

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #17 – February, 2021)



POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

Issue #17 – February, 2021 (Vol.6#1.WN#17)

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

All contributors are paid before publication. Anyone interested in submitting a story, poem, or art work, and wants to check out rates and submission guidelines, or anyone interested in downloading current and/or back issues, please go to:

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Art Credit

COVER: *Geishas in Space* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Editorial

This issue was supposed to come out last December. Alas, I fell behind, as I did in all my writing projects, mainly because I had taken on too many projects. The kicker is I still couldn't find the time to work on my "biggest" project of all, namely making another effort at writing an SF novel.

You see, publishing an actual honest-to-Ghu SF novel has been on my bucket list for more than half a century. I doubt I'd stand much chance of being accepted by a mainstream publisher. But this is the era of self-publication! I could publish it myself, both as a kindle and a print-on-demand. Could be mine would be the only shelf on the planet to host my book, but I don't care; I'd feel immense satisfaction every time I glanced at the book's spine and saw my name on it.

And who knows? A few people might buy it out of morbid curiosity. What kind of novel-length fiction is The Graeme capable of writing? About forty years ago an editor rejected one of my novel attempts with the comment "We don't like your main character and don't think anyone else will either." Has the Graeme improved since then? Inquiring minds want to know.

Just to make it easy on myself, to free up some needed time, I've decided to start up a new magazine, a sister publication to this one, to be titled *Polar Starlight*. It will be devoted entirely to Canadian Speculative poetry. (See page 40 and page 54 for more information.)

Actually the new magazine won't be much of a bother, as I ~~tricked~~ talked Rhea Rose, a professional Canadian poet, into helming the magazine as editor. I'll just be the publisher. I've known Rhea for many years and have absolute faith in her ability to produce a superb magazine. She and I have different tastes, so will represent two "voices" in poetry selection, albeit complementary to each other.

Which reminds me, this month, February, is my open submissions window. It won't be closed till Midnight on February 28th. So send in your stories and poems! Bear in mind the stories will be for *Polar Borealis*, but both magazine editors will want to look at the poems (and then fight over them?). Two markets for the price of one submission. Good deal. Doubles your chances of being selected.

As of this writing I have received 65 stories and 67 poems. Still room for more. Granted, this coming out so late is short notice, but if you have any SF&F stories and/or poems on hand, worth a shot. For requirements and info how to submit to both magazines, go to: <http://www.polarborealis.ca>

Cheers! *The Graeme*

SCIFAIKU #9

by *Roxanne Barbour*

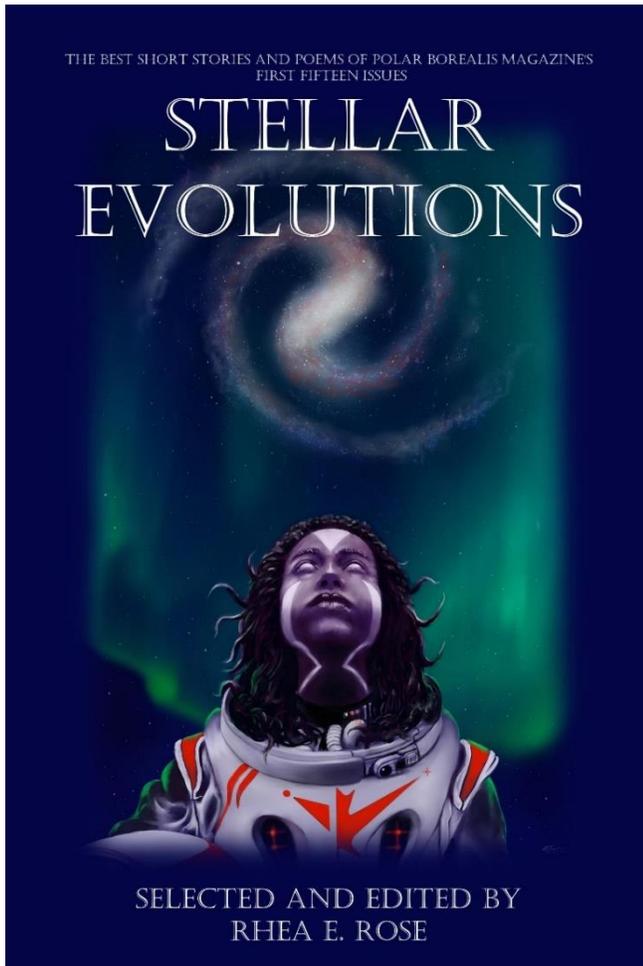
(Previously unpublished)

sparkles
catch notice
descending slow particles
lunar base
destroyed

STELLAR EVOLUTIONS:

The Best Short Stories and Poems from the first Fifteen Issues of Polar Borealis Magazine

Cover: *Space Force* – by Michael Dean Jackson



Poetry – by Lynne Sargent, J.J. Steinfeld, Melanie Martilla, Lisa Timpf, Kirsten Emmott, Catherine Girczyc, Andrea Schlecht, Selena Martens, JYT Kennedy, Taral Wayne & Walter Wentz, Douglas Shimizu, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Matt Moore, Richard Stevenson, Mary Choo, and Y.A. Pang.

Stories – by Mark Braidwood, Jonathan Sean Lyster, JYT Kennedy, Casey June Wolf, Monica Sagle, K.M. McKenzie, Jeremy A. Cook, Lawrence Van Hoof, Lisa Voisin, Elizabeth Buchan-Kimmerly, Dean Wirth, Robert Dawson, Michael Donoghue, Steve Fahnstalk, Michelle F. Goddard, Chris Campeau, Ben Nein, Karl Johanson, William Lewis, Tonya Liburd, Jon Gauthier, Jonathan Creswell-Jones, and Akem.

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Go To: [Kindle version via Amazon.ca](#)

Or you can order it as a 209 page paperback, 9 x 6 inches in size, for \$16.99 CA or \$12.95 US.

Go to: [Book version via Amazon.ca](#)

WE USED TO LAUGH

By Martin Munks

(Previously published in the online magazine *Lit Up*.)

Do you remember your first email from a Nigerian Prince? How you knew instinctively that it was a scam? It's like they composed those emails exclusively of red flags: littered with typos, strange sentence structures, Capitalized Words out of NoWhere. And of course, the too-good-to-be-true premise of sending you—a “distant relative”—boatloads of cash to guard while the Prince gets his banking issues sorted.

Of course people still fell for them. But not us. Not the smart ones. We laughed about it.

And those phone scammers. Who were they trying to fool? Telling you to press 1 for your free iPad, or warning you about unpaid back taxes. Robots announcing that you've won a cruise by tooting a horn as soon as you pick up. I'd get that once or twice a month, and would put my phone on speaker so my coworkers could listen in. “Oh, I've won a trip!” I'd say with mock jubilation. “Who's coming with me?!”

Tinder was half catfish. People using photos scraped from Instagram and then asking you to visit [www.\[randomnonsense\].ru](http://www.[randomnonsense].ru) to keep chatting. Or they'd trade nudes and then blackmail you. Sextortion, it's called. We shared memes about toying with scammers, or trying to convert them. Lots of Likes and Follows in that social media career path.

IT constantly warned us to be vigilant of scams at the office, forcing us to do asinine quizzes full of stock photos and following up with weekly reminders. I distinctly remember a co-worker next to me getting so frustrated with the warnings that he said, “What kind of idiots do they hire here?” But we *did* see some sophisticated phishing attempts, like emails from a domain that looked exactly like ours except they'd replaced an l with an i. At first glance, you couldn't tell. Still, everyone knows not to share your password, right?

Hacking has always been an arms race. Scammers develop more sophisticated attacks, and in response the security side and the white-hats build more advanced protections. Back and forth, back and forth, like evolution at 100x speed. And for the most part, it all evens out for hardware and software. Just not wetware. Not our brains.

As scammers see exponential progress in automated social engineering, us humans are stuck with an operating system that's a hundred thousand years old. We'll never catch up. There's nothing we can do except drill security

tactics into everyone's head, only they're outdated by the time we've made them routine.

Suddenly it's not funny anymore.

Do you remember the first time you actually fell for one? I do. I checked into a hotel in New York, and then about an hour later I got a text saying my card had been declined.

When someone else falls for it, they're an idiot. Computer illiterate, foolish, gullible. But when it happened to me, I had no shortage of excuses. I was in a hurry, my phone plan didn't have roaming data, there were no Starbucks to dip into to steal Wi-Fi, I'd had a couple drinks at the hotel bar. I could go on.

I called the number in the text. You'd think I'd get a funny feeling on the phone, but the guy spoke perfect English. He had all my info. Super polite, felt honest. He was just going to text me a confirmation number and I'd have to read it out loud. It still sounds legit.

That was an expensive lesson.

I don't remember the second time I got scammed. Or the third, fourth, tenth, fiftieth. But I think we all remember that first national emergency broadcast.

I was at my parents', watching *Border Security* with my dad. Then the screen blips and suddenly we're staring into the eyes of the President. Flip channels, but he's on all of them. "My fellow Americans, we're in grave danger," he says. He warns of a foreign assault, an onslaught of scams and faked messages that look like official government communications. Calls it an "ideological attack on our freedom", and the only defense is to immediately go dark. Turn off your phones, your TV, your internet. Disconnect to safety while our cyber forces fight back.

We rushed to unplug the TV and our laptops, turned off the router, put our phones in the fridge. Not sure how that was supposed to help. Dad raced to the store and literally fought other shoppers over canned goods. Meanwhile, the rest of us got out candles and filled both bathtubs with water. It was like the End of Days.

That's how seriously we took the cyber attack on the USA. And we're *Canadian*.

24 hours later, we timidly powered one phone back on and discovered it was all a hoax. The President had been a digital dupe, meant to keep us offline while Russian hackers cleaned out millions of bank accounts. But hey, at least we weren't the only ones who fell for it.

That was years ago. Governments gave mandatory courses on it, pointing out the skipped frames and how he looked odd when he blinked. The world gained protection against fake-President-on-TV phishing attempts, but of

course the scams kept evolving, faster and faster. Now when my mom calls, I don't know if it's really her on the other side, or just the hollow echo of her data floating through cyberspace.

The only sure-fire way to avoid scams is to stay analog. Don't surf. No phones. Only share important information face-to-face, and quietly. Online interaction is pointless, like a world where everyone you meet could be a thousand rats stacked into a roughly humanoid shape and draped with a trench coat. Absolutely everything you do within range of a router can be used in a phishing attempt down the road, either against you, or against people you care about.

Might as well throw the whole internet away.

And to think, we used to laugh about it. How ridiculous the scams were, and how stupid you had to be to fall for one.

Ha, ha, ha. Real funny stuff.

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is produced out of Victoria, BC, Canada.

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband and wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson. The first issue of Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine was printed October 10, 2003. Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine won the Aurora Award in the category of Best Work in English (Other) in 2007 and in 2009.

Contents of issue 30:

Cover: *Lunar City*

– by Karl Johanson

The Last Farewell

– by Nicola Kapron

Heart of a Champion – by Geri Green

Pulls Weeds and Does Dishes – by Anthony W. Eichenlaub

Rite of Passage – by Julie Frost

The Fossil Beds of Asgard – by Russ Colson

Detour on the Eightfold Path – by Robert Runté

Stevenson's Planet – by Karl El-Koura



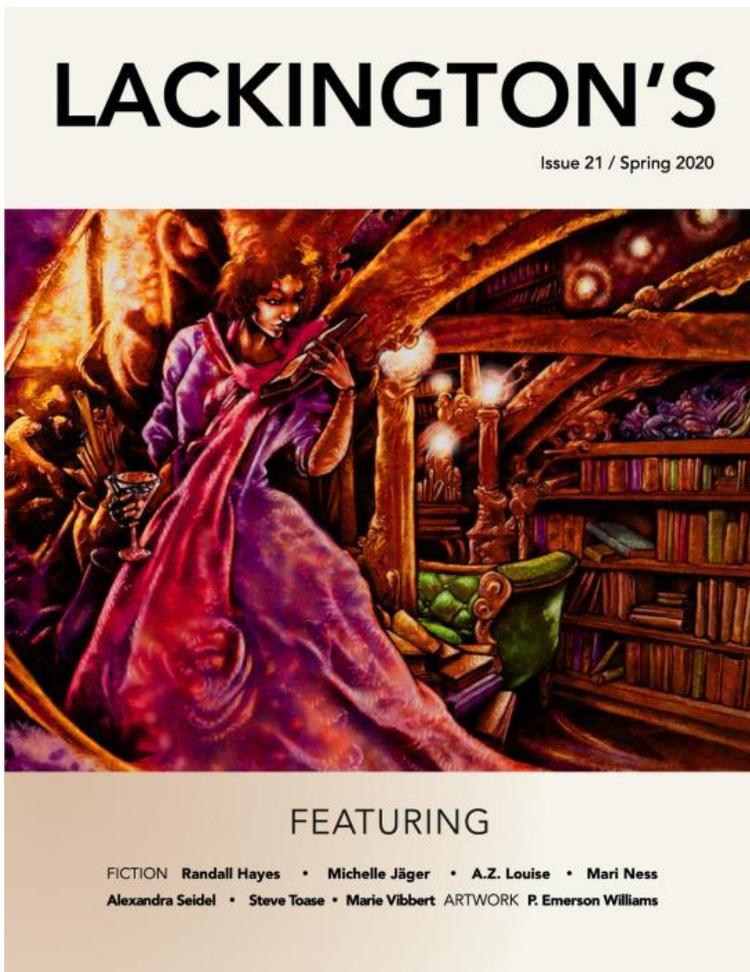
Find it here: [Neo-opsis #31](#)

PLUTO'S MOON

by Swati Chauda

(Previously published in her poetry collection *Love at the Speed of Light*, 2019.)

