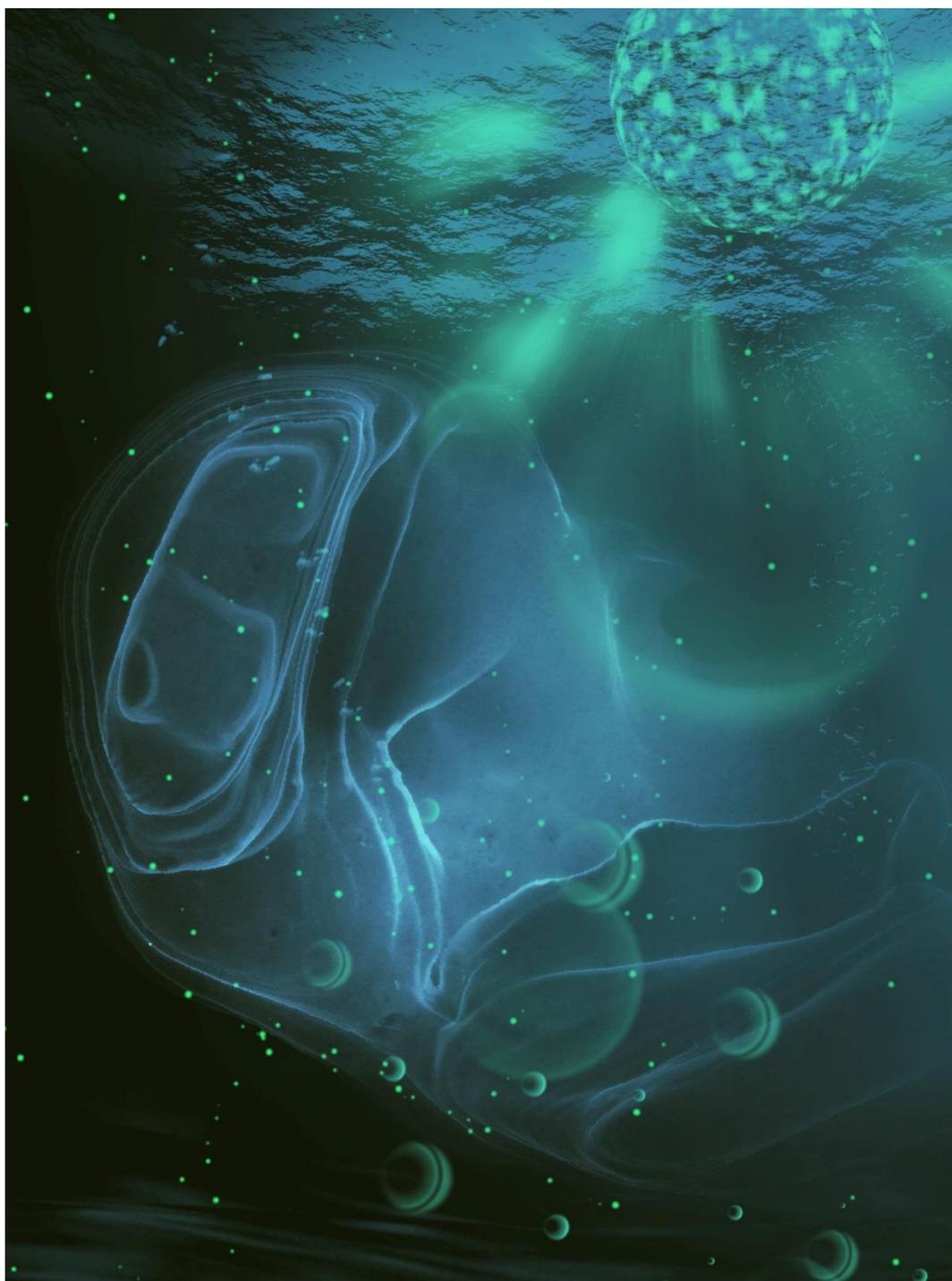


# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #18 – May, 2021)



# POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

Issue #18 – May, 2021 (Vol.6#2.WN#18)

**Publisher/Editor:** R. Graeme Cameron

**Proofreader:** Steve Fahnstalk

POLAR BOREALIS is a Canadian semi-pro non-profit Science Fiction online PDF Magazine published by R. Graeme Cameron at least three times a year.

Distribution of this PDF Magazine is free, either by E-mail or via download.

POLAR BOREALIS buys First Publication (or Reprint) English Language World Serial Online (PDF) Internet Rights from Canadian Science Fiction Genre Authors, Poets and Artists.

Copyright belongs to the contributors bylined, and no portion of this magazine may be reproduced without consent from the individual Author, Poet, or Artist.

POLAR BOREALIS offers the following Payment Rates:

Short Stories 1,000 words or less in length – \$10.00

Short stories between 3,000 and 1,000 words in length – one (1) cent per word.

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

Interior Illustration – \$20.00

“Fillo” Illustration – \$5.00

To request to be added to the subscription list, ask questions, or send letters of comment, contact Publisher & Editor R. Graeme Cameron at:

< [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:

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

ISSN 2369-9078 (Online)

Headings: Engravers MT

By-lines: *Monotype Corsiva*

Text: Bookman Old Style

Ad Text: Calibri

## Table of contents

- 03) – EDITORIAL – R. Graeme Cameron
- 04) – SEARCHING – (Poem) by Greg Fewer
- 05) – BONDING WITH JAMES – by Pamela Kenney
- 07) – BLUES – (Poem) by Douglas Shimizu
- 08) – RAJIV’S FIRE DRILL – by Garth Spencer
- 12) – UNTITLED – (Poem) by Marcie Lynn Tenchoff
- 13) – GOOD GIRL – by Alistair Bibby
- 17) – PREVIOUS PLANS FOR ESCAPE – (Poem) by J.J. Steinfeld
- 18) – MIGHTY QUINN – by Geoff Hart
- 23) – CRYPTIC – (Poem) by Lisa Timpf
- 25) – LEAST CONSCIOUS UNIT – by David F. Schultz
- 29) – GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT – (Poem) by KB Nelson
- 30) – THE TALE OF EMPRESS SARASSA AND THE PILGRIM – by Robert Dawson
- 33) – A POET’S APPRENTICE – (Poem) by Melanie Marttila
- 34) – VICA VR – by Martin Munks
- 41) – INTERNAL MICROCLIMATES – (Poem) by Lynne Sargent
- 42) – PROFESSOR PANDEMONIUM’S CARNIVAL OF CHAOS – by Lena Ng
- 48) – ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
- 53) – AFTERWORDS – by R. Graeme Cameron

## Art Credits

COVER – The Lurking – by Swati Chavda

## Editorial

You are reading the 18th issue of *Polar Borealis*. A month late but still more-or-less on schedule in the grand scheme of things. There will be at least two more issues this year, possibly three. Hope you enjoy this one.

Actually, I can relax. My February submissions window being closed and processed, I now have enough stories and poems to fill the next four issues. All I need to do is edit the submissions, lay them out, and Bob's your uncle. (An expression coined in 1887. Always wanted to use it. I believe this is my first time ever. Probably the last time.) Finances will dictate when stuff gets published, but so far everything is on track.

In general, I aim for four issues of *Polar Borealis* per year. And four issues of my new magazine, *Polar Starlight*, which is edited by Rhea Rose and dedicated to speculative poetry. Its first issue was well received. During the first month of it being available online it was downloaded at a rate four times faster than a typical issue of *Polar Borealis*. Would indicate there's a lot of poetry lovers out there!

Speaking of which, I read some of my poetry online and Swati Chavda (who did this issue's magnificent cover) volunteered to format a chapbook of my poems and guide me through the process of publishing it through Amazon. Whoot! That's a major item on my bucket list. Thank you, Swati!

Further, because I got so excited about her offer, I took another look at the first chapter I had written for my last attempt at a science fiction novel, decided it had potential, and started writing. Am now nearly finished with the first draft of the third chapter. At this rate the first draft should be finished before the end of the year. Since I'm revising as I go along, it could mean I'll be ready to self-publish my novel sometime next year. That, too, would be another item crossed off my bucket list.

Another exciting development. The final ballot of the 2021 Aurora Awards (for works created in 2020) has been announced. In the category of "Best Fan Writing and Publications" I have been nominated three times, for *Polar Borealis*, for *BCSFazine* (BC SF Association Newsletter), and my Canadian Speculative Literature review columns in *Amazing Stories Magazine*. Since there are three other nominees, I might not win. In fact, I'm guaranteed to lose, because even if I win one of my nominations, I automatically lose the other two. I find this amusing.

Anyway, win or lose, the Aurora Awards are remarkably good fun, and incidentally splendid publicity and PR for all the nominees. Huzzah!

Cheers! *The Graeme*

# SEARCHING

*By Greg Feuer*

(Previously unpublished)

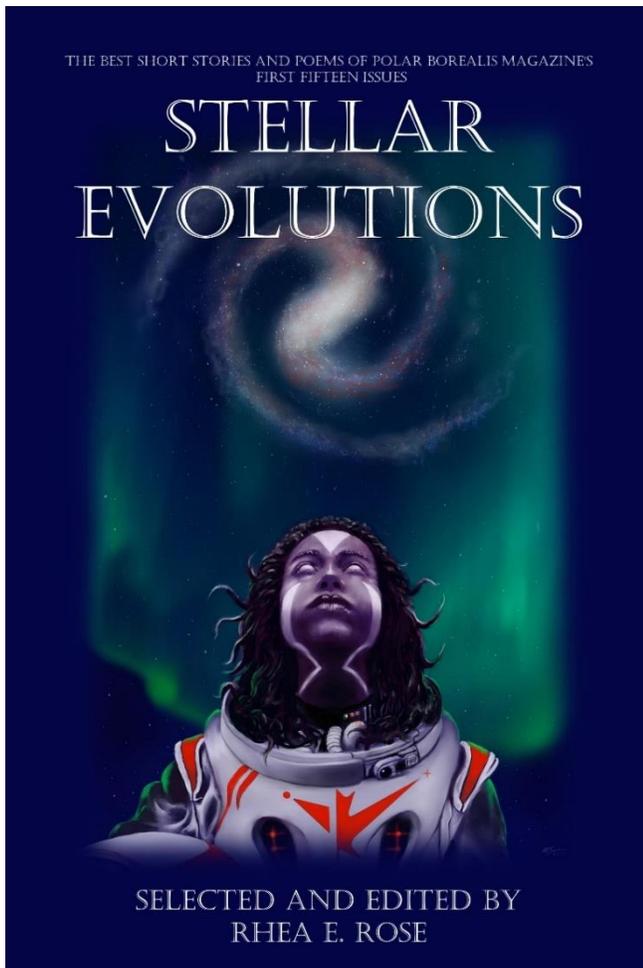
orbiting probe  
beams views of large cities  
all of them ruined

-----

## 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.

Available on Kindle for \$3.92 CA or \$2.99 US.

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: [Print version via Amazon.ca](#)

# BONDING WITH JAMES

*by Pamela Kenney*

(Previously unpublished)

I was just on my way out the door after a quick glance in the mirror when the auto-butler stopped me in my tracks, saying, “Sir, there’s something stuck in your mustache.” I retreated a step and turned to look in the mirror again. Wiping away the offending bread crumbs, I smoothed out my sparse mustache and contemplated getting rid of it altogether. That’s one thing I could do to look more like 007 from that old movie last night.

I smiled my most charming, deceptive smile. No one knows what I’m thinking. I’m an enigma. I could charm the secrets out of any spy in the world.

The red light in the corner of the mirror turned to green and I was on my way again. Pushing out the front door, I set off for work, but this morning was different. This morning, I could feel a new spring in my step. Muscles tensed and ready for action at the slightest provocation.

My heart had been racing during that movie and sleeping was difficult. Well, sleeping was always difficult, but at least last night it was for a good reason.

Travelling to exotic foreign lands. Catching spies. Falling in love with beautiful women.

I scanned my surroundings looking for any suspicious behaviour. What was that guy doing on the park bench over there? Waiting for a secret rendezvous? Was he passing secrets vital to national security over to that woman walking towards him? She was wearing a trench coat, after all.

My pace quickened and heart raced at the mere thought of having to chase down a criminal. I knew I could do it. How hard could it be?

I flexed my arms but the muscles didn’t make much of an appearance under my work shirt. I put my arms down again. No need to dwell. Something else to add to my list of resolutions.

Reaching the entrance of the office building, I grabbed the door handle and watched as the auto-identifier momentarily glowed neon green.

“Good morning, Nestor Finklebutt,” the automated voice said. “Welcome to Mallwork 57, the complete mall experience on your way to and from work. Don’t forget to make a purchase before you reach the office elevators.”

