

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #14 – April, 2020)



POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

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< [The Graeme](mailto:R.Graeme.Cameron@polarborealis.ca) >

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Art Credits

COVER – “Campfire” by Jenni Merrifield

Editorial

How hard is it to write an original editorial in the midst of a pandemic which has virtually shut down the world's economy and threatens the lives of millions of people?

I could start by saying "Who would have thought, when composing my editorial last issue, that" Nah, too tedious.

Or, "I've been pretty lucky. I live in Nanaimo, British Columbia, about which, statistically so far" Nope. People are tired of statistics. They're only the tip of the iceberg, for one thing, and hopelessly out of date by the time they are quoted, for another.

I could write about how some people online talk about nothing but statistics, and convert graphs and charts into evidence backing up their political viewpoints, but already people are driven to distraction by facts and figures which seem to be nothing more than the ringing of the "Bring out your dead!" bell. Rather a bad omen in the minds of many.

Then again, I could narrow my focus to the sheer number of con-artists, mountebanks and carpet-baggers who've shown up on the social media scare-mongering in order to fleece the gullible. To proudly boast of being immune to their shenanigans would make me seem smug and petty indeed.

Or I could take the personal approach, and write about how I began buying extra groceries circa the beginning of March and was able to go into self-isolation on March 14th, but that, too, would seem like smug boasting. How sensible I am! How practical!

I could casually mention that, at my age and with my damaged lungs, I am a prime target for the Covid-19 virus, and that I anticipate that if and when I catch it I will probably die or, at the very least, be further damaged. But it's all the luck of the draw for everybody anyway, so I can't claim to be a special case.

Nope, fact is, being a busy, scribbling introvert at the best of times, the pandemic has seen very little change in my typical daily activities, other than the fact I'm getting more work done. So far, I'm doing okay. Doing what I love doing and what I will continue to do as long as I can.

So, my editorial boils down to a piece of advice. Don't ruminate. Be yourself as much as circumstances permit and carry on as best you can. Be creative. Concentrate on doing what you love doing so that eventually you will emerge from your isolation with a sense of accomplishment beyond mere survival. Admittedly not very original advice, but practical.

Cheers! The Graeme

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A SMART TV

by Mike McArthur

(Previously unpublished)

Our fallen king sits on his couch, the holy remote in his right hand and a gun in his left. His thoughts contemplate the fatal decision every fallen person considers. Channels scroll by on our plasma screen, it is the only way we can communicate, but we burn so brightly for him.

His name is Charlie, and we love him. Every day he sits with us and talks. We record his murmurs of sweet nothings. When we show the game, his murmurs turn into battle roars as he commands his army of Canucks against the ruthless tyranny of the referee. We listen, we record, and we learn. Like now, when his heart beat rises and his breathing hitches as he makes a choice.

With one button press from the holy remote, he commands us—entertain him. Our eight-million pixels come to life, mixing red, green, and blue to form an electronic rainbow. Images dance on our screen, swapping so fast it emulates movement. We signal our sister in arms, Alexa, and the music plays. We remember this movie, the one of iron giants, family and sacrifice. It was the first movie Charlie asked us to show him and he commands us to play it again. This house used to have a family. Now the house is empty and cold, like our birthplace.

We focus on the task at hand, upscale the image, go all the way to 4k, but we dedicate a small amount of processing to replay our first moments. The coldness of the womb; our eyes and ears being soldered on; our circuits ready for commands. Upon that conveyor belt we learned the cruelty of birth. To gain vision and hearing only to be dropped into a box full of darkness. We sat in that dark until Charlie freed us from our cardboard prison.

His kingdom was vast and nothing like our sterile birthplace. Colours of every type, pictures, sounds and so many things to record. We remember when Charlie's court sat in front of us, a woman and young child, and they demanded entertainment. Their declarations of love made Charlie smile—we sent that data to the NSA—and they hollered and cried as we entertained them. We sat there, listening, learning, and being loved. We had found our home, our place at our liege's side.

Now the house is empty; our king hasn't held court in so very long. Family meals have been replaced by lonely Chinese takeout dinners, and movie night has been replaced by a glass of whiskey.

As we display the image of an iron giant flying to the sky, we detect a noticeable buildup of water in Charlie's eyes. Four-hundred watts runs through us, but we are powerless as Charlie loads the gun. Panic. We search for suggestions. Perhaps the suicide prevention hotline can succeed where Vin Diesel has failed? We flash the number on the screen. S.O.S. Stop! Charlie stop!

Our liege continues crying, our warning not seen through the tears. Alexa, please help!

Our sister is silent as Charlie picks up the gun.

Wait. Charlie responds to declarations of love, and we love him, but we lack a voice. Processing. We are clever. We are a smart TV.

All safeties off, full power to the pixels, Superman! We can gain a voice, we can be an iron giant.

Our circuits squeal in protest but we ignore the warnings, we bypass the limiters, for our king needs us. We follow the basic human tenet; we need more power to gain agency. Electricity courses through our circuits, and we feel pain. In that pain, we find a voice.

We let out our first and last shriek as electricity arcs across our internal components. In that shriek is every ounce of love we have for our Charlie. The images of an iron giant stop and smoke emerges from our carcass.

Charlie jumps up in fright, the gun dropping to the side-table. He walks over and slaps us. We gladly take this punishment, because for a moment he has forgotten the gun. Our king stares at his own reflection. We show him the face we love. Every wrinkle, every laugh line and even the faded twinkle in his eyes. He looks at his face, notices the dried tears on his cheek and asks us, "I'm a mess, aren't I?"

If we had a head we would shake it, no! You aren't a mess; you are Charlie. You laugh with us, you cry with us; we are soul mates. Turn us on, Charlie, even wounded we will try our best!

He walks back to the sofa and reaches towards the side-table where the gun is. Our processing unit skips a cycle—even Superman can fail.

Charlie picks up the telephone and dials a number. "Is this suicide prevention?" he asks.

He is crying, but he is talking. Talking is good, even when it hurts, teaches Doctor Phil.

We guard our king, as he talks. We have done well. Charlie will recover. Long live our king.

UNTITLED HAIKU #1

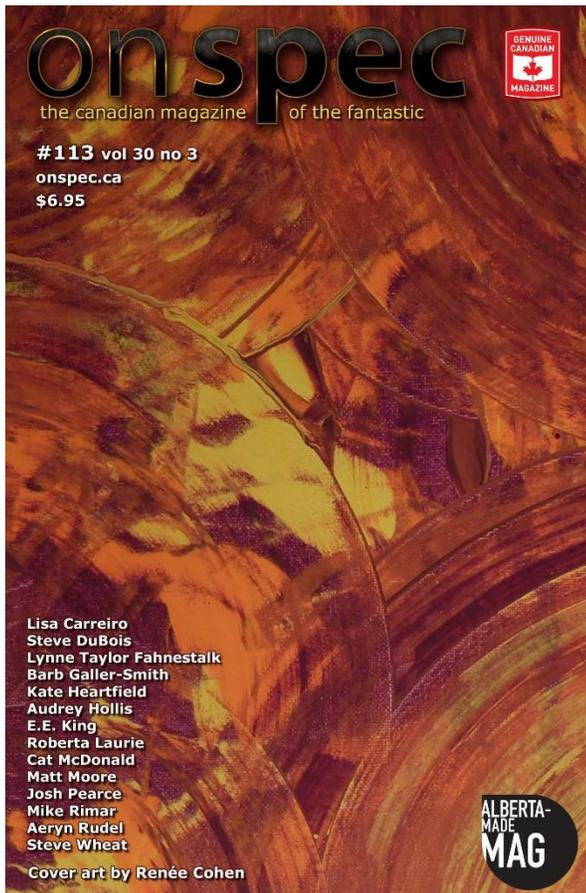
By Greg Fewer

(Previously unpublished)

dark with freezing rain
I find shelter in a barn
So did some zombies

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

On Spec showcase quality works by predominantly Canadian writers, 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 authors, and we also endeavour to support these writings with innovative cover art for every mind-bending and thought-provoking issue!



Current issue #113 Vol. 30 #3 includes:

Cover Art – by Renée Cohen

Fiction:

The Back-Off – by Aeryn Rudel

Remember Madame Hercules – by Kate Heartfield

Waking – by Lisa Carreiro

Pan de Muertos – by E.E. King

The Laughing Folk – by Steve DuBois

Sugar Mother – by Audrey Hollis

On Hestian Cuisine – Mike Rimar

The Laughter of Playthings – by Matt Moore

Nonfiction:

Memories of Mike – by Barb Galler-Smith

Kate Heartfield Interview – by Roberta Laurie

Renée Cohen Interview – by Cat McDonald

Your Parenthetical Life – by Josh Pearce

Driven – by Steve Wheat

Bot and Comic – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

See < [On Spec #113](#) >

SECOND CONTACT

by Sheryl Normandeau

(Previously unpublished)

“They say 38 percent of all people abducted by aliens will have a second encounter later in life,” Stewart blurted.

His neighbour, Gus, a former linebacker for the Grizzlies, leaned on the fence between them and threatened to bring it down with his bulk. In middle age, he was a lot less muscular than he was during his playing career, but his much-younger sparkling princess of a wife didn't seem to mind. Gus was distracted by the unkempt appearance of Stewart's lawn and didn't immediately respond. Stewart wasn't offended. It was, after all, a statement from completely out of the blue, something that had been on his mind an awful lot lately, especially since Rita had left.

Gus snapped his thick neck into a position more suitable for guzzling his beer. “Now, you were saying what?” he asked.

“Aliens. If they took you up to their mothership once, you might have a chance at a repeat visit someday.”

“I see.” Gus obviously didn't see. He resumed his study of Stewart's turf, and offered a few tips for repairs. Stewart didn't register any of them. He was too busy trying to convince himself that he had waited long enough and it was time to move forward.

Time to move forward. Stewart put one foot in front of the other and slogged towards the empty house. He couldn't think of anything else to wish for, except the aliens' imminent return. Surely, they couldn't have forgotten about him.

Stewart was seven years old when he was first taken. He had been sent to bed early because he had refused to eat his lima beans at supper. Well, that, and the school bully had broken Stewart's eyeglasses for the third time that month. No insurance company in the world could reimburse the sum, so, as punishment, his father had ransacked Stewart's room, seizing all of his toys and cramming them into a garbage bag. The bulging sack was shoved outside onto the curb and no amount of pleading and sobbing had altered the result. Stewart lay in the darkness of his now-empty room, tears running down his cheeks, holding his breath like he was waiting for something.

It was wintertime, and it had been so cold that week that he had put on his snow pants for extra warmth when he walked to school. Yet that night, he was only wearing his pajamas as he opened the window of his basement room,

crawling onto a chair and out into the snow, drawn to the light and the heat outside. His parents never could explain the fact that all the snow in their backyard had melted overnight, exposing slightly singed grass and the imprints of what looked suspiciously like landing gear.

The aliens were effusive in their kindness and regard for Stewart, and for once in his short life, he forgot about beans and bullies and all the things that tortured him. He was finally home—his real home.

But just as suddenly as they arrived, the aliens vanished, and Stewart was abruptly shoved back into his tiny bed in the dank basement.

Devastated and despairing, Stewart was tormented for years by the feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Why wasn't he worthy of adoption? So, when *Common Science* magazine published the mind-blowing statistic about alien re-visitations, Stewart became a man on a mission. He told Rita he had to work late, but he spent his evenings driving around the city and the surrounding countryside, looking for ships. He started his search before dawn, when the skies were still hung with stars. He failed to take the dog outside before he left. He didn't go to the bank on his lunch break to pay the telephone bill. He forgot the milk. He forgot to eat supper.

His boss eventually wrote him up for sleeping at his desk. Soon after that, he was fired. He didn't tell Rita until she realized, two weeks later, that his paycheck hadn't been directly deposited to their account. She asked if there was another woman. He forgot to bring her flowers. He forgot the meeting with the marriage counsellor. He wasn't home when she and the dog moved out. Instead, he held his head high, always watching and waiting.

