard everything these last few years. Since we lost the Southern Bloc and after the New Gulf Wars. Everyone from military to civilian life had an opinion and they hardly ever seemed to agree. I figured Hawker would live up to his namesake.

But at the same time ... I didn’t want to listen to him ramble on. I couldn’t take any more conspiracy theories and false flags. It was hard to comprehend we were once part of the greatest military on Earth ...

At our peak altitude, the grandeur of the world below served as a distraction to both of us. We stared out from our portals.

I saw megacities smashed into each other, a scattered gold-dust thrown on a black carpet of night. Tilting back, I could see the Rockies from where we had come, shining brighter than anything around. The twinkling faded into the dusty deadlands to the east and to the bays that had crept up the continent.

And then there was a blank expanse, an emptiness that swallowed all light and clawed at memory. The few southern cities left made me think of a ceremony I’d once seen in VRX. Of people releasing lanterns into the night. Where did they land? How long until they were snuffed out?

I had closed my eyes.

He felt the water on his hand. It was warm. Muddy. When he raised his fingers there was a slimy residue on his skin. He could tell it was tinged with chemicals. Continued exposure would lead to burns.

Awkwardly, he splashed to the river bank. A chunk of mud tumbled into the water, floating away in the current.

“Supercells are forming forty miles from here. We should direct the refugees to safety.”

Clera, a K7 Super Sent, was speaking to him from the campsite, twenty feet from the edge. She was silhouetted by the setting sun. Insects swirled and moved around her, motes of shadow not quite burnt by the heat.

“We’ve got to move them away from the river. It’s rising,” he said.

“Noted.” Her voice echoed clearly. “I’m unable to reach Command directly, but I have dispatched a message. We should lead the refugees north. In three

quarters of a mile there is a series of low hills. Latest sat maps suggest there may be a few buildings there where we can shelter.”

He wheezed as pulled himself from the mud. He hadn't been feeling well, despite the generous injections she had been administering. The medications clearly weren't keeping up with the rapidly churning viral strain that had been escalating in the region.

The refugees were faring worse.

He paused to gather his breath, looking out to the squalid camp. There were more than eighty men, women and children. Each day a handful more appeared, walking out of ruined fields and shattered towns, half-starved and desperate.

A DL45 Kickbacker strode to him and leaned its metal head down. He grabbed at the frame joints of its face and it lifted him firmly, causing his body to spasm painfully. It dragged him to Clera and arched its head before trotting away.

“You think they could make them nicer, not like haughty stallions,” he smiled.

She returned the smile and he wondered if it was one that she meant, not just some programmed reaction to elicit a positive response in him.

“DL45s are built for duty, not for manners, Kyle.”

Her voice was too real. Too human.

She reached her hand out and he held it. Her grip was firm, her skin neither warm nor cool. She pulled him up with ease. The movement stirred the blood from his head and he felt a moment of dizziness.

In the distance lightning crashed.

Hawker mutters to himself. He must know it. Words slip from his mouth, hot and sharp.

A sudden metallic clang breaks out, echoing in the metallic chamber. It bounces and crashes against the walls, a cacophony of noise.

“God dammit,” growls Hawker.

I had slipped on the rung of a ladder and fallen a few steps, my helmet slipping to the floor.

“If anyone's here for us, you've just given them all the warning they'll need.”

“If anyone's here they would have seen our jet,” I counter, but I curse myself for my clumsiness.

I reach out for the ladder again, holding as firmly as I can, gripping through the never-ending tingle in my hands. It hasn't been easy keeping this condition quiet. Perhaps Hawker might even be wondering about it now. Still, I'm in far too deep for some fatal—albeit very gradual—virus to matter much now.

Reaching the top of the ladder, we see a wall-mounted swipepad. Hawker pauses, swinging his weapon back and taking off his gloves to get us access.

It's almost quaint to see such old technology. No holodisplays here. I'm suddenly reminded of JANE11, the domestic unit that practically raised me. She had one of these displays in her chest. She'd play funny movies for me and she'd chuckle along with me with a digitized laugh.

She wasn't even a *she* at all.

That thought gives me pause.