Stepping inside, I turned my head away from the holographic billboard of Pepto Bismol that usually greeted my every morning.

Today, however, the billboard was different. There was no pink goo in a bottle. Instead it was advertising a black tuxedo complete with diamond cufflinks. I stared, slack jawed. It was perfect. Exactly what I wanted. I'd look so great in that suit, sipping a martini.

Suddenly the billboard on the other side of the hallway appeared with a photo montage of a trip to a tropical island, complete with bikini-clad women.

Crystal-clear blue water. White sandy beaches. Tanned bodies. No jingle accompanied this ad, just the sound of water lapping on a beach. Rhythmic ocean sounds with the occasional exotic bird call.

With reluctance, I left that ad and my forward motion triggered the next billboard, sporting a big box of condoms.

“Get your blue box today.

Don't be without your blue box today.

If you want to play, play, play,

Get your blue box today.

Thank you for your cooperation in stopping overpopulation.

Obeying the law can be fun.”

I could feel my face burning red as the well-known jingle reverberated up and down the hallway, making the people standing near the elevator turn around to see who was approaching.

I waved weakly at the sight of my boss standing there, a huge grin spreading across his face.

“You had a good night, Nestor,” he said, slapping me on the back.

I nodded meekly and turned away, grateful to hear the sound of another familiar jingle greeting someone else just entering the building.

“Can't sleep? Don't weep. Count sheep. Sweet!

Get your Lanolizer pills today.

Sleep guaranteed.

Don't take more than three Lanolizer pills at any one time. Side effects may include nausea, unexplained hair growth, shortness of breath, internal hemorrhaging and on the very rare occasion, death. Always follow instructions carefully.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, waiting for the stupid ad to finish. Who was I kidding? I should never watch old movies. Like there ever existed a time when machines couldn't read our every thought. That James Bond was just science fiction.

-----

# BLUES

*by Douglas Shimizu*

(Previously unpublished)

No more seeing you at sunrise.  
No more seeing you at noon.  
Don't see you at the seaside,  
While I'm whistling the latest tune.  
Been eighty-five days since main engine burn,  
Only black carbon and grey steel everywhere I turn.

No more driving Pacific Coast Highway.  
No more surfing Tofino Beach.  
Can't help missing those earthly pleasures,  
No matter what they preach.  
Timeline check nominal: separation stage two.  
Moving faster from you baby, no idea what to do.

Cobalt, cerulean and ultramarine.  
Those sapphire eyes, the coolest I've seen.  
Midnight, ice and topaz, too.  
Miss that terran marble, my favourite colour hue.  
My eyes burn red crying tears, of a dozen shades of blue.  
Trans-Jovian insertion, I got the monotone spacecraft blues.

-----



## UNNERVING MAGAZINE #15

*The Wemategunis* – by James Edward O'Brien  
*Danger's Failed Film Pitches* – by Danger Slater  
*I was Crazy about Horror Films* – with Tess Gerritsen  
*Darkness in August* – Bentley Little  
*I Loved Super Dramatic Covers* – with Danielle Trussoni  
*Double Dare* – by Serena Jayne  
*Black Brothel: Part Four: Frankenstein's Whore* – by Renée Miller  
*Fading Memories* – by Michael Bracken

Find it here: [Unnerving #15](#)

# RAJIV'S FIRE DRILL

*by Garth Spencer*

(Previously published In BCSFAzine, December 2004)

Rajiv Witherspoon-Li was preoccupied one evening with abducting domestic cats and dogs for the less scrupulous pharmaceutical labs, so at first he did not realize someone was trying to kill him.

“Pss, pss, pss, pss.” He twiddled his outstretched fingers invitingly. The overstuffed Persian watched him from the unlit backyard, and didn't approach. “Hello, puss, puss. Puss-y! Want to say hello?” Rajiv tried to look dumb and innocent and harmless, which was how he usually evaded trouble, but the cat evidently wasn't buying it. “Maauw?” Rajiv said in falsetto. That didn't work either.

Rajiv was squatting, rather than kneeling, and now he lost his balance; his ass smacked the broken alley pavement and he went “Oof.” At that moment something went V-W-W-I-I-P past his forehead, right through the space his head had occupied. Rajiv flailed his hand around, trying to brush away what he thought was a mosquito. He didn't see or hear the hole that appeared in the fencepost beyond him. The Persian had vanished when he looked up again.

Rajiv sighed, got up and dusted off his jeans. Tonight was obviously a bust. He wasn't going to have any experimental subjects to call in on his cell, not from this borough anyway; the most gullible and vulnerable pets must have been hunted out here already.

Turning, Rajiv spotted a gray, foreign-looking vehicle moving out of a cross-street into the alley. He froze for a second, then relaxed. City people usually ignored each other, and if someone actually inquired what he was doing, he could say quite truthfully he was on his way home. If they asked about his overtures to the cat, he could even say he was trying to make friends, which was also true.

Rajiv shrugged and turned to go.

It was three or four blocks later, standing at a darkening bus stop, that Rajiv saw the unfamiliar vehicle's outline again. For a paranoid second he wondered if a plainclothes outfit was tailing him; then he shrugged it off.

When he saw the same gray vehicle a third time, after getting off his bus, Rajiv was certain.

Without a change in step or a turn of his head, Rajiv marched past his street and back to the nearest commercial zone. It had more than a mini-mall and convenience stores; it actually had a supermarket, bookstore, cafés and a

single-feature movie house, unusual in a suburban neighbourhood, and therefore a high-traffic area. Rajiv walked into a café as if it were his original destination. He spent a half-hour there pretending to read his textbooks, then went to the movie house and bought a ticket he couldn't afford. Halfway through the movie he slipped out, intending to zigzag home.

They caught him in the first alley he entered.

Rajiv never knew why he ducked. Something spanged off the bricks above him, and fragments stung his neck. He sped behind a dumpster and tried to spot the shooter. No movement; no sound.

He counted to fifteen, then tried to dash for the man-high recycling bins. V-W-W-I-I-P – no luck.

Rajiv thought fast, harder than he had ever done. Then he called “I’m coming out! I surrender!” and inched up slowly, putting his hands up first. No shots yet... nothing yet...

V-W-W-I-I-P – and he was crouched behind the dumpster again. He didn't even remember getting there.

“Stop that!” he yelled. “I’m unarmed!”

“Sure you’re unharmed,” an accented voice called, “if we got you you couldn't talk!”

“I’m NOT ARMED, I said! Who are you, anyway, and why are you shooting at me?!”

“Never you mind, just come out of hiding!” a harder voice commanded.

Dark as it was, Rajiv thought he could spot the shooter now, on a fire escape... and then he spotted two more man-high figures, one standing in shadows at each end of the alley.

So this was it. Rajiv felt more pissed off than anything, because this end was *pointless*. That faintly surprised him.

He stood up and stepped out, not bothering to raise his arms until the nearest figure stepped up to pat him down. Rajiv saw a husky figure dressed in drab black clothes, wearing black gloves and a balaclava; his partners looked just the same. The big man pulled out Rajiv's wallet, pulled his knapsack off his shoulder, then stepped back to examine the contents with a penlight. The shooter approached. Rajiv didn't recognize the weapon, any more than he had recognized the make of vehicle.

“Tempus fugit, guys,” the remaining team member called.

“Yeah, yeah... it's him... funny! Don't see the notes for his paper here.” The penlight turned and glared in Rajiv's face. “What are you studying?” the hard-voiced man demanded.

What was he *studying*?? Rajiv knew this kind of heat couldn't be motivated by his catnapping; so what *did*...? "Uh... sociology, mainly, since I quit Fine Arts. Some make-up courses in hard sciences..."

"Found 'em," the hard-voiced man said. "Applied logic, and a psychology elective. But none of his theory yet; we're just in time."

"In time for *what*?" Rajiv was bewildered. He was almost ready to be killed, but not ready for this craziness.

The hard-voiced man silently produced a plastic bag containing a switchblade. As he opened it, the shooter said conversationally, "To stop you from inventing—" and the third man growled, "Shut up!"

Rajiv felt flooded with relief. He said, "Oh, you mean that crank theory about sociology? I burned the manuscript."

There was silence for a time in the alley.

The hard-voiced man said furiously, "Jesus, I *told* you to transpose us—" and the third said "Shh!"

"It doesn't matter," Rajiv said. Ridiculous as the situation was, he knew where he stood. "You thought I was going to originate the first rigorous theory of human behaviour, did you? You thought I would explain, and predict, and even control behaviour, from mass actions right down to individuals, at least within limits of tolerance? Hell, lots of people have had the idea, but almost everybody discounts it... and I sure as hell can't get it together."

The hard-voiced man said, "Oh yeah? Then what about your courses?"

"That was my brother Ari's idea," said Rajiv. "I had to make up my course deficiencies somehow."

The shooter had lowered his weapon at this point. He said doubtfully, "Hang on. You said *lots* of people had this idea...?"

"Sure," said Rajiv. "Look it up in any science fiction section."

There was a somewhat longer pause.

"Science fiction section'," the hard-voiced man growled. He cradled his face in one hand. "I wondered if we were at the wrong address."

"*Time*, guys!" the third man said insistently.

"Are you worried about the cops?" Rajiv said brightly. "I think you've got a good half-hour's wait. We haven't made much disturbance, and even if anyone *has* noticed us, this is a quiet, relatively upscale neighbourhood. The cops in this city take a while to believe that shootings or knifings happen here."

The third balaclava-face asked, "And you know this because...?"

"I've been working with the police for a year now," Rajiv said simply. "I'm infiltrating a catnapping and dognapping ring, posing as a dirt-poor student trying to work his way through college. I joined the force just to work as a clerk-typist, but because I *am* a dirt-poor student working his way through

college, I got reassigned. While I was still at the precinct, though, I overheard a lot from their dispatch centre.”

The three men groaned with disgust and turned to their vehicle. The one with the weapon and the one with the switchblade practically threw them into the back. The third man silently handed back Rajiv’s possessions.

The third member of the team entered first, and put his head out again to announce, “Yeah, we’re off our coordinates. We’re at—” and the hard-voiced man said “Shh!”

The man who had been designated shooter paused, and turned to Rajiv. “We can leave you alone,” he said, “partly because you burned your manuscript, and partly because you report that your theory is a science-fiction idea... but mostly, because you’re working with the police.”

“My cognates don’t do that, eh?” Rajiv said interestedly.

The shooter froze.

“You found the name you expected on my ID,” Rajiv said, “and outside of the arts community, who’s going to have a name like mine? You found the course materials you expected in my pack. You were assigned to eliminate a threat, though I hadn’t done anything threatening... yet. So I had to conclude, ‘time travel’. And *still*, I wasn’t the Rajiv you were sent for. So I have to conclude there is more than one timeline, and you aren’t in quite the right one.”

A police siren began to emerge from the urban background noise.

“I shouldn’t pursue my crank theory again. You know where to find me,” Rajiv added. “And I can’t say anything about time travel either, for the same reason. Is there anything you *would* prefer that I do?”

The man in front of him relaxed, and punched him lightly on the shoulder. “You could have helped to create a slave society, and destroy all the chances and choices people could have. Or you could open up choices and opportunities.” He nipped into the vehicle and closed the door before Rajiv could respond.

Both the vehicle and Rajiv were gone when the squad car arrived.

-----

**AEscifi: FREE SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE FROZEN NORTH** See: [AEscifi](#)

We publish weekly short fiction that explores worlds that could be, paying authors fair rates and promoting under-represented voices.

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.

# UNTITLED

*by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff*

(Previously unpublished)

alternate world  
will Tesla write our future  
in pigeon feathers?

-----

**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 31:

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](#)



-----

# GOOD GIRL

*by Alistair Bibby*

(Previously unpublished)

I am not the first. There have been many before me: Brown Dog, Fiona, Snuppy, Belka and Strelka. Laika, she is my grandmother of a sort. Sasha always said that. That I was like her. She was the first of her kind, and I will be the first of my kind. Sasha always tells me how much of a good girl I am, that I am smart, and loyal, and good. I hope I can be as loyal and smart and good as Laika was. She was a good girl. She went where I am going but I am going further, much, much further. No human has gone as far as I will go, and because I am a good girl, I will go first, so Sasha can follow.

It's loud inside this ship. Sasha and the others put me in loud places before, many times. Sasha said it was conditioning. Loud places, hot places, cold places, small places. Places with strange smells I didn't like. The ship smells strange but I am used to the smells. Conditioning.

When Sasha put me here, he was very sad. He was crying, I don't know why. It made me sad. I have been with Sasha my whole life, and sometimes he has sad days. I cheer him up. I lick him, and give him one of my toys. It makes him smile. I licked his face when he put me in the ship, but it didn't cheer him up like all the other times. He become more sad, he cried harder, all his smells changed. He told me I was a good girl, but I couldn't make him happy.