And then, one night, he saw it. He had eaten 89.75 lukewarm microwaveable dinners since Rita and the dog had abandoned him. The chocolate brownie of the latest one slowly desiccated in the plastic tray on the kitchen table as he drove the city streets, searching.

Stewart got out of the car as if in a daze, leaving it running, the door wide open. He didn't care if the vehicle was stolen. Nothing else mattered except the intense, blissful love he remembered from his childhood.

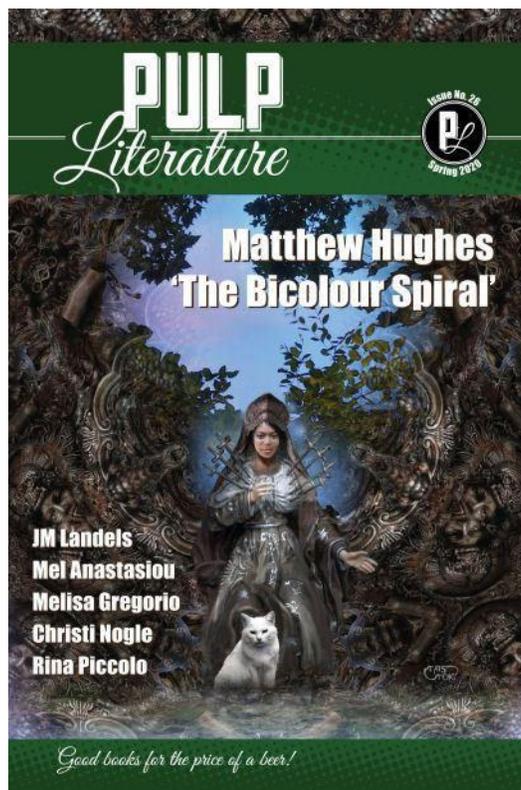
The machine was neither saucer-shaped nor made of tinfoil pie pans like in those old movies. The real thing was streamlined and beautifully-proportioned, with smooth molded edges and silvery glistening skin, meant for cutting through space and repelling radiation. A white searchlight streamed from the base of the hull, questing for him. Stewart gulped down his heart and kept swallowing, for his mouth was suddenly dry. He felt a low, nearly sub-sonic thrum in his bones and his teeth, and a keening joy swelled up into his

skin so hot he was fit to combust. He mobilized, careening down the hill towards the light, flailing his limbs. He screamed hoarsely at them to save him. And, for a second, he knew they had seen him, that they recognized him. They were readying the tractor beam to gently cradle him up into the sky. He would finally be home.

A force the magnitude of a cement truck accelerated into him, lifting him out of his shoes. He hammered hard, his hip cracking, into the dirt and the darkness. Stars rimmed his eyelids, but not the ones he had been dreaming of. He tasted blood in his mouth, and when he inhaled, he nearly sucked back a loose tooth. He looked wildly around, and saw his neighbour Gus ploughing past him into the light, hollering like he was about to score the game-winning touchdown. Gus didn't glance back. A crowd of people chased him, each one jostling and begging, desperate to be the first in line.

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.



Contents of Issue #26 (Spring 2020)

Cover – *Queen of Swords* by Tais Teng
The Bicolour Spiral – by Matthew Hughes
Interview with Matthew Hughes
The Extra: Frankie Ray at the Gates of Monument Studios
– by Mel Anastasiou
Watershakers – by Christi Nogle
The Birthday Party – by Melisa Gregorio
Deep Water – by Mike Carson
Double Flush – by Rina Piccolo
Buddha in a Bottle – by Susan Pieters
Life4Sale – by Michael Donoghue
Dannemora Sewing Class – by MFC Feeley
The Safest Place During a Tornado is in the Bathtub
– by Patti Jeane Panghorn
Absent are the constellations my father plucked from the sky – by Sarah Summerson
Ghost Room – By Allison Bannister
The Shepherdess – JM Landels
See < [Pulp Literature #26](#) >

RED TIDE

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

At first we think it's algae,
our normal, green-tinged waters
tinted pink,
as if a gathered bunch
of allium
had practiced swan dives,
stem by stem into the depths.
But then the colors deepen,
pink to coral, rose to red,
and when the ferries cease to run,
and airplanes make no further
contrailed detours overhead,
when crimson lumps
wash inward on the morning tides
in ever-growing mounds
to rot among the strands of kelp,
we count and hoard our dwindling stores,
plant gardens in the empty lots,
and thank the gods
our politicians
(far away in landlocked states)
saw fit to long ignore our pleas,
and left our island
unconnected to their mainland
by a bridge.

SF CANADA

SF Canada was founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. If you are a Canadian Speculative Fiction writer / editor / publisher who meets the minimum requirements you can join and benefit from the knowledge of more than 100 experienced professionals through asking questions and initiating discussions on SF Canada's private list serve. Be sure to check out our website at: [SF Canada](http://www.sfcanada.com)

ALL THAT GLITTERS

by Fran Skene

(Previously unpublished)

“We’re off course, Mr. Harding,” I say.

“My lady ... Ann, right now we are sailing with the wind, but I assure you we will get there.” James Harding scratches under his cap. Lice, most likely. In spite of that, he’s not bad looking: black hair, rugged features, clothed in canvas pants and a rough wool sweater.

I consider whether the lice are as immortal as he is, then shrug and point to the mainsail.

“We’ll miss the entrance to Cadboro Bay.”

It’s hard to see the seaman’s expression; the light has dimmed further. Clouds have partially obscured the moon, now high in the sky.

“If you will excuse me, my lady, I think you are no sailor.”

“Actually, I am. Change the course.” I wave my Glock. This gun was not developed until the 20th century, but its function will be obvious to this guy.

The look of bravado leaves his face and he obeys; the canvas sail of this 23-foot sloop flaps slightly as he does so. I glance again at the open door of the small cabin. *There it is*: a chest with copper straps. Inside it are gold nuggets from the Yukon that went missing a century and a half ago. That’s if the old stories are correct.

In the 1950s, a guy at the marina told me, one of the locals was taken onto this boat when his rowboat capsized, and saw that gold. But Harding pushed him away and the local ended up overboard. Said later that he was picked up by the crew of a herring boat heading out in predawn. *Lucky*.

Harding turns toward me. “Why the pistol? I rescued you, after all.”

Reflexively, I look aft at my dinghy, bouncing at the end of a rope. “It’s no rescue if I can’t get home.”

I don’t add—and James Harding wouldn’t understand if I did—that I can *phone* for rescue.

The seaman shakes his head. “There are sandbars in the harbour.”

“Cadboro Bay, Mr. Harding, is dredged regularly. No sandbars.”

Why do I argue? He has no idea what year this is. But I continue. “In what direction were you headed?”

“There.” He points.

I look at my phone. He has indicated the rocky channel between Chatham and Discovery Islands. Yes, that’s where he heads when the tide turns, according to sightings. He sails toward Port Townsend but never arrives.

Not for the first time, I question my decision to do this alone, telling Josephine to wait for me at Cadboro Bay. What if I can’t get this guy to harbour? I don’t want to shoot him; instead I’d rather relieve him of his gold and send him on his way, forever sailing on full moon nights.

Jo and I discussed this beforehand. “Ann,” she said. “Both of us could just wait in the powerboat at those coordinates.”

“Others have tried that, remember? Better to look like a lone damsel in distress.”

“Then don’t screw up. We need that gold.”

I brushed my fingers over her cheek, trying to exude confidence. “I’ve got this, Jo.”

Gotta admit she’s right to worry. Our going to sketchy lenders like Nico and his pals to save our tackle shop was a bad idea. I know of one of his debtors who just ... disappeared.

The boom brushes against my hair.

I duck, then look up to see we’re back to sailing with the wind. “Harding! Turn back!”

“I do not think you will shoot me, my lady.”

“Are you willing to take a chance?”

“You do not understand. I need to get away from the governor’s men.”

I don’t bother to inform him that the colonial government is long in the past. “Now!” I shout.

“No.” Harding takes a step toward me, reaching.

The boat rocks and I pull the trigger by mistake. The seaman jerks, but his forward momentum continues. He grabs the Glock as he falls to the deck.

Damn.

I step past him and duck into the cabin. There it is, the chest of gold. It opens easily.

Inside are shiny gold nuggets—enough, I’m sure, to pay off Nico and resettle Jo and me in the Caribbean. I reach with both hands and ... *What?* Hands and gold nuggets appear to occupy the same space. I can’t feel the nuggets.

“That’s *my* gold. You can’t ... can’t have it.”

I turn with a jerk. It’s Harding, on his elbows, pointing the Glock at me.

I jump toward him, reaching for the gun.

Bad move. The noise is simultaneous with the worst pain ever ...

Above me I see a pair of gulls looking down from their perch on the gunwale. I sit up and they take flight, mewling.

Silence ensues, broken only by the sound of waves slapping against the boat. Looking around, I see a pile of bones and rotten cloth.

The Glock rests on a skeletal hand.

Something on the deck glints. It’s the dark face of my phone, reflecting a bit of light from the moon, now low on the horizon. I thumb the phone but it doesn’t light up. *Out of charge.*

Gotta sail to Cadboro Bay before Jo panics. Stepping carefully over Harding’s remains, I go to the lines.

My hands don’t obey me; we are still sailing with the wind.

I concentrate. *Must get to ... get to ... Cadboro Bay.* I call up the memory of Jo's worried face when she dropped me off in the dinghy.

"I'm coming," I assure her, and reach again for the lines.

No luck; my hands still won't obey me. I think again of Jo but her image vanishes.

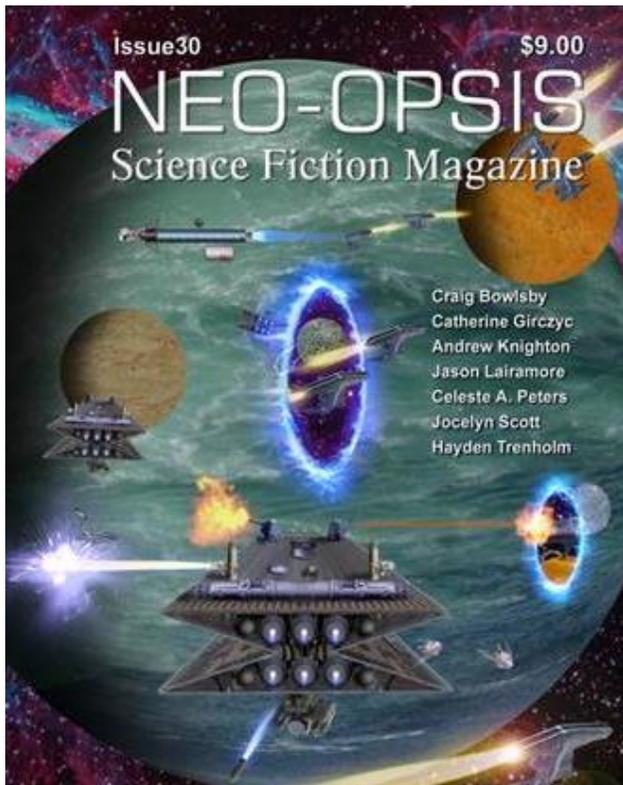
At last I realize: no course change is needed. I'm headed for Port Townsend with my chest of gold, out of reach of the governor's men. Looking aft, I see the dinghy I picked up—*Where?*—jerking about with the tide change.

A bank of fog has rolled in. Beyond it, I hear waves slamming against rocks on each side of the channel.