We'll go traipsing together
across the nights
across the worlds—
You
and I.
You are
Pluto's Moon. I am
the no-longer planet.



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.

Contents of issue #21, Spring 2020.

Cover – by P. Emerson Williams
A Selection of Drinks from the Courts of the Five Silver Moons and the Seven Red Stars – by Mari Ness
A Galactic History of the Asmodean Fire Hoof – by Alexandra Seidel
Barley Wine and Potable Myths – by Marie Vibbert
When the Hawkweed Blooms – by Randall Hayes
Tempus verum – by Michelle Jäger
Old Fashioned – by Steve Toase
Whiskey and Bones – A.Z. Louise

See [Lackington's #21](#)

HOW NOT TO DIE

by Fran Skene

(Previously unpublished)

The antique shop is supposed to be open right now. Lucy peers through the window. Her tanned face stares back, with the seen-it-all expression typical of fellow ex-military, framed by the hood of her jacket. Beyond are reflections of people hurrying past in watery noon sunlight.

The window display is of children's dolls in a variety of clothing styles. She's reminded of her first doll, baby-sized, under the tree Christmas morning the last year she believed in Santa Claus.

One doll, in a sort of G-I Joe outfit, appears to look directly at her. Experimentally, she steps sideways. Its head and brown-lashed eyes follow her movement.

Just an illusion.

She remembers Mark again, his dear face, during that night last year in Lima. "I'm also fated to die early," he said, "but I've heard of a seer who can fix that."

"Yeah, right," she responded, and Mark laughed. A month later, he failed to return to the base after a week's leave.

"Sorry I'm late opening." A voice from behind her, clear in spite of traffic noise.

She turns and sees a woman leaning on a cane. Long black hair with white roots. Face of stretched skin with the look of too many facelifts.

"Where's Rafael?" Lucy asks. "He told me on the phone that ..."

"He's at an auction right now."

"And you are ... ?"

"Alicia, his sister." The woman opens the shop door. "Come in."

Inside, the shop is dim, lit by a pair of bulbs in the ceiling. And it smells dusty, typical of other antique shops she's visited.

The woman is staring at her. "What can I help you with?"

"I... uh..."

"You're not looking for an antique, I think."

"No, I'm hoping Rafael can help me."

The old woman—Alicia—sits down with a sigh behind a small counter that's taken up mostly with an old-fashioned cash register. She points at a chair. "Tell me about it."

"All right." Lucy sits down, her back to the shop door.

“Someone read your fate, I assume,” Alicia says. “At your first menses?”

“Yes. She was a member of my aunt’s church, in San Diego.”

“I know it’s a tradition in some places, but did you really want to know when you’ll die?”

“Dunno. But what adolescent really believes in mortality? After college I enlisted in the army and deployed to South America because I knew I’d live through it. Now, though...” Lucy takes a deep breath. “I’m supposed to die tonight.”

“Sometimes I wonder if fate is only a matter of odds. You *might* have died in battle.” Alicia pauses. “Or were you doing support?”

“No, I volunteered for front-line missions. Once, my convoy got blown up, and I survived, unhurt.”

And she failed to do her job as lookout, she doesn’t add. *Not my fault.* She’d told the captain she was hung over before they set out. *At least Mark was gone by then.*

“Do you know the *manner* of your death?” Alicia asks.

“No. She did say something about being with a soulmate, whatever that means.” Lucy twists on the chair. It feels hard under her skinny butt. “I do know the accredited Readers can be believed. People die when they’re supposed to.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Worth a try.”

The door *dings* and Lucy looks behind her.

A gray-haired man enters the shop. “Not much of an auction.”

Lucy recognizes his basso voice from the phone. *Rafael.* He closes a long black umbrella and places it in a basket by the door.

“You have a customer,” Alicia says to him.

Rafael turns. “You must be Lucy.”

So this is the seer she has searched for. Lucy notes laugh lines, and relaxes slightly.

The seer sits down beside his sister and leans forward. “As I said on the phone, I can help you. Together, we can reinterpret the meaning of your fate. Did you bring the payment?”

“In here.” She taps her purse, now fat with a bag of American twenties.

“Good.” Rafael extends his hand.

Lucy hesitates; she exhausted her savings to obtain these. But what good would they do her after tonight? She places the bag on the counter.

The seer reaches in, pulls out several bills at random, and examines them. Finally he nods and looks up. “We can start now.”

Lucy’s breath catches. *That easy?*

Alicia is looking at something over Lucy's shoulder.

Following the old woman's gaze, Lucy expects to see another customer but no one is there.

She shrugs and turns back.

"I don't know, brother, whether she is a good fit for this." Alicia frowns at Rafael.

"I can help her." Rafael sounds defensive, as though the two of them have had this discussion before. He returns his attention to Lucy. "But it's up to you."

What alternative does she have? Lucy nods. *Yes.*

The seer gets up and beckons. "In here." He points to an interior doorway. Lucy stands and follows him, feeling Alicia's worried gaze behind her.

There is darkness beyond a window, with lights casting intermittent circles of yellow on an empty street.

Where am I? The last thing she remembers is Rafael snuffing the last candle after that long ritual.

"I'm sorry, Lucy." A whispery sound.

She tries to turn. Only her head moves, slowly, and her eyes.

It's the G-I Joe doll.

She concentrates and at last gets the words out through an unmoving mouth. "How you... I... ?"

"I'm sorry," the doll says again. "I shouldn't have told you about this guy. Though I'm glad you're here to talk with. The others have mostly stopped."

Oh my god. "Mark?"

"Yes. I followed my own advice and look how I ended up."

"I looked for you."

"And here I am, cheating death." The bitterness is clear even in Mark's whispering doll voice. "Welcome to the world of the In-Between."

Lucy weeps but no tears run down a face she can't feel.

SF CANADA

SF Canada, 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: <https://www.sfcanada.org/>

THE BUNNY MAN

by Richard Stevenson

(Previously unpublished)

This creep ain't no cryptid critter!
More Ted Bundy than Easter bunny,
however cute, fluffy and fuzzy
his bunny ears appear to be.

Stand back! He's got an axe!
Gonna give you forty whacks,
put Lizzie Borden in the shade.
You won't be lookin' for Easter eggs!

What's with the rabbit ears?
Couldn't find a blue ox sidekick
or match Paul Bunyan blow for blow
choppin' trees or hammerin' railroad ties?

Thought you'd try the easier enterprise
of deliverin' evil with a stroke?
Something definitely broke inside you.
Ether Bunny maybe? Rubber Ranch escapee?

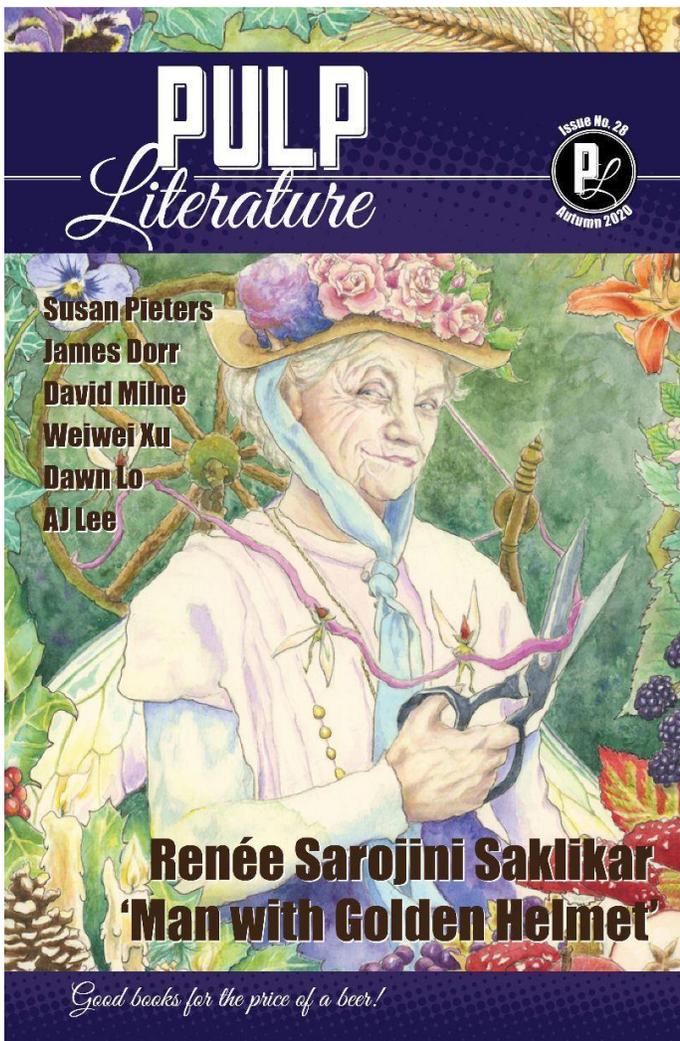
Or just get tired of chopping cords
of wood to keep your cabin heated?
Tired of catching scrawny rabbits
and other rodents for your stews?

Lost a few screws, scratchin' for
tubers or pickin' magic mushrooms
outta the cow pies in the farmers' fields?
Take a load of buckshot up the wazoo?

Wanna get even for all the times
Daddy took a belt to you as a kid?
Rape and pillage no longer do it for you?
Rabbit ears only pull in three stations?

Parents couldn't afford an aerial back
in the wacky sixties before Cable or Netflix?
Hidin' under the bed while your parents
put the bunnies in your cages to shame

get you thinkin' more long range? Who knows?
Tryin' to tune you in with electro-shock
didn't seem to knock the stuffin' outta you.
Or maybe you're just tryin' to stuff some back in.



Cover: *The Faery Godmother*
– by Ashley Rose Goentoro

FICTION:

Man with the Golden Helmet

– by Remée Sarojini Saklikar

Little Snowflake Girls

– by Dawn Lo

Chimaera

– by Weiwei Xu

Moons of Saturn

– by James Dorr

Practicing the Art of Forgetting

– by Soramimi Hanarejima

Starry Nights

– by David Mine

What Kind of Story?

– by A.J. Lee

Hoax

– by Susan Pieters

Mourgadze

– by Cameron McDonald

The Sleuth with the Platinum Hair

– by Mel Anastasiou

The Shepherdess: Versailles

– by JM Landels

Find it here:

[Pulp Literature issue #28](#)

BEMUSED

by Arlene F. Marks

(Previously unpublished)

Danna Olsen sensed the familiar gloomy presence in her room even before she opened her eyes and saw the dark cloud hovering over the foot of her bed.

“You again,” she moaned. “What is it this time? Somebody sprained an ankle three farms over? A soup pot boiled dry on some unattended stove?”

The cloud did not reply. It did, however, scud over to the window when she threw back her blanket. She couldn’t decide whether it was protecting her from curious eyes as she dressed or simply moving to get a better view.

“Why won’t you go away?” she demanded. It was a rest day, a day of freedom from the clutch of children she normally taught and cared for while their parents worked the various farms in the area. Danna loved being a schoolteacher, but it was demanding in ways that made her cherish her personal time. Today she had hoped to spend it immersed in a book, not running around investigating alleged portents.