The ship is getting louder. The whole place is shaking. The smells are changing. Heating steel, rushing ions, electricity moving faster through the computers. I still smell Sasha, I like his smell, it's my favorite.

Sasha and others said I would not be coming back home. But I don't know how that is possible. I have a strong nose, and I can run well, and I am a good girl and I love Sasha very much.

The ship is now louder, and it hurts my ears. I have been conditioned but this is much louder, the smells are much stronger than all the other times. Sasha was never sad when he put me in these places before. But this is different. Everything is different. So much louder. So much hotter. I hope I can cheer Sasha up, I hope I can be as good a girl as Laika.

\*\*\*

It's not so loud now. It has been a few days, I think. The ship is quieter, the smells not as strong. I feel very light. I knew this would happen, I learned it from my conditioning. It's hard to move around. I move my legs, but it's not

like walking, it more like swimming. I am a good swimmer. After long, hard days, Sasha would take me to my favorite lake. He would throw sticks for me, and I would swim out further than all the others and bring back the stick. This made Sasha very happy.

I still smell him in the ship. I am swimming in the ship and it is peaceful. There is a little window but there is nothing outside. It is night time. Sasha said it would always be night time where I was going. I do not mind. The night is nice, calm. Night-time means I get to go home and be with Sasha and watch television with him. He would give me treats and tell me not to tell the others. I never did. But it is night and I am not at Sasha's house....

My great grandmother, Laika, was in space for a week. She was brave, she taught the humans many things, even if she did not live long. Sasha reassured me that the humans had learn many things from her and from the many years of humans going to into space. He told me I would live much longer than my great grandmother. I have already lived longer than her. The others made sure I am kept cool and have water and food, and they trained me well.

Swimming in air is very tiring though. I will sleep. And try to remember lying next to Sasha on the couch. I will never tell a soul that he fed me treats I wasn't supposed to have.

\*\*\*

*Sasha! Sasha!* I call to his picture but he does not answer me. He cannot hear me. Can he even see me? He is telling me I am a good girl! He says that he misses me! *I miss you, Sasha! I am tired of swimming.* I see him but I cannot smell him. He is on a television. I only smell electricity. The ship smells less like him, so it is good to see him and good to hear his voice. *I miss you.* I know I am a good girl.

\*\*\*

It has been many, many days. I am very tired. I don't want to swim any more. I have not heard from Sasha again. He has not been on the television. It has gotten very cold in the ship. I do not smell Sasha any more...

\*\*\*

I lick Sasha's face. It tastes of glass, he smells like wires and lights, but I do not care. I am so happy to see him again. It has been many days. Too many days alone. *Sasha, I miss you! I want to go home!* He says this will be the last message he can send, that soon I will be too far away. I am going to Alpha Centauri. I don't know what or where that is, but no human has been there, so I will go first.

*Sasha, please stay! Don't leave me again!* I lick his glass face. He looks older, much older than when he put me in the ship. His face is all wrinkly, his hair is lighter. He is an old man. He told me this would happen... but I don't understand why. The screen goes black. I am alone. He said I was a good girl, but I am far away from him.

\*\*\*

It is very bright. I swim to the small window. Outside is very bright. Sasha and the others said I would go very fast and very far. I would go to Alpha Centauri. Sasha told me, one night when I was lying next to him on the couch, that I would go farther than any human or any other living thing from Earth would ever go. That it would only take me a month to get there. But for everyone on Earth, many, many years will have passed. I do not understand what he meant. I know it made him sad. So I licked his face until he smiled again. He said when I got to Alpha Centauri, he would be gone. He hugged me tight, he said he would miss me, but I was doing something amazing. Something great like my great grandmother. But like her, I would not be coming back. I would be gone to... gone like Sasha? Gone like his smell?

The light outside hurts my eyes. There is a bright thing outside. I think that is where I am going. Sasha and the others said I would not be coming back home. I would be going too far away to return, so I would go to the star they called it. The bright thing outside, I think that is the star.

I know Sasha and the others have been watching me; they told me they would even if I did not hear them or smell them or see them. They would watch me, and keep me safe. They are all good humans. Sasha is my favourite, because I got to go home with him and he would give me treats when I was not supposed to have them.

Sasha said it was best that I go to the star. That it wouldn't hurt when I went. They said it was humane. I will do what I am told. I am a good girl. I am smart, and loyal and good like Laika. Sasha is on the television. He looks young again, he looks the same as the day he put me in the ship. He talks to me. He says that I am a good girl, that I have taught the others many useful things. He says I am brave, that Laika would be proud of me. He says he is proud of me.

It is getting much, much brighter. The ship is hot. The smells of hot steel, melting wires. But no Sasha. I do not smell *Sasha!* I see him. He is sad, he is crying. I lick his face but I only taste glass. It is not him, it's a television.

*Sasha! I'm scared! I want to go home!* You are a good girl, he says. It's time for bed, he says. *Sasha. I want to go home it's too bright. It's too hot!* There is only hot light outside, the night is all gone. Sasha is smiling through his tears.

“You’re a good girl,” he says; “don’t tell anyone,” he says. Where the food comes out, a treat appears instead. It floats up to my nose. *I won’t tell anyone.* I am a good girl. I am the first.

-----

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #115 V.31 #1 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](http://OnSpec.com)

-----

## PREVIOUS PLANS FOR ESCAPE

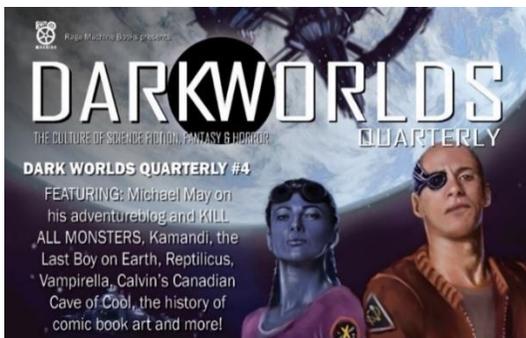
*by J. J. Steinfeld*

(Previously published in *Star\*Line*)

Broken time have you been captive  
on this peculiar little planet  
a hundred of their sad years  
the first of your species  
sent to explore for reasons  
long forgotten as you have been.  
Crawling through a dark prison  
constructed for your strangeness  
the corridor long and unfamiliar  
the sounds loud and sinister  
someone else's makeshift beliefs  
yet familiar photographs on walls  
of confinement and privation  
the blood on the ceiling  
reminds you of the sacred region  
of your distant in memory planet  
you have only injured swiftness  
left to get to the corridor's end  
into that place of journey's memory  
where a hidden spacecraft awaits  
but movement is nothing but mockery  
of previous plans for escape.

-----

### DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



Now an online blog featuring absolutely fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction books, magazines, and comics, often with a Canadian slant. Recent articles include:

- Bulwer-Lytton's *"The House and the Brain."*
- Second-hand Sorcery: Avalon's Barbarians.
- Caveman Hero Comics
- The Original Thongor Stories by Lin Carter.

Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)

# MIGHTY QUINN

*by Geoffrey Hart*

(Previously unpublished)

The reporter walked the hundred yards from his B&B and entered what he hoped would be the last pub in a long series of dashed hopes. He paused inside the door, resigned to the inevitable head to toe inspection, and when the regulars finished and returned to their quiet conversations, he walked up to the bar.

The barman looked up from polishing a glass. "Evening. What'll you have?"  
"Jameson, no ice."

The barman pulled a nearly empty bottle from the shelf and splashed some into a tumbler. "So what brings you to this part of Ireland?"

The reporter swirled the glass, took a deep sniff, and saluted the barman. "*Slainte!*" He took an appreciative sip. "Believe it or not, I'm here in search of the Mighty Quinn."

The bartender snorted. "You and everyone else."  
"Do tell."

"Nothing to tell. The Quinn's a legend, and about once per year, someone comes looking for the truth behind the legend."

The reporter cocked an eyebrow. "Do they ever *find* him?"

"Most find something."

"How might I become one of them?"

The bartender poured himself a stiff drink of the Jameson's, then poured the last of the bottle into the reporter's glass. "*Slainte!*" He downed half the whiskey in a single gulp, then met the reporter's eyes, appraising. "You're staying at the B&B?" The reporter nodded. No need to specify; there was only one, a short stroll across the moorland. "Then my best advice would be to turn right out the door in the morning, and continue up the road. The Quinn's usually out working the fields in the morning. It's not a sight you can miss."

"I'm grateful." The reporter downed the remainder of his drink, coughed, and laid a few euros on the bar. "I wish you a lovely night."

"And you a lovely morning on the morrow."

The next morning, the reporter set out on his quest. It was a sunny morning, dew still sparkling on the vegetation, and the aroma of greenery, and within a few minutes, he was out of sight of his B&B. It wasn't long before he came to a field littered with boulders ranging in size from waist-height to Stonehenge-tall standing stones. In the middle of the field, a small red-haired

man was moving the boulders. His arms were too short to tuck the stones beneath, so instead he pulled them from the dense sod, balanced them on his head and carried them that way to where he was building a wall. Then, with a bounce of his knees and tilt of his neck, he propelled the stones onto the growing pile.

The reporter was amazed at this feat of strength, and stopped, pleased by his good fortune. Surely this was the Mighty Quinn! He shouted to the farmer. “Sir! Excuse me, sir, might you have a moment?”

The farmer threw the current stone on the pile and approached. “And a very good morning to you sir. How might I be of aid?”

“I’ve come in search of the Mighty Quinn, and wondered if you might be him.”

The farmer blushed, turning red as his hair. “Bless you for your kindness, Sir, but I’m not the *Quinn*. I’m the *Finn*. The Quinn’s *strong!* But if you continue on up the road, you’re sure to find the Quinn out working in the fields.”

The reporter thanked the man and continued up the road. After a time, he came to another rocky field. In it, a medium-sized farmer was tilling the soil with a single-moldboard plow that he was pushing through the soil while an ancient and enormous draft horse stood by, watching. The man’s bald head gleamed in the sunlight. The reporter nodded. As the first farmer had said, it was easy to recognize the Quinn.

He shouted to the farmer. “Sir! Excuse me, sir, might you have a moment?”

The farmer held up an index finger, indicating he needed a moment. As he did, the horse ambled over, nuzzling at the reporter in hope of an apple. When the farmer had completed his row, he left the plow and strode over. Finding the horse between him and the reporter, he slid a hand under the horse’s belly and lifted him out of the way.

“How might I be of service to you this fine day?”

“I’ve come in search of the Mighty Quinn, and wondered if you might be him.”

The farmer smiled. “Not to gainsay your kindness, Sir, but I’m not the *Quinn*. I’m the *O’Brien*. The Quinn’s *strong!* But if you continue on up the road, you’re sure to find the Quinn out working in the fields.”

Shaking his head, the reporter thanked the man and continued on up the road. The sun had risen higher, and he soon found it necessary to remove his jacket. After a time, he came to another farmer, this one enormous—7 feet tall if he were an inch—with a mane of glossy black hair bound into a queue and flowing midway down his back. Under his left arm, he held a dozen thick fenceposts, each as long as the reporter was tall. With his right hand, he

plucked a post from under his arm and pushed it into the rocky soil. Then, with a blow from his fist, he pounded it a good yard deeper. Noticing the reporter, he laid down his poles and approached the road.

“Bide a moment... fence building’s thirsty work in this hot sun.” With that, he seized a pole and grasped it in both hands. Then he lifted it above his head, and wrung it like a rag until water ran out and filled his mouth. “Ah! Much better. So how can I help you?”

“I’ve come in search of the Mighty Quinn, and wondered if you might be him.”

The farmer smiled, and offered the reporter a second fencepost, which the reporter politely declined. “Away with your flattery! I’m the *Ó Branáin*, not the *Quinn*. The Quinn’s *strong!* But if you continue on up the road, you’re sure to find the Quinn out working in the fields.”

Shaking his head, the reporter carried on up the road, beginning to wonder whether he’d ever find the elusive man. After a time, he came to a field with a woman sitting beside it on a blanket, under a parasol, with a picnic basket open beside her. Her black hair flowed down her spine in a gleaming river, and her eyes were the blue of a mountain lake at sunset. In short, she was breathtakingly lovely. The reporter approached, wondering whether she might know the whereabouts of the Quinn. “Begging your pardon, Madame, but I was wondering if you might know where I could find the Mighty Quinn.”

The woman appraised the reporter from head to toe. “And why would you be wanting the Quinn?”

“I’m writing a story for a major American magazine.”

“Ah. Well, if you promise that this chat will be off the record...?”

The reporter thought a moment. “Agreed.”