"You know I found one of them K8s in Bangkok?" grunts Hawker. "Last day, standard patrol. Find this busted up K8. Gone rogue. Claimed to be a flesh-in-the-sack human. Said it was a backpacker! *I'm just travelling, mate*. It even sounded English! If we didn't have the special sensors we would've been fooled."

There is a chiming sound as he enters an access code.

"Only when we check, it's not matched to production. No serial number. So they're self-producing now. And what the hell do they need a battle unit for if they're only looking for 'equal rights for man and machine'?"

A harsh buzzing noise sounds twice.

"Here we go," he says.

A doorway opens and brilliant light explodes.

The DL45's floodlight glared in defiance. The night echoed with noise, the incessant drumming of rain and the ebb of thunder to the north. Lightning flickered constantly.

The camp was agitated.

Clera and Kyle were finishing up with a man with a broken ankle. She had no painkillers left but had splinted his foot and helped to calm him.

Several people were exhibiting concerning symptoms, fevers that were rising. One woman's condition was becoming serious. Clera had medicated her, giving her one of the last hydrating fluids, and ordered her to sit alone despite her husband's protests. He had raised his voice, desperately demanding to be with her, but he dared not speak out against the K7 and her metal beasts.

“What should we do tomorrow?” Kyle asked, wondering at what point in the mission he’d begun asking the questions.

Clera stared at the ground, illuminated by a camp light. He caught her gaze and they watched as an insect struggled along the wet earth. Some sort of beetle. Its shell was dark grey and its carapace was so reflective that it seemed perfectly smooth. A blank slate.

“Our directive instructs us to proceed with caution, to try to make it to the internment center in Memphis. If we cannot then we should head east and seek higher ground. As best we are able, we should proceed to the quarantined zone outside Atlanta.”

The distances were significant. There were miles of flooded lands between them. Burned out cities. Roving gangs. Disease.

“We’ll never make it to Atlanta. Not with the condition they’re in.”

“So we move to Memphis.”

“But what if we can’t get there? What if people start to die?”

She was silent.

“Tell me, Clera. What happens when they start dying? Do you have some figure in mind? Is there some number of fatalities that we can accept?”

“We will adapt as we need to.”

“What if it’s fifty percent? Seventy? Ninety?”

“Command may be contactable again.”

“What if they all die? What if I die?”

She turned to look at Kyle.

He gazed into her eyes. Unfathomable. Portals to something he could not comprehend. Who the hell made those eyes? And why did they have to make them such a beautiful ice blue of all colors?

“We carry on. As long as we can.”

There is a stale smell. There isn’t any need to maintain air quality. No one has been here for fourteen years.

Hawker lets out a low whistle.

“What we came for, Kyle.”

In the centre I see the kill switch. A steel frame enclosed by two red metal braces. Within would be the button—literally a button—that when pressed would send the signal to permanently shut down every sentient robot on Earth.

We had to time it right of course. There were protections in place in both the real and digital worlds. Checkpoints and firewalls that our teammates at Aurora would be close to breaching. There would only be one chance for the shutdown to work before detection.

Done incorrectly, the system would detect the threat and render the kill switch impotent, restructuring the protocols.

Hawker places his weapon on the bench and immediately begins working on the first brace. He jiggles with it.

“You ever met one? A Super?” he asks.

Screens flickering around me show numbers. Figures. Maps. Records of every unit, everywhere. An index. An inventory.

“Just one,” I say.

The storm was closing in, the winds becoming stronger by the minute.

“I’ve received a message from Command,” said Clera, her voice loud but not raised.

He waited for her to continue. The wind howled.

“Emily is now Category Six and due to reach us within two hours.”

If he didn’t have a fever he would have thought his trembling may have been fear. He was weak, tired. He had vomited several times in the night. He felt cold.

The people hadn’t fared well. They had lost some in the night. Taken away, maybe. More likely run off to try on their own. There had been fights.

“We are to seek high ground immediately. There is a set of hills to the east. I have received revised maps.”

“What about the people?”

“I’ve been ordered to take you and the DL45s as a priority. The people may follow.”

At that, the beasts began broadcasting a message to the people, relaying instructions to head east. They flared their headlights, illuminating a path. The rain had filled the streams and creeks and water now flowed beneath their feet.

“Hey! You meds! Someone found this boy. He’s real sick.”