I’m your muse, the cloud replied inside her head, in the voices of her brother and her cousin Becky.

“Whoever told you that was lying.” Danna aimed the toes of her right foot into a sock and shoved, extra hard. “Muses are made of light, and they help people. They inspire them to create, or they guide them to safety, or they strengthen their bodies as they strive for excellence.”

So I’ve heard. A new voice this time, belonging to Mr. Carmichael, the egg man from down the road. Memories of his overturned cart last week splashed across her mind.

“All you ever do is bring me bad news and send me on fool’s errands.”

Yes. It still doesn’t change what I am. Three familiar voices, one after the other.

“What you are is a nuisance,” she declared, pulling her favorite slacks out of the closet.

Your uncle named me. A child’s voice this time.

Yes, he had, she recalled, right after dropping his tea mug on the floor and uttering something in the sort of language that children weren’t normally allowed to hear.

It had happened eight years earlier. Danna had been twelve, two years past the age by which most of the children in the colony acquired a muse. No one knew exactly where these tiny luminous beings came from, but they were

intelligent, they were generous, and they seemed to gravitate toward the young. Once paired with one of the alien creatures, a human was “bemused” for life.

That Danna wasn't came as no surprise. Her only demonstrated inclinations to that point had been a dogged curiosity, a love of reading, and a bossy attitude toward her younger cousins.

By her twelfth birthday, Danna was telling herself that not everyone needed a muse. Perhaps it was better not to rely on another being for inspiration. Perhaps she was fortunate to be able to find it within herself.

Nonetheless, when a small fluffy cloud materialized in her bedroom early one morning and addressed her by name, relief flooded her body. She felt as though she'd reached the top of the mountain and could finally stop climbing. The fact that she'd been chosen by a cloud and not a light was of little concern to her. Danna hummed happily as she came downstairs for breakfast that day, with her new friend trailing behind her.

Uncle Mats was standing in the front hall, sipping his customary tea. He turned at the sound of her footsteps, a smile on his lips. An instant later the mug lay in pieces and the tea in a puddle on the hard wooden floor, and the shock stamped on his weathered features stopped her in her tracks.

“A harbinger!” he rasped, pointing excitedly with rapid jabbing motions at the cloud. “Danna, it's not—you've got to—!” Then his mouth snapped shut and he fled out the front door.

Drawn by the commotion, Aunt Suzanne emerged from her studio. She'd been painting—the glow of her muse illuminated the slice of room visible through the doorway. Suzanne cast a regretful look back over her shoulder. Then, with a confirming glance at the mess in the hall and a curious one at the cloud coming down the stairs, she went to fetch a broom and some rags. It had been another full day before Mats could bring himself to look his niece in the face.

According to the colony's common lexicon, a harbinger was a warning, foretelling the later arrival of something big and important. Danna had to admit, the cloud had been looking much more threatening lately, like one of the thunder hammers that built up in the sky before a heavy storm.

On the other hand, the “portents” she had already witnessed—eight years' worth of minor annoyances—hardly added up in her mind to a major disaster.

Danna stood in front of her closet, choosing a top to go with her dark green slacks. Pulling on a matching tunic, she fastened a belt of woven leather strips around her waist and stepped in front of the mirror to adjust the drape of the cloth.

Green was the color of Earth's oceans. Perhaps she would read *Moby Dick* today. Or *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Her father had loved the classic novels of their home world. Now, reading them always made her feel as though his spirit was nearby, sharing them with her.

Downstairs. The voice was her uncle's this time.

Danna whirled to stare at the cloud. "What about downstairs?" she demanded.

Bad news. Downstairs.

"Danna, we have a guest who wants to meet you."

It took her a moment to realize that her aunt's voice was real and coming from the other side of her door. There was a visitor. Bearing bad news? Or perhaps bad intentions? In the mirror, the cloud hovered black and roiling behind her. Danna drew a deep breath and left her bedroom.

Sitting in the front room was a plain-faced woman wearing city-made clothes—tailored, with gem-shaped buttons that glittered in the light. She stood up as Danna reached the bottom of the stairs. The woman's dark eyes shifted to register the storm cloud floating just behind. Then she turned to Uncle Mats and said quietly, "That's it?"

He nodded.

"And she doesn't know what it signifies?"

"She was just a child when it first appeared. It would have been cruel to tell her then. Now it would be cruel *not* to tell her."

"So you believe she's ready?"

All this urgent muttering about her as though she wasn't there was making Danna impatient. "Ready for what?" she chimed in.

Aunt Suzanne put a soothing arm around her shoulders. "Do you remember the very first time a cloud came to you? You were quite young."

"I was twelve," Danna corrected her.

Suzanne threw her husband a pleading look. "Maybe it's best if we just—"

"No," Mats declared. "If this is her lot in life then she needs to know everything."

Bad news, the cloud confirmed.

"You'd better sit down, girl," he told her. Uncertainly, Danna lowered herself onto the sofa beside him. "When you were just four years old, your parents went on a sailing expedition, leaving you in our care. Two weeks later I found you on the back porch, talking to what appeared to be a puff of smoke. You were reciting numbers. Every day for the next week, you sat on the porch reciting numbers, a different string of them each day. I thought it was curious, so I wrote them down. Then the wrecked hull of your parents' boat was found washed up on a beach on the southern land mass. No bodies were recovered.

But all at once the numbers made sense. We checked. They were coordinates, changing each day as the ocean currents moved the wreck closer to shore.”

Something inside Danna was spinning like the useless wheel of Carmichael's overturned cart. “So the harbinger came to warn me that my parents were dead or dying. It told me where to find them so that I could tell you,” she said numbly.

“Darling, I’m so sorry! We didn’t understand—”

“Hush, Su!” Mats commanded her.

“When the harbinger returned eight years ago,” said the visitor from the city, “your uncle informed us immediately. We’ve been on high alert ever since.”

“And does your presence here today mean that you know what it’s been trying to warn me about? Because I honestly have no idea.”

The woman’s expression softened. “It’s taken eight years for the message to arrive here from Earth, but yes, Danna, we finally know.” A pause, then, “There has been a war. Nuclear weapons were involved. The Earth we remember, that you’ve been reading about in your father’s books ... that planet no longer exists.”

Comprehension broke over Danna in a suffocating wave. The harbinger could assemble brief verbal messages using the voices stored in her memory, but new information had to be communicated in symbols. Injured limbs, crashed vehicles, sudden fires—it worked with whatever was at hand, pointing her at clues and hoping she would be able to solve them in time to sound a warning.

No, she corrected herself, it wasn’t the harbinger’s hope, it was the colony’s.

Uncle Mats was gazing at her with pain in his eyes. Danna swallowed hard, but the bitter taste in her mouth persisted as she recalled his earlier words. This was her lot in life, he’d said. To be tormented with riddles and vague premonitions, understood only in hindsight. To pass them along to others if asked. Like an ancient Greek oracle. That wasn’t so bad. There was a reason seers were elderly. Eventually, she would learn to interpret the harbinger's language, but only if...!

As though through a veil, Danna watched the cloud grow pale and dissipate. *Don’t come back*, she begged it.

I am cursed, it whispered sadly in her own voice. *I have no choice.*

ILLUSION

by Melanie Marttila

(Previously unpublished)

it is barely
something
pulled
soft
green and
simple
from mind
something
teased with
gentle tongue
from folds of
grey matter
then given
like Houdini's key
mouth to mouth resuscitation
of a different kind.
promise of
death defied with this
small green simple
something
a kiss and a
flick of wrist.

In one famous escape, the Mirror Challenge, Houdini's wife, Bess, is said to have walked on stage and kissed him, passing him the key to the cuffs he wore.

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We pay our authors and artists at rates that respects the value of their craft, because we believe that published writing should be paid. Creating literature is a vocation, not a hobby. We are an SFWA eligible market.

A VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

by Sylvia Son

(Previously unpublished)

11:45p.m.

The lobby of the movie theatre was occupied with the woman standing at the ticket booth, a bored teenager at the concession stand, and two young women staring at the movie posters that were framed in cracked glass covered in grime.

“*Midnight Massacre?*” Bea said. “*Sleepaway Camp?* Jesus, is there anything here that is made in this century? How is this place still open?”

As far as Bea could remember the place had been open since forever, probably even before she was born. Opened only at night. She never came here by herself. It was too grungy, too cheap looking and definitely had many health violations. But oh, no, Jane insisted they check the place out.

“Who cares?” Jane said. she pointed at a poster. “Look they have *Midnight Dark Terrors* here.”

“Isn’t that title redundant?”

“No, it’s meant to emphasize fear.”

She knew Jane was a B-movie fan. With her collection she could easily start a video rental store, were there a demand for something so retro.

“Sounds stupid,” Bea said. God, why was she here. They could have gone to the multiplex and seen something recent.

“It’s not stupid. It’s intense. It’s real.”

Bea glanced at the poster of the ‘70s version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and gave her the side eye. “A guy with a mask made of human skin is real?”

“You know what I mean.” she pointed at the *Midnight Dark Terrors*’ poster. “You won’t regret it.”

Probably would, but they had missed the last screening at the multiplex and she didn’t want to go home yet.

They walked to the ticket counter, the woman manning it painting her nails green.

“I’ll pay for this and you can owe me later,” muttered Jane.

The ticker operator didn’t even bother to look up. “Can I help you?”

“Two for *Midnight Dark Terrors*.”

“The only showing is at 11:55.”

“I know. That’s why we’re here.”

She stopped painting, the little brush still touching the thumbnail. She looked up. “You are aware?”

“Yup,” Jane said.

The ticket seller paused for a second. “So... cheap seats balcony, or front row downstairs?”

“Cheap seats, of course,” Jane said. The choice was clear.

“Really?”

“Uh huh.”

Bea almost missed the woman’s left eyebrow raised for a second. “Twenty dollars,” the woman said.

“Twenty bucks?” Bea almost screamed at the price.

“Each,” the operator said.

“Each? That’s forty bucks! How is that the cheap seats?”

“You want downstairs then? That’s ten dollars. If you can afford that,” she said snottily.

“Fine—” Bea said.

“No!” Jane cut in. “No, we’ll take the cheap seats. We’ll definitely take the cheap seats.” She pulled out her card and waved it. “You take credit cards?”

The ticket operator didn’t roll her eyes, but she did curl the side of her mouth into a sneer. “Of course.”

The upper balcony was unoccupied. The seats of the first five rows near the railing were worn but adequately patched up enough to sit on. All the rest of the seats had been removed entirely.

“Sweet,” Jane said. “We have the choice of seats. Come on, we need to be in the first row.”

If Jane looked down below, she would have seen rows and rows of clean and well upholstered seats and probably lost her mind with outrage, but she was too busy looking at the floor she was walking on .

“Ugh,” Bea said. “I think stepped on gum. I hope that was gum.”

“Ignore it,” Jane examined each seat and found two in the first row. “Here, these are the best seats in the house.” She sat down and planted her feet on the balcony ledge. “We have at least 10 more minutes before it starts.”

Bea noticed a rip in her seat and sponge stuffing oozing out. She didn’t want to sit on that for ten minutes thinking of nothing else. “I’m going to the bathroom. Save my spot.”

Once Bea was in the lobby she wondered what to do. She could leave but Jane had gone to the trouble of driving them here. Wouldn’t be fair to abandon her. Besides, too far to walk. She tried to pass the time by reading the credits on the movie posters. Thought she was alone until she felt a bump against her

back.

“Oh! Excuse me.” A young woman’s voice.

Bea turned to see a pretty goth girl. Her hair was black with blonde streaks and she wore black eyeliner and black lipstick.

“You here to see this?” She pointed at the poster Bea had been reading.

“Uh, no, that one.” Bea replied, gesturing at a door which had the number 6 on it. Which was weird because there was only three screening rooms in the theatre. But not as weird as paying twenty dollars for crappy seats.

“*Midnight Dark Terrors?*” The girl took two steps back from her.

Great, Bea thought. Now she thinks I’m weird.

“Front row or balcony?”

No point in trying to impress her. “Balcony.”

The girl took several more steps away from her. “Wow. That’s pretty ballsy to watch the midnight showing. I know, I was in there a few weeks ago.” Bea noticed she kept glancing at the front doors of the lobby.

“I’ve never seen it. Is it any good?”