The woman nodded. “Then *I’m* the Quinn.”

The reporter felt his jaw drop. He examined the woman, noted her slender arms and uncalloused hands, and shook his head. “That can’t be. The Quinn is strong—stronger even than the scarcely credible feats of strength I’ve seen all along this road.”

The woman shook her head. “Nay, it’s all a misunderstanding. One spurred by a phonetic error. The word you’re looking for is *queen*. The lad who spread all those rumors was Spanish, and one of you Americans just assumed he was mispronouncing Quinn. The rest, as you Americans say, is history.”

“And yet the Quinn is supposed to be mighty. No offence intended, but you hardly look mighty to me.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

The reporter was tired and frustrated, and so less civil than he might otherwise have been. “Undeceive me, then, Madame.”

The woman pursed her lips, and took a deep breath. Then, in a voice that shook the earth, she called out: “*Finn! O’Brien! Ó Branáin!* Get your *masa* down here.” From her basket, she took an iron kettle and two teacups. As she set them on the blanket, a dust cloud arose on the road, and before it could begin to settle, the three farmers the reporter had met earlier were standing before the blanket, hats in hand.

“Finn! I want tea. *Fresh* tea.”

The redhead looked at the angle of the sun, made an angle between his thumb and pointer finger, adjusted his facing, and ran off so fast that wind tore at the woman’s hair.

“*O’Brien!* *Fresh* cream. Swiss cream, mind you.”

The bald man repeated Finn’s gesture, and struck out north of the redhead’s trajectory, off like a shot, sun gleaming from his bald pate in the noon light.

“*Ó Branáin!* I’ve a craving for strawberries. *American* strawberries.”

The giant man looked at the angle of the sun, looked west, and sighed. Then he fled westward, black hair blown horizontal behind him from his speed.

The woman clucked disapprovingly. “Have you any Irish blood in your background?” she asked.

“Yes. My great grandparents came from Ballymoney. Left some time after the famine.”

The woman nodded. “A common tale of woe.” Before she could continue, O’Brien was back, a cap of melting snow on his head and a silver pitcher, condensation dripping from it, in his hand.

“We’ll need boiled water, O’Brien.”

Without a word, O’Brien set to rubbing his hands together so fast the eye saw nought but a blur. When smoke began rising from his palms, he placed his hands on either side of the kettle, and steam soon began rising from it. By the time the kettle was whistling, Finn had returned, clutching what looked to be a tea bush in one brawny grip and a take-out tray of samosas in the other. He held the bush out to the woman, who inspected it closely, then plucked a small handful of leaves and threw them into the teapot. After a few moments, she poured the water and began nibbling on a samosa.

By the time the tea had finished steeping, Ó Branáin had returned. He was dripping, an eel had become tangled in his fine black hair, and he stank of brine, but in one mighty fist, he clutched a basket of strawberries. The woman poured some of the cream into a bowl, neatly beheaded a handful of strawberries with a tiny paring knife, and dropped them into the cream.

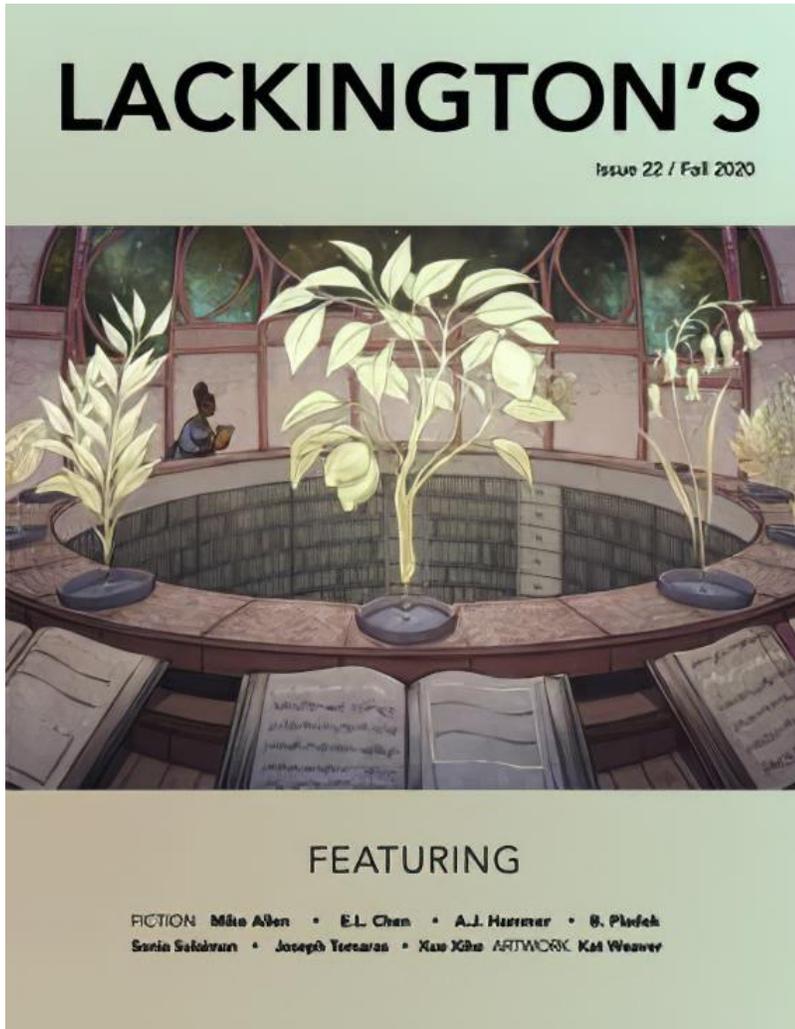
“Will you have some tea with me, Mister...?”

“O’Connor. Yes, ma’am, I’d be delighted.”

“And have you learned anything today?”

O’Connor thought about it a moment. “The legends clearly didn’t lie. The Mighty Queen?” The four men exchanged glances, then spoke simultaneously: “*She’s strong.*”

-----



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 #22, Fall 2020.

Cover – by P. Emerson Williams

*“Lost and Found: Recollections of Space and Time”* at the Museum of Thousandfold

Worlds – by Xue Xihe

*Collections* – by E.L. Chen

*The Feather Stitch*

– by Mike Allen

*Tatreez* – by Sonia Sulaiman

*What the Marsh Remembers*

– by B. Pladek

*Sokal* – by Joseph Tomaras

*Learning Tihluhan in the*

*14th Century* – by A.J. Hammer

See [Lackington's #22](#)

-----

### 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/>

# CRYPTIC

*by Lisa Timpf*

(Previously unpublished)

Despite all our years of cohabitation  
humans still find it hard to read a cat's mind,  
let alone their face, and the news article  
discusses that, even provides a quiz,

so you can test your skills, and I decide  
to try it, figuring, after having been owned by  
a cat for a few years, I've learned a thing  
or two. Or so you'd think. But I'm here to tell you

the test is cryptic. My performance is dismal,  
barely better than I might have achieved  
flipping a coin, which makes me wonder,  
what if it's really *cats* who are behind this quiz

and each time the link is clicked, they cluster  
around a computer in some secluded lab,  
eyes intent, tails twitching, as the results roll in.  
They stand there in white jackets with their names

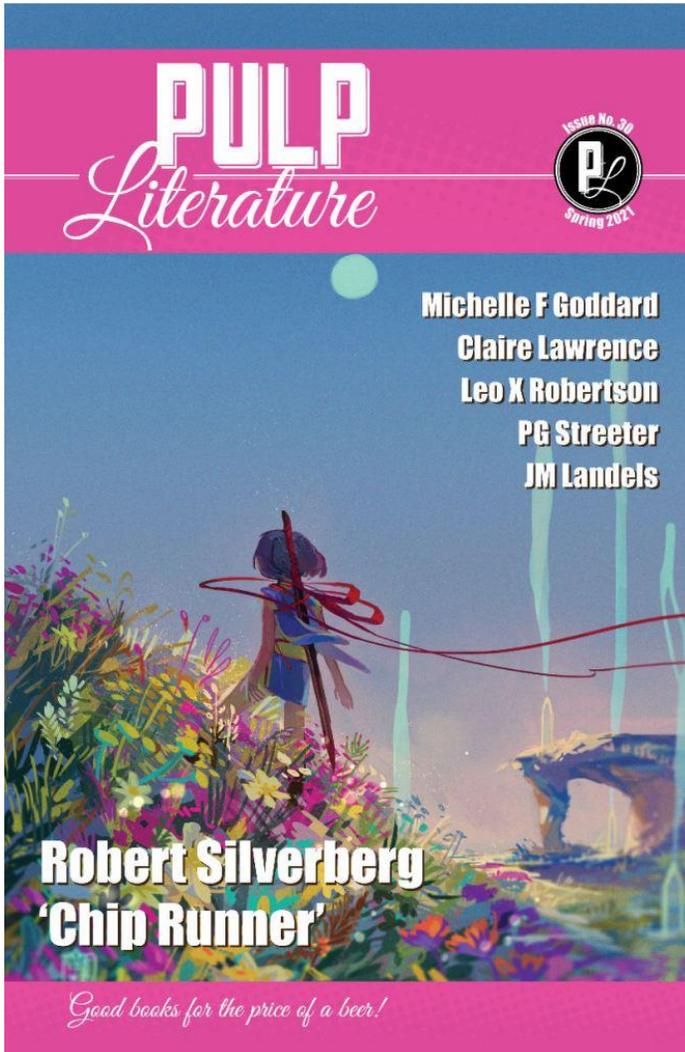
embroidered on the left side, Bolt and Truffles  
and Jinx and Emmitt, Mamba and Furball,  
Ripley and Rogue, all the tabbies and calicos,  
the Russian blues, the Persian long-hairs, the Siamese,

their faces inscrutable. Not for them the drooling,  
tail-wagging, ear-twitching, grinning  
obsequiousness of canines, the urgent need  
to please. If dogs are an open book, cats

are a cryptogram, a handful of zen koans,  
the sound of a single hand clapping  
an off-beat rhythm. And as they collate the data,  
feline reserve cracks, and the cats give each other

high fives (or, in the case of the polydactyls, high sixes) as they confirm for themselves humans don't understand them at all. Which, as far as they're concerned, is just about purrfect.

-----



### **PULP LITERATURE #30 Spring 2021**

**Cover:** *Superbloom* – by Weiwei Xu

**Contents:**

- Chiprunner* – by Robert Silverberg
- Barhopping for Astronauts* – by Leo X Robertson
- Bhut* – by Michelle Goddard
- The Shepherdess: Merveilles* – by JM Landels
- The Smell of Screaming* – by Adrienne Gruber
- Life Supports* – by Claire Lawrence
- Good Intentions* – by Nancy Ludmerer
- It Can Be Done with Words* – by Erin MacNair
- Heaven or Las Vegas* – by Paige Elizabeth Wadja
- The Earth Has Bubbles* – PG Streeter
- Edna St Vincent Millay's "O World"* – by Phoebe Mol
- The Extra: Frankie Ray and the Blazing Anubis* – by Mel Anastasiou

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #30](#)

-----

### **2021 AURORA AWARDS (for works in 2020)**

The finalists have been nominated. May 29, the voter's package (nominated works) for free reading becomes available. June 27, an online AGM takes place. July 31, voting begins, and closes Sept 4. Awards happen online in October. To check out details go to: [Aurora Awards](#)

# LEAST CONSCIOUS UNIT

*By David F. Shultz*

(Previously unpublished)

The campfire popped and crackled. Night creatures of the forest croaked and rustled in the trees. Warm rays of the fire illuminated the group, serene and meditative, so far removed from human civilization that the latter might well not exist.

Staring into the shifting flames, the professor let his mind wander; and he remembered how he used to fear the boogeyman. In those long nights spent fighting against eyelids that grew heavy, monstrous shapes lurked in his room among shadows cast by moonbeams. The darkness would twist and turn in terrifying ways until morphing at last into the dreaded boogeyman. He would know then that he'd fallen asleep. The creature emerged from the dark shadows of his psyche, its mouth open in an impossibly gaping maw. Then it would lunge. Gangly, clawed limbs dug into his body. Gnarled teeth sank deep into his flesh. The pain seemed real enough until he managed to wake.

The professor had overcome his childhood fear of the boogeyman. The monster was a harmless figment of his imagination. There were no boogeymen, except those that haunt the dreams of children.

A strange noise interrupted his ruminations: a whirring, oscillating hum. *BVRVBVRVBVRVBVRV*. The baffling sound did not suit the dense woodlands. He listened carefully, past the sounds of the campfire, past the rustling of leaves in the wind. The sound emanated from all directions, both close and far away at the same time.