A man approached, holding a small child. Clera looked at Kyle and he thought for a moment that he saw a look of confusion in her clear eyes.

Kyle stepped forward. “Let me see him.”

He took the boy and sat down, fat drops of rain smashing into the ground. The child was pale, his skin sallow and his eyes sunken. His breathing came in short, rasping breaths and there were red welts around his mouth.

The man turned and ran off. Kyle cursed under his breath.

The boy quivered.

“Clera, he needs albuterol,” said Kyle.

She stood in the rain, legs set wide. Her uniform was soaked and her face was wet.

“Our directives have been set. We must proceed at once.”

“But, Clera, he’s just a child. He’s dying. He needs it.”

“Kyle, you know full well that his odds of survival are close to zero. Medications are to be rationed and allocated to maximise lives saved.”

“Clera,” said Kyle quietly. “This is a life. Please.”

The Super stared at the distant storm.

“Clera. We need to try.”

Lightning flashed and barely a moment later a boom of thunder shook.

Clera knelt down and examined the boy. Tilting her head, she reached out an arm to test his breath, gently tracing her fingers along his neck.

“His breathing is constricted.”

At that her arm opened and a needle unfurled. She held it close and inserted it into the boy’s chest. He took in a sharp and sudden breath, his body becoming stiff and straight in Kyle’s arms.

Then he relaxed and coughed, his breathing grew steady. He stared at Clara with an unfocused gaze.

“Momma?”

Clera turned to Kyle.

His heart jumped and the world seemed to stop. It was just an instant, but one that shook him. He knew then that it would be something he would not forget. Something impossible.

He could swear he saw tears in her eyes.

Then there was a rushing noise and a wall of water surged towards them. Kyle stepped forwards to grab for the Super and the boy, but he was pulled backwards. He was jolted and shaken and he realised a DL45 had taken him and was dragging him towards the hills.

In the distance he saw Clera, cradling the boy close to her chest. Standing to face the deluge.

“They’re all the same,” mutters Hawker. “They let people die. We put too much faith in machines. It was a mistake.”

I find my hand reaching back along my webbing. I run my fingers along the pulse-grenades, issued in case of heavy resistance. Small packages, easily armed with anything up to ten seconds to discharge. A blast radius of 30 feet. Capable of destroying an enemy unit.

Or breaking a system.

“Every Integrationist saying they’d help guide us. Shame about the robots being just as selfish and as awful as the rest of us.”

Despite the chill of the room, I find myself thinking of distant warmth. Of a muddy river. Of the last rays of sunset. I pull the grenade pin, holding the handle firm.

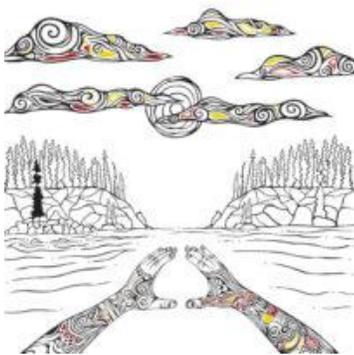
“Ready?” asks Hawker.

The second brace falls to the floor and he rises, wiping his hands on his fatigues. Slowly, I raise the pulse grenade and step toward Hawker.

“Kill time,” he whispers and looks up to me, his smile disappearing.

I let go.

THE GREAT SKY D.G. LADERROUTE



The first time Piper Preach died he was ten years old. But the Anishnaabe spirits thought otherwise. Now, six year later, Piper struggles with the hard realities of life in a big city. The ancient ways of his people are a distant memory. But the spirits aren’t done with him. Pulled into their bizarre world, the place the Anishnaabe call The Great Sky, he’s plunged into the middle of a brutal war raging just a step away from reality. And this time there may be no escaping death – or even worse.

D.G. Laderoute and his wife, Jackie, live in Thunder Bay, Ontario, along with their three kids – Andrew, Mark and Sarah-and the obligatory writer’s cats. He has a Master of Science Degree in Geology, has worked extensively in the mining and geo-science sectors, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel from the Canadian Army Reserves. He and Jackie now run a successful business in Thunder Bay, The GameShelf, specializing in board, party, card and other unplugged games.

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THE GHAZAL OF THOMAS THE RHYMER

by Robert Dawson

(Previously unpublished)

Under the fairy hill, flutes and fiddles play tonight.
Choose, Thomas Rhymer: will you go or stay tonight?