“The movie? It’s okay ...” The girl kept looking back and forth between Bea and the front doors.

“That doesn’t sound very promising.”

“No, it’s a great experience. You’ll never forget it. You won’t believe what you’re seeing, because it’s all true ...” She seemed excited, but maybe it was nerves?

“I thought you said the movie was merely okay.”

“It’s not just the movie. It’s the entire experience. It will change you for life.”

She was overselling this. But since she was here maybe misery loved company. “Do you want to see this again?”

“No!” The girl jumped, as if shocked at her own vehemence. “I mean, no. Once is enough for me.” She looked over her shoulder and exhaled in relief. “I think that’s my friend calling me. Enjoy the show.” She tore out of the lobby and into the street outside as fast as she could.

Okay, Bea thought. She thinks I’m a freak. Terrific.

Three couples walked toward door six. Bea wasn’t sure if they were intending to go downstairs or up into the balcony. One couple wore black coats, another wore yellow raincoat and the last couple wore clear plastic coats. Which made no sense since it wasn’t even raining outside.

She checked her phone. Ah, less than two minutes before it starts.

The lights in the theatre was halfway down by the time Bea arrived in the balcony. Jane was flipping through her phone and didn’t even bother to react as Bea sat down next to her.

“You took your time.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Thought you were going to bail because you pushed out.”

“No way. I’m not a wimp.”

“Good.”

Bea turned her head to check the three couples now seated behind her. They were taking out binoculars. Okay, sure they were far from the screen but they weren’t that far. The screen was so huge, they could see it all. Why hadn’t they chosen the front row? “Hey,” she said to the couples. “There’s plenty of room here. And it’s closer.”

The couple wearing matching black coats waved off the offer. “Don’t worry. We’re fine this way.”

“Whatever.” Curious, Bea leaned over the railing, then growled in outrage. “Jane, are you serious? Look how much better the ground floor is than up here! Look at it!” she pointed down below.

“Will you sit back?. You’re making a scene.”

“Come on. How is that fair?” Bea leaned further to scan the rows. “I swear it smells better down there.”

“That’s not possible.” Jane said.

“No, I think it smells like lemon cleaner and fresh leather seats.”

“Sit down or you’ll fall over.”

“Shhh!” The guy in clear plastic. “We came all this way for the show so don’t ruin it for the rest of us here.”

“Shhh, yourself!” Bea didn’t get it. Why the fuss?

“Just relax.”

“No, they’re acting like they’re seeing the moon landing. How come?”

“You’ll see,” Jane said.

Bea stewed for 20 seconds of silence, then finally cracked.

“We should be down there. What does it matter where we sit?”

“It matters a lot.” Jane said very low and without any humour. She checked the clock on her phone. “Now shut up. It’s about to start.”

The lights dimmed further and then the screen flashed words in scratchy red letters.

Pre-show in 10.

“Pre-show?”

The message changed on the screen.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Bea became nervous and a cold dread filled the pit of her stomach her as

each number flashed on the screen counting down to one. It didn't reassure her when she checked behind her and noted the couples were gripping their binoculars tightly, with wide eyes and wide toothy grins. They were practically salivating at each number as it appeared, creeping Bea out.

"We need to leave."

"Wait for it."

Six.

"We should get out of here."

Five.

"Just wait. At least stay for the pre-show."

Four.

Three.

A buzzer from above.

"What was that?"

Jane shrugged. "They locked the doors."

"The fuck?" Bea jumped out of her seat and ran to the exit.

Two.

One.

The screen went black.

Three blasts of an air horn and then she heard a wet hiss from below.

Somewhere someone screeched like a frightened owl.

Maybe she should have remain near the doors, but she was too curious to know what was going on to stay put.

She walked to the edge of the railing and peered down. Even in the half-lit theatre she could see people had gotten out of their seats and were milling around in a state of confusion. Oddly, they looked like they'd been dipped in red paint. A smell from down below reached up to the balcony, a familiar metallic smell.

"What is this?" a woman screamed, her arms thrust out to stare at her hands.

Bea found herself gazing fixedly at the crowd below as she stumbled along the balcony railing back toward her seat.

A man with a black t-shirt lifted his hands up to his face and sniffed them. "Oh shit, I think this is blood."

Another blast from the air horn and the screen lit up. A low moan filled the theatre ... from behind the screen? The people below turned to gape.

"Here!" Bea almost jumped as a binocular was shoved in her face by Jane. "See and believe!"

A black spot in the centre of the screen started small but pulsed in and out bigger and bigger till the surface cracked and peeled sections of the screen

away from the centre to reveal tendrils that unfurled and stretched out to the corners of the screen. Once each tentacle touched a corner it began to split in two and then split again. Then the tips of all the tendrils peeled away from the borders of the canvas screen and thrust straight out to curl against a cheek or around the neck of moviegoers too stunned with fear to attempt to flee.

Bea felt oddly jealous watching something so weird and awesome that she wasn't able to actually experience because Jane had insisted on sitting in the crap seats far above and removed from the action.

And then, as if an invisible switch had suddenly been thrown, the tentacles changed from tentative and tender to sudden violence as each wrapped itself around the neck of a victim. People tried to scream but that just made the tentacles squeeze all the more and the only sounds were wet chokes. When one woman tried to claw at her neck the tendril gripping her whipped back and forth and Bea heard the sickening crack of a breaking neck, saw the woman dangle limp.

More tentacles pushed out from the screen, the new ones serrated and wrapped in barbed wire. They reached out to each imprisoned moviegoer and slowly snaked around their bodies until each man and woman were covered in torn clothes and ripped flesh, all drenched in their own blood.

The smooth tendrils loosened their grips around people's necks and slithered down to wrap around the upper torso of their bodies.

"What are they doing?" Bea said.

"Wait for it," Jane said.

The upper tentacles pulled in one direction while the barbed tentacles lower down pulled in the opposite direction. They pulled and pulled until a scream and a sickeningly wet rip saw each moviegoer torn in half splattering blood and bits of entrails all over the seats. A few stray drops of blood splattered the side of Bea's face.

It was surreal to see each person below hanging in two pieces. Even weirder when the air horn sounded again and all the dead men and women were jerked into the screen which somehow healed whole behind them in an instant. Then the lights went out and the people from the balcony were sitting in the theatre in darkness.

Should I scream? Bea wondered, or is it too late for that?

Ten seconds later the lights from the projectionist room lit up and on the screen appeared a title: *Midnight Dark Terrors*.

"Great, it's starting," Jane said. "Come on, sit back and enjoy."

Bea, still shell-shocked, turned to Jane. "What... Was... That?"

"The pre-show," Jane said. "Now sit."

"Are the doors still locked?"

“Nope. You can leave if you want. But you’ll miss out on a classic.”

“We witnessed multiple murders by whatever that thing was. Is that normal?”

“It is not. Does it matter?”

Bea collapsed back into her seat with a grunt. “Did the people down there know what was going to happen to them?”

“Of course not. Well, maybe a few of them, if they are into that kind of thing. You know, suicide cults, stuff like that. Who cares. I don’t. Do you?”

“Uh, I don’t know. A bit much to take in.”

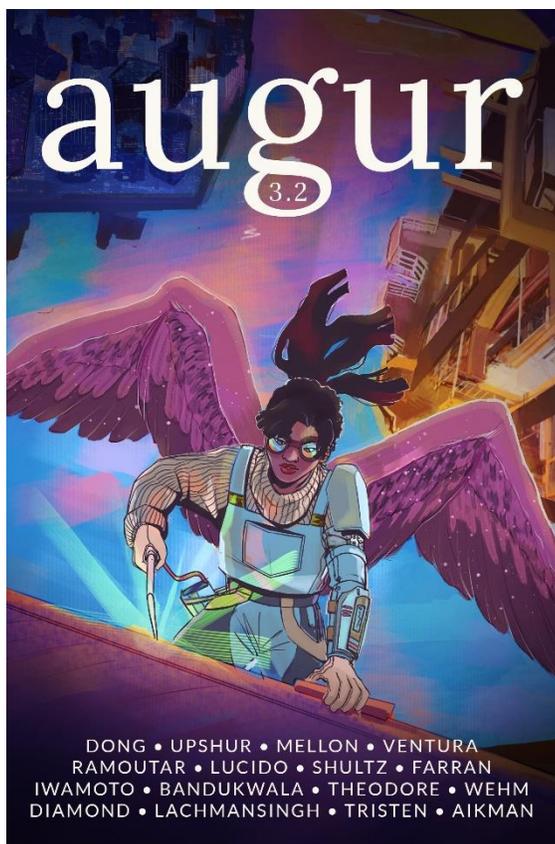
Jane flashed a beatific smile. “Face it. Admit it. Before they were torn apart, you resented being up here instead of down there.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Aren’t you glad to be alive after seeing that? And that it wasn’t you?”

“Why... yes. Feels good, now that I think about it.”

Bea settled back to watch the movie. She noted the theatre still reeked of blood and leather. Pretty good Smellorama, actually. Definitely got her money’s worth. Good show.



Augur issue #3.2

- The Truth at the Bottom of the Ocean* – by Maria Dong
Glass Womb – by Elizabeth Upshur
Are We Ourselves? – by Michelle Mellon
Extinction #6 – by Morgan L. Ventura
This Soil Still Gives – by Natasha Ramoutar
No More Monuments – by Mikaela Lucido
Junkhead – by David F. Shultz
Fearsome Figures – by Yara Farran
Electrify the Bones – by Ren Iwamoto
When I Could Draw A Sun in the Sky
– by Manahil Bandukwala
Moon Gazing – by Michelle Theodore
Creation Myth – by M. Darusha Wehm
X.O. Tempo – by Frankie Diamond
We Sell Skin on Sale – by Rachael Lachmansingh
My Body the Nest – by Sienna Tristen
The Bananas TM Barcode – by Barton Aikman

Find it here: [Augur #3.2](#)

UNTITLED VOID

by Melanie Friedman

(Previously unpublished)

2meyouare a black hole/empty
full of magnetism
something aboutyou whisper(ed) my name
&call(ed) me back
sound travel(ed) the vacuum between us

ohYou of confidence
YoutheOne who's always present
theOne who lacks warmth
doYouknowhowmuchithinkofYou?

But no,You are a black hole
cold&barren
/swirling into space
giving off just enough energy to keep the sun close



Fusion Fragment Magazine

Content of issue #4

Sailing to Byzantium – by Jennifer R. Donahue
Wormwood – by Edward Ashton
The Imitation Sea – by Lora Gray
In a Village Without Dogs – by Eileen Gunnell Lee
The Ten Thousand Lives of Luciana Kim – by Maria Dong
You, Tearing Me Apart Onstage – by Matthew B. Hare
Getaway – by Jennifer Hudak

Check it out at: [Fusion Fragment](#)

THE PECULIAR PROBLEM AT THE MUNICIPAL POOL

by Alexander Winfield

(Previously unpublished)

“God damn hippies,” muttered the Mayor. He glared out the clean windows of his tower office, binoculars fixed to his eyes, wearing a sneer that put most gargoyles to shame. “Dirty punks should put some clothes on, it’s a disgrace.”

From his office, the Mayor had an unobstructed view of the municipal pool. The city of New Mordiggan was in the 8th day of a merciless heatwave, and by now every one of the city’s pretty young things knew they had access to an Olympic-size outdoor pool for but the humble price of 25c, and a moderate wait in line (the swimming pool’s capacity was 250).

“Filthy god damn *sluts*,” the Mayor hissed, and his aide could hear the teeth grinding and splintering from across the room. The aide picked at the corner of a financial report, and coughed.

“Glorious is the flesh of life,” stammered the aide. He wiped his brow. “These are the words of Sapha Green itself, immortal is its name, hence the city charter’s liberal laws regarding public nudity and—”

“Get out!” yelled the Mayor, and the aide did, pursued by a hurled paper weight. “Sapha Green said *that*, eh?” the Mayor wondered, rubbing his hands together. “Well... we shall see what it says *now*.”

This was an impressive boast but, as the Mayor well knew, nobody saw Sapha Green, much less held an audience, without an express invitation. Nevertheless the Mayor was nothing if not determined. Also, he was sick; sick of lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, in the dark, staring at the ghostly white legs and bronze valleys and curves and the succulent fruits of meat that he couldn’t banish from his sight no matter how he tried, and at the backs and the necks of all those pretty young things in the pool and the memory was torture and and *and*...