*BVRVBVRVBVRVBVRV*. He recognized it from somewhere, but the significance escaped him. He turned his mind from the noise, back to the students, gathered for the outdoor retreat.

“My research goal is to measure consciousness,” the professor explained. “Lord Kelvin said that before you can really understand something you need to measure it. Until you can express something in numbers, your knowledge does not reach the stage of science. My research concerns the LCU—the Least Conscious Unit. It corresponds to the theoretical minimum complexity of an information processing system required to produce conscious experience...

“...Where does consciousness begin? Are worms conscious? Is their experience much different from our own, and if so, how? Is the pain of a mouse more or less significant than the pain of a human? At what level of complexity might virtual people in a computer simulation develop

consciousness or the capacity to suffer? And there is one more question that is particularly pertinent for the present occasion, on which I would like you all to focus.” The professor leaned forward. “Since we know the human brain creates consciousness, could sub-processes within the human brain create separate streams of consciousness? Could characters in a dream have their own conscious experience, separate from the dreamer?”

The students reflected silently. Why was this question “particularly pertinent”? Then it hit them all at once. The forest was an aspect of the professor’s mind. This campfire was his dream, and so were the characters around it—and so were they. Mere fragments of personalities. No memories, no home to go to when the fire died, no names.

One student spoke, sullen and disconcerted. “If we’re just characters in a dream—if everything we do and think is a product of your brain—doesn’t that make our existence meaningless?”

“Not at all,” the professor said. “You’re right of course that my brain determines your thoughts. But this is no different from the situation I find myself in. After all, the laws of physics control my thoughts—electrical impulses, chemical reactions, physiological processes. The brain is just a complex game of billiards. Ultimately, I have no more control over my thoughts than you do over yours. But determinism doesn’t imply that our lives are meaningless. Or, if it does, then it does so just as much for you as it does for me.”

“And what happens when you wake up? What happens to us?”

“You’ll all still exist as dormant sub-processes somewhere within my brain. You won’t experience anything, until I see you again.”

“That’s not entirely true,” the professor’s research assistant said.

“Oh! I didn’t see you there.”

“I’ve got some exciting news. If you recall, we were conducting a scan last night. You went to sleep in the neuro-imager to record your dream state.”

The professor recalled lying down inside the tubular metal scanner the previous night, struggling to fall asleep. The worst part was the constant drone of the machinery: *BVRVBVRVBVRVBVRV*.

He now recognized the noise around him. The humming throughout the forest was the sound of the neuro-imager. He was still dreaming within the tube.

“You’ll be happy to know we’ve got excellent readings from the brain scan,” the professor’s assistant said. “We’ve fed all the data into the simulator.”

“Great. I can’t wait to have a look.”

“You and I are already going over the results now in your office.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“The scan of your dream is running on the computer, just like all the other experiments—scan the dream-state, run the simulator, isolate the Least Conscious Unit, then run it on the computer. You know the drill.”

He was inside the simulator. The professor had previously imagined his excitement at proving conscious experience could exist within a computer simulation. But in his imagination he was always on the outside of the simulator looking at the data. Now he found himself trapped inside, and it was not excitement he felt, but a creeping, soul-chilling dread. “You’re saying I’m inside the computer?”

“Yes. Or more accurately, a copy of part of the professor’s brain is running inside the computer. A copy of his dream state.”

What was his name? Did he have one? Or was he just the professor?

“Jesus,” the professor said. “I’m a simulation?”

“You’re a simulation of part the professor's brain—recorded while he was dreaming.”

“How many cycles is the simulation set for?”

“Why are you asking me? You designed the protocols.”

“That’s right, I did. Okay. Ten thousand and twenty-four cycles, rate of roughly one-hundred-k-to-1 simulation-time to dream-time, with five minutes per cycle, that would mean—” he shook his head. “I can’t do math right now.” Or perhaps he couldn’t do math at all. He didn’t often do math in his dreams, and perhaps that ability was not recorded into the simulation.

“It’s about a thousand,” his assistant said.

“A thousand days? I'm going to be stuck in here a thousand days?”

“No. That’s years.”

“A thousand years?”

“From your point of view, yes. But the simulation will take less than four hours in real time.”

“One thousand years,” he said. “No. I can’t be trapped in here for a thousand years! You’ve got to get me out of here.” He spun to face the campfire. The dark forest surrounded him in all directions. The warmth of the fire was gone, replaced by a biting wind. He was alone in the darkness.

Something rustled in the bushes. The professor froze. A tall, gangly silhouette hunched in the brush. Red eyes glowered. The grotesque creature grinned with a wide row of snaggle-toothed fangs. The boogeyman.

“Turn off the simulator,” the professor screamed to the sky.

No one was there to hear him. He was completely alone in the simulator. Alone with only the products of his dreaming mind. Alone with the boogeyman.

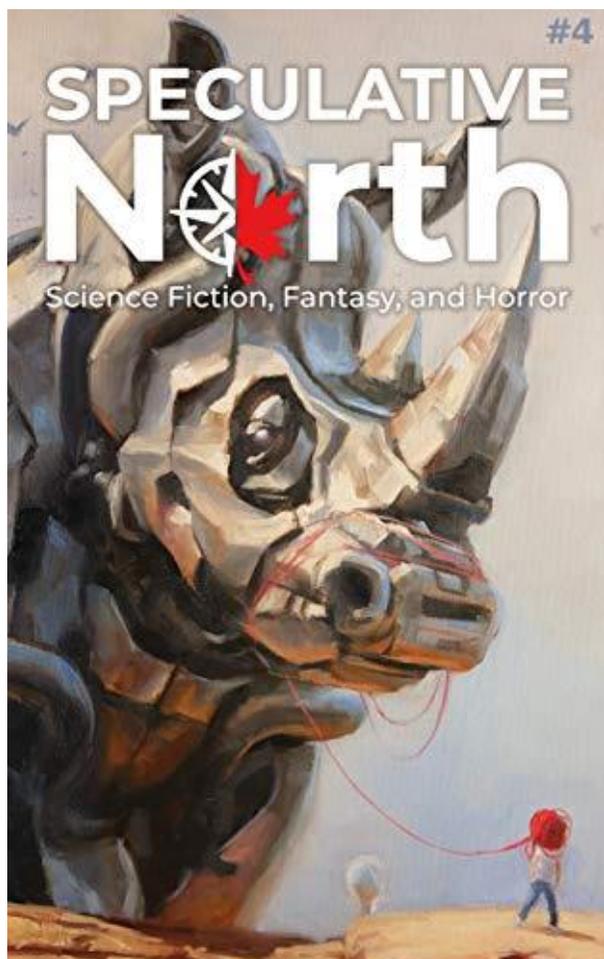
“It’s not a dream,” the professor screamed. “It’s a nightmare!”

The creature crawled hungrily towards him, and for the first time he heard it speak.

“Your experiment worked, professor,” it said, with a deep, demonic growl. “Now I am as real as you.”

-----

### SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #4, February 2021



#### FICTION:

*The Cat's Tale*

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

*Crystal Ash* – by Atalanti Evgripidou

*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](#)

-----

### VCON 2021 VIRTUAL CONVENTION

An actual physical, in-person convention, though planned, is still problematic. However, come Hell or high water, there WILL be a virtual online VCON October 15-17. Will feature online art show and dealers' room, plus chat rooms, panels, lectures, demonstrations and workshops. Anyone who buys a supporting membership gets to attend, and can upgrade to physically attend if and when physical venue confirmed. Details: [VCON Online](#) Purchase supporting membership: [VCON 2021](#)

## GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT

by KB Nelson

(Previously unpublished)

The man with the pinto beard  
shied into a corner of the food court at the mall,  
a location where all the city could pass by and he,  
anonymous in the mass, could watch  
and report relevant information to homeworld station,

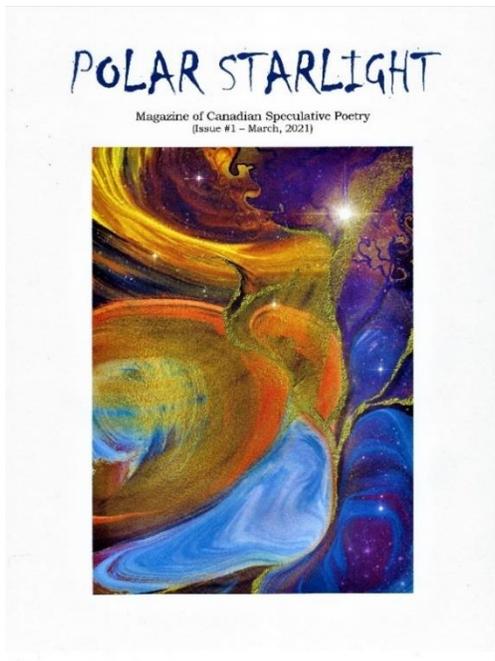
the cephalic hair, not the only poor choice but the most obvious;  
mismatched ears, another aberration, hidden by the pied hairstyle.

Planet-hopping pioneers who'd provided base parameters  
had failed to notice a glitch, a brief cessation in the transmission.

One crucial point lost in sunspot noise:  
bilaterally symmetrical  
configuration.

-----

**POLAR STARLIGHT**, a brand-new online Magazine devoted to Canadian Speculative Poetry.



It is 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.

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

The first issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, M. Sean Dowd, Bernadette Gabay Dyer, LeRoy Norman, Neile Graham, KB Nelson, Elizabeth Page, Lynne Sargent, David F. Shultz, Virginia Stark, Richard Stevenson, and Marcie Lynn Tentchoff.

The second issue will be published in either late May or early June.

Download #1 for free at: <http://www.polarborealis.ca>

# THE TALE OF EMPRESS SARASSA AND THE PILGRIM

*by Robert Dawson*

(Previously unpublished)

One day, in the early years of her reign, Empress Sarassa the Wise was sitting in the audience room of the fabled Iridium Palace, reading the month's agricultural reports and checking the statistical analyses. A palace guard came and knelt before her.

"Your Majesty," he said, "there is a man at the Spiral Gate, a pilgrim from a distant world, who seeks an audience with you."

Because the stranger had traveled far, and because of her well-known magnanimity, Empress Sarassa told the guard to admit him to the audience room.

The pilgrim came into the room and stood in front of her. "Mother of Wisdom," he said, "I have come to beg a favor."

"What would that be?" the young Empress asked.

"They say that your scientists are the cleverest in the Galaxy, and what they cannot make cannot be made."

The Empress smiled, for she was proud of her laboratories. "And what would you have them make?"

"Your Majesty, I am ashamed to say."

"But if you do not tell us, how can we grant it?"

"Most Excellent Lady," he replied, "I was a monk for thirty years, and for all those years I tried to master the weaknesses of the flesh. Two years ago I realized that I would never be strong enough, unless I had a body of steel that could not lead my mind into sin; and so I left the monastery and became a pilgrim, traveling from world to world in search of such a body."

"Wouldn't it make you stronger to face your weaknesses, even imperfectly?" asked Sarassa.

"I have tried since I was a novice, and I cannot," he said. "Please, Your Majesty, have your technicians fashion me a body of steel."

The Empress took pity. "Thirty years is a long time," she said, and pressed a button. Soon her chief roboticist appeared before her.

"This man desires a body of steel," she said. "Can you make it for him?"

The roboticist raised an eyebrow. "We can. But... are you sure, Your Majesty?"

"No, we are not; but he seems quite certain. So we shall grant his wish."

"As you desire, Your Majesty." The roboticist took the pilgrim away, and

soon his brain was housed in a body of steel that never led him again into sin. The palace gardener buried the old body under a willow tree.

\*\*\*

For many years Empress Sarassa saw no more of the pilgrim. Then, one day, he appeared again at the Spiral Gate; and once more she had him admitted to her presence.

“Is your new body satisfactory?” she asked graciously.

“Yes, indeed, Your Majesty,” he said. “But my brain is weak and unpredictable. I have fallen prey to insomnia, absent-mindedness, and gossip. I have heard that your cyberneticists could copy my mind into a brain of silicon and gold that would never err.”

“That may be so,” said the Empress, scratching her cheek with a gilded fingernail. “But wouldn’t you grow wiser by living with your errors?”

“For forty years the errors of my brain have led my body to foolish acts,” said the pilgrim. “I beg you, have pity on me.”

And so Empress Sarassa summoned her cyberneticists; and they told her that while they had never done such a thing before, there was a first time for everything, and that very likely they could do it. And soon the pilgrim’s mind was housed in a brain of silicon and gold, and erred no more; and the palace gardener buried the old brain under a rose bush.

\*\*\*

Years later, the pilgrim appeared once more at the Spiral Gate, and once more the Empress had him admitted, acknowledging his presence with an arthritic nod of her gray head. “Is your body still satisfactory?” she asked.