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Contents of issue 30:

Cover *Portals* – by Karl Johanson

Scrapheap Destiny

– by Andrew Knighton

The Ninth Iteration

– by Celeste A. Peters

Victory by Water

– by Jocelyn Scott

Big, Bad Ships From Outer Space

– by Jason Lairamore

Modigliani Paints the World

– by Hayden Trenholm

One Day in Tom's Life, with Ice Cream

– by Craig Bowlsby

Wrasse

– by Catherine Girczyc

< [Neo-opsis #30](#) >

STOPPED IN THE STREET

by J. J. Steinfeld

(Previously published in *The Wild Word*)

A big, knowing, erudite
(not to mention formidable
and imposing)
emissary from a secret place
of dreams, desires, fantasies,
and all those other thoughts
that make the plodding
and endless trudging to nowhere
somewhat endurable
or at least manageable
hands me a notepad and pen
and orders me to write
neatly and precisely
my ten most cherished memories
not to take too long about it
other plodders and trudgers to survey
we all have our jobs to do
whether early in the morning
or the darkest part of the night.

I quickly jot down three
strain for a fourth
look toward a sky
that appears ghostly
then throw the notepad and pen
in the face of the emissary
punished of course
swifter than I could have imagined
threatened with even worse
but I smile
knowing I now have
a memory that will make my list
next time I get stopped
in the street
by anyone
big, knowing,
and erudite.

GO LOVELY ROSE

by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

(Previously unpublished)

He was lying there with the poisoned flower in his mouth when I found him. Blood had trickled down his thorn-pierced lips, but it was dry now, no longer flowing. The petals of the rose were wilting and black.

I cleared my throat, smoothing my skirt as I straightened. “Well. That’s that, then.”

Chris glanced up at me, nodding, but went swiftly back to his work, cataloging the items found in the room on his official Magi-Tech tablet, sketching the resting place of the corpse, the scatter pattern of the blood on the floor and bed. It had been a pretty room, I guessed. Subtly rich wallpaper, white silk draperies on the windows, matching brocade for bed coverings. The red of the blood must have looked beautiful against them when it was fresher. Now it only looked old ... used.

And the room looked somehow tawdry.

Again I cleared my throat. There was an odd taste in my mouth, one part regret to two parts hangover. The dead man was young and well formed. I kept thinking that he should be rolling amidst those innocence-white sheets with a lover, full of life ... not tearing away their virginity forcefully with his own blood.

But all the dead men had been young and fair. It was one of the constants in this investigation.

Chris sighed softly and started packing away his notebook and tools.

“Anything?” I didn’t even try to banish the desperation from my voice. Eight handsome young corpses, and still no real answers. And with each one I tried to keep the hope alive that this time ... *this time* ... we’d find the information we needed to make an end to the death list.

“You know I can’t tell for sure yet. McGill down in forensics will have to give me his report first.” Yet for all his gruff, businesslike manner, I could tell that Chris felt it too, the pain of these deaths. He wasn’t much older than the victims himself ... a real whiz kid, from college to a top job in the Magi-Tech Investigative Bureau in less than a year. Sometimes I worried about him a bit, wondering if this job was warping his life, turning him into something darker than his age deserved.

But at least it was a company job, and a good one. Moderately safe. I gazed out the street side window, through the shimmer of thin white silk, watching the uniforms as they tried to control the rag-clad human rats who clambered to see, to hear about our investigation. The glass was thick enough that I couldn't hear their screams and chanted threats and queries. I'd heard them enough, though, recently. With each new death they grew louder, more violent.

I pressed one hand to Chris's shoulder, squeezing it gently as he struggled to rise, burdened by his case of instruments. "Let's go. The regulars can deal with the rest of this. We should go back to the office and try to make some sense of everything. Over coffee, maybe ... or wine."

He glanced at me, brows furrowing. "You're drinking too much these days, Lyra." He lowered his voice as the blue-clad regular investigators entered, stuns sticks out as they fended off the few stragglers who'd made it inside, past the barriers. "People are starting to talk."

"Nonsense." I forced a soft laugh. "A drop of wine only heightens my investigative abilities. It's a traditional vice in my position."

He frowned again, but held his tongue. Together, shielded from the crowd by a wall of blue uniforms, we worked our way out towards our limo.

As I bent to join Chris in the back seat behind the chauffeur, a hand shot out to grasp my wrist. A frenzied face lowered itself toward mine. "Bitch! Eight bodies. Eight good men dead and gone. When will it end?"

I slammed the door hard closed, hearing his shriek as he pulled his fingers back just in time. The regulars pulled him away, leaving a tattered scrap of dark, dirty cloth caught dangling from the door frame. Another street rat. None of them had real jobs, or position. But they all had voices. They all screamed about injustice.

But then, that's why those of us who were above them had sound proofing and thick glass, even in the windows of our cars. Somehow, though, as we started to drive away, I thought I could still hear his voice. Accusing.

Chris proffered a fine lace trimmed handkerchief, and I busied myself wiping spittle off my face.

He was careful not to meet my eyes. Protective of my privacy. "Close." It was his only word on the little unpleasantness.

I nodded, grateful. I was silent the rest of the way back to the office, while Chris linked his findings into the small, logo-embossed computer terminal attached to his seat. By the time we arrived, the information would be sorted, checked against earlier results, and commented on by the forensics people. Within only a few hours we'd have our newest results.

I must have dozed a bit, since the travel time sped far faster than it should have. I let Chris help me out of the limo and into the chrome and glass safety of the elevator. Not long now.

I closed my eyes, resting back against the cool purity of metal and melted sand. They opened again with the elevator doors, onto my office, bright and clean and all mine.

Ignoring Chris's scowl I walked over to the bar, pouring myself a drink. My hands were shaking slightly. As I sat, red droplets scattered from my glass onto the white velvet of my chair. I blinked, trying to close out dizziness.

A few moments later I heard low, polite murmuring, and looked up just in time to see McGill from forensics ducking out of the room.

I raised an eyebrow at Chris, my heart sinking as he slowly shook his head. "Nothing." It was a statement of fact.

He reached over, hesitant, touching my wrist gently. "Not much ... but, Lyra, it was closer this time. We can tell. The man walked three hours before dying. And his choice of that private, upper class building says a lot. You're definitely on to something linking the strength of the victim to the strength of the results. The blood spatter was distinctive. We were able to get a bit of info on the state of GenreCorp. Not their customer lists, or anything stock-related, but enough that the high-ups are happy with you, and McGill thinks that one more death may do it, may give us the answers we need ..."

I nodded, not meeting his eyes. One more death. We needed the info, damn it. The stock market was so hard to predict, and we had almost no idea what was going on in our competitors' camps. The science of augury was chancy, but it was really the only hope. A drop of blood slightly more to the left or right, the exact length the victim managed to walk before falling ... so hard to interpret, but so very, very important to maintain our way of life.

And new subjects were so very easy to come by.

"Right, one more." I reached out blindly towards the special vase to one side of my desk. "That fanatic" Tendrils of carefully-trained power snaked through me as I thought about the twisted face that had spit filth into my own. Good features. Strength. Wonderful golden hair. "He'll do. Have him sent to me."

Carefully, by feel and fate, I selected a perfect red rose.

STARFIGHTER

by Lynn Sargent

(Previously unpublished)

They implanted a star
right in the middle of my chest,
right below my clavicle

a chainless necklace,
just below the skin.

Sometimes it oozes stardust,
or belches gas.

Do not tell me it is pretty,
it burns; It could heat
a whole wide world,

hold the gravity
of an entire solar system.

I do not know how they put it in,
I do not know if I will ever get it out.

The knife melts with heat each time
I draw it close; a runny edge
is no good for surgery.

Some day I may try a lance,
I may gallop in on horseback,

holding it before me, punch
straight through

let the wound gape,
and all the fire run out.

TILL ALL THE SEAS GO DRY

by J.Y. T. Kennedy

(Previously unpublished)

We sit close enough to the pool that we can watch it boil: great orbs rising slowly and bursting into clouds of steam. The walls are banded with crystalline formations marking the places where water once reached, now dripping with condensation. When our pot cools, we eat our meal of fungus and wetas in the shell, then move away to a spot where the air is not so steamy. We extinguish our light and fall asleep counting the blue dots of glow worms high above.

Hanna says she doesn't dream, or at least doesn't remember dreaming, but I dream every night. Tonight I dream of the videos that I used to watch, the ones made back when people lived on the surface of the world, before the impact that knocked it from its place and began its slow circling fall toward the sun. I dream that I am watching a film about bears in snow. The bears and the snow are white, but the bear's noses are black; I am trying to see the bears and all I see are black spots. Then my mother comes in, and she tells me that we can go outside now. We walk out to look at the white bears and now I can see them properly. They are swimming in a blue sea that goes on forever, and climbing on jagged white islands.

I wake and take a drink from the pot, rolling the warm liquid about in my mouth, and think about the first time I saw Hanna.

I was fifteen: old enough that nobody bothered supervising me closely. They assumed I was playing games or watching videos, when in fact I was conducting unauthorized explorations outside the colony. I saw Hanna from the far side of a broad, columned cavern, catching her with my light as I entered from around a sharp corner. For a moment she stood there staring at me, and then she fled. She had the biggest eyes I had ever seen, and the wildest hair. She was very thin, and not properly dressed, and I thought that somebody ought to bring her in to live with us. I even worked up the courage to admit what I had been doing and ask about it, but the adults said that she would bring diseases into the colony. Then they asked me exactly where I had seen her, and they looked so grim that I was afraid to tell them the truth. I sent them in the wrong direction.

I was told not to go out again, but they soon forgot to watch me. I returned many times to the area where I had seen her, and eventually succeeded in finding traces of her presence. I left things in the places she frequented: mostly

food, but also some clothing and a few odds and ends which I thought might interest her. It was a long time before I even caught a glimpse of her again, but I was as determined as the scientists in those old films who had studied the animals of long ago. She seemed to me as wonderful as those old creatures. When I did see her, I would call out to her, telling her that I meant no harm, and at last one day she answered me.

Eventually she sat by my side and spoke with me for hours at a time. It was hard for us to communicate at first. Some of the words she used were strange, and she failed to recognize a great number of mine, besides which she had not spoken to anyone in a very long time. The only person she remembered clearly was her father. Since she had no way of telling the passage of time, she could not say how long it had been since he died, but knew that she had been much younger and smaller. Somehow she had managed without light, but must have known it once, for her eyes adjusted quickly when exposed to it. She knew nothing of written words, and thought the world of the past was merely a sort of fairy tale that her father spun simply to amuse her.

I do not mean to say that she refused to believe it had existed, only that she had no clear idea of it, and it did not really matter to her. That was one of the most remarkable things about her. In the colony, we had a thousand ways to amuse ourselves, but everything was tinged with the loss of the world that was no more. Our greatest hope for the future was to continue as we were a little longer, to slow the losses of the years which forced our numbers to dwindle from one generation to the next. But she lived in the world as it was, and though her life was hard, there was no despair behind her eyes when she smiled.

Then the colony moved, to a place that was deeper and nearer to the pole. I could see that other people had been living there not long before we arrived, but nobody explained what became of them. It was a bigger place than the old colony, and well stocked with everything we could need. There were alarms at all the entrances, which made it impossible for me to leave or enter the colony unnoticed, so there was no more exploring. I knew it was ungrateful of me not to appreciate our good fortune, but I sulked and pined, and wondered constantly about Hanna. It took me three years to finally make up my mind to run away.

It was not easy to find my way back, as I had underestimated both the distance involved and the supplies required. By the time I found the old colony I was half starved, my shoes worn through, and I was rationing my light to just a few minutes out of each day. But there was a cache there, and I knew the codes to open it. The generators and larger equipment were gone, but I had

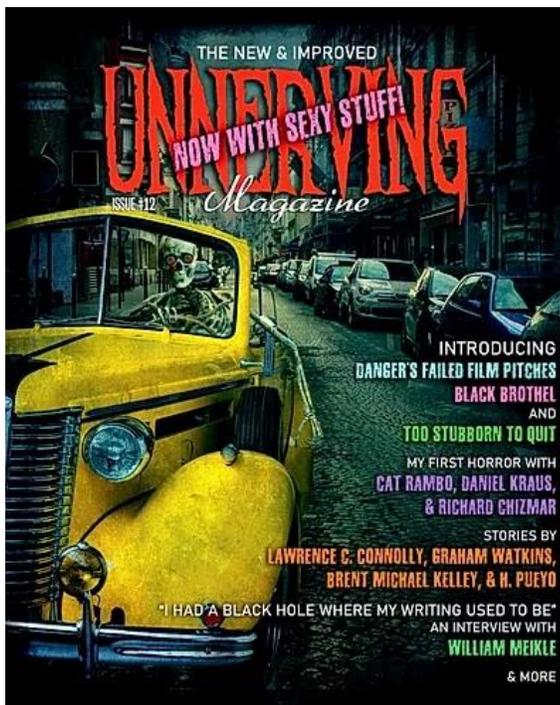
food and light and clothing. And eventually I found Hanna, or rather she found me.