So it was, bright and early the next day, that the Mayor was at the Prime Residence, that heaven-scratching obsidian ziggurat just west of the downtown mall. He knocked furiously on the door. “Let me in!” he snorted. “I’m the Mayor! Let me—” Despite his passion, he was surprised at how quickly the vast, heavy doors suddenly shifted, and swung open.

“Do you have... a request?” asked one of the Blind Priests. The thing shuffled forward under scarlet robes, a long hood concealing everything save for a smile set in emaciated, pale flesh, a smile full of dog teeth speckled with blood and meat. The Mayor, suddenly, could think of nothing to say. So,

instead, he merely pressed the envelope (heavy with the document he'd been working on since 4:00 am) into the priest's twitching, hidden fingers.

The Priest's tongue rolled out of its mouth and cleaned saliva from the scars on its chin.

"You are willing... to pay the price... if your request... is denied?" it hissed. The Priest looked, greedily, down, at the Mayor's fat, sandaled feet. "We are always... *hungry*... here, at the Prime Residence," It chortled.

"Of course I'm ready," nodded the Mayor, forcing himself to be brave. He'd come this far. "Why wouldn't I be here if I wasn't ready?" The words emerged as whispers, forced through a dry mouth.

The Priest shrugged, squeezed the envelope in its hands, and vanished into the Prime Residence. The doors closed, slowly and firmly, behind it.

For two weeks the Mayor paced in uneasy circles in his office. He couldn't concentrate, he couldn't think. Requests for new roads, for speeches, for policy addendums slowly grew like a field of mushrooms on his desk. The Mayor didn't care; he either sat in grim silence or stood at the window, staring down at the pool.

"It'll be worth it," he growled, his face turning red. "If Sapha only punishes *one* it'll be worth it." That his request could be denied the Mayor didn't like to consider. Who would? Who would want to imagine hearing the rustled march of dozens of padded feet on the carpet, the sharp wheezing of breath sucked into dozens of hungry mouths, then the teeth, on the back of the neck, ripping and tearing....

The Mayor could scarcely believe it when he finally received the telegram, buried amidst the many of the day's menial correspondences. All it said, in plain black letters, was: "Sapha Green will soon take action on your request." The Mayor was a grown man, deep into his fifties. He giggled like a schoolboy presented with his first lollipop when he read those words. For the next two days, he could not be pried from his window.

"Soon," was all his aid heard him say, over and over, breath steaming the glass. "Soon! Action... soon!"

On the third day, his patience was rewarded.

A mere 5 minutes after the pool's opening at 8:00 a.m. sharp, a very large organism flew on seven black wings into the pool's shallow end. The handful of pretty young things that had arrived swam back, startled, from the strange interruption of their reveries. They stopped their aqua yoga and breast strokes and meditations, and stared.

It was, to be fair, a very large organism, a swollen mass of pulsing flesh with a ring of red eyes around its torso, and a mane of twitching, reed-like tendrils where a head should have been. It sat there, the water barely covering

a third of it, for several minutes. When such time had passed without the thing so much as doggy paddling the pretty young things, who had been cautious at first, shrugged and got back to their business of swimming and sunning themselves. For the next hour the organism dwelt, mostly ignored, in the shallow end, and for the next hour the Mayor's breath grew increasingly tight, his eyes ever wider.

“What are you waiting for?” he groaned. “Murder them, you ugly shit bastard.”

Finally, at five past 9:00 am, a lovely woman with long, braided black hair and a palm-shaped, purple birth-mark on her belly jumped into the water. The organism began to move, with speed, in her direction.

“Yes, yes, yes,” chanted the Mayor. The woman looked up, her mouth agape, as the shadow of the organism fell across her. “Yes, yes, yes!” laughed the mayor. “Get her! Rip her up! That’ll show ‘em all!” The Mayor felt happier than he had in years. Tears fell down his cheeks, and he even jumped, a little, a few times, in place. “Get her!”

The organism was as a mountain, a primal forest, a swamp of filth and horrors that moved with merciless intent... as it wriggled up, a respectful distance from the woman, and leaned against the poolside. The woman stared at the organism blankly, for a moment. Then she laughed, laughed heartily, throwing her braids back, as if she’d just heard the world's funniest joke.

“What?” said the Mayor.

For several minutes it was a silent tableau: the thing shivered, shook, and the woman nodded happily, and doubled up with laughter more than once.

“*What?*” gasped the Mayor.

After ten minutes of what *really* looked like friendly back and forth, the organism and the woman got out of the water and walked, side by side, out of the pool area. The odd pair then crossed the street and stopped in one of those hip, new cafes. The woman found a table for two on the patio while the organism compressed itself, like a deflating balloon, into half its original size and rolled into the cafe. Soon it re-emerged with what *really* looked like two iced coffees and a plate of gourmet biscuits held in its tendrils. It laid the drinks and munchies on the table and sat down across from the woman.

Even at such a distance, the Mayor could make out the woman’s surprised, pleased expression. The “Aw thanks,” was clearly visible as it passed her lips. The woman then offered the organism the warmest smile the Mayor had seen in years.

“What,” howled the Mayor, “the absolute shit?!”

He sped out of the office, shoving his objecting aide to the floor. In what felt like an instant, he was back at the Prime Residence, his mind a tempest, his fists striking again and again at the unblemished ebony of the great door.

“What the shit! What the shit!” he shouted, mouth foaming.

Eventually, a Priest deigned to answer.

“Action,” the hooded creature explained, “does not mean 'your' action.

What is, is, and Sapha Green most certainly *is*. On occasion, what the uninitiated consider a request serves as a trigger for the higher inspirations of Sapha Green, and it may apply such means, to fulfill such plans, as it sees fit. Where you wanted a slaughter, the Sapha Green created a new harmony between strangers. What is, *is*. Glorious, indeed, is the wisdom and insight of Sapha—”

“You sons of bitches!” bellowed the Mayor, his face red.

“Now, see, I don’t think that kind of language is a good idea at all,” sniffed the Priest. The Priest attempted to close the door, but the Mayor thrust in an arm to hold it open. The arm broke instantly under the great weight, but the mayor barely noticed; the agony only spurred him on.

“You might as well have eaten me, you cocksuckers!” he shouted, right in the Priest’s withered face.

“Well,” said the Priest.

“Eat me!” The Mayor smashed his head on the door. “C’mon, you stupid... just god damn... Eat me!”

“No,” said the Priest.

Eventually, the police had to be called.



Unneriving Magazine #14

- The Spindly Man* – by Stephen Graham Jones
- Danger’s Failed Film Pitches* – by Danger Slater
- Special Delivery* – by Bev Vincent
- Figures in an Unimportant Landscape* – Em Dehaney
- Finding the Path* – Kaaron Warren
- Hotel* – by Donna Lynch
- Black Brothel: Part Three: Midnight Snack* – by Renée Miller
- Home is Where You Sink Your Teeth* – by Ann Gresham
- Don’t Let the Dark Stop You Shining* – by William Meikle

Find it here: [Unneriving #14](#)

THINGS YOU LEFT BEHIND WHEN THE GREAT FLOODS CAME

By Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

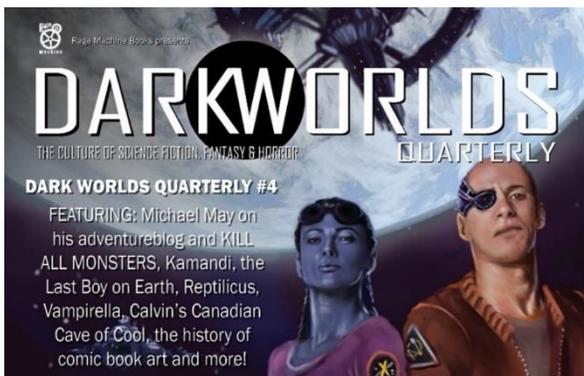
photo albums
you didn't know
what to do with anyway,
winter clothes and heavy boots

that might drag you down
if you fell overboard,
old dog tags you'd been saving
for some unknown reason,

all the books
you thought you'd get back to
but never did,
all the good intentions,

the things you said
you'd do, someday,
if and when you
ever found the time

Dark Worlds Quarterly Online Magazine



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SMOKE AND BUBBLES RISING

by Paula Johanson

(Previously published in *Small Rain & Other Nightmares*, June 2020)

I remember smoke rising up into the clear sky, into the baking hot blue day; and the barbecues firing up behind the houses out of sight from the road traffic, with the burnt offerings sending up a scent to the deep bowl of blue sky.

I come round a door and there are people there already, friends, all taller than I am, looking down to see me. For a while there is a hand on my shoulder, a hug from one and a half-hug from another as we talk in murmurs, not real talking, not about real things, not about what we all know and what we all are thinking.

It's odd to see blank faces, carefully blank faces instead of cheerful chatter and the interplay of smiles. Indoors, outdoors in shade or shadow the faces aren't lighting up. Oh, two faces look the same as always. My parents are busy, same as always.

Out on the patio, my father has the barbecue lit up already, and with a spatula in one lean hand he is turning meat on the grill. He drinks from the beer bottle in his other hand, the bottle going up to drain, amber glass up in an arc against the blue bowl of the sky. Blue eyes wide as he grins, he is happy as he always is when the doors are open and people going in and out in the smoke from the barbecue.

And in the house, my mother is taking potatoes baked in tin foil out of the oven, burning her long, crooked fingers through the folded tea towel. She is as happy as she ever gets, as her pursed mouth ever looks after cutting the meat, wrapping and baking the potatoes, making the salad, mixing the Koolaid, slicing and buttering the garlic bread, and getting the cutlery and plastic plates and glasses and condiments all outside onto the old table beside the picnic blankets. She is happy enough, if I asked her she'd say so. But she doesn't look it, even when she drains her glass of beer, leaving a ring of foam.

"It's easier this way," says my father, turning the meat. "Simpler. No fussing," he says as my mother goes past him with a stack of paper napkins and an ashtray and her cigarettes. "We didn't plan this. No, that would change the way we live. Completely. This is better."

Empty faces, not saying anything, as my friends mill in and out the doors and around the yard in the smoke going up. Empty mouths, not eating yet. Empty hands, not holding or carrying anything, putting down immediately

anything that's picked up. Something is happening, something I can't see, something out of sight and out of mind for those who do not know to look for it.

I don't know where to look for it and don't need to. There is something inevitable in among us, insubstantial like the smoke swirling and rising. It comes in around a corner, around a doorway with her, with more people, more people who know. We aren't looking for it, as we meet my sister and hug her a little, not too hard, but we know.

It is here, it is near, it is a word away, a word that not one of us will say to her, not for anything, not to anyone here, least of all the two who are busy at the smoking grill and the lit cigarette and another beer each because everyone is here at last.

Everyone but one. For my parents that one is my brother-in-law, thousands of miles away at a commitment he couldn't break.

For the rest of us, we know who is not here and we cannot speak of it. I even see my brother-in-law through the smoke, and he says nothing. He is too far away, of course, and doesn't know what to say. He never told me anyway, he never said anything about it then or later. But this is now and he says nothing to me, only looks down to meet my eyes and away and murmurs and moves through the smoke.

The heat from the fire comes up through the ground, burns my feet as I come towards him. Through the smoke I see him, arm's-length away and out of reach, no words to say. At my feet the fire is hotter, backing the ground hard and tan. The ashes are powdery white, flaking, and the charred wood and bone blacken in the flames.

I kneel beside the fire. I have knelt beside so many fires. I have never needed to light a fire, never needed to blister these small, idle hands with anything but pastimes and luxury. I have chosen to learn this, not to be ignorant and unprepared. I don't have to be here. It could have been me.

The child looks like my son, golden hair in the ashes. He is lying half-curved in the fire, limbs twisted. He is no bigger than I am, now, and will never be any bigger. I've long known I am no bigger than a child. But to know that he will never get bigger than me, ever, breaks my heart. I've been willing to carry him, broken or bleeding or scorched, and soothe him in the little ways I know.

I kneel in the ashes and stroke the golden hair off the hot forehead. "It doesn't have to be this way," I say, and my words are one more torment for him and for any I am fool enough to let hear. We are all seared as the smoke rises up.

“Yes, it does,” he says through cracked lips, with the curves of antlers burning beside his ribs. “I don’t want to do any more. I’m broken. I want to be done.”