Outside the storm shrieks, rain lashes the moor,
the firth is wild, the waves are white with spray tonight.

Here rare wines flow and merry dancers laugh;
torchlit is the hall, the music gay tonight.

Treasure piled upon treasure, jewel on gem:
take what you will; you need not pay—tonight.

The Queen of Sidhe, your partner in the dance,
herself within your arms would lay tonight.

Her clinging gown, her heady perfume, give
promise of wild lovers' play tonight.

Dazed by her face, your mind's eye cannot see
hers that she tempts you to betray tonight.

Time passes fast under hill; come, mortal lover, trade
ten years of marriage for this ae tonight.

He pauses upon the threshold, hand on latch:
Wonder forever, Rhymer, what you flung away tonight!

SHOES

By Colleen Anderson

(Previously published in *Embers Amongst The Fallen*)

It was a nightmare, finding the shoes. Albeit dusty, the ruby sparkle still showed through, after all those years. She'd been so young and trusting then, but an involuntary trip to a land with flying monkeys, attack crows and sinister trees makes anyone grow up quickly.

Dorothy reached into the back of the closet and pulled out the leather, jewel-encrusted shoes. In their gaudiness they were shoes only a child could love; a trap any child would fall for. They had been silver once, when on the feet of the dead witch and Dorothy's own, but the witch's blood had soaked into them, adding a touch of her hidden charms, and after the field of poppies they'd bloomed crimson. Childhood had been abandoned like a lost doll at that point.

Shivering, Dorothy shied away from the memories, and what she couldn't remember. The poppies they waded through on that journey long ago had brought a languid sleep, a sea of red that bled into her vision. They, her companions, had carried her, they said, but what else had been done to turn the shoes scarlet? Kneeling in front of the closet of faded, well-worn clothes, Dorothy let her hands brush over the shoes, removing layers of grime and lost years that danced as fairy motes in the late afternoon light. It should have been a comfort, knowing that she hadn't made it up, that enduring the taunts of "Dotty Dot" had been worth it. There should have been solace for all that she had borne, but like the Lost Boys, she only felt unsettled.

Dorothy stared at the shoes daily, wondering what they were trying to tell her. Keeping up the farm allowed her little time to idle over the past. But events happened to remind her.

There was the day she drove the tractor out into the field and a murder of crows took flight, blistering the sky. Their silence shuddered her ears and she stopped, peering into the black mass. Crows weren't unusual but that they had remained noiseless was. Could these crows have known of the murder in Oz, the cleansing water, the witch only a wisp of memory in Dorothy's present? Were they plotting against her? Why now? Had the shoes eventually pointed the way?

She shook her head, her braids flopping against her shoulders. That was nonsense. If you looked for coincidence, you'll find coincidence. But she

carried her rifle after that, just in case.

Like the birds, Dorothy's memories wheeled around to her return from that land. So sure had she been of Oz's existence that she had insisted in telling her story. Aunt Em and Uncle Henry had been relieved to have her back at first, having assumed that she had been killed in the cyclone, but their belief had faded with her wild tales. They'd convinced themselves and her that she'd been swept up and suffered amnesia, been delusional, had a knock on the head, something that left her wandering aimlessly for months. That explained the different clothes. It didn't explain why, two months later, Dorothy, after suffering knife stabbing cramps, released a small bloody mass into the toilet.

She had told no one, not wanting to end up in some sanitarium. That scarlet letter would never spell a word. And *that*, she had no story for. One day, she had then vowed, she would leave Kansas for good, with its pressing heat, and sinister winds that could smother a life forever.

One day

Every day Dorothy went to the closet and looked at the shoes. Sometimes she pulled them out and just stared at them. She didn't think of trying them on, not really. Inevitably, she would toss the insidious footwear back and go on about the day's work.

Increasingly, she would stop in the middle of milking a cow, of herding the cattle, of using the tractor to cut the golden hay, and just daydream. What-ifs buzzed about her head as thickly as the wicked witch's black bees. But dreams too fell dead at her feet like those expired insects.

It hadn't been pleasant, but it had always been memorable. An adventure. That world had little in common with this farm, and Dorothy could have walked from fencepost to teetering fencepost blind, she knew it so well. But it was more that the Kansas farm had been ground down, buffeted by rain, tornados and snow, until its image had been branded into her skin. Gritty and no nonsense.