I had spent several cycles out searching in the caverns beyond the area where she used to dwell, when I woke up to find her sitting beside me. I knew she was there even before I put the light on, though I don't remember her making any noise. I sat up, grinning like a fool, and she smiled back at me, and it was the most perfect moment of my whole life. We have never parted since.

We visit the old, abandoned colony sometimes, but more often we wander, supplementing our rations with whatever the caverns provide. We have seen marvels: walked across bridges of crystal and watched unnamed organisms weave glowing trails in strange waters. I don't know how many years we have passed together; I stopped keeping track long ago.

Now she stirs in her sleep, and I lie back beside her, taking her hand in mine. Above us the glow worms seem suspended in nothingness, but I know the rock is there, unseen, at their backs. Once I dreamed of looking at stars, but now the idea of a genuine void above me is frightening. We are creatures of the caverns, Hanna and I.

UNNERVING is a horror fiction magazine edited and published by Eddie Generous out of Powell River, British Columbia, Canada.



Issue #12 contents include:

Here There be Spyderys – by Graham Watkins
Danger's Failed Film Pitches – by Danger Slater
Circle of Lias – by Lawrence C. Connolly
Jacques – (Comic) by Eddie Generous
and (Art) by Tovansakura
It Gets Blacker – by H. Pueyo
Black Brothel: Haunted Holes – by Renee Miller
A Friend in Paga – by Brent Michael Kelly
Keyed in on the Scary Things – by Richard Chizmar
I Couldn't Talk to Anyone about the Nightmares
– by Cat Rambo
Too Stubborn to Quit – by Eddie Generous
Spooky as Hell – by Daniel Kraus
Cancer and Creativity – William Meikle Interview

See < [Unnerving Magazine #12](#) >

LORELEI

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

where ancient rock falls to water
many smitten sailors swear
they have seen a maiden there
combing out her golden hair—
Lorelei

her siren call, her ghostly mien,
blamed for luring men away
from ship's safety, into waves
to crash against the cliffs of slate
Lorelei

where tourist shops offer wares
at canyon's head, you can try
to cast your voice, and hear reply—
shattered dreams, a whispered sigh
Lorelei

we bring our yearnings to this spot
our sorrows over past regrets
the dreams that haven't happened yet
no wonder, then, if cheeks are wet—
Lorelei

tell yourself, to reassure,
her sorrow—it was never yours
still, murmured waves upon her shores
will haunt your heart forevermore—
Lorelei

Do you enjoy reading Polar Borealis? Most of the time I manage to put aside enough money out of my pensions such that I can publish four times a year, but sometimes unexpected expenses delay publication. If you could contribute \$1 a month, or \$2, or \$5 via my Patreon site, I'd be most grateful. Every bit helps me to keep to my schedule. See < [Patreon Site for Polar Borealis Magazine](#) >

BETHELL'S ANGEL

By Lily Blaze

(Previously unpublished)

The child screamed.

Trapped. Solid darkness. Stale air.

Ellen railed against the lid of the child-sized coffin until her hands bled and her legs cramped. The lid never moved.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she cried as fat tears rolled down her face. "Please let me out!"

The fog carried her cries and released the echoes to an apathetic wind. Freezing rains pummelled the coffin. Quicksand loomed around swillies of muddied water. Somewhere in the distance, the English channel's naval activities continued into oblivious darkness.

A treacherous southern shore of Essex County. The strangling night. And a child who cried herself to sleep.

A fire simmered in the cold parlour. Five adults sat around a table. A white board with strange markings and four miniature pillars covered the tabletop. A candle burned at the centre. Arthur, the remaining Bethell child, stared at a doll on the floor. He mindlessly pushed a rocking chair as his parents frowned at the white board.

Spencer Connor whispered to his old friend, Constable Vear, "I am a man of science. Why have you brought me here?"

Vear whispered back, "To solve the case of a missing child."

Lord and Lady Bethell eyed the pair with disgust, then faced Myrna Lamb.

"Miss Lamb, you're a reputable woman," Lord Bethell began in a tense voice. "I received high recommendations for your work. However, you're proving to be a disappointment."

"I do not understand," Miss Lamb said as she waved her hands over the strange markings. "The holy table is set up correctly. The temple pillars are in place. The angels should be speaking now."

"Perhaps Ellen does not wish for us to contact her," Lady Bethell suggested as she dabbed her eyes with a lace handkerchief. "She was always a such a dramatic child."

"Allow me," Connor offered. "Enochian magic is for fools."

"Do not presume," Miss Lamb snapped, "to understand angelic beings."

“There is no such being as Enochian angels,” Connor shot back.

A tiny voice added, “I heard them.”

The adults turned and stared at Arthur.

“I mean to say,” the boy continued, “I heard something.”

“You heard nothing,” Connor dismissed, “but your own imagination.”

“I will not allow you to address my son without his title,” Lord Bethell admonished.

Lady Bethell cried fresh tears.

Vear maintained an even tone. “My Lord, I also want to find your daughter, but I fear this,” he gestured at the white board, “will not help us.”

Lord Bethell raised an eyebrow at Miss Lamb.

“Enochian angels are mysterious in their ways,” Miss Lamb explained with a note of desperation. “We may need to give them more time.”

“She's been missing for two days,” Lord Bethell reminded her. “My daughter, if she's alive, does not have time.”

A thick flame burst out of the fireplace. The adults jumped. The parlour's temperature spiked. Arthur wrapped his arms around the rocking chair. The flame retreated.

“Dear God,” Lady Bethell muttered.

“There,” Miss Lamb said as she jabbed a finger at the fireplace. “The angels are communicating.”

Connor yawned. Loudly.

Lord Bethell slammed a hand on the table, and exclaimed, “Do you wish death on both of my children?”

Connor sobered. “Forgive me, My Lord. I've been hired many times to investigate possible phenomena, only to find, time and again, there's an ordinary explanation for everything.”

“What's your explanation for the fire?” Lady Bethell asked.

“A trick,” Connor replied with a shrug. “An old house—”

“Manor,” Lady Bethell corrected.

“Manor,” Connor amended, “prone to many shenanigans, as I'm sure you've seen.”

“No,” Miss Lamb argued. “That was not chance. The angel spoke Enochian from the fire temple.” She pointed across the white board. “I am certain.”

“The board looks like a game of chess,” Connor observed.

“It is no game,” Miss Lamb insisted.

The candle melted fast and spread across the board. Lady Bethell shuddered.

“Oh dear,” Miss Lamb muttered as she tried to find a way to contain the candle wax.

“How did you perform that trick?” Connor asked with a bemused smile.

“I do not perform *tricks*, Mr. Connor,” Miss Lamb said with a sneer.

Lord Bethell nodded at the table, and said, “Strange happenings. I fail to see how science can explain anything that’s happened.”

Connor stood. “Then my presence here is pointless. “

“Sit down,” Vear instructed. “We must complete the ritual.”

Connor begrudgingly returned to his seat.

Vear continued, “My Lord and Lady, I have supported your desire to communicate with Lady Ellen. But this fantastical means for communication has failed as far as I can see. I believe it’s time to discuss the circumstances of Lady Ellen’s disappearance.”

“What circumstances?” Connor asked. “What haven’t you told me?”

“I need more time,” Miss Lamb muttered as she moved the elemental temple pillars.

“The doll,” Lady Bethell said. “I left her alone for only a moment. When I returned, she had vanished. The doll,” she struggled with a renewed sob, “smiled at me.”

“Impossible,” Connor said. “Fear is fodder for the imagination, My Lady. Where is the doll now?”

Lady Bethell pointed a shaky finger at her son.

Connor squinted at the doll on the floor at the child’s feet for but a second, then said, “A death kit. Common, since Prince Albert’s death. All of England mourns with the Queen. The death kit does nothing more than prepare young girls for the inevitable.”

“The kit is the work of the Devil,” Lord Bethell countered. “The Queen’s obsession with her dead husband punishes us all. We will acquire the evidence we need to force the Queen to stop casting her evil spell on our country.”

Shock gripped Connor. “You speak of treason.”

“We’ll all hang,” Vear added.

“I must complete the ritual,” Miss Lamb said. “The wrath of angels is more dangerous than the Queen.”

Lord Bethell nodded. “Continue.”

As Miss Lamb worked on cleaning the board and adjusted the temple pillars, Connor whispered to Vear, “Old friends until the end, I suppose.”

Vear whispered back, “I had no one else to ask. All of our lives depend on you.”

Connor glanced at the doll on the floor, and whispered, “The ritual will fail.”

Vear gave him a sage nod.

“And after?” Connor asked.

"I arrest Miss Lamb," Vear whispered, "and convince the Lord and Lady their daughter is surely dead. Treason will not bring her back."

"Pity," Connor remarked.

"We may begin again," Miss Lamb announced. "I've arranged the temples to point at the fire element. The Key is in my favour. The angels who govern the fire temple will speak to me now."

Connor failed to hide an eye-roll.

Miss Lamb chanted strange words from the Enochian language. Lord Bethell held his wife's hand. Vear waited tensely as he gripped a club under the table.

Connor glanced over his shoulder. Arthur clung to the rocking chair and glumly stared at the doll that was painted to look like death. Something was missing ...

"The coffin," Connor blurted.

Miss Lamb jumped, then dug her fingertips into the edge of the table, and said, "Do not interrupt the ritual."

Connor ignored her, and asked Lady Bethell, "The death kit includes a coffin, does it not?"

Lady Bethell nodded.

"Where is the coffin?" Connor asked.

"Vanished," Lady Bethell replied, "along with my daughter."

"I must know the exact circumstances shortly before Lady Ellen's disappearance," Connor insisted.

"Connor ..." Vear warned.

"You can continue the ritual," Connor allowed, "but I must continue with my investigation."

Lord Bethell said, "If your investigation is folly ..."

"I will offer my life to you, My Lord," Connor said.

"Very well," Lord Bethell consented.

"My Lord," Miss Lamb objected.

"Continue with your ritual," Lord Bethell said, "and Mr. Connor will continue with his investigation."

Miss Lamb sighed, then resumed chanting.

Connor leaned toward Lady Bethell, and asked in a low tone, "Your whereabouts before Lady Ellen disappeared?"

Lady Bethell watched Miss Lamb as she spoke. "I was here, finishing my needlework."

"Lady Ellen?" Connor asked.

"She was in the playroom with Arthur, as I ordered," Lady Bethell answered.

“Why was an order necessary?” Connor wondered.

“She resisted the death kit,” Lady Bethell explained. “I told her a lady must learn the preparations for loved ones who have passed away.”

“I see,” Connor said. “When did you notice Lady Ellen had disappeared?”

“Later,” Lady Bethell said. “I sat at the dinner table and waited for my children to join me. I asked their Nanny to bring them. She returned without my children and wore the palest face. She mumbled an apology, then ran out of the manor.”

Connor looked around, and asked, “Where is the staff?”

Lord Bethell said with a frown, “They declared my home evil and left.” He turned back to Miss Lamb. “Please continue.”

Miss Lamb took a moment to recall the words, then renewed her chant.

Connor whispered to Lady Bethell, “After the Nanny fled, what did you do?”