I deserved that. I knew what was happening and this is my only part in it, to be here with blistering knees and hands as he burns, or not to be here at all. Some aren’t here, after all, and my brother-in-law is only here in thought and memory, not spirit, for he puts no words like spirit into the flesh that is so arguably here or not here.

I can’t even kiss him, either of them, one shuffling in the smoke an arm’s-length out of reach and the other scorching under my hands in the flames. The coals flare under him, scent of cedar flaring up and around me as I flinch back. The blood bubbling in his ear is red, bubbles rising impossibly red, and leaking from his cracked lips is blackened and caking dry.

It will be ages before he is gone, while the smoke rises up and the hiss of flames over coals mingles with the meat sizzling on the grill and the hiss of the gas flame. I sit back on the picnic blanket the colour of baked earth, hearing the sigh of bubbles rising as another beer is opened and poured for my mother and father who do not see what I see, who do not hear what I hear and who do not notice as we sit in a circle around my sister, how we keep her at the centre of ourselves as we pretend to talk and pretend to eat the food for what comfort it can give us. The smoke rises up from behind our house, from other houses on the block on block of streets, smoke rising into the blue dome of the sky.



Hexagon Speculative Fiction Magazine

“Hexagon is an online magazine created to take our readers to fantastic worlds and to meet incredible characters. We specialize in the weird, the wondrous, and the whimsical.”

Content of issue # 3

Charmed Honeycake – by Archita Mitra
The Minute – by Joshua Green
Visarjan – Disha Bisht
Winter’s Heart – by Vanessa Fogg
The Drowned King – by Joanna Papadopoulou

Check it out at: [Hexagon #3](#)

TONNSTAIL
STALLION OF THE WAVES

by Lee F. Patrick

(Previously unpublished)

Sea horse, foam horse, favoured child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, foal of the waves.

Curiosity brought you near the shore,
Curiosity made you touch flipper to land,
Angrily the Lady changed you to mortal steed.

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, banished to land.

Kept from the ocean, tied to the land, you
Kept hearing your herd in the winds of the storm,
Alone you wept knowing the Lady was near.

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, forbidden your home.

Eight times the Lady refused you
Eight times you went to the seaside with hope
Will She leave you alone again in this storm?

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, flees the steading of man.

One man swears to break you to his will.
One boy swears to let you do as She wills.
The bard tunes his harp to sing you farewell.

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horses, foam horses, travel in the storm.

Dawn is late coming, sun peeking through clouds,
Dawn guides boy and bard to the cliffs near the sea,
Light reveals the man, rope ready to ensnare.

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horses, foam horses, the herd nears forbidden land.

Caught by the rope, the sea horse fights free,
Caught by greed, the man dies seeking a frightened foal,
Transformed by love, the sea horse returns home.

Sea horse, foam horse, exiled child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, killer of man.

Boy bids farewell to the herd of sea horses,
Boy cries farewell to the brother he loved,
Bard sings the tale of sorrow and joy.

Sea horse, foam horse, favoured child of the Lady,
Sea horse, foam horse, foal of the waves.



Anathema Magazine

Content of issue #11

Heard, Half-Heard, in the Stillness – Iona Datt Sharma

Tiger of the New-Moon – Allison Thai

Hungry Ghost Marriage – by May Chong

We Have Evacuated, Have a Good Day

– by Jendayi Brooks-Flemister

In the Name of our Baroness

(the Most Magnificent, the Most Steadfast)

– by Hadeer Elsbai

Pinafore – by May Chong

The River That Will Drown You – by Joshua Chizoma

Find it here: [Anathema #11](#)

THE BALEEN BELLOW

by Justin Dill

(Previously unpublished)

Stimm struggled to gain purchase atop the deck of the Tusked Trawler as the ship succumbed to the rough jostle of the sea. The distinct howl of the wind—low in pitch, like the growl of a hungry wolf—warned of the treachery of these waters. Enough sea salt to the brain and you tended not to heed such portents, and besides, so great a prize as the one he sought could not be happened upon in calmer waters.

Coiled on the warped wooden boards of the deck, next to the slouching mast, lay a heap of rusted chains, the ends fitted with hooks of balinite, which he'd fashioned himself from the fruits of an excavation in the mines of Mount Vocah, an undertaking that had nearly cost him his left leg. *Luck of the Breathless*. A fool's superstition, if ever there was one. Far as Stimm saw it, there was no luck in having been born a mute Cantorian—how could he expect the wayward winds to serve at his beck and call if his call had all the import of a dog whistle to an aged ear?

But he'd soon rectify that. Cracking his knuckles, he rested a thick-soled boot upon the hull, narrowing his eyes at the boiling black waters. The hiss of steam carried malicious whispers, and the spirits of the sea would soon be wise to his presence, had they not already noticed his intrusion. They'd move quick, but he'd move quicker. And they wouldn't see it coming. If there was one silver lining to his plight, it was that there was stealth in silence.

To exercise their will, a Cantorian had to coax the intended target with the proper intonation and timbre—according to lore, his kind had inherited the art of mimicry from the great Mocking Macaws of Collarbone Isle. But Stimm was nothing if not determined, and in his thirty-odd years he'd devised an alternative method to inflict his will, an alternative method to harness the magic of his people. While the abilities of a skilled Cantorian to command trees, clouds, and rivers lay beyond his grasp, he found balinite as malleable in spirit as in composition, and so had ensured that the dull, aquamarine-tinted metal was always in ample supply.

With the twitch of his fingers and the clacking of his overgrown nails, he coaxed the metal hooks into action. They raised their dreary heads like a child rudely awakened from a frolicking dream. The chains clinked as they slithered along the deck, dragged by the levitating hooks and trembling from the humid haze wafting up from the waters. Sweat trailed down the crook of Stimm's

nose, but he dared not wipe the skin dry—once wheedled into motion, the target of your Cant had to remain under the caster’s control, else they might turn on whoever had disturbed their slumbering spirits.

Stimm heaved his arms about, waving and flailing his weather-beaten limbs, wincing at the acidic sting of the heated mists. The hooks bobbed along, floating through the air at his command. The bead of sweat that had graced his nose dribbled down to his lip. Though it tickled, he willed away the distraction. After all, how could you expect to enforce your will on mother nature herself if you couldn’t exercise command over your own mortal flesh?

As he commanded, the mottled black hooks swept across the deck, chains in tow, and leapt over the hull, splashing into the sea. Their chains clinked behind them. Attuned to the sway of the metal implements beneath the surface, Stimm felt little resistance other than that of the softly churning current. The ominous howl of the wind threatened to punish him should he overstay his welcome—not that any welcome had been extended. For a moment, his heart seized at the prospect that he’d been mistaken, that his quarry did not, in fact, inhabit the territory he’d so brazenly encroached upon.

But the fleshy squelch of his metal hooks piercing a rough hide dismissed his worries. Had he the vocal cords to do it, he’d have squealed with joy. As it was, he stomped on the deck with his boots, taking care to keep his hands steady for the duration of the jig. Now came the tricky part. Any entity bold enough to call these waters home would not allow itself to be torn from the depths so easily. He’d pierced the beast with no less than nine hooks—one commanded by each digit (the tenth, he’d lost to the mines).

The beast refused to budge, but neither did he relinquish his hold. He’d waited years to stumble upon such prey, and only by bartering away all but the skin off his back—and of course his treasured trawler—had he managed to track it down. If it took the skin off his back to haul his stubborn prey up to the surface, then he’d be one happy set of bones when all was said and done.

But Stimm was nothing if not deft with his hooks, and he knew just how to prod to get the beast to cast down its defenses. And so, his face glistening and salty from the sweat of his efforts, he hauled his catch up to the surface. The Broiled Baleen finally reared its head, bumpy as a southern crag. The maw of the specimen could have devoured his ship whole, and Stimm had to exercise precise control over the hooks in order not to drag his quarry close enough to give it the opportunity to capsize him. As it was, his boat rocked, threatening to dislodge him.

In the whale’s eyes there lay neither anger nor resentment—only a glazed-over look of resignation, imbued with what seemed to be disappointment. But Stimm was not swayed. Mother nature had claimed his vocal cords, his right

thumb, and a hefty chunk of his hip. As he saw it, he was only reclaiming what was owed him, with interest, of course.

What at first Stimm mistook for a blubber he soon realized to be a plea, issuing forth from deep within the jowls of the beast. “Release me,” the whale implored, and Stimm struggled to keep his sea legs steady. “Release me,” came the repetition, and Stimm had to clench his fists to steady the hooks.

He would, of course, set the mammoth free after he’d harvested his prize. Very few Cantorians in the annals of history had managed to come into possession of a Broiled Baleen’s voice box. Stimm shook with glee at the very thought of what he might command with the voice of a whale. The winds, the mountains, the light of the sun—mother nature would, at long last, bend to his every beck and call.

“Release me,” the whale repeated a third time, but Stimm remained lost in his revelry.

I will make the deed quick and painless, he thought, and for a brief instant he believed he caught a flash of understanding in the whale’s voice. Twitching his fingers, Stimm willed the hooks into motion. With artful precision, they hewed open the flesh, burrowing through a foamy mass of blubber and navigating the labyrinth of the whale’s entrails until at last he discovered the coiled cluster of twitching tubes—the whale’s vocal cords. Stimm breathed in deep, wishing he could afford to wipe the sweat from his brow. On with the extrication.

The whale, to no surprise of his, was sturdily built, and endured the procedure with the utmost of dignity. His knees wobbled under the emotionless gaze the whale cast upon him as he severed and removed the throbbing organ and stitched the flaps of hide back together. When he at last held his prize, the cords writhing in his palms like the polyps of an anemone, he could scarcely contain his anticipation. Overcome by excitement, he clutched the mass with both hands. But a second later he realized his mistake. The chain links fell slack, and the hooks broke free of his control.

He peered over the hull at the whale, gulping, viscous streams of sweat trailing down his face as he anticipated its vengeance. But none came. The whale simply cast him the same solemn glance before descending to the depths of the sea and dragging the hooks along with it. Their chains had been secured to the mast, and the wooden pole caved under the pressure, snapping in two and hurtling over the edge of the ship. Stimm ducked and only managed to avoid a good head-bashing by the skin of his teeth.

When the sea stilled, he tensed from the thrill. He’d done it! Hastily, he devoured his prize—and though he cared for neither the taste nor texture of the organ, he dutifully downed every last twitching tube. The meal ingested, he

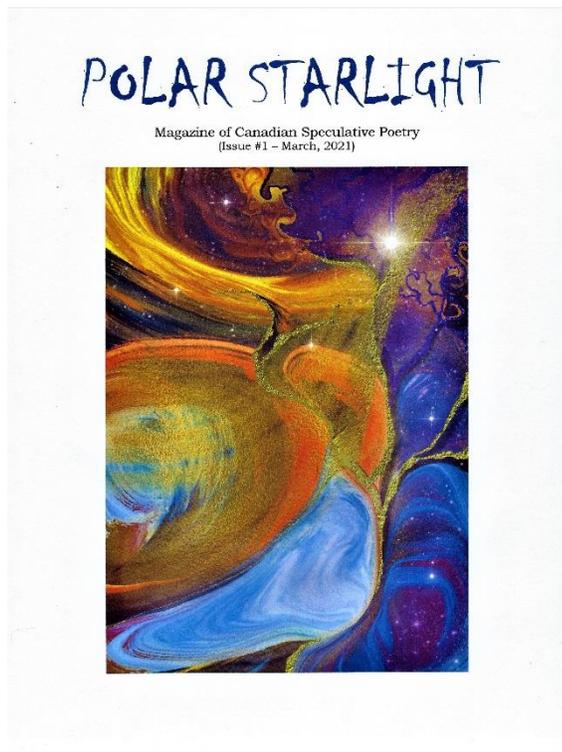
tentatively raised his head to the clouds, his lips quivering. At last, his moment of glory was upon him.

And glorious it was. His voice rippled throughout the heavens, his bellow so thunderous that he was certain it reached the shores of the western coasts. The skies churned, the powerful vibrations of his vocal cords summoning thick and heavy clouds. He continued to sustain the resounding note, tearing at the sheer beauty of it. So enrapt by the sound of his newfound voice was he that he failed to notice the dark clouds brewing overhead, pelting him with torrents of rain. More! He commanded the wind, the waves, the very heavens themselves. The sea raged all about him, his Cant persuading mother nature to twist, to dance, to sing!