There had been plenty of nonsense in Oz. It was founded on the incomprehensible. Still, for Oz, the Scarecrow had been remarkable in his way, animated, searching for thoughts when they filled his straw-stuffed head already.

And the Tin Woodman who had endured such terrible torture, being cut limb from limb; a will to live so strong it could not rust. Now *that* had been heart. Even the lion, in a place where all the animals talked, managed some

compassion. Those creatures, not one of them really human, had all gone on to rule. But then man had often proven himself more savage than the supposed beasts.

Dorothy had only really been herself, a hero by chance and a slave by ignorance. She had been a child wanting the comfort of home, be it ever so dreary. There had never been a grand plan, or ambition for something larger. The dry Kansas dirt that swirled in under the doors had permeated slowly, making it impossible to see the future when keeping it at bay took part of every day.

Before she knew it, Henry and Em's life had become hers. Dorothy supposed she should be grateful. Just as in Oz she had been given a means to return home. She had never had a grand plan like the Wizard.

A week later Dorothy walked the fence line, checking that the boards held firm. A couple of cows had been found wandering in the neighbouring field. She'd stumbled over something in the grass, crunching metallicly under her foot. A collection of old tin cans shot through, pitted and rusted to the colour of dried blood, rested in the tufted grass by a fencepost. People always took pot shots and practiced in the fields, but why did these ones lie in the figure of a man, a small metal funnel touching like a cap? She kicked at them to find that dirty string held them together. It tangled about her foot, the tins rising up until she had beaten them flat with the butt of her rifle. Then they had fallen lifeless to the earth as Dorothy wiped the sweat from her eyes.

Down to earth. That's what they had always told her. "Dorothy you gotta come down to earth." "You need to be more down to earth." She had stopped talking of Oz, stopped imagining a better future. A different place. So down to earth had she become that she was an extension of the earth. It was as if she had become one of those defensive trees that had snared the Scarecrow until the Tin Man lopped off the offending limbs. Rooted, she could only wave her arms about, evict crows and trespassers with a strong word and the motion of a rifle if need be. But she was as planted as ever any tree had been.

The vortex of time had spun ten years away. First Aunt Em died of a cough that wouldn't quit, and two years later, Uncle Henry (who had never been able to remove the gray with which Kansas had painted him) up and expired of hard living. Dorothy had worked the farm alone for the past six years and felt much older than her twenty-five.

She had pulled the shoes out again and absentmindedly rubbed them as

she thought of Aunt Em and Uncle Harry. After Aunt Em's and Uncle Henry's deaths, Dorothy had been less likely to go to town. Sure, she needed supplies, but socializing always made her feel more alone. She had never had close friends after Oz. Toto had been a loving little companion. He'd never been that bright, even for a dog but his antics had made her laugh. She'd thought of getting another dog or several, but she still missed Toto's happy-go-lucky ways.

The dust from the shoes now stuck to her fingers, making them gray. She rubbed her fingers together thoughtfully. The gray had once been everywhere. Now the fields were green like the Emerald City but the gray still trickled down within the chinks, mortaring her to a family tradition. Tossing the shoes back into the closet, she stood and wiped her hands on her jeans, then turned to stare out the window at the fields of corn.

Oz had been no delusion, no fevered imagining. The shoes had led her through a change of perspective, and they had led her out. Trying to banish the uncomfortable memories, she grabbed up the broom and swept the porch, shooing the chickens away. But she was caught up in the colours of the fields. Of all the colours of Oz, the meek blue Munchkins, the timid yellow Winkies, the grandiose Emerald city and the green-haired girl, it was the red that still shaded her vision. The poppy fields, the shoes, the red-uniformed girls and the russet tones of Glinda's hair. The witch had been so kind, giving Dorothy a kiss full of succulent regret, or places yet to explore, and the secret for leaving.

Grabbing a beer, Dorothy opened the screen door to the porch, letting it squeak and softly bang shut. She sat in a creaky wooden chair that Uncle Henry had made. Like that sturdy piece of furniture, Dorothy had grown up plain. If she'd remained a beauty, not even the stigma of being crazy would have kept the boys away. "No nonsense" is what Aunt Em would have called it. Dorothy was no nonsense. No gingham pinafores or white silk gowns now. They just wouldn't do on a farm. And no ruby slippers for skipping through surreal landscapes.