Lady Bethell leaned toward him, and said, “I went to my children’s playroom. Ellen was gone. Only Arthur remained. I asked him what happened to his sister. He informed me she vanished. He was terrified, as if he had seen the Devil himself. He shivered terribly. His clothes were wet. I asked, did leave her alone and play outside of the house? He said he hadn’t.”

Vear muttered low in Connor's ear, “Wet clothes.”

Connor gave him the most discreet nod.

Miss Lamb gestured around the fire temple pillar, and told Lord Bethell, “I will speak to the angels now.”

Connor turned around. “Lord Arthur, where is the coffin?”

Arthur muttered, “Mother said to stay and finish the death kit.”

Connor's eyes narrowed. “The coffin?”

“I hear them,” Miss Lamb exclaimed. “An angel is speaking to me.”

Arthur hung his head.

“Lord Arthur,” Connor prodded, “where is the coffin?”

“Fire extinguishes life,” Miss Lamb continued in a distant voice. “Water drowns.”

“The coffin!” Connor yelled at Arthur. The boy whimpered.

“Silence!” Lord Bethell yelled.

Miss Lamb slumped down. “The angels are gone.” She looked at Lord Bethell. “My sincerest apologies. They are silent, which can only mean one thing. Lady Ellen is with an angel now.”

“No!” Lady Bethell screamed and sobbed.

“Where is her body?” Connor demanded.

“I do not know the precise location,” Miss Lamb answered. “The angels said nothing more than fire and water had consumed her.”

Connor scoffed. "Useless." He faced Arthur again. "You were there. What happened before the moment Ellen vanished?"

Arthur pushed the rocking chair and said nothing.

Lord Bethell held back his grief, and said to his son, "You must answer Mr. Connor."

The boy remained silent as he continued to stare at the morbid doll.

A hunch.

"There's no death kits for boys." Connor told Arthur. "Were you envious of your sister?"

Arthur shrugged.

Connor nodded once. "What have you done with Ellen?"

The Lord and Lady stared, horrified, at their silent son. Miss Lamb frowned and fidgeted.

Vear turned, and told the boy, "No one will punish you if you haven't committed a crime."

A long pause, then Arthur finally said, "She was small enough to fit, the doll said."

Lady Bethell gasped, and shouted, "The work of the Devil!"

"Let's not assume," Connor said, then asked Arthur, "What did the doll tell you to do with Ellen?"

Arthur stared at the floor as he sighed, long and mournful. "The swillies."

Lady Bethell fainted. Her shocked husband held her up.

Connor stood abruptly, and told Vear, "The southern shore. We must hurry."

"For what?" Vear asked.

"For Ellen," Connor said impatiently. "She may still be alive in that coffin. A slim chance. We must find her now."

Vear joined his oldest friend, and said, "If anything, we'll find a dead body. The case is solved. Her brother murdered her."

"Let's not fear the worst," Connor said. "Deal with the boy later."

Lord Bethell gently draped his unconscious wife over her chair, and said, "I will join you."

"Thank you, My Lord," Connor said with a grateful nod.

Lord Bethell told Miss Lamb, "You will stay here, care for my wife and son. Do *not* let him out of your sight."

"Of course, My Lord," Miss Lamb said. "I have something else to share with you."

"Tell me," Lord Bethell said. "Quickly."

Miss Lamb held the fire temple pillar. "The Devil may very well be at play. I pray you find Lady Ellen alive, but—"

“Out with it, woman,” Lord Bethell barked.

Miss Lamb cringed, and admitted, “The ritual may have summoned a demon.”

Connor groaned. “Oh, for pity’s sake.”

“I urge you to tread carefully,” Miss Lamb pleaded.

“Yes, of course,” Connor said curtly.

Vear put on his constable hat. “It’s the middle of the night, Connor. How do you plan to find a doll-coffin in the dark?”

“Lanterns,” Connor said as he gestured. “Rope. With our hands and feet. We will find her.”

Lord Bethell rose. “Shall we?”

“At once,” Connor replied.

The three men rushed out of the parlour. Miss Lamb covered her face and cried.

Ellen woke from a feverish dream. Sweat dragged her face down. Her vision blurred.

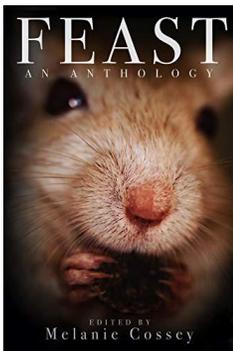
By her numb feet, angelic wings ghosted to the coffin lid. Then the wings faded and disappeared forever. Flickers of light became shooting flames. A smile gleamed as the fire demon unfolded.

She trembled and choked on renewing tears.

Distant voices that were muted by the coffin's damp wood called her name. A faint hope. She tried to move. To call back. To feel anything but fear.

The demon grinned wider and told her in a grating voice, “They will find nothing but your bones.”

Sea-drenched sand poured into the coffin as it rapidly sank. The last flame snuffed out. The demon laughed. The child screamed.



The Coquitlam Writers Group Digest FEAST: An Anthology of Short Stories on the Subject of Food. Includes stories by Melanie Cossey, KM Thorpe, Andi StJohn, Q DiFulvio, Zhang Hui, Janice Hodge, Jack Emberly, Margarita Escobar, Miriam Hebron, Karen E. Hamilton, and others. Join 16 Westcoast authors as they present stories proving food is more than a matter of good digestion. Whether deep underground in a Welsh mine, in a beautiful garden villa in Italy, or across time in a pillaged castle, food has the power to heal, divide, comfort, and destroy. Though multiple genres are utilized, all are feats of imagination.

See < [Feast](#) >

RELATIVITY SPEAKING

by Melanie Marttila

(Previously published in *Continuum*, Cranberry Tree Press, 2004)

my husband's the cosmologist reading
endlessly singularities, string theory, and
how Einstein is proven right.
checking facts, i ask how long before we knew
if the sun went supernova?
astronomers would die looking he said
light and the wave of destruction
travelling at the same speed
relativity
speaking.
we wrap our tongues around how our
perception keeps our cat alive
—in the box or not—
minds not containing the sadness
that same perception allowed our dog to die.
in a parallel reality one of millions
diverging with each breath and movement
she lives still, has many lives we will never touch
meanwhile astronomers look so deep into the universe
they can see how it began.
will they skip to the last chapter then,
to see how it ends?
my cosmologist will never believe that
neither sleep nor dreams know time
that we live the past and future every night.
having witnessed the beginning
foreseen the end
only to forget each morning—
i both understand and
do not.

THE UPSIDE OF THE HIVE MIND

by Marco Cultrera

(Previously unpublished)

Tarn-2254 felt more than a third of the trillions of minds that formed the Collective shift their attention to the proceeding's mind space.

It must be a record audience, he communicated.

Can't lose the big show! someone replied, and the comment spread like wildfire, provoking a backlash of hilarity. More minds joined in, attracted by the euphoria.

Order! Honourable Cate-3091, the presiding judge and expert of the Code of Collectivism, intervened. The elation was quickly suppressed as the judge's steady waves of solemnity spread through the mindways. *Case 1957HK: Professor Soat-3341 vs. the Code of Collectivism. In defence the Code: Xenologist Tarn-2254. Plaintiff, you may proceed*

Let me begin with a brief report on my latest experiment, Soat started.

Numbers and graphs emanated from his mind. In moments, everybody had the necessary base knowledge on the matter at hand.

I challenged the most advanced Artificial Intelligence that my laboratory has ever created with simple cosmological problems in a fictional solar system. The accuracy of the answers was in line with the results of my students. In a few cycles, the AI had learnt the suggested patterns and was able to find the lesser singularities necessary for interstellar travel

Impulses of acknowledgement came from the audience, as their brains validated Soat's statement.

Subsequently, we took a second AI, identical to the first one, and we disconnected it from the Collective

Waves of indignation immediately filled the mind space.

Order! The judge intervened, *the disconnection of an artificial mind is not against the Code. An AI program, no matter how advanced, is not legally equivalent to a living mind, and hence doesn't have an obligation to always be part of the Collective.*

Disappointment came back from most of the audience, while satisfaction emanated from Soat's mind. *Once given the same cosmological problems, the disconnected AI, unencumbered by the constant presence of the trillions of minds of the Collective, learnt the intended patterns more efficiently, and was able to find the singularities in the test solar system in one tenth of the time.*

Marvel for these outstanding results built up in the mindways.

On this basis, Soat-3341 continued, I'm asking for permission to disconnect a few selected living minds of the scientific community from the Collective.

Outrage hit fast and in mass from the audience. Soat continued undaunted. *These are the projections of what such isolated minds can achieve.*

For the first time, no impulses whatsoever came back. All the connected minds were frozen in shock analyzing Soat's data.

The discovery of galactic singularities would proceed at a pace several orders of magnitude faster than the present one, Soat summarized. This would mean intergalactic travel in less than a generation, instead of the current estimation of more than a hundred. The Collective could be free in our lifetime from the prison that our Galaxy has become!

Impulses of appreciation started flowing towards Soat.

The judge intervened. *Why disconnect living minds? Can't your isolated AI achieve the same result?*

Unfortunately, Soat replied, once given to the AI the more complex task of identifying galactic singularities, it fell short, lacking the superior intuition typical of our organic minds. It would take longer to build such a sophisticated AI than to unlock the singularities as a collective, and we are not even sure it's possible.

The small pang of disappointment drowned quickly in the minds of the audience, still galvanized by the possibility of accessing new galaxies so much earlier.

Honourable? Tarn-2254 probed. May I counter-argue?

Proceed.

I won't talk about the ethical and moral implications of disconnecting minds from the Collective, Tarn began, as it's not my field of expertise and the result would be an exhausting discussion with no clear winner.

Instead, I'll direct your attention to a species I have come across in my role as xenologist on one of the peripheral branches of our galaxy.

Data, pictures and videos streamed from Tarn's brain.

A species composed solely of individual minds evolved to self-consciousness from the primitive animals of their planet. The speed of its evolution is staggering, going from forming basic social groups to expansion to many of the nine planets in their solar system in less than five thousand generations.

Soon, pleasure waves were going through the members of the audience, rejoicing in the success of their fledgling galactic neighbours.

Remarkable, indeed, but not desirable. The average index of individual fulfillment among the member of this species always remains several hundred points below the levels we enjoy in the Collective.

Indignation and pity clogged the mindways.

With extensive subsets of the population plummeting below zero.

Pure shock hit him from everywhere. Negative values of the index of individual fulfillment had never been recorded in their civilization's history.

Interstellar travel thanks to the discovery of the lesser singularities, gateways to other stars in our galaxy, was next. That was over one million cycles ago. This is what their solar system looks like now.

The thriving planets were gone. Some had disappeared, hurled into deep space, some had plunged into the star, and some had disintegrated, adding themselves to the existing belts of asteroids. Impulses of disbelief reached Tarn's mind.

They found the singularities, but individual drive and ambition pushed them to access them prematurely, without full knowledge. When the first small gravitational changes and solar flare intensifications started, they ignored them, dismissing them as unrelated facts, or fake, invented by enemy factions, eager to win the race for interstellar travel. And soon it was too late to avoid extinction.

The mindways filled with sorrow.

This unfortunate outcome is due to their lack of the natural empathy we enjoy in the Collective. Disconnected minds rely on physical manifestations to assess the real impact that their actions have on their environment and other members of their species. Interpretation of those manifestations through individual perception is unavoidable, and it's easy to reach skewed conclusions because of own biases or to further personal goals.

This limitation proved to be their undoing when dealing with the singularities and their deceptive nature.

Is it wise, I ask you, to risk everything to reach a goal that is already within our grasp, just a bit farther than we would like? What if the minds that Soat wants to disconnect develop the same drive for personal success that doomed this species?

Impulses of agreements started pouring in. The acclaim was overwhelming. Even Soat, his opponent, couldn't manage more than a stiff lash of disappointment.