“Yes, gracious Empress.”

“And your new brain?”

“My brain, for which I am forever grateful to Your Majesty, works perfectly. But there is one more favor that I crave.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“My body does exactly what my brain tells it to do,” said the pilgrim. “And my brain acts just as my spirit wills, without error. But I am still bound to earth and time.”

“We do not see how we can help you with that,” said Empress Sarassa.

“I’ve heard that any computer program, whether a trivial script to add two numbers or something as complicated as that which flickers in my own brain, can be reduced to a single number; and that the program is the number, and the number is the program. And the outcome of the program lies in the number as the oak tree lies in the acorn.”

“We shall consult the Court Mathematicians,” said the Empress. And, after some head scratching and argument, the mathematicians, mentioning arcane names from ancient times such as “Gödel” and “Turing,” agreed that what the pilgrim said was, in some sense, true.

“Then, Your Majesty, have your mathematicians compute that number for my mind,” he said. “And then destroy this brain and this body, so that I may live forever free of earth and time.”

But Empress Sarassa shook her head. “You are being foolish,” she said. “That number, like all numbers, already exists. What good could computing it do?”

And at that moment, it is said, the pilgrim achieved enlightenment.

-----



### 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](#)

-----

### CORFLU 39, THE CONVENTION FOR FANZINE FANS

In-person Coflu 39 is tentatively planned to take place in Vancouver, British Columbia, March 18-20 2022, pending Covid developments. Venue: possibly Best Western Plus Sands Hotel in West End.

Devoted to SF&F fanzine fandom. For membership, room booking, and other info, go to [Corflu 39 info](#)

*by Melanie Marttila*

(Previously unpublished)

I am

## A POET'S APPRENTICE

learning words;  
noun and adjective,  
verb and adverb.  
Putting them together  
in little sentences—  
she won't let me play  
with big ones yet.

But she's left me alone  
just for a minute  
with this big cauldron  
teeming with letters  
and other viscera.  
Before she returns  
I grab the ladle  
and gulp,  
burning my mouth  
with potent brew.

Then I run  
me and my belly full of words,  
out the Dutch-door,  
through muddied fields  
of hay stubble,  
to the tree with leaves of paper,  
draw forth the quill—  
stolen from a feather duster—  
prick my thumb  
for ink.

Then.

I write.

# VICA VR

*by Martin Munks*

(Previously published in *Lit Up*)

I am sitting on a raised stage, in a sturdy but comfortable leather armchair, feeling the smooth coolness of it under my fingertips. Across from me is Lana Michelson, host of *Lana Tonight*. Her talk show airs on NBCNN, one of only two major news stations left, and pulls in the most viewers of any program on cable TV. Not nearly as many as I do, of course. But a respectable amount for a flat show.

The set smells artificially fresh and sweet, like they sprayed it just before I sat down, but it still has that hot metal of old studio lights. The crowd is mostly middle-aged women, twenty-or-so years older than my average viewer, and not nearly as valuable to advertisers. They're murmuring quietly while they wait for the show to start.

Lana's producer stops by to whisper something into her ear, too quiet for me to pick up. A red clock overhead ticks silently to 20:29:26.

*Lana Tonight* starts at 8:30pm. My show, meanwhile, never stops.

I glance down and to the right, which triggers my HUD to jump to full transparency. It shows me that, right now, 78 million people are watching through my eyes on their Vica VR headsets, seeing what I see, being what I am. A strong showing, but still far behind my space jump, and my date with Sadie Blue, and a dozen other exploits of mine. The average is in the 20–30 million range, and I haven't seen it dip below a quarter million for years—not even while I'm sleeping. Frankly, I don't even know if it's possible to go that low anymore.

Beneath the viewer count is the comment feed, scrolling by in a blur. Vica's algorithm plucks out a few of the most popular ones to show me: "Good luck!!" "I LOVE U!!" "Watch out for her tricks!" "Give 'er hell, Danny!"

My fans are incredibly supportive and attached to my success. It also helps that I've autoblocked the negative ones.

"In ten!" shouts a crew member.

The house lights come down. I take a breath. Lana smiles at me, and I wink back. She laughs.

The *Lana Tonight* intro music plays over the loudspeakers hanging around the studio, short and catchy with some urgency to it. Red lights blink to tell the audience it's time to applaud. They do, but it's quiet and half-hearted

compared to what you'd usually hear on the screen. The producers must pump it up in post.

Cameras on long boom arms swing in close to the two of us. The studio lights fade up.

"Welcome to *Lana Tonight!*" she says as the mild applause dies completely. "Our guest tonight is none other than Danny Hall, Vica streamer and self-proclaimed Most Popular Person On Earth. Hello Danny, thanks for coming on my show."

"Thanks for being on mine," I say, pointing to my headset. The audience is silent. I feel like that deserved at least a chuckle.

"Now, you've been in the news recently after—"

"Well hold on, hold on," I interrupt. "I just want to talk for a second about that introduction you gave me."

"Okay, talk."

"I'm not the 'self-proclaimed' most popular. I just wanna clear that up. It's fact. *Wired* said that. They crunched the numbers, they wrote the article proving I'm more popular than the politicians, the celebrities, more popular than all the West kids put together. I just retweeted it." There's a hiss coming from somewhere in the audience. "I know, I know. But I just want to set the record straight. Sometimes I feel like the legacy media goes out of their way to paint me as some self-centred jerk, and I don't think they're playing fair."

"So you think your reputation as a self-centred jerk is undeserved?"

"I do, I do. I get why people say it, though. I focus on myself a lot, which I guess is the definition of self-centred. But that's because I'm the product. My fans see everything I see, and do everything I do. And I'm constantly saying what I think out loud—unfiltered—which is sometimes not the nicest to hear. But I do it because the only thing they *can't* experience are my thoughts. I want to be honest, I want to be real, so that the people being along with me get a true sense of what I'm thinking."

"You say 'being' along with you?"

"Yeah! It's not just watching. Here, look." I run a finger along my Vica Cam, the lightweight, plastic horseshoe that wraps around behind my head. It's like a pair of glasses worn backwards, with cameras on the tips that would normally fit behind your ears. "Everyone knows about Vica by now, right? The cameras capture everything I see in real time," I saying, pointing to my eyes. "Microphones here and here. And for people at home wearing VR headsets, it's a perfect visual and audio feed. They're seeing and hearing my life. Cool, right? But! I also have a TasteBud," I stick out my tongue to show the stud embedded in it, "and a Sniffstream," I tap the sensor on my nose, "so that fans can taste what I taste and smell what I smell. That's why the food segments are so

popular. And then about two years ago I added a Sensieve, which is this a false disc in my spine which digitizes all the sensations travelling through my body, which means—”

“—which means they feel everything.”

“Everything. Pleasure and pain.”

“Are there any limits?”

“To an extent. I had to set a maximum on pain after Senator Johnson body-slammed me through a table.”

“Any limits to what you will do for people to experience, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course,” I say. “There are obviously things that my advertisers won’t support, but you’d be surprised. Still, I try to be family friendly. I don’t do drugs or alcohol, even though lots of other Vica streamers do. I try not to swear. All of my sexual exploits are age-gated. But again, the things I do, it’s not for me. It’s just, it’s what the people want to experience.”

“So you’re not acting this way because you’re a narcissistic, self-centred—”

“—egomaniacal, vain, pompous—”

Lana laughs. “Right. You’re not selfish, you’re acting this way because that’s what your fans want to see.”

“Be,” I correct. “What they want to be. That’s what this is. TV lets you watch someone else, Vica lets you *be* someone else. One minute you’re me, the next you’re President Gabbard, the next you’re an orphan on the streets of Mumbai. You can live a day as your best friend, or your enemy, or your mom or dad. You can be a dog! How amazing is that! It just—Vica builds empathy and understanding in a way flat TV never could. You can do anything, and be anyone.”

“And what about the people who are *just* you? Can we talk about them?”

“Ah, here it comes,” I say with a chuckle.

“Well, the people here want to know how you feel about Vica dorms,” she says. “And for those of you at home who aren’t following the recent news, Vica dorms are warehouses where people are hooked into Vica feeds all day, every day. Some of them for years now, living every moment through streamers like Danny while they’re stored on a shelf. NBCNN did an exposé about the conditions inside of them about a month ago which caused quite a stir. A number of your advertisers threatened to leave because of it.”

“They did threaten to, yes. But we settled that, that’s over.”

“And then just last week, Congress upheld an act—”

“—the Right to Persistence Act—”

“—the Right to Persistence Act,” she echoes, “which continues to make it illegal to disconnect someone from Vica without their permission.”

“It can be bewildering,” I add.

“I’m sure it can. So yes, let’s talk about that for a second.”

“Vica dorms or the Right to Persistence?”

“Both.”

I take a deep breath. “The Right to Persistence Act, I think, is about freedom. I think that’s important. But for the Vica dorms? Of course I don’t like them,” I say. “But it’s not my decision. They’re all consenting adults. When they hook in at a dorm, they sign all the papers, they make the agreements. I can’t stop them. And look, you close them down in the US and people will just move to China, move to Malaysia, or Thailand. Mexico. The conditions in those dorms are even worse.”

“But you do know that more than half of the people living in Vica dorms are hooked into your feed, don’t you? And that because they’ve signed those papers—because of the Right to Persistence—their own families can’t disconnect them.”

“I, well,” I pause to collect myself and choose my words carefully. “Look. I take people on adventures. Incredible, amazing adventures. I know this is going to sound egotistical again, but why *wouldn’t* someone want to be me? 99.9% of the world lives in relative poverty, and I give them an affordable way to escape that. To see what it’s like to be rich, to be beautiful, to be popular, to be famous. To date a celebrity! To be in a movie! To go, I don’t know. I mean, hundreds of millions of people went to *space* with me! How many of them would have gotten to go otherwise?” I turn to the crowd. “I’m ‘a conduit of the ultimate human experience’. Vice said that. And that people have an option to live a better life? I think that’s something to be celebrated.”

“But you don’t think they’re missing out? Shouldn’t they be able to live their own life? To make their own decisions? If they only live through you, is that truly a life worth living?”

I feel my heart racing, and a fire in my face. “No, of course not. I can’t help it if some people lack the control—the self-control—to turn off,” I say, putting my hands up. “Look. It’s entertainment. Like TV, like, like news programs like yours. It’s about moderation. Go to school, go to work, take care of your family. And then if you want to spend an hour or two as me at the end of the night, then yes. That’s great. I’m honoured.”

“But you *can* pull your show from the dorms,” Lana tells me. “That’s within your power?”

“If I start deciding who can and can’t be me, that’s, that’s censorship. That’s not the answer. Now I’m not happy about it—”

“Are you happy about the subscription fees they pay you?”

“Again, I’m not putting a gun to their heads. They can decide at any time to leave.”

“And how about the ones who no longer can?” Lana asks. “The ones who have had their muscles atrophy to the point where they can’t lift their arms to remove their headsets? Or have had their throats dry up from disuse? Without help, they’re essentially stuck in there. They’re stuck in you.”

“Yeah, but—”

“What’s even worse is that recent studies are saying that the experience is so immersive that after as little as two months, a viewer—sorry, a be-er—might actually start believing that they *are* you.”

“I’m not saying it’s a perfect system. But, I feel like I’m being unfairly targeted here. Vica has problems, but so does any platform. That’s just the way it is.”

“That’s the way it is.”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Lana says. A long breath slows the show. “Okay Danny. I have some special guests for you today.”

I’m surprised. This wasn’t in the show notes. “You do?”

“I do. Why don’t you stand up?” she says, turning to the crowd.

I follow her gaze. The entire audience stands up, and the house lights come on full so that I can see them.

“I want you to take a good look at this audience,” Lana says to me. “A really good look. Scan them all one by one.”

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Just humour me, Danny.”

I sigh. “Fine, all right.” I slowly scan across the crowd, one face at a time. Everyone is old and plain and sad looking. Not just sad—angry. They’re frowning at me, scowling, some staring back like they’re going to jump onto the stage and strangle me. I feel myself sweating. “Okay. Done,” I say.

“Did you recognize any of them?” Lana asks.

I shake my head. “No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Never seen any of them before in my life,” I lie.

Lana stands up and walks to the edge of the stage, waving her hand across the crowd. “Every person in the audience tonight is a parent, or grandparent, or sibling, of somebody who is trapped in a Vica dorm,” Lana explains. “Relatives of a person who has withered away on a shelf, who is being fed through a tube into their stomachs, who has their bowels emptied with a vacuum.”

She keeps talking, but I’m not listening anymore. I’m concentrating on a face in my peripheral vision. Trying to force it into focus.