"It all became no nonsense after that, didn't it, Toto?" Then she remembered again that he had died the year before. She sighed and sipped the beer. "No nonsense."

It began to bother Dorothy, thinking of Oz, the shoes, Toto and all those odd inhabitants of a decade gone. Of course she had had no responsibilities, protected by her companions. She'd done nothing by design, not even killing a

witch. A fortuitous accident, some had called it. It hadn't been a pleasant journey but Dorothy had been alive. So what was life? Was there really so little to do on the farm that she could ponder the past?

In truth, what she did exhausted the body but rarely the mind. It would have been likely for a little girl to fabricate a world, seeking relief from boredom. Except for the shoes. Why had they returned after so long? Why beckon forth those images now? After she had had to endure the comments, looks and ridicule of her town. After she'd lost all hope of a distant world. Could someone have sent them, because they needed her, wanted her in Oz? Were they hunting her?

By rights she should throw the shoes away, but she was afraid to cut off that avenue of escape. Oz might only be a few steps away. So Oz continued to regard them, hold them and finally, once even try them on (miraculously they still fit her feet).

She chewed her lip and paced at night, a beer in her hand. Walking the fields under a harvest moon, listening to the crickets, she searched for the love she had felt here. The fields may have been green but all had turned to dust: in the end it was the dust and gray that claimed Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. She did love the sunset and the smell of cut hay, the musky barn scent of the cows, but there was a grittiness to everything.

Dorothy stopped in the field, staring up at the stars sprinkled like daisies in the meadow of night. She had loved "here." And she had loved in Oz. Her unlikely companions had been friends and family but she had never been kissed by a man. Not there. Not here. It was the Witch of the North, mysterious and never named, who had kissed her upon arriving; and the Witch of the South, Glinda who had kissed her upon leaving. Her journey had begun and ended with a kiss, but she had never thought what she really wanted.

In Kansas everyone is aware of the weather if they don't want to become victim of it. Sometimes it was lightning storms and sometimes it was strong winds debating if they would work themselves into a frenzy. That night Dorothy closed the storm shutters, made sure the cattle were safe in the barn and kept a flashlight by the bed, and the trap door accessible in the next room.

Normally the howling wind alerted her to a tornado. That night she slept well until a horrendous banging and scraping bolted her awake. She could hear the wind but no more than that. Yet something ... someone? ... banged at the door.

Heart beating so loudly that she could barely hear, Dorothy took deep breaths to calm herself and grabbed the rifle. In pajamas and bare feet, she quietly moved toward the door. When the front window was in sight, she saw through the muslin curtains that a shutter had come loose and the shadow of something, someone was at her door. What was he doing? What did he want? She shouted, "Get away from the door or I'll blow a hole in you!"

The banging continued.

"What do you want?"

No answer. And then the wind let up and the shadow was gone. Dorothy waited a few minutes, letting her adrenalin settle, then cautiously approached the door. She peeked out but could see nothing. Rifle at the ready, she threw open the door and looked around. The wind shrieked and a man threw himself on her. Screaming, she beat him back and shot without thinking.

Shaking, she looked down and saw a figure on the ground. Her rifle held ready, she took a step closer and prodded him. He was soft ... too soft. Then, she realized it was a scarecrow blown loose by the wind. But it had been at her door, wanting to come in.

She shuddered and ran back into the house, locking the door. Making strong coffee, she wrapped herself in a blanket and sat on the couch for the rest of the night. Oz wanted her. What would come next? A lion, a pack of wolves, the hideous yet noble flying monkeys? Her past was trying to reclaim her. It would be like before: she would be pulled along, red shoes and all, with hollow kisses to set her on the road. Would she ever get to make her own choices?

Just before dawn when the sky had moved from black to the deepest teal, Dorothy crawled into bed and slept.

When she awoke, she fed the chickens and the cows. Then she made a few calls. Back in her room she pulled out a large green backpack, still looking as if it had never been used. There would be no baskets this time. Carefully going through her wardrobe, she chose the most colourful shirts, some jeans and cut-offs, a good pair of sports shoes, her western boots, and, after a moment's hesitation, the ruby slippers.