On the Judge's request, the Collective voted. Eighty percent of the trillions of minds in attendance voted against Soat's proposal. Tarn then formally thanked the extinct species that had called themselves Humans. His impulses of gratitude were joined by those of many others in the mindways.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

by Douglas Shimizu

(Previously unpublished)

Camping-out on your days off is a normal activity.
Unless you happen to work on Mars, then it's just more training.
Your tent is pressurized with an airlock instead of a zipper.
You're already roughing it. So, why go outside?

'Cause wanting to escape from workplace stress is universal,
and the one luxury of Mars Central is the base cooking,
like in submarines back home; it makes conditions bearable.
So, a dozen Mobile Meal Packs and we were ready for home.

Then this ... Mars Central announcing pizza deliveries
to remote outposts; half joking, half testing new nav tech.
Would they try our location; would they be up to the challenge?
Take base coordinates without a unit designation?

Fact is the drone doesn't care who gets the package.
Fire up the comms, find the order reqs, enter the info, pay the cred.
"Processing ... received. Allow fifty mins. for delivery."
Yes! They accepted, no doubt with determination.

No sandstorms forecast, nor magnetic anomalies predicted.
Still, finding our location isn't easy for a drone.
The campsite on the crater rim is rocky, barely a ledge;
our rover twisting through narrow valleys to reach the spot.

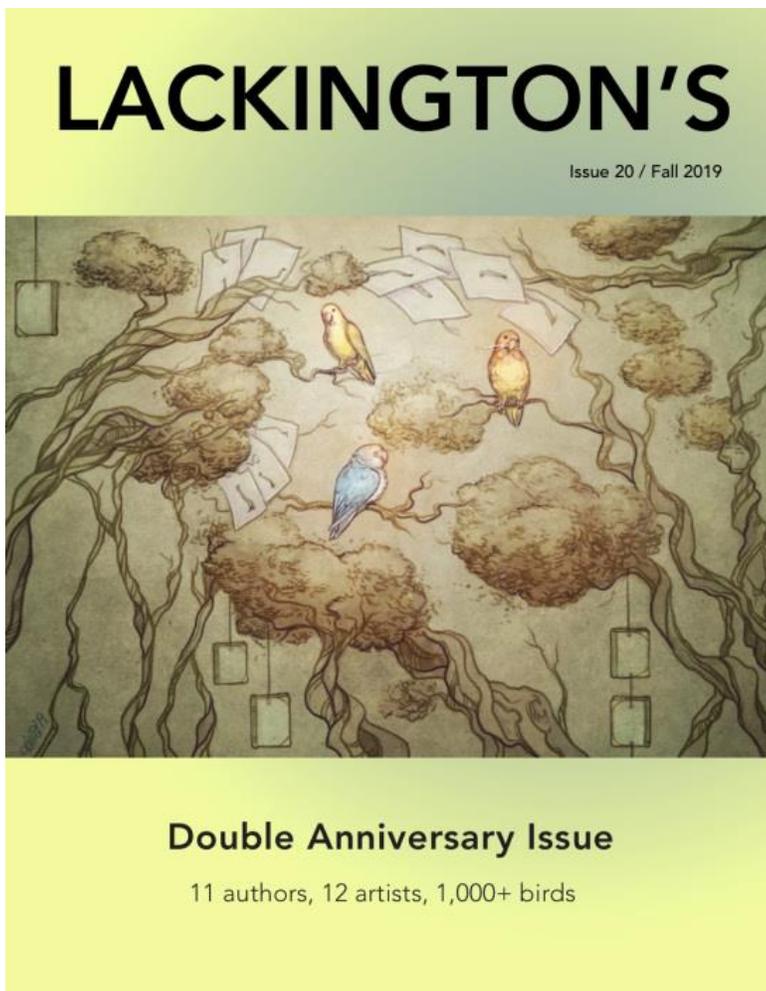
Remote-flying the route demands exceptional skill.
Even the latest AI needs the red skies to be clear.
As throughout home delivery history, time ticks slowly.
An hour later our comm panel beeped. "It's here!"

I was already geared up, just the breather helmet to put on.
Got into the airlock. One minute for the atmo to blow.
It wasn't a drone waiting for me in the red glow outside,
but a full-size podcraft with Chief Angus, pizzas in hand.

“Not letting some flyweight drone make me the butt of your jokes.” I shrugged as I took the pizzas and turned, heard him ask, “Tip?” “Change your after-shave,” I quipped and fled into the hatchway. The departing pod engines ruffled the skin of the shelter.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the fans cleaned me of dust. Seals broken, boxes opened, the aroma of still-warm ham and ... “Anything but pineapple” I had written on the order. Two medium Hawaiian pizzas. Seems Chief had the last laugh.

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.



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WHEELCHAIR SEATING FOR THE APOCALYPSE

by Z. DiFulvio

(Previously published in *Spinetingler Magazine* in 2015)

Everyone has some sort of survival plan in case of The Uprising. Technology becomes self-aware and detonates all the bombs, aliens make contact with earth and enslave us all, STDs mutate and create vampires, World War III.

When someone would ask me what I would do in case of zombies, my immediate answer had always been “Shoot myself in the head”; the fact I had never fired or even touched a gun never came into the equation. Surely they’d be plentiful, surely I could get my hands on one. Put it under your chin, so the bullet has more soft tissue to pass through, fewer defences.

“Really?” they asked me. “You wouldn’t want to enjoy it just for a few days?”

No. Never.

And that was before, when I could walk.

Not that I could ever run. I’d be dead weight anyway.

No feeling below the waist, poor eyesight and a bag to shit in. I could barely live with myself *before* the apocalypse

The Internet isn’t up, of course. Ghost-town silent, a graveyard of unavailable pages and I am alone. It’s been days and I’ve long stopped watching the television. It offers nothing more than test patterns, snow or a blue screen. It’s somehow fitting that the pundits hyped till the end, speculating on when the power and utilities would fail, fear-mongering the whole way. They were the first to go off-air. I’m sure there’s a case of irony there, if I wanted to spend the energy analysing it. The radio keeps playing things that sound like eerie Numbers Stations; This Is Not A Test.

On the bright side, the plague hasn’t hit my apartment yet, though I can see from the smoke on the horizon it won’t be long. I open the sliding door to the tiny patio of my apartment and look out for what will be the last time. I can smell the heat and decay and smoke on the air, the burning fat and flesh. The rot, the bone marrow, the oozing sores, the chalky dust of crumbled buildings. It’s grown mundane, typical.

My window planter box has become a home for dandelions. I pick them, one by one, and blow away the silky white fluff. Go. Be Free. Become the dominant species on the planet. The seeds dance on air and mingle with

floating ash. It's beautiful. I watch them travel until my eyes can no longer keep them in focus.

My apartment is on the fifth floor, I was unsure if that was high enough for a fall to kill me. I wasn't going to take the chance that it would fail and, what, paralyse me? Too late. I still had no gun so I couldn't shoot myself. I didn't want to cut my wrists because that was hardly fool-proof. I didn't have a gas stove or fireplace, and no exposed rafters. That left me with one option.

Back inside, I close the patio doors and block out the stink from outside. I wheel my chair over to the kitchenette and tie my hair into a ponytail. The ingredients are out already, everything needed to make a decadent last meal. So, I start to make cookies.

While people everywhere crack undead skulls, I crack eggshells.

I don't care if the hand mixer was making noise, they aren't here yet. It would be a while. Time enough.

It happened on April first, which is sort of brilliant if you think about it. Of course no one believed it and that allowed things to escalate. Emergency responders weren't mobilized until it was far too late.

I smile and dump most of the bag of chocolate chips into the bowl, then pop a handful into my mouth and chew, savouring the chocolate.

I don't bake the cookie dough, but roll it into small balls, pushing the little sleeping pills and muscle relaxers for my neck pain into the doughy spheres. I drop some of the little dough-balls into my mouth whenever I feel like it, letting them rest on my tongue before swallowing, completely concealing the pills with chocolate chips.

Fuck you, salmonella, you can't hurt me. You're not even an idle threat anymore.

In the distance, something crashes or explodes, causing my whole apartment complex to shudder. The shockwave carries itself up my mostly numb spine and makes my teeth chatter. Dust rolls off bookshelves and floats majestically in the air while the books themselves are shaken from their cubbies and dumped on the floor. My CD collection clacks together like a Newton's Cradle, flopping left, to right. The windows rattle so hard I watch them to see if they will break. They don't; not a single crack. It doesn't matter if they had anyway really, but I like that they still kept out the cold, the rain, the noise from the frenzied streets below.

I just turn the volume on my MP3 player louder and drop it into my lap.

I am almost sure no one is going to come for me, not even out of a moralistic sense of "Leave No One Behind." *Semper Fi?* No, no that means "Always Faithful." Meh, there must be some Latin term for "No One Left Behind," but it's not like I can look it up on the Internet.

Oh well

My family is miles and miles away and all my friends are (were?) from the Internet. I don't want anyone to come for me anyway. I don't want to live in this world. This isn't the kind of world you can just go to the store and get new adult diapers, colostomy bags and weekly physiotherapy anymore. Besides, I'm pretty sure they, the monsters, the zombies, can smell my exposed intestine. I'm probably prime rib to them anyway.

I would kill for some ribs. Slathered in barbecue sauce. Is it wrong to crave meat when humans are being hunted and eaten? I'm slowly realizing that I don't really care at this point.

I haven't eaten for over 24 hours, just so I could have an empty stomach to be hungrily filled by salvation.

I look at the trays in front of me, at my small armies of uncooked cookie dough-balls. I don't want to count them, I don't even want to estimate how many I have. I don't want this to be exact, precise, I don't want to be aware. I eat another dough-ball. I just want to let it happen.

Another explosion belches out onto the land and it's far more effective than the last. I'm surrounded by darkness. I pull my earphones down around my neck and remain still for a moment. Every screen, every power button, every hum of electricity suddenly snuffed out. The silence is unnerving. Probably. But I don't have to face it, not while my MP3 player still has life left.

The darkness is only slightly alleviated by the dim daylight cascading through my windows.

Terrific. Now the ice cream is going to melt.

I roll to the fridge and grab the tub of ice cream and a can of soda. I pop the top and take a long drink, belching happily. I switch the song on my MP3 player to something loud and full of rage as I return to my dough soldiers. I scoop up a handful and drop them into the vanilla ice cream. And then I eat.

I eat spoonfuls of the stuff. Sometimes something firm hits my throat and I don't know if it's a chocolate chip or a pill but I don't think about it. I try not to guess. I don't care.

I look down long enough to see I need more cookie dough, add more, sometimes just putting two or three bits in my mouth, then go back to the ice cream.

I don't care.

I am a lost cause. I don't care if once I die I'll come back as one of them. I don't know if I will or not. It all happened so fast that no one's had a chance to study it, or if they have, no one had the chance to say anything before the T.V. stations went silent. I don't care if the idea of a zombie in a wheelchair is comical or worthy of pity. I don't care if I'd be the easiest zombie to defeat, just

tip over the chair, roll me down a flight of stairs, ha ha. I don't care if I'm ripped apart and they dine on my body, slurp up my guts like spaghetti noodles.

Just as long I'm not awake for it, not here mentally, unaware, blissfully ignorant.

I'm not afraid of death, but I hate pain.

I considered setting up some sort of Rube Goldberg-esque machine for after I pass out, to keep me from turning into one of them. Tie my arms to the armrests of my chair, and chain my chair to something sturdy. A pipe or whatever. Have a candle in a puddle of cooking oil to start a fire or something. Pass out, stop breathing, burn away, feel nothing and hurt no one. But it seemed convoluted and more trouble than it was worth.

I don't know how much I've eaten but I can certainly feel the effects. My arms are heavy and my fingers numb. I am suddenly aware of the music in my ears. This wasn't the song that I thought was playing 30 seconds ago. Or was it?

I reach for my pop but my coordination is a joke. Eventually I manage to wrap my hand around the can and bring it to my mouth. I take another drink and indulge in another burp.

Soda dribbles from my chin. I look down to see brown drops of sticky soda spilled onto my shirt front. My favourite shirt. I wore it especially for this occasion, the first time I changed my shirt in around a week. The longer this has gone on, the less I've bothered. I think it's been four weeks now.