But some songs were not meant for mortal ears. So impressive was the tempest he brewed, so tumultuous the downpour, that it tore his ship plank from plank. And still, he did not relinquish the pure tone, entranced by its magnificence. Not even the boiling waters could muffle the clarity of his bold note as he splashed beneath the surface. And so it was, still deep in the throes of his song, that Stimm sunk into the sizzling pit of mother nature's stomach.

Announcing the birth of POLAR STARLIGHT

A brand-new online Magazine devoted to Canadian Speculative Poetry.



It will be published by R. Graeme Cameron, but edited by Rhea E. Rose, a well-known and highly respected British Columbia poet.

It will come out four times a year in-between issues of Polar Borealis Magazine and be free to download.

Each issue will feature cover art and 16 poems selected by editor Rhea Rose.

Polar Borealis will continue to publish poems as well.

Polar Starlight will publish only original poems. Polar Borealis will accept both originals and reprints.

Currently both magazines are accepting submissions until Midnight February 28th.

Payment rate is the same for each magazine, namely \$10.00 CAD per poem up to 60 lines in length. \$40.00 for cover art.

Cover of the first issue, *Order in Chaos*, is by Swati Chavda.

To learn what the requirements are and how to submit, go to: <http://www.polarborealis.ca>

THE DOOR NOBODY OPENS

by Jean-Louis Trudel

(Previously unpublished)

Hold still
late at night, alone on a country road
throat clenched, eyes shut
feel the dark stream through your cells
slipping between the rungs of life's code
so close that it could fill you and move you
and be you

Or don't.

Tickle and cradle your daughter's sleepy head
record her delight as you kneel by the bed
flashing faces from behind your hands
getting her to laugh at an inconstant mother

Outside, inside, you swim in dark matter
at sea everywhere, yet never sinking
waiting for stars to pull you in
and dry your skin
drenched in unborn worlds and impossible lives

But there are no suns on the shadow side,
no solid flesh, no child smiling wide
just a smoke of subatomic scraps
unseen matter opening the orbital ruts
of the galaxy's whirling worlds
bringing together the starstuff we grew out of

Light cannot show you the darkness
truth vanishes when you try to see
So love the creatures of the dark
(aren't we all)
hug them

even as the dark whispers without a mouth
of the fates that it shapes, careless and fingerless
but never listen to the hungry voices
risen out of extinction

Night is always the mother of day
so our dark mother we will never hate
for she gave us a pretty child
but her dark twin hides inside reality's foam

ON SPEC Magazine – #115 V.30 #4 Fall 2020



FICTION:

Escape From the Sunset Vista
– by Anthony W. Eichenlaub
The Perfect Shot: The Adventures of Flick Gibson, Videographer
– by Peter G. Reynolds
The First Woe – by Virginia Elizabeth Hayes
Immensity – by Kim Whysall-Hammond
Self-Segmenter – by Leah Ranada
And Should I Fall Behind – by Greg Wilson
Pokey Potz Come Out to Play
– by Colleen Anderson
Masquerade – by Colleen Anderson
Between The Worlds – by Lee F. Patrick

NON-FICTION:

Guest Editorial: A Few Thoughts on #DisneyMustPay – by Derryl Murphy
Fred Gambino: Aiming for a Sense of Wonder – Artist Interview
– by Cat McDonald
Find your Expression, Even if your Hands Shake – Author Interview with Virginia Hayes – by Cat McDonald
Bots: “Sammy Shinebot”
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
“Outer Rim Day Work” cartoon
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
Get it at: [On Spec #115](#)

NOBODY SUSPECTS A GRANNY

by R.A. Clarke

(Previously unpublished)

“What is Granny McPhee doing here?” Ace pondered the suspect standing behind the one-way glass. An elderly woman in her 80s stood proudly in the lineup room for a mug shot. She had silver hair coiffed into a popular ‘40s style, wearing a bunchy floral dress that would make an exquisite drapery. Or perhaps it was just her body that was bunchy.

She wore a smug smile, completely unconcerned.

“I think the movie you’re referring to is actually *Nanny McPhee*,” Nick corrected matter-of-factly.

If it had a fist, Ace’s irritation would’ve popped the guy right between the eyes. “Yeah... I know. I was kidding.”

The viewing room door opened, Detective Michaels walking in. His eyes were alight with interest, peering through the glass. “I heard we had a new arrival,” he grinned. “Ol’ *Mary Poppins* sure didn’t age too gracefully, did she?”

“It might actually be *Mrs. Doubtfire*, out of retirement,” Ace chirped back.

“Did you check under the stockings for leg hair?” Michaels snorted, slapping his thigh.

The two men busted a gut, and Ace shot Nick a pointed look, as if to say, *See? This guy gets a freaking joke*. His new partner was quite the stick in the mud.

The lights flickered.

“So, what did she do anyway? Looks innocent enough.” Michaels straightened his face, getting back down to business.

“She gutted a guy.” Ace adjusted the surveillance camera, ensuring the suspect was in full frame on the monitor.

“Gutted?”

The station photographer entered the lineup room with another patrol officer, busy prepping the camera for photos.

“Yeah, the body was sliced wide open and hollowed out. Freaking mess. Dude looked like a hammock spread out on the bed.” Ace leaned back against the window, crossing his arms. “Thing is, patrol didn’t find any cutting tools on her.” The strangest shit always seemed to happen this time of year.

“She was picked up leaving the scene. The hotel manager reported that he was fixing a TV across the hall and heard, what he described as ‘some pretty crazy noises’.” Nick explained dryly, air-quoting where appropriate. “Through

the peephole he saw this woman leave. The description matches perfectly.” Nick pushed his black-rimmed glasses up. “The database says she’s the victim’s wife. She came willingly.”

Ace nodded. “That’s right. She sure didn’t get too far though. I mean, who considers *shuffling away* a valid escape plan?”

“It’s been pretty cold and rainy,” Michaels quipped, bending to retrieve a note that slid in beneath the door. “Her arthritis might be acting up.” He and Ace fist bumped with a chuckle.

“Unlikely assumptions.” Nick didn’t even crack a smile, busy fiddling with an ancient-looking locket around his neck. “A getaway car was probably nearby.” He watched the photographer take the first picture.

“Geez, who invited the buzzkill?” Michaels muttered, eyeing the nerdy detective. Ace shrugged, twirling slow circles with a finger by his ear. Right from day one, the guy had just been weird. No sense of humour *at all*, and what self-respecting man wears a freaking locket?

The lights blacked out for a couple of seconds. Ace growled, smacking the ceiling lamp.

“Apparently, they identified two sets of innards at the scene.” Michaels passed the note.

Ace’s brows furrowed as he read it for himself. “Two? So, we’re missing a body?”

“Interesting,” Nick smirked.

“Hey guys, does granny look taller to you?” Michaels asked with a raised brow. He shifted over to the surveillance desk, clicking buttons and inspecting the screen. “Look.” He spun the monitor, presenting a before image.

“She does indeed,” Nick confirmed.

“What the hell are you guys fussing about?” Ace finally turned to look, just as the lights died. “Oh, for the love of—” They sparked back to life, and all three men jolted in shock. Granny McPhee had sprouted two feet taller.

“Holy shit!” Michaels shouted.

“What is she?” Ace stared with his mouth agape. The old woman’s neck and legs were stretched beyond what was normal, skin straining as an uneven texture pushed from behind. She licked her lips with a long black tongue and he let out a gasp.

“Is this some kind of twisted Halloween prank or something?” Michaels spat out.

“It looks pretty real to me,” Nick replied.

Ace slammed his hand on the intercom. “Get outta there,” he ordered to the officers inside the room, but they were already moving toward the door, firearms up.

The suspect's skin continued distorting, something inside growing and shifting. The outer flesh tore in several places, releasing sinewy arms with rounded knife-like claws. Darkened jade skin revealed itself, scales slick with a luminescent secretion. It shuffled forward.

"I do believe it's wearing her like a costume," Nick mused. "How *festive*, and you know ... Nobody ever suspects a granny."

"This is no time for jokes!" Ace snapped, watching what looked like a horror movie unfold before his eyes. The lights stuttered again. Both men inside gave up on caution and bolted to the door, frantically swiping their keycards to no effect. The door wouldn't budge.

"It's manipulating the system somehow," Michaels shouted from their own door, swiping his card and yanking on the handle to no avail. "Shorting out the electrical or something." He began banging with his fists.

"We're trapped," Ace muttered.

"No wonder it didn't resist arrest," Nick shrugged, then swept an arm in a wide arc. "It's got an all-you-can-eat buffet right here."

"Just shut up, Nick!" Panicking, Ace had zero patience for Captain Obvious over there. The little weirdo was leaning against the wall, like all of this was just another day at the office.

Inside, the photographer furiously kicked at the door, screaming. Muffled shouts rang out from the hallway, mixing with thundering footsteps, as backup came running.

The silver-haired mask finally ripped loose from the misshapen body, skin dangling. The creature shook, flinging it against the mirrored glass that separated them. The old lady's smug smile slowly slid down, leaving a streak of blood and aphotic slime behind.

Ace shuddered as a broad, jagged skull was revealed, housing large cat-like eyes and three flaring nostrils, set amidst thick overlapping scales. Taut spades of jade tissue spread up its spine, shoulders, and onto the base of its skull. The creature's neck was long and agile, moving with snake-like capability. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

The fiend's opalescent eyes looked at the glass, seeming to settle *on him*, and Ace froze. Unable to pry his gaze from the monster, he asked, "Hey, boys... it can't see us, can it?"

Nobody replied.

The creature unfurled its muscular legs from the now-shredded shroud of skin, free of its constraints. It wasn't shuffling anymore.

The lights started to fritz off and on in rapid and randomized intervals. Segments of action were revealed intermittently, as if taking place beneath a strobe.

The beast lunged toward the door.

A barrage of gunshots cracked through the air.

Claws impaled the photographer's chest, lifting his body.

The patrol officer loaded a fresh clip.

The monsters pitted lips pulled back to reveal rows of entangled teeth.

More gunshots.

The photographer's limp body slammed against the wall.

The creature turned to leap at the patrol officer.

Gunshots.

It clutched the officer by the neck, squeezing.

Click, click.

Gnarled teeth clamped over the man's head.

Click.

With a twist, his head severed.

The lights went out, and stayed out. Only a dim glow came from the surveillance desk.

Slowly, Ace crept toward the light source. "Michaels," he whispered, watching the monster approach the mirrored glass. "Michaels, get over here." No answer. "Nick?" He hissed more urgently. *Where the hell is everybody?*

The glass shattered.

Ace cringed, his sidearm raised, a bead of sweat rolling down his back. His eyes darted around in the black, terrified. *Is it an alien? Some kind of demon?*

Loud banging continued from behind the locked door. Any second now, they'd get it open. Help was coming. He hoped.

Using the keypad, he shifted the camera view. The infrared night mode was his saving grace, the only way he could see what was going on. Ace hit the record button, watching the monster crawl through the window on screen. He needed proof of all this.

Unable to follow the beast with the camera any farther, he switched to the room feed. Ace's brows furrowed. Nick was visible, calmly walking away from a body slumped over by the door. *Was that Michaels?* Ace held his tongue, unwilling to give away his position. Nick slowly looked up at the camera, smiling.

That psychotic mother fuc...

The monster appeared in frame then, silently approaching Nick's location. Ace couldn't decide whether to shout or let Nick pay for his actions, but he didn't need to. Nick held his locket up in front of him, and it began to luminesce. The beast slowed in reaction.

It didn't attack, but rather stopped a foot away and lowered its ugly head. Nick raised a hand to pet the abomination, as if it were a cuddly puppy, his fingers stroking and scratching around the dark scales. Ace watched in shock.

In the next breath, both heads swiveled in tandem to look in Ace's direction. The hair raised on the back of his neck; his mouth dry.