She packed the clothes, leaving the footwear out for now, then went to her safe and took her bank card and savings. When all that was done she walked slowly to her bathroom. Staring into the mirror, she undid her auburn braids, which brought her hair to just past mid back. She cocked her head from side to side, then picked up the scissors. Carefully, with comb in hand, she cut her hair to just above her shoulder. The past was the past. Then she had a good

long shower, scrubbing the night's scare from her skin.

After she was dressed, she went through the kitchen and chose sausage, cheese, crackers, a few tins of tuna and granola to put in her pack. Finally, done, she surveyed her place, a half smile touching her lips. Dorothy made one last call. "Hi. Yeah. I'm ready to go. I appreciate you looking after the place. No, I'm not sure how long I'll be gone. Use what you can, whatever you like. The key is under the watering can. Bye. Thanks."

Dorothy stood still for a moment, eyes closed, feeling the vibrations around her, breathing deep the fresh scent of hay, the tired dusty smell of wood. Listening to the distant call of swallows, the contented lowing of the cows, she knew it was all a part of her; Oz and Kansas, but it was the past. She wanted to remember it well.

Back in the bedroom, she rummaged around until she found one of Aunt Em's old lipsticks. It was somewhat dry but there was enough to it to put some colour on her lips. Ruby red. She smiled, pocketed the lipstick, and then turned to pack the footwear into her pack.

Lifting it, she was happy to find it wasn't too heavy. Dorothy grabbed the keys to her old car and left the house, locking the door.

She took one look at the scarecrow and turned her back on it, moving to the watering can.

Dorothy stopped again, looking at the keys. Glinda had awakened her in so many ways. She turned back to the house and rummaged through her pack. Pulling out those crimson shoes, she ran her fingers over their sharp texture one more time, sniffed the muskiness of old leather and placed them on the porch near the scarecrow. Just as she had had the magic of the shoes all the time she was in Oz, she realized she had always had the secret for leaving. Her last adventure had begun with the shoes and a kiss.

Dorothy blew a kiss to the house and the fields. This time she would do it on her own.

CHIZINE PUBLICATIONS ANTHOLOGY open for submissions January 15 – March 4, 2018.

We're looking for deranged and demented stories and poems that snap back against all that holiday schmaltz. Our leanings are toward the dark, the speculative (SF, fantasy, horror), the flat-out weird, the humorous, but that covers a lot of ground. It's likely there will be a lot of Santa stories submitted. We'd urge you think more widely, especially outside the white, Judeo-Christian canon. There's really plenty to hate about Christmas, so it shouldn't be that hard.

See guidelines at < [War on Christmas](#) >

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 three anthologies. Some recent 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.

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*.

Robert Dawson

Teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. In his spare time he writes, fences, and hikes. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *AE*, *Perihelion*, and numerous other periodicals and anthologies. He is a graduate of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops.

Nestor Delfino

Is a computer programmer whose stories have been published in the *Far Orbit Apogee* anthology, *The Canadian Science Fiction Review*, and *Kzine*, among others. One story has received an Honorable Mention from the Writers of the Future Contest.

Paul Alex Gray

Enjoys writing linear and interactive fiction starring sentient black holes, wayward sea monsters, curious AIs and more. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Nature Futures*, *PseudoPod*, *The Arcanist* and others. Paul grew up by the beaches of Australia, then traveled the world and now lives in Canada with his wife and two children. On his adventures, Paul has been a startup founder, game designer and mentor to technology entrepreneurs. Chat with him on Twitter @paulalexgray or visit <http://www.paulalexgray.com>

Karl Johanson

Is the editor of *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*, which has won two Aurora Awards, and a former editor of the four-time Aurora winning magazine *Under the Ozone Hole*. Karl's publication credits include work in *On Spec Magazine*, *Sci Phi Journal*, *Monday Magazine*, *Perihelion*, *Stitches: The Magazine of Medical Humour*, and the anthology *Here Be Monsters: 7*. As a writer/designer/tester of computer games, Karl has done work for North Star Games, Disney Interactive, and Sanctuary Woods Multimedia. Many of the games were science fiction or fantasy related.