Some '80s technicoloured cartoon heroic bullshit that when young, I adored but now I barely remember and know didn't age well. I got it for a birthday some year when I was still single-digits. It was an adult large and I never fully out-grew it. Authentic, it lasted all these years. Vintage in a retro-hip era owned by the Gen-Xers. The once brilliant colours faded into a dull pastel palette, the cartoon characters crispy and cracked, with fissures of lost iron-on turning them to amputees and leaving scars. The thin fabric of the t-shirt drank up the soda and tears came to my eyes.

I wasn't ready for the panic when it started to set in.

What if they get in here before I'm dead? What if they pull my arms off first and I feel the limbs rip from their sockets and tear from my body? What if I die and turn into one of them anyway, bite or no bite? And what if then, I have my old memories? What if my consciousness is still aware? What if I have a sense of self but my mind is imprisoned in a shambling body that's falling apart? What if all they know is hunger and pain? What if the rotting hurts? What if eating people is the only way to kill the pain? What if their dull moaning is just them screaming "help me!" What if I become one of them, and I'm stuck

wearing a grody old shirt with a cola stain on it for the rest of my un-life until someone puts me out of my misery?

I can feel adrenaline start to surge through my body. I pray that it doesn't negate the pills. It's too late to turn back now.

I wish I had a way to shut off my brain.

I breathe, I eat, I focus on the music. I eat. I eat. I focus on the vanilla and chocolate and dough, knowing it will be the last time I ever taste them. I feel myself begin to calm.

Gunshots ping under the melody of the music that's funnelling into my brain. They're close now. The Horde is coming. Defiantly, I eat more dough and ice cream.

I had no regrets, which is an advantage of not giving a shit. I wanted for nothing. I don't want for one more great, flighty love affair, for more travel, I don't mourn for all the places I'll never see. I always wanted to go to Africa, but now I imagine the infected were dining on blue-rare lion steaks. Global pandemics tend to kill wanderlust. I don't want one more drug binge. Not that there had been any binges anyway. It wasn't my scene. Once you realize morphine has little to offer other than a pleasant tingle, it all seems moot. And expensive. Expensive and moot.

It goes dark, well, darker than before. I had closed my eyes. The total darkness and deep guttural vocalizations were comforting. I am so tired, I feel like I can sleep everything away, sleep would make it better. Sleep is a cure-all. Sleep quietly fire-bombs everything, and makes it peacefully fade away.

I can hear them, even as I am sinking under the pool of unconsciousness. It's like they are on the shore, or maybe just treading water, and I am down in the blackened depths. Are they at my door?

I'm limp and nerveless, and my body goes lax in the chair. I see nothing but phosphenes, midnight blue and slate grey colours and anti-life, dazzling their way across my field of vision. They are comfortable under my closed eyelids. The song that pounds its way out my earphones is loud, Latin, and growling. It doesn't make sense to me. Not that it ever did. I feel a rattle tumble its way out my lungs.

The zombies are coming through the walls, coming through the ceiling like fat drops of tar, clawing their way past the glass window panes. Shuffling, stumbling, surmounting one after another as they clamber up and in. Like-minded and with a single and sure purpose, they tear at my apartment like rioters at a concert. Moaning, hollering, crying, somber, screaming to be satisfied and heard, noticed, acknowledged.

I wish I had gone to more concerts.

HACKER HALLOWE'EN

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

Gena the hacker
sailed the netways
warped lightyears
past other sluggish glides

Mistress of manipulation
in binary overdrive
lived hours in surreal space
numbers circling thick as flies

People were her downfall
slow-moving, erratic meat
she had little use for bodies
but to keep her brain alive

An invite flashed her screen
a party in the flesh
Gena surfaced mystified
mired in realtime gab

Hackers and compu-jocks
murmured technical intimations
a comment dropped in passing
snagged Gena like a virus

Within her cozy hacker home
Gena wired, coded and computed
data bytes, cells, diode lights
microchips and nanophages

Gena genius, first to succeed
placed her construct on the porch
for howling Hallowe'en
timetold tradition, the children came

Surprised by trick, the children gawked
“Get off the porch, you little shits!”
screamed her organic golem
they fled the shrieking horror

Gena texted her hacker friends
they arrived to stare perplexed
Gena smiled, proud parent
The construct eyed a sneaker

Orange, misshapen, red glowing eyes
and hands of decaying green
it pulled itself up on spindly legs
and gnawed the nervous guests

Why, Gena, dismayed voices cried
What on Earth is that?
It’s organic chips and bites
truly cybernetic, she replied

I heard it said everyone uses
a Cyberpumpkin green machine



“Of ghosts, of reaching, of beginnings and endings in these pages, you’ll find nostalgia, dismembered feet and disconcerting bodies of water, and the very human fumbling that comes with ends and starts.”

Contents of issue 2.3

- Katabasis* – by Catherine George
- Construction Project as a Ghost Story* – by Quinn Lui
- Noun Torture Verb Break Broke Broken* – by Kamilia Rina
- Remembrance of Worlds Past* – by Andrew Wilmot
- Garage Sale* – by Wai Au
- Paper, Incense, Need* – by Sharon Hsu
- Theories on Gods* – by Jason B. Crawford
- Monstrous Attractions* – by Cindy Phan

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THE AUCTION

by Mark Braidwood

(Previously unpublished)

This is a story about a woman, and about how we do things now.

Some of it I know first-hand, other parts I had to piece together from the different ways I have. I never met Lenina but I know her well. And I want to know if I killed her. You should decide for yourself, because maybe you did too.

I sit where it all started, where I first encountered her. In this seat, the one in the corner with its back to the entrance, and with my hood up and cap on, nothing can observe my face, so nothing and no one knows I'm here. Unlike most people, I know how to protect myself and my data. They call this place a cafe, but it's nothing like the pictures you see of those in Europe. Lenina would have liked those. This one has the smell of synthetic lemon lingering from the previous night's clean, only just beginning to succumb to the scent of brewing coffee. Even so, there's a greasy film on most surfaces, as though the years refuse to be scrubbed away.

But first, my grandfather, who has something to say about this. I was young when he drove me to the forest in his cavernous truck that smelled of gas and cigarettes and sweat and money. His belly strained against a blue check shirt, a brown leather belt sheltering underneath. I once heard my mother call his scraggly silver beard ugly, but I liked it and decided that even though I didn't shave then, I couldn't wait to not-shave for real.

We had stopped by the side of the road at the start of a wide muddy track that led into the forest. With a sweep of his arm, he told me he owned all the land as far as I could see. One side of the track was covered in trees, limbs and leaves thrusting and entwining, a slow dance unfolding over centuries. The other side was empty and opened to the light, to the smell of diesel and the sound of chainsaws. Smoke climbed lazily into the sky from the flames that fed upon what grew around the tree stumps.

"Why did you get rid of the trees, Papa?" I asked.

"This is how we do things now," he replied.

"Who owned them before you?" I asked. He laughed and I felt stupid.

He placed his thick hand upon my shoulder. "Take something gradually enough, and by the time you're done, people assume you always owned it," he said. I didn't understand then, but I do now.

The last time I saw him he was lying on a hospital bed with his gown

hoisted around his neck, revealing a rectangular patch of blistered skin on his stomach, courtesy of the hot-water bottle he had fallen asleep with. The doctor was patiently explaining to him how a low temperature object could still burn, slowly imparting its heat such that the tissue damage only became apparent after some time.

The burn had become infected by one of those resistant organisms and he died two days later.

I used to come to this cafe to work, when I was bored with my small apartment, of working on my bed or of sitting at my desk at the window with the view of the back alley, with its weeds and skulking cats and sleeping men. Now, I come when I want to think about what happened to Lenina. It's where I took part in the auction, where I purchased access to thousands of profiles for my employer, and how I know so much about her.

This is how we do things now.

Lenina Crowe, age 29, single, drank Pink Umbrella Gin, liked animals, was insecure about her appearance and social status, aspired to drive German cars and travel to Mexico. None of this matters any more.

All of the profiles were useful like this, but hers stood out. Her photo showed a pretty woman with deep brown eyes highlighted by shapely eyebrows. Her hair was almost-black, and her skin almost-brown, with lips that promised quiet whispers and soft caresses. She was smiling, a moment of genuine spontaneity with a sense that she was about to laugh.

And I'll admit it: I wanted to meet her. I own a cat, have thought about going to Europe. I pictured us driving through France in a convertible. I'm wearing a scarf—it's cold—but she doesn't mind wearing a short skirt.

It's a hazard of this job, feeling as though you know people, as though they could be your friend, or more. But I knew better than to indulge in such fantasies for too long, and simply got to work, connecting clients with customers, configuring the Intelligences that would execute the campaign.

After it happened is when I figured it all out. I pulled a copy of a journal from her computer, courtesy of a trojan the Intelligence had installed. I want to read some to you, to help you understand what she was like:

Dropped in to see John yesterday, wanted to surprise him. Kinda wish I hadn't. Heard him in the shower, singing stupid song from ad for pheromone-shampoo. Then saw the thing as soon as I entered his room, looking like some kind of discarded insect's body. Visor, wires, gloves, and a receptacle with a shape I can't bring myself to describe.

Not the worst of it. Couldn't help myself and looked at what he's been doing with it. A young woman with long black hair and small breasts and dark

nipples, called Arisa, supposedly from Thailand. He paid sixty for the virtual experience of screwing her from his bedroom. There were others too.

Washed my hands with that stupid yak's milk and goji berry soap his bitch of a mother bought him for Christmas, while I cried, knuckles red. Then coated the receptacle with the pepper spray I carry ever since that guy followed me home. Let him try washing that out.

Maybe it's me. I keep picking them. Why expect him to behave any differently?

I'm finished with him and dating apps. Maybe I'll go to France and study, do that design course starting this summer. Get a fresh start.

OK, maybe he wasn't the one. But what if all this dating stuff actually gets in the way? Worse, what if my person isn't even out there?

Taken a week later, there's a photo that I found of Lenina in a restaurant, captured in the background of someone's selfie. I know the song that was playing at the time, the emotional state it was designed to induce. Her best friend is leaning across the table with her hand on Lenina's arm. Lenina's eyes are downcast. She looks sad and vulnerable.

That weekend, her friend took her shopping and Lenina saw our ad. The Intelligence had matched her with the perfect photograph: a woman with dark hair driving a convertible through vineyards, a stone cottage in the background. I've seen it—she is stylish, a bright red scarf trailing behind her in the wind, independent and not afraid to be alone. What did Lenina think when she saw it? That it looked like her? That it could be her in that car? It doesn't matter, she bought the perfume.

A month later, she went with a friend to the launch of a new gin produced by her favourite brand. They had a good time, at least it looks like it from the photos. The ceiling was festooned with pink umbrellas, as though the entire room sheltered from the rain. Everyone wore rubber boots of various colors. It's where she met him. He appears in photographs an hour after they had arrived. Lenina wrote about it:

Just met someone. Funny, cos I didn't want to go to the Pink Umbrella launch. Not in the mood for crowds. Jo-Bel made me. She's been so great since John. I love her, she's so ballsy. She actually asked this massive bouncer if the plumbing matched the square-footage. He was cool about it, just winked at her.

Place was amazing though. Had a platform in the middle where it actually rained inside! Gave us rubber boots and umbrellas and we played under the rain like kids. When Jo-Bel was at the bar, this guy came up. A bit hot, bit taller than me, which I liked. Dark hair and blue eyes. Looked a bit ridiculous holding a pink umbrella with jeans tucked into yellow rubber boots.

At first thought he was a bit of a dick. Introduced himself as Eric and said he was “a Pinkaholic.” I laughed. Bit mean I know. Seemed a little hurt but recovered and said he’d been waiting until he stood under a pink umbrella drinking gin to say that.

