

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #19 – August/September 2021)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

2020 Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction

Issue #19 – August/ September 2021 (Vol.6#3.WN#19)

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

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< [The Graeme](mailto:R.Graeme.Cameron@gmail.com) >

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

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ART CREDITS

COVER – “The Spider” by Akem

EDITORIAL

Covid continues to plague us. The Delta variant is in play now. Plenty of letters left in the alphabet. Undoubtedly more mutant variants will appear. Could be years before wars and drought are all we have to worry about. You know, before we're back to normal life.

Well, my Grandparents survived the 1919 pandemic. I intend to emulate them. I've had my shots. I continue to take precautions, and I continue to make the best of things and enjoy life as much as I can.

That means staying at home working on projects such as this, the 19th issue of *Polar Borealis* Magazine. I figure it's a good one, chock full of interesting and entertaining stuff.

And now that I've completed this publication, I can turn my attention to the third issue of *Polar Starlight* Magazine, entirely devoted to Canadian genre poetry as edited by Rhea Rose. Should get that out sometime in September. Then on to the 20th issue of *Polar Borealis*.

Meanwhile, most weeks, I manage to produce another review of Canadian Speclit books and magazines for Steve Davidson's *Amazing Stories* (online) Magazine. I be a busy lad. That be the point. Staying at home because of Covid is no curse for me.

Don't let it be a curse for you. It gives you more time for reading, which as any reader knows, is something akin to paradise.

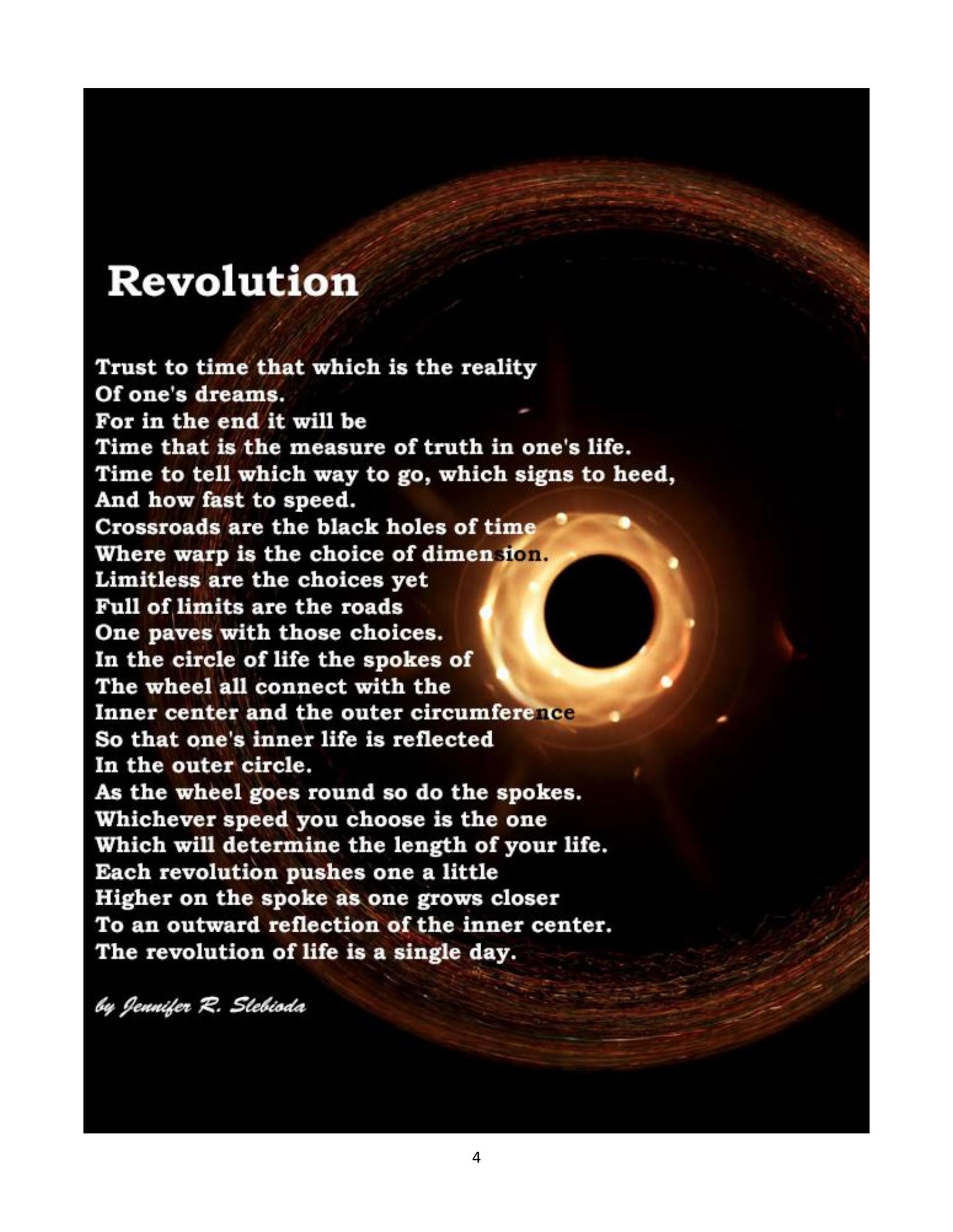
Even better, if you're a writer, more time for writing.

Lately I've been keeping to a daily schedule working on the first draft of my science fiction novel, averaging over a thousand words a day. Currently up to 23,000 words or about 60 pages. Aiming for a minimum length of 70,000 words.

I've written novels before. Just haven't published any. This one's fate may be different. Instead of extensive research and elaborate note-taking, which was my habit in the past, I've avoided research and made no notes whatsoever. The entire novel is being written off the top of my head, making it up as I go along. My daily goal is three pages, with each chapter nine pages in length. My method is to read the last three pages I wrote before going to bed and reading them again when I wake up. Then I start writing.

This makes sense. My 70-year-old brain isn't much good at juggling memorized information anymore. But spur-of-the-moment ad hoc thinking based on latest impressions is something I can still do. This is the basis of my new writing technique. Seems to be working. Try it sometime.

Cheers! Graeme



Revolution

Trust to time that which is the reality
Of one's dreams.
For in the end it will be
Time that is the measure of truth in one's life.
Time to tell which way to go, which signs to heed,
And how fast to speed.
Crossroads are the black holes of time
Where warp is the choice of dimension.
Limitless are the choices yet
Full of limits are the roads
One paves with those choices.
In the circle of life the spokes of
The wheel all connect with the
Inner center and the outer circumference
So that one's inner life is reflected
In the outer circle.
As the wheel goes round so do the spokes.
Whichever speed you choose is the one
Which will determine the length of your life.
Each revolution pushes one a little
Higher on the spoke as one grows closer
To an outward reflection of the inner center.
The revolution of life is a single day.

by Jennifer R. Stebiada

FISH EYE

By Byrne Montgomery

(Previously unpublished)

Just as the saying goes—curiosity can kill. I know this to be true. Curiosity killed me.

Daybreak. Looking out at the bay for the gazillionth time, checking the winds, scanning the sky and the swell, as all fishermen consistently do, I noticed something out of the ordinary. One of the five large rocks we all avoid while piloting the tight harbour had no seagulls grouped on it. Why?

With hours to kill before our boat's scheduled departure, I rowed out to the abandoned boulder for answers.