Kurt Kirchmeier

Lives and works in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. His fiction has appeared in *Space & Time*, *Tesseract 15*, *Weird Tales*, and elsewhere. When he isn't writing, Kurt can often be found with a camera held up to his eye. He has a particular fondness for birds.

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 Merril 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.

Andrew J. Lucas

Has contributed to books published by Fasa, Dream Pod Nine, White Wolf Games and Atlas Games among others. His creative output is often blunted by his day job and the enthusiasm of his daughter in distracting him, but he does manage to produce a few projects each year. Recently he has successfully sold stories to magazines such as *Nebula Rift*, *The Argosy*, and *Thinkerbeat*.

He has five stories out in anthologies this year, *A Bleak New World*, *Tales of Unseen Terror and Slumbering Horrors*, *Game Fiction Vol II*, *Starward Tales*, and *Within Strange Eons*. His first novel, *Hellmaw: Eyes of the Beholden* is due out in 2018.

He is also line producing an array of Miniature wargames and RPG products for Rebel Minis and has three books due to be published this year, most of which include Goblins of some sort or other.

He lives in Langley, British Columbia. He likes cats even though he has none.

Lee F. Patrick

Is a Calgary, Alberta, Canada, writer of science fiction and fantasy, and sometimes poet. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee is particularly interested in the stories and poetry of Celtic tradition and history. Her short story *The Fire Mage* was published in *Enigma Front: Burnt* by Analemma Press. It is available in print and e-book format from Amazon.

Daniel Roy

Is a video game narrative writer whose credits include *Eon Altar* and *Need For Speed Payback*. An unrepentant nomad, Daniel has lived and written in places ranging from rural India to Seoul's Gangnam district.

Robert Runté

Robert Runté, PhD is today Senior Editor at Five Rivers Publishing, EssentialEdits.ca, and SFeditor.ca. He has three Aurora Awards for promoting Canadian speculative fiction, wrote the entry on SF for the Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada, and was a GoH at the 1992 Worldcon. *The Luck of Charles Harcourt* was his first published story and originally appeared in the very first issue of *On Spec Magazine* (1989). His most recent story sold is in *On Spec Magazine* issue #106.

Vincent Sakowski

His *Blender Ventures* have appeared around the world in a variety of formats, including print, online, radio, and 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.

Holly Schofield

Travels through time at the rate of one second per second, oscillating between the alternate realities of city and country life. Her stories have appeared in *Analog*, *Lightspeed*, *Tesseract*, *Cli-Fi: Canadian Tales of Climate Change*, the Aurora-nominated *Lazarus Risen*, the Aurora-winning *Second Contacts*, and many other publications throughout the world. She hopes to save the world through science fiction and homegrown heritage tomatoes. Watch for new stories soon in *Water* from the Optimistic Sci-Fi Series and in *The Young Explorer's Adventure Guide*, along with a second appearance in *Analog*. Find her at hollyschofield.wordpress.com.

David F. Schultz

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 *Would You Hide Me?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press, 2003), *Misshapenness* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2009), *Identity Dreams and Memory Sounds* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2014), *Madhouses in Heaven, Castles in Hell* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2015), *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), and *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies 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

Has recently retired from a thirty-year gig teaching Creative Writing and English for Lethbridge College. My two most recent books are *Rock, Scissors, Paper: The Clifford Olson Murders* (a long poem sequence forthcoming from Dreaming Big

Publications, 2017) and *A Gaggle of Geese* (haiku, senryu, tanka, kyoka, zappai and haikai sequences from Alba Publishing in the U.K.)

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

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 Delirium*, *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.

Lisa Timpf

Is a freelance writer living in Simcoe, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in a variety of venues, including *Star*Line*, *The Martian Wave*, *Scifaikuest*, *New Myths*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: My Very Good, Very Bad Dog*.

Phil Wolters

Is a 32-year-old writer and medical transcriptionist currently living in Calgary, Alberta with his adorable dog Molly and even more adorable girlfriend Zabreana. He has written stories, articles, plays, and programs that have been read, spread, and performed all across Canada (with tiny little toe-hold in the US and the UK) in publications as diverse as the *Klondike Sun* and *McSweeney's*. His first novel was *Lies at the End of the World*, published by Pill Hill Press in 2010.

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