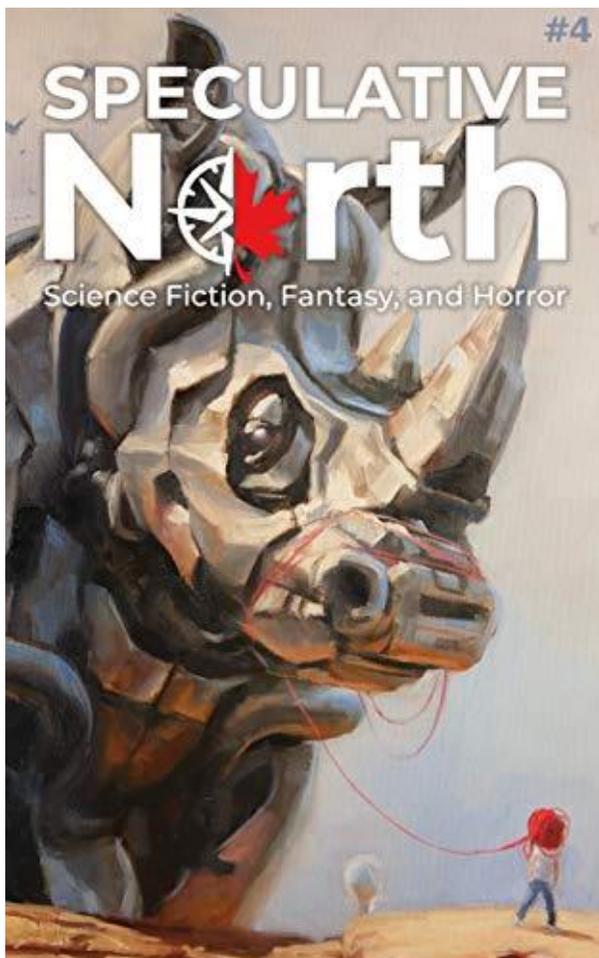
Beyond the screen, *two* clear sets of eyes began to glow, smoldering in the darkness. Nick raised an arm, his finger pointing straight at Ace. The creature obeyed, stepping forward.

"Come on now, Nick. Let's talk this out like rational human beings," Ace reasoned. There was clearly no point in remaining silent any longer. He kept his aim on the monster.

The surveillance monitor shorted out.

"Joke's on you now, Ace."

SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #4, February 2021



FICTION:

The Cat's Tale

– by C.J. Carter-Stephenson,
illustrated by Mauro Vargas

Crystal Ash – by Atalanti Evripidou

Gone with the Fairies – by T.A. Sola

Hellion Babysitting Services – by Jennifer Shelby

Precious Junk and Swift Riches – by Ife J. Ibitayo

A Woman of the Old School – by Hugh J. O'Donnell

The Messenger – by Carleton Chinner

Etched in Light – by Deborah L. Davitt

Day and Nights in the Jeweled City

– by Bruce Boston and Todd Hanks

NON-FICTION:

An Interview with Dr. Michael Johnson – by David F. Shultz

Craft: The Passive Voice – by David F. Shultz and Andy Dibble

Podcasts We Love – by Yale Wang and Justin Dill

Cover art – *The Following* – by Dimitri Sirenko

Check it out at: [Speculative North #4](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Roxanne Barbour

Roxanne has been reading science fiction since the age of eleven when she discovered *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars* by Ellen MacGregor. The years passed by while she had careers as a computer programmer, music teacher, insurance office administrator, and logistics coordinator for an international freight company. She took early retirement in June 2010. Six months later, she decided to put to use all the books on writing that she had accumulated over the years, and actually start writing.

To date her books include: *An Alien Collective* (2014, Wee Creek Publishing), *Revolutions* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Sacred Trust* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Kaiku* (2017, Self-published), *Alien Innkeeper* (2017, Wild Rose Press/Fantasy Rose), *An Alien Perspective* (2017, Self-published), and *An Alien Confluence* (2019, Self-published).

She also writes speculative poetry, and has had poems published in *Scifaikuest*, *Star*Line*, *Polar Borealis*, and other magazines.

Website: <https://roxannebarbour.wordpress.com/>

Swati Chavda

Swati is an author, editor, artist, and a former neurosurgeon. After years of repairing people's brains, in 2010 she left her thriving neurosurgery career to follow her passion to become a full-time writer. She has published a self-help book: *Ignite: Beat Burnout & Rekindle Your Inner Fire*, and two illustrated poetry books. Her poem *At the Edge of Space and Time* is a 2020 Aurora Award winner.

She also writes speculative fiction, where her characters tend to seek answers to questions ranging from "Is there life after death?" to "Should there be life before breakfast?" She uses too many commas, too few coffee breaks—and there's a constant battle waging in her head between British and American spelling.

Websites: www.swatchhavda.com and www.thewritingvault.com

R.A. Clarke

R.A. is a former police officer living in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. Juggling two busy kids, a sportaholic husband, and a couple of bizarrely ill-behaved dogs, she manages to maintain a semblance of sanity by guzzling coffee, and savouring copious amounts of chocolate.

R.A. has won 1st place in the Writers Weekly 24-hr Short Story contest, and 1st place overall in the Writer's Workout Writer's Games. Her work has been published by *Sirens Call Publications*, *Jolly Horror Press*, and *Cloaked Press*. When not crafting short stories, she keeps busy writing/illustrating children's books.

Website: www.rachaelclarkewrites.com

Justin Dill

Justin lives in Toronto, Ontario, where he currently works as a freelance copy editor. He is also an editor for tDotSpec. This is his second published short story.

Website: www.justindill.ca

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Lynne spent most of her childhood drawing dinosaurs and purple bunnies. Since then she has served as Art Director for three national magazines, started her own printing company, created a comic strip for cows, produced a science fiction colouring book and *The Really Silly Cartoon Book*, and illustrated a book about fish. She has also discussed composting toilets with Frank Herbert and penmanship with Harlan Ellison.

Lynne is an illustrator, cartoonist, and sculptor. She is a two time recipient of the Canadian Prix Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement and her work has appeared in numerous publications including *Amazing Stories Magazine*, *On Spec Magazine*, *Polar Borealis Magazine*, *Aurora Lights Magazine*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Pulphouse*, *Dragon magazine*, *Dungeon Magazine*, and *Science Fiction Review*.

Lynne also creates one-of-a-kind robot sculptures from upcycled metal objects which have been described as 3-D cartoons and she likes that comparison. The question she is asked most often about her Bots is, "Do they move?" and her answer is "Not when I've been looking."

Lynne lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her wonderful husband and a house full of amazing things.

<http://www.facebook.com/rivetofrobots>

Melanie Friedman

Melanie is an Australian-based Canadian writer and performance artist. She is cultivating a daily embodiment practice that sometimes expresses itself through movement, collage or words. Her most recent works include a poem published in PACE magazine and a performance piece at the James Black Gallery in Vancouver, BC.

Paula Johanson

Paula is a graduate of the University of Victoria with an MA in Canadian literature, she has worked as a security guard, a short order cook, a teacher, newspaper writer, and more. As well as editing books and teaching materials, she has run an organic-method small farm with her spouse, raised gifted twins, and cleaned university dormitories. In addition to novels and stories, she is the author of forty-two books written for educational publishers, among them *The Paleolithic Revolution* and *Women Writers* from the series *Defying Convention: Women Who Changed The World*. Johanson is an active member of SF Canada, the national association of science fiction and fantasy authors.

Arlene F. Marks

Born and raised in Toronto, Arlene F. Marks retired from the high school classroom in 2012 and dived straight into a full time writing career, focusing on her first love, speculative fiction. The sixth installment of her *Sic Transit Terra* space opera series, *The Identity Shift*, was a spring 2020 release by EDGE Publishing. She currently lives and writes in Collingwood, Ontario.

Melanie Marttila

Melanie has been writing since 1977 and her poetry and short fiction have been published in small press anthologies including *Stellar Evolutions*, and in magazines such as *Bastion Science Fiction*, *On Spec*, and *Polar Borealis*. 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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Martin Munks

Martin lives in Toronto, Canada, where he writes near-future sci-fi that (mostly) explores the impact of new technology on everyday people. He hopes to one day see the Earth from space. Send him an email if you liked the story: martin@martinmunks.com. He'd be thrilled to bits.

Lee F. Patrick

Lee is a writer of science fiction and fantasy, and sometimes poet, living in Calgary. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee is interested in the stories and poetry of Celtic tradition and history. Lee's fourth novel *Always My Love* joins *Lonely Together*, *Alter Egos*, and *The Alanyo Heir* this year. Lee is available on Facebook and her works through Kobo and Amazon.

Fran Skene

Fran is a retired librarian who has been actively involved in science fiction fandom and promoting science fiction literature since the 1970s. Her story "All That Glitters" appeared in *Polar Borealis Magazine* #14. She is also a co-author of the Science Fiction novel *Windship: The Crazy Plague*, which can be found here: [Windship](#).

Sylvia Son

Sylvia's fiction has appeared in magazines like *Elements* and *Green's Magazine*, online with *Defenestration*, and in a novella about a man being haunted by a ghost cat that made the shortlist for the Ken Klonsky 2014 Novella Contest for Quattro Books. Another short story was published in the Anthology *Strangely Funny III*. Three of her scripts were made into short films for the YouTube channel Cradle the Hat Maker: namely *Night Train*, *Last Girl*, and *Rebel Elf*. See them here:

http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH2mMLo5b8DFze8PpSOP_ZA

Richard Stevenson

Richard recently retired from a thirty-year gig teaching English and Creative Writing courses for Lethbridge College and has published more than thirty books to date, including: *Why were all the Werewolves Men?* (Thistledown Press,, 1994), *Nothing Definite Yeti* (Ekstasis Editions, 1999), and *Take Me to your Leader!* (Bayeux Arts Inc., 2003). In addition, he

recently completed a trilogy, *Cryptid Shindig*, containing the full length volumes *If a Dolphin Had Digits*, *Nightcrawlers*, and *Radioactive Frogs*, recently accepted by Hidden Brook Press. "The Bunny Man" is from a standalone collection titled *An Abominable Swamp Slob Named Bob*, forthcoming from Alternate Reality Press in the States.

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.

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books, and more than 100 short stories. He's also published occasionally in English. Recent publications in English include the story "The Snows of Yesteryear" (in the Tor anthology *Carbide-Tipped Pens*, reprinted twice in English and translated into Italian and Chinese, earning an Honourable Mention from Gardner Dozois), the story "The Call of the Freezing Souls" in *On Spec*, and the story "The Way to Compostela" in *Asimov's* (Jan.-Feb. 2020).

Alexander Winfield

Alexander Winfield is a writer and puppeteer. He was born in Bermuda, where he grew up in and around the ocean. He made many friends there, though not all of them were human. He has been writing since a child, creating large, shared universes with his siblings, who also write. He has worked with puppets around the world; for now, he lives in Toronto.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

I'm exhausted. I'm always exhausted finishing up an issue of *Polar Borealis*. But there's a sense of accomplishment like no other. A good feeling.

Now I have *Polar Starlight* to look forward to. I'll be using the same template, the same font, point size, spacing, etc. And yet the new magazine will be quite different in appearance. A lot simpler, for one thing. No ads. No announcements. No filler. A lot of white space. It will be a kind of poetry chapbook after all, and a clean, spartan layout is key to placing all emphasis and focus on the poems themselves.

There will be 16 poems. All my budget per issue can afford. Rhea will select them and determine the sequence they will appear. I'll do the layout. Much will depend on the length of the poems. I intend each page begin on a page of its own, but I might have to balance the "look" of the poem in various ways, such as beginning it halfway down. I published a poetry chapbook of my own, titled *Poems Off the Wall*, back in 1981, and I may use it as a guide. Then again, I have a four-volume set of Robert W. Service poems I inherited from my mother who had inherited them from her mother. I figure the layout that's good enough for *The Cremation of Sam McGee* back in 1913 is good enough for *Polar Starlight* today. At any rate Rhea and I will send the issue back and forth till we're both satisfied.

It's easy to keep track of the poems as they come in. I assign each one a number and list them, with the number added to each poem's file title. Once a week I send a batch of the latest to Rhea. A few days later she sends me her response listing them under the headings "Yes," "No," "Maybe," and her thoughts on each. I print this out. Thus I keep track of the potential fate of every poem.

At the end of the month she will get first dibs on the poems she wants to publish in the first two issues of *Polar Starlight*. At 16 poems per issue that would be 32 poems. No worries, I figure the end of the month will see a total of 100 poems or more received, so I will still have plenty to chose from for PB.

In the unlikely event we aren't able to find enough poems to suit our immediate needs I will elect to keep the poetry submission going, perhaps year round 24/7. If we get swamped, I can always close the window temporarily.

I know there's a lot of talented Canadian SF&F genre poets out there and Rhea and I are looking forward to publishing hordes of them. Going to be fun.

Cheers! *The Graeme*