“Look, like I said, I can’t control that,” I say. “They’re consenting adults. They signed the paperwork, they—”

“David!” shouts a voice from the crowd. A woman’s voice. A voice I recognize.

In an instant everyone is yelling and screaming, shouting every name at once. Eyes, my eyes, peer into the crowd, scanning over the angry people.

I see her. Just for a second, I see her.

I see Mom.

“Listen, I don’t—I can’t be here if you can’t keep your audience under control,” I say. But it’s not me saying it.

“Right now, while one family member is here in our audience, another one is sitting in a Vica Dorm,” Lana says, standing and raising her voice over the crowd. “Sitting next to someone who is trapped inside your head. Sitting next to you.” She points right at me.

I stand up and I don’t feel the chair anymore. My head tilts down and I see fingers rip a microphone from my chest. “I’m not doing this anymore,” says my voice.

But Lana grabs my shoulders, and looks into my eyes. No. Into the cameras. “If you’re listening,” she says, “and you want out, just say it. Say ‘out’.”

Hands push her away and my view turns toward the rafters. I’m running now, running backstage. Running past crew members, past angry faces.

“Just say ‘out!’” shouts her voice from far away.

I try to speak. Nothing works. I suddenly feel grit in my throat, like I’ve swallowed sand. My vision shakes as I push through a door and outside. Hands shove photographers out of the way. Flashes go off. I cover my face and look away, which triggers my HUD. It fills with comments: “Say out!” “OUT OUT OUT!” “u can do it!!”

Something cool drips onto my lips. Reflexively, they part. More droplets follow, into my mouth this time. Cool. Moist. A million miles away, my tongue peels away from my cheek and licks at the droplets. I swallow and it’s like drinking shards of glass.

I’m running through the streets. There is a crowd there. Strangers dash in front of me, look into my eyes. “Say ‘out!’” they yell. I look away. “Say ‘out!’” screams another.

Danny dives me into a limousine. He says something to the driver. There should be a sensation of movement, acceleration, weight pressed down and back against the seat, the scent of leather. But I feel the falseness of it now. Unnatural. Uncanny. Digital signals converted into analog. It nauseates me.

I close my eyes to shut it off. I focus my thoughts. I will my lips to move.

I want out.

All my strength, every ounce of energy I have left, is gathered to form a whisper, a gasp, and I croak a syllable that has been strangled for years.

“Out.”

Something tugs at my back and my nerves explode in pain and soreness. The city sounds of cars and horns shift and transform into beeps of electrical equipment and hissing fans. The view of the limousine is ripped away from me, up and to the sky, disappearing in a pinprick of white as night reclaims my vision.

I feel the world again.

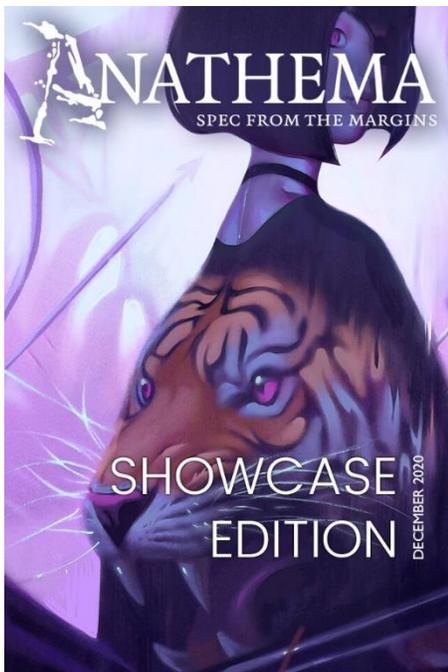
It’s awful.

I am lying on a mattress, lumpy, covered in sticky plastic. My body feels sweaty and clammy and cool. I smell musty air, and body odour, and the stale sting of urine. I see cables and blinking LED lights against the walls that are painted a mottled brown of indifference.

Across from me is my father. Older than I remember, more gaunt than I remember. He sees my eyes and I see back. He sighs and smiles and cries and shudders, all in one movement. I watch him squeeze a bony claw at the end of a brittle twig. I feel the squeeze, his fingers in my fingers, the sensation running up my arm, through my spine, into my brain.

“Welcome back,” my father says.

-----



## ANATHEMA MAGAZINE ISSUE 12

*A Complex Filament of Light* – S. Qiouyi Lu  
*Aqua Mirabilis* – Stephanie Chan  
*Never Yawn Under a Banyan Tree* – Nibedita Sen  
*“Punch God (in the Face),” by the Harmonnes*  
– by Brendan O’Brien  
*Eruption* – by Jaymee Goh  
*White Noise* – by Kai Hudson  
*A Whistle on the Drum* – by Mir Plemmons  
*The Bridge* – by Joyce Ching  
*The Pull of the Herd* – by Suzan Palumbo  
*Control* – by Davian Aw  
*There are Ghosts Here* – by Dominique Dickey  
And more ... Find it here: [Anathema #12](#)

# INTERNAL MICROCLIMATES

*by Lynne Sargent*

(Previously unpublished)

Here I am:

See my hands open to service,  
unblemished, my voice soft with only  
kindness.

But my throat was not always so clean.  
Once, it held frogs, warm and wet  
they grew

my body terroir for their slime,  
their warts.

Once a geyser in my diaphragm erupted  
once a day, forcing  
clear white phlegm

the purging of a childhood  
of atomistic centering, be like  
the family, be reptilian

have all the jewels  
and hoard them.

How lucky I am  
that kind acts are always open,  
that I can make the world

dry, and soft,  
and warm.

-----

# PROFESSOR PANDEMONIUM'S CARNIVAL OF CHAOS

*by Lena Ng*

(Previously unpublished)

First came a drop in temperature: the warm winds of summer gave way to chill autumn gusts, bringing with it a whiff of distant popcorn and cotton candy which drifted on the heels of shedding leaves.

Then it was the posters, awash in lurid colours of red and yellow: the Human Torso, a man consisting of a head and chest, placed on a cushion like a pearl; the Strong Man, with a long, sharp moustache and bulging biceps; the Webbed Creature from the Deep who carried a barely-clad woman. All kinds of technicolour monsters leering out from their paper prisons. Posters which were stapled on telephone poles and hung in the windows of the laundromat, behind the bars of the convenience store, on the dingy walls of the vacuum repair shop. The whites of the images' eyes carried a yellow tinge and they seemed to stare at you as you walked past. "Professor Pandemonium's Carnival of Chaos" read the slogan beneath an image of a rabid wolf's outstretched, slavering jaws. "One night only."

Finally, we saw the resurrection of a tent on the outskirts of town: striped in red and white, bigger than a church. It seemed to cast a long shadow.

The carnival had come to town.

I was fifteen at the time, a boy big for my age, but my brain still had a ways to go. On the day of the carnival, I went with my grandfather, a grizzled old man of beard and sinew, and tattooed skin sleeves of skulls and roses. Since it was a gray day of mist and drizzle, no one else wanted to go and he said he'd come along to keep me company.

We gave our tickets to a gaunt man whose face was covered in white make-up. The make-up was so thick, his face looked like a macabre death mask with empty holes for eyes emerging from it. I couldn't help but stare.

Inside the gates, the calliope's music ran slowly, in a jerky manner, like that of a music box winding down. The carnival's games seemed odd and dark. The barkers called to us. "Come here, boy," one called, who was wearing a red-stained shirt, like that of a butcher. He balanced a glass bottle with murky water on his palm, containing a fist-sized, round piece of meat. "Don't you want to win a heart in a jar?"

Another held cages with cane toads that croaked. The man himself had a broad, frog-like face. "Cold-blooded pets," he called. "Step right up for a cold-blooded pet."

We moved past the hawkers selling scorpions on sticks and crickets leashed by a red string. An automaton, which looked like a ventriloquist's dummy wearing a swath of red cloth wrapped around its lacquered wooden head, was encased in glass. It had a sign overhead that said "Truth-teller. Ask your questions." I peered at it through the glass and shrank back as it swivelled on its base and clacked open its jaws.

Finally, I saw a game I was familiar with—target shooting with a BB gun. I fired off three shots, but the balloons, the size of tomatoes with a cartoon devil's face printed on them, remained unpopped.

Grandpa held out his gnarled hand for the gun. "Here, kid. Let me show you how it's done." He aimed the BB gun and shot the blue balloon in the top right corner. Then in quick succession, he shot the green balloon in the top left corner and red balloon dead centre. He handed the gun back to the game operator. "Grew up on a farm. Learned to shoot an acorn from between a squirrel's paws." He let me pick out a prize. I chose a big, plastic sword with a blue glass jewel in its hilt, as though it were forged by barbarian. I tied it within its sheath to my back.

We made our way through the makeshift rows of the carnival stalls, passing tables of strange curiosities of many limbs and heads. We walked by a poster reading "Madame Le Fou, Palm Reader and Fortune-Teller." Grandpa gave me a wink. "Let's see what she has to say about you," he said.

I pushed back the red velvet curtain, the fringed tassels dragging on the floor. Madame Le Fou sat at a table which was covered in black linen. She wore heavy make-up with kohl-rimmed eyes and violent, red-stained lips. "What is your name, boy?" she asked.

"Kane," I replied.

The corners of Madame Le Fou's lips turned up and she held out her hand. Grandpa reached into his back pocket and gave her a five-dollar bill. She tucked it into the waistband of her skirt before she gazed into her crystal ball, tracing her scarlet nails over its surface. She furrowed her brow. "Tonight, you will face the challenge of a lifetime. You will either learn to meet this challenge..." the crystal ball magnified further her widened eyes.

"Or what?" I asked. I saw nothing in the crystal aside from her reflection.

Madame Le Fou looked up at me with a ghost-white face, the candle light illuminating her fear. "Or you will die."

Grandpa snorted. "Let's go," he said, pulling on my arm.

We wandered around the rest of the carnival until we reached the red-and-white striped tent at the centre of the fairgrounds. A painting on a wooden easel stood beside the tent's entrance. Like the posters around town, it read "Professor Pandemonium's Carnival of Chaos." The professor's darkly-cast,

hypnotic face was in the centre of the painting. He was surrounded by ugly, dog-like demons, jaws bared, with yellow eyes, wormy red veins escaping from their irises.

We took a seat upon the bleachers. People jostled around us to get a seat. I waved to one of our neighbours, Mr. Lawson, who used to work behind the meat counter at the grocery store before his old knee injury flared up and he went on disability. He now walked with a cane. I nodded at a couple kids from school, John and Aaron; nice kids, but we didn't run in the same circles. I didn't run in any circles. I kept to myself and didn't have any close friends.

The lights dimmed. A drum-roll sounded. There was a bang and a puff of smoke and a spotlight turned to the centre of the ring where a man appeared from the ether. He was a compact man with a head of gleaming dark hair, his face adorned by a sharply trimmed moustache and goatee. He wore a red double-breasted jacket, black breeches with knee-high riding boots, and a matching black top hat. He looked like the debonair Devil himself, holding a coiled leather whip.

The audience went silent. The ringmaster opened his arms. "Welcome, everyone, to the Carnival of Chaos. I am your host, Professor Pandemonium." He gave a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Tonight, I will show you the wicked wonders of the world. Tonight, on the autumn equinox, when the night grows longer than the day, when the boundaries of fantasy and reality blur and weaken and break, on this night, lives will lengthen and lives will be lost."

His voice held such command, yet I didn't understand all that he had said. The giant belching organ in the right of the tent began to play by itself, no musician at its helm, a melody ominous and menacing.

The music abruptly halted. The Professor reached into his pocket and threw something upon the ground. When the smoke cleared, the Professor stood outside a blue-lit dome which seemed to be made from light and energy. A loud bang and a flash of light, and within the dome, a monster appeared. It must have been a man in a costume, but the costume looked real. It was the size of a rhino, with foot-long spikes down the spine and a heavy, dog-like head with weighty jaws and large, glowing eyes. It growled and pawed at the ground.

The organ began playing again. With each crash of a discordant chord, another explosion, another flash of light, and inside the dome, another monster appeared. A giant, slug-like mass nestled on a tangle of eight, spidery legs. A dragon's head on a snake's body; the flames from its breath licked the dome but remained contained within.

The audience gasped. The Professor held a hand towards these horrific creatures. "These are the monsters of my imagination. Tonight, the boundary

into reality will break, and the fantasy will be made real.” He said some strange words, a spell perhaps. “*Fantasy ad realitatem*. Arise, my children. *Ab ortu solis usque ad occasum, carpe noctem*.”

My grandfather muttered the translation. “Fantasy to reality. From sunset to sunrise, seize the night.”

Above us, the tent flap to the sky was pulled open and the moonlight shone upon the dome. With an electric sizzle, the blue light of the dome sank to the ground, forming a circular outline of light on the floor. The monsters stood before us uncaged.