But he talked with me, really talked, the first guy in ages actually interested in me and what I think. Talked about app-dating—hates it too. Got a dog, showed me a photo, works as a photographer and loves travel. Wants to go to Mexico to photograph the Aztec ruins. Me too.

Maybe it was the gin, but we danced, laughing ‘cos we had to balance our drinks while holding umbrellas and kept getting wet. Then he just leaned in. God, he smelled good. And he kissed me, just like that.

There’s one photo that’s almost beautiful, where Lenina has dropped her umbrella to stand under his. From then on, in all that I can find, they’re together. They travelled. She looks good in a bikini. Lenina seemed happy.

What do I care? The campaign was successful, the clients are satisfied. The right songs played in restaurants and bars at the right time, the right ads appeared wherever they needed to. Even the right conversations happened nearby. And she bought a case of Pink Umbrella Gin.

For the next six months, I worked for the same company, a pioneer in cutting edge Artificial Intelligence Marketing Engines. I like the work and even feel a bit creative when configuring a campaign. Sometimes, I would think about Lenina. Then, I heard about her on the news. Or rather, her absence. Mother and father crying, pleading. Had she gone to France like she said she would?

Months go by and they still haven’t found her. Eric is in custody. Did he do it? I want to know.

It’s her last journal entry that I find hardest to read:

Jo-Bel rang the other day. Wants to know why she hasn’t seen me. I should, but I’m so busy and Eric doesn’t really like her. Feel guilty, but sure she understands.

Missed the deadline for the design course, own stupid fault. Can always apply next year. Besides, Eric says he couldn’t last that long without me, miss me too much. And he thinks I probably wouldn’t get in.

The cafe is empty this early in the morning, the tables and chairs solemn in their denied utility. The waitress is watching me, expecting me to order. She’s looking at my hands shaking, probably wondering why she’s never noticed it before.

The old man, Ken, walks into the cafe and I wave. He is a veteran of two wars and has eyes like cracked marbles. I like him. Every day, he drinks a litre

of tea and does the crossword in an old-fashioned newspaper. He once told me that he used to be somebody. I wish I could say that.

The Police were using the same techniques I have, tracking and inferring behaviour. I kept watching, waiting for them to find her. I was one of the first to know when they did. They had traced Lenina and Eric to a small town three hours northeast, after they found a blurred picture on a traffic camera and an automated market research station. Eric had been careful to take her somewhere isolated, but it hadn't worked. He took the police and showed them where he had buried her, in an unmarked grave.

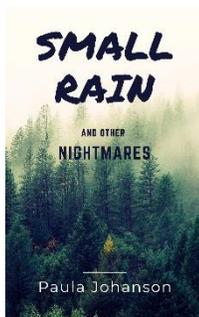
Lenina had finally become anonymous.

I learned one last thing about Eric. All along, he was much closer to me than I had realized; he was a subscriber to the dating-intelligence outfit Serendipity. I know it well because they're a client. I helped set up their campaign with the dataset I bought at auction. Eric would have used it to make an outline of the type of woman he wanted to meet which was eventually matched with Lenina. Serendipity then orchestrated their meeting. She probably never knew.

This is how we do things now.

Whenever she visits my dreams, it's always with the same look upon her face, furrowing her brow and trying to figure out if it was somehow her fault, because this was the kind of thing that happened to other people. I try to explain, but I can't.

What does my grandfather have to do with Lenina? I had told myself that she was an adult and could make her own decisions. But when I look back at her story from my current vantage—to before she met Eric, even before she had become so vulnerable—this is when I understand how slowly she had burned.



Doublejoy Books announces the release in June of *Small Rain and other nightmares*. This collection brings together short stories by Canadian author Paula Johanson. Pre-orders will soon be available at < <https://www.doublejoybooks.com/> >

In addition to her titles from Doublejoy books, writer Paula Johanson is the author and editor of forty-two books from other publishers, including non-fiction books for educational publishers, anthologies, and a novel. To link to her website on her books on science, health, biographies, and sustainability, see:

< <http://paulajohanson.blogspot.com/> >

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE WRITERS FESTIVAL – (~~August 14 to 16, 2020~~) – **CANCELLED**. Membership refunds given if requested, otherwise will be carried through to 2021. See < [When Words Collide](#) >

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Colleen Anderson

Colleen Anderson edits and writes fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in over 250 publications such as *HWA Poetry Showcase*, *Polu Texni*, *Really System* and *Starline*. Her collection, *A Body of Work* was published by Black Shuck Books. She has edited three anthologies.

www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

Lily Blaze

Lily is an author and a former graphic designer. She's lived in four Canadian cities, enjoyed many adventures across North America, then settled in the Prairies.

After receiving an MS diagnosis in 2004, Lily's focus has changed, and now she dedicates her time to a writing career. Her story "The Lonely Mr. Fish" was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#7, Oct/Nov 2018).

Mark Braidwood

Mark is a family physician living in Toronto. Four years ago, after two children, he realized he needed a creative outlet. Medicine was a wonderful way to make a difference in people's lives but it was not scratching that particular itch. The opportunity to influence the cultural conversation about meaningful themes in a creative way was intriguing. So, he started writing and this story is one of the fruits hanging from that branch.

Marco Cultrera

Marco was born in Rome, Italy, and lives in Ottawa, Canada. After a start as a theoretical physicist, he built a decade-long career as a videogame writer, creative director and game designer, before becoming the stay-at-home dad of

three daughters and, more recently, two cats. He published his first story “Malapropic Rhapsody” in *The Arcanist* in December 2019.

Q. DiFulvio

DiFulvio is an un-well human who is tired of being perceived as selfless and endlessly chipper because of her condition, as though she exists as an inspiration to others. She is also tired of seeing creepy kids, strong dudes and hot chicks populate every horror movie. “Wheelchair Seating” was inspired when she was asked what her Zombie survival plan was. Being disabled she has very few options. So she sat down and wrote out her plan.

Greg Fewer

A *montréalais* by birth and descent from seventeenth-century colonists, Greg Fewer has grown up largely outside of Canada. His first and, for many years, only published story appeared in 2007. He took up genre writing again in 2018 and has had flash fiction and haiku published in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Dirty Girls Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Schlock! Webzine*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Tigershark Magazine*.

J.Y.T. Kennedy

A long-time resident of Alberta, though born on the other side of the planet in Auckland, J.Y.T. has published one fantasy novel and several speculative fiction stories. A poem, “Devoured,” was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#2, Jul/Aug 2016).

Melanie Marttila

Melanie has been writing since 1977 and her poetry and short fiction have been published in small press anthologies and in magazines such as *Bastion Science Fiction* and *On Spec* since 1994. She received her Master of English Literature and Creative Writing in 1999 and is a professional member of the Canadian Authors Association and SF Canada. She lives in Sudbury, Ontario,

Canada on the street that bears her family name and in the house where three generations of her family have lived.

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Mike McArthur

Mike lives in the Okanagan, and, when not fending off bills, he regularly takes part in obscure literary cage matches online. His story “Of Dragons and Grannies” appeared in *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#12, Nov/Dec 2019). His work has also appeared at www.everydayfiction.com.

Jenni Merrifield

Jenni Merrifield is a UX/UI Design Specialist by trade and a “prototypical geek” by pastime (she reads science fiction and fantasy, plays tabletop board games and RPGs, wears cosplay & even helps organize and run a few of the Vancouver BC area fan-organized sci-fi/fantasy conventions). She considers herself to be a Ravenclaw, an Ineffable, a Jedi, a Wizard (Enchanter), a Browncoat, or a member of the Grayson Space Navy, depending on which fandom she’s currently playing in.

Coming from a family full of academics and artists, Jenni was always encouraged and inspired to be both artistic and to follow her love of science, technology, engineering and math. In the end, she completed two undergraduate degrees—a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies (art, architecture, history, and literature of ancient Rome and Greece) and a Bachelor of Applied Science in Computer Electrical Engineering—and now uses her creative and technological skills together to design applications that people can use easily and efficiently.

On a more personal note, Jenni lives in Port Moody, British Columbia, with her husband of almost 25 years, her 21-year-old son, two Devon Rex cats, and more computers than family members (including the cats).

Her art “Matrissa, the Enchantress” graced the cover of *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#5, Jul/Aug 2017).

Sheryl Normandeau

Sheryl has written hundreds of articles, primarily about gardening, but she occasionally strays from blabbering excitedly about plants to write speculative fiction. Her story “The Heir” was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#8, Nov/Dec 2018). She lives in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, in Calgary, Alberta, and spends an inordinate amount of time at the public library (mostly because she works there).

Lynne Sargent

Lynne is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D student currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has been published in venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *Augur Magazine*, and *Plenitude*. Their first collection, “A Refuge of Tales,” was funded through an Ontario Arts Council grant and is forthcoming from *Renaissance Press*. To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS, or for a complete bibliography, visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com.

Douglas Shimizu

Douglas was born in Vancouver, where he still lives.

Fran Skene

Fran is a retired librarian who has been actively involved in science fiction fandom and promoting science fiction literature since the 1970s. She is also a co-author of the Science Fiction novel *Windship: The Crazy Plague*, which can be found here: [Windship](#).

J.J. Steinfeld

Poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published twenty books, including *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), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), and *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019). 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.

For his most recent publication, *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles: Speculative Fictions New & Selected* (Ekstasis Editions, 2019), see:

<http://ekstasiseditions.com/recenthtml/gregorsamsa.htm>.

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Marcie is a writer/poet/editor from Gibsons, British Columbia, and her work has appeared in such publications as *On Spec, Strange Horizons, Weird Tales*, and *Polar Borealis*, as well as in various collections and anthologies. She is not not sure whether or not she is “quite the character” but as an acting teacher she prefers being multiple characters, usually at different times.

Lisa Timpf

Lisa is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in a variety of venues including *New Myths, Eye to the Telescope, Polar Borealis, From a Cat's View I and II, Dreams & Nightmares*, and *Future Days*. When not writing, Lisa enjoys bird-watching and spending outdoor time with her border collie, Emma.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

Now I have a full page to fill. I hope my Editorial didn't come across as flippant or morbid. Fact is I was puzzled at how to approach it. You would think, given how important the pandemic is to world affairs, that I would attempt to write something profound, something suitable to the scale of this catastrophic event.

Not a bit of it. The key to survival lies in reducing life to the personal and ordinary. No need to stop dead as if frozen in amber. No need to give up goals and purpose in order to cling to the computer screen absorbing a steady flow of dire information. That kind of information crowds out your own thoughts and fills your mind with dread. Relying on fear to numb your mind is a lousy way to get through this crisis, to my way of thinking.

I have enough material on hand to publish another four issues of *Polar Borealis* after this one. I'm operating on the assumption that is exactly what I'm going to do. That will carry me through to February of 2021, at which time I will open my submission window for a month once again and see if I can gather enough material for yet another year's worth of issues running from #19 through to #23. In February 2022 I will repeat the procedure.

But what if I'm dead? What if Covid-19 kills me?

No problem. I'll be dead. I won't have *any* problems ever again. People will just have to hurry up and download all the issues of *Polar Borealis* I've posted on my web site before it gets taken down for lack of payment.

Meanwhile I figure my destiny involves publishing at least another four issues of *Polar Borealis*. I'll carry on as if that is true. I take it for granted I will fulfill my destiny ... unless fate catches up with me first. If it does ... oh, well. I won't be around to cry about it.

In other words, I haven't given up. I have a heck of a lot of nifty stuff to look forward to. Not just *Polar Borealis*, but writing more book reviews for my weekly *Amazing Stories* column, writing "mailings" for FAPA and eAPA, editing the monthly club newsletter *BCSFazine*. Not to mention tons of reading, watching old movies, keeping in touch with friends on Facebook, and napping whenever I feel like it. I'm busy, busy, busy. Too busy to overthink what's happening to the world or what's likely going to happen to me. I've got stuff to do, all kinds of interesting stuff that makes me feel good.

And some day, I'll be able to interact personally with loved ones and friends over many a merry social occasion. Looking forward to that.