The dog demon was the first to attack. Bounding into the bleachers, the audience scattered, screaming. Mr. Lawson, cane in hand, arose from the metal bench and stumbled. The dog demon was upon him, jaws clamped around his shoulder, tearing his arm from his body, blood dripping from its massive jaws. It crunched Mr. Lawson’s head as though it were an egg before dragging the remains through the portal of blue light in the centre of the floor. Grampa grabbed me and we started running as the flames of the dragon scorched overhead, setting the striped tent on fire.

My chest ached as we sprinted down the aisles which had, in the dark, turned into a maze. The wooden truth-teller turned and clacked its jaws as we raced past. Its turban was the same colour as the flames. A look came over Grandpa’s face and he turned to face the automaton. “Why is this happening?”

The automaton’s eyes lit up. It said in a melodious, mechanical voice, “The Professor has sold his soul to live forever. But he must pay a price. One year for one life. The monsters drag the souls to hell, and for each, the professor gets another year on earth.” The eyes went dark.

Grandpa banged on the glass. “Well, how can we defeat them?”

The automaton’s eyes lit up and it clacked his jaws. “By turning fantasy into reality.”

“What? How?” screamed my grandfather, but a flame shot out and the glass case holding the automaton exploded. The truth-teller was set on fire.

We ran through the carnival stalls, each one along our path going up in flames as the dragon monster pursued us. Screams seemed to surround us as we dashed past the target shooting game. Grandpa yanked me to a stop. “Hold on a minute,” he said. “The night when fantasy will be made real.” He grabbed a BB gun. “Let’s try it out.” He concentrated for a moment, trying to remember the words “*Fantasy ad realitatem*.” The gun seemed to grow heavier in his hands, and the BBs that he had held clenched in his fist, when he opened his hand, had turned into bullets.

I pulled out the plastic sword from its sheath, still carried on my back. Grandpa repeated the words, “*Fantasy ad realitatem*.” The plastic blade

gleamed into sharpened steel. It grew heavy in my hands and I awkwardly tried to hold it in a way where it would cut my opponent instead of myself.

A flash of flame as the dragon monster slithered closer. Grandpa turned and shot off two bullets in quick succession. Two small glints of light as the bullets ricocheted off the armoured scales. I held the blade and hacked at the dragon's tail. Grandpa grabbed me by the neck of my t-shirt as the flame shot towards me. He dragged me under a table. I held the sword close to my chest.

As the dragon monster screeched, Grandpa put a hand on my shoulder. "*Fantasy ad realitatem*," he said. My veins felt like they were set on fire. We got out from under the table and I held out the sword, the blue from the jewel's hilt glowing in the night air. The awkward weight of the sword turned familiar, as though it were a steely extension of my arm. Amazed, I spun the sword first with my right hand, then with my left, the edge of the blade reflecting the moonlight.

I held the sword in front of me as the flame bore down. The dragon's fire split into two, deflecting it away from me. It attacked, baring its teeth with outstretched jaws. I lunged, and with both hands around the hilt, plunged the sword upward through the top of the dragon's open mouth. With a last, blistering groan, the dragon fell heavily upon its side.

The rays of the distant dawn released tendrils of light throughout the carnival. The dragon's body started sizzling when touched by the light. It disappeared into cinders. We raced back to the remains of the striped tent. Again, I held out the sword. I felt the white-hot hatred of Professor Pandemonium's glare as he leapt through blue portal in the floor. His two remaining monsters followed, squeezing through the shrinking portal, each dragging with it a twisted and broken body. The portal disappeared as the sunlight grew stronger. The sword grew lighter in my hands as it turned back into a toy.

Thirteen souls were lost that night. Thirteen years on earth gained, stretching longer that life that was based on blood, on innocent souls. Now, thirteen years have gusted by, and the autumn winds are gathering again. I can smell the carnival in the distance. The powers of the blade, they lasted for only that one night. But since then I've trained with the best fencers and swordsmen and sharp shooters in the country. When the lurid posters go back up and carnival comes back to town...

I know the words.

I'll be armed.

I'll be ready.

This time, he won't escape.

-----



## FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE

Content of issue #5

*A Vial of Electric Blue* – by Vanessa Fogg  
*Animal Hour* – by Ian Donnell Arbuckle  
*Desert Animals at Night* – by Jess Koch  
*Otherwhen* – by Zandra Renwick  
*Starship Solitaire* – by David F. Shultz  
*The Stumblybum Alternative* – by Christopher Hawkins  
*Winter's Song* – by Spencer Nitkey

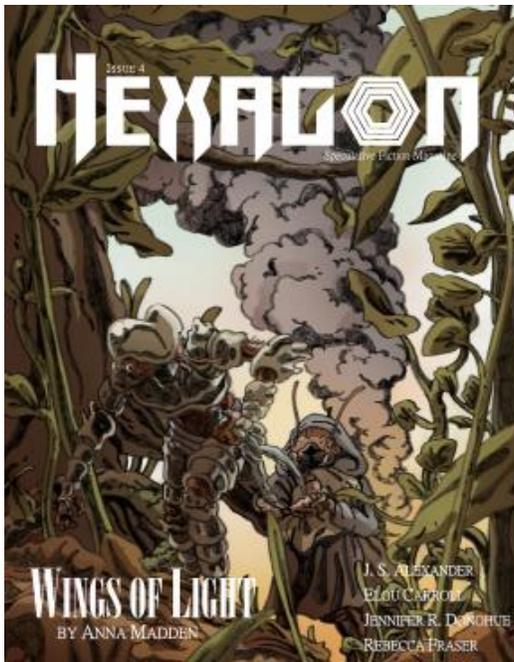
Check it out at: [Fusion Fragment #5](#)

-----

## SMOFCON 39, THE CON FOR CONVENTION RUNNERS

The secret masters of Fandom will meet in Lisboa, Portugal, 3-5 December, 2021. Numerous panels and lectures will explore the intricacies of putting on SF&F conventions. If Covid still a problem, much of the con will be virtual. Supporting membership is good for virtual version. If in-person becomes feasible, can upgrade to full membership. For details go to: [Smofcon 39](#)

-----



## 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.”

*A Witch, a Gift, and a Wakening of Honey*  
– by Elou Carroll  
*Serpentine* – by Rebecca Fraser  
*How Do You Grow?* – by Jennifer R. Donahue  
*Our Nomadic Forest* – by J.S. Alexander  
*Wings of Light* – by Anna Madden  
*Interview with Anna Madden*  
*Quick Sip Reviews* – by Charles Payseur

Check it out at: [Hexagon #4](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

### **Alistair Bibby**

Alistair resides on Salt Spring Island. When they are not stomping around in the woods looking for birds, they can be found hunched over the computer working on an upcoming science-fiction novel. *Good Girl* is Alistair's first published short story.

-----

### **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.swatichavda.com](http://www.swatichavda.com) and [www.thewritingvault.com](http://www.thewritingvault.com)

-----

### **Robert Dawson**

Robert teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. In his spare time he writes, fences, and hikes. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *AE*, *Perihelion*, and numerous other periodicals and anthologies. He is a graduate of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops.

-----

## **Greg Fewer**

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

-----

## **Geoffrey Hart**

Geoff (he/him) works as a scientific editor, specializing in helping scientists who have English as their second language publish their research. He also writes fiction in his spare time, and has sold 34 stories thus far. Visit him online at [www.geoff-hart.com](http://www.geoff-hart.com).

Note: *Masa* = Irish for buttocks. The Irish side of Geoff's family does indeed come from Ballymoney, but this O'Connor's no relation so far as he knows.

-----

## **Pamela Kenney**

Pamela is a Calgary writer who likes to incorporate humour into her books and short stories. She's the author of a series of cozy mysteries about a retired police officer who can't seem to stop finding dead bodies. Her work has also been featured in anthologies such as *knucklehead Noir* published by Coffin Hop Press.

-----

## **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.

email: [melanie.marttila@gmail.com](mailto:melanie.marttila@gmail.com)

blog: <https://www.melaniemarttila.ca>

Facebook: <https://facebook.com/melanie.marttila>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MelanieMarttila>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melanie-marttila-20868047>

-----

### **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](mailto:martin@martinmunks.com). He'd be thrilled to bits.

-----

### **KB Nelson**

KB Nelson is a Canadian writer who thrives in the intersection of art and science. She has won awards in both poetry and short fiction. You can find her work in a variety of publications including *SurVision*, *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, *Sea-To-Sky Review*, and *Polar Starlight*. KB has resided from coast to coast in Canada; in Arizona; and in New Zealand; and currently lives on the sunshine coast of B.C.

-----

### **Lena Ng**

Lena Ng dwells in the eternal winter of Toronto, Ontario. She tiptoes at night so no one knows she's awake. She has short stories in three dozen publications including *Amazing Stories*, from Australia, Canada, the United States and the UK. *Under an Autumn Moon* is her short story collection. She is

currently seeking a publisher for her novel, *Darkness Beckons*, a Gothic Romance.

-----

### **Lynne Sargent**

Lynne is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D. candidate currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has been nominated for Rhysling and Aurora Awards, and has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Their first collection, *A Refuge of Tales* is out now from Renaissance Press. To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS or for a complete bibliography visit them at [scribbledshadows.wordpress.com](http://scribbledshadows.wordpress.com).

-----

### **Douglas Shimizu**

Douglas lives in Vancouver where he enjoys writing, drawing and photography. Blues is actually meant to be lyrics for a blues song. If you have a standard blues song pattern in your head while you read it, maybe you can hear it.

-----

### **David Shultz**

David writes from Toronto, Ontario, where he organizes the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers group and is lead editor of *Speculative North* magazine. Author webpage: [davidfshultz.com](http://davidfshultz.com)

-----

### **Garth Spencer**

Garth has been a prominent Canadian science fiction fan since his university days in the 1970s. He won the first fan Achievement Aurora Award (back then known as the Casper Award) in 1986 “for his editing of *The Maple Leaf Rag* and for his Dedication to Canadian Fandom.” Since then he has

published and edited numerous fanzines, often addressing the trials and tribulations of the fandom of the day, most recently *The Obdurate Eye* which can be found at efanazines.com. Garth is also the O.E. of E-APA, an all-digital Amateur Press Association which comes out monthly. He is noted for his satiric sense of humour and his eternal quest to explore the whys and wherefores of the vagaries of human nature. He likes to think, he does.

-----

### **J.J. Steinfeld**

Poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published twenty-one books, including *Identity Dreams and Memory Sounds* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2014), *Madhouses in Heaven, Castles in Hell* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2015), *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), and *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020). A new poetry collection, *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential*, is forthcoming from Guernica Editions in fall 2021.

For his most recent publication, *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement*, see: <https://49thshelf.com/Books/M/Morning-Bafflement-and-Timeless-Puzzlement>

For his forthcoming publication, *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential*, see: <https://www.guernicaeditions.com/title/9781771836043>

-----

### **Marcie Lynn Tentchoff**

Marcie is a writer/poet/editor from B.C.'s rain-soaked Sunshine Coast. She lives surrounded by deep, dense underbrush and various noisy animals, both human and not. Her latest poetry collection, *Midnight Comes Early*, is due out from Hiraeth Publishing in early 2021.

-----

## Lisa Timpf

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

-----

## AFTERWORDS

*by The Graeme*

What is the biggest problem facing writers?

The fact that they are writers. Even professional, well-established authors are prey to periodic bouts of impostor syndrome and self-doubt. And someone like me, who has never sold a novel or a short story since I began writing more than half a century ago, tends to sit down at my writing desk feeling like a fraud. And yet I write. I feel compelled to write. Heck of a hobby.

Besides, the worst that can happen is that no editor will ever choose to publish me. I already know what that's like. No big deal. Daily life.

Thing is I remain optimistic. I like what I write. I'm not unique. There must be others out there with similar tastes. They might like my stuff, too. That I write for me means I write for them. Guaranteed readership.

Yes, there's more competition than ever before, and fewer mainstream publishers, but a quick perusal of the ads in this issue shows there's a surprising number of SF&F magazine publishers in Canada. A bit of diligent research will prove to you there are all sorts of Indie and regional publishers as well. And then there's the huge international market.

Best of all, and this is why you can relax and feel at ease, if the vast international conspiracy of editors dedicated to hating your guts continues to reject you (a conspiracy theory as invalid as all the others, by the way), you can always self-publish. It ain't easy, but it *is* possible.

"But if I self-publish I'll never get rich!" you protest.

Of course not. You're a writer. Writers never get rich. Most earn below the poverty line. But, if they're lucky, they *can* be read. Be honest. Isn't that why you write? So that others can enjoy your writing as much as you do? So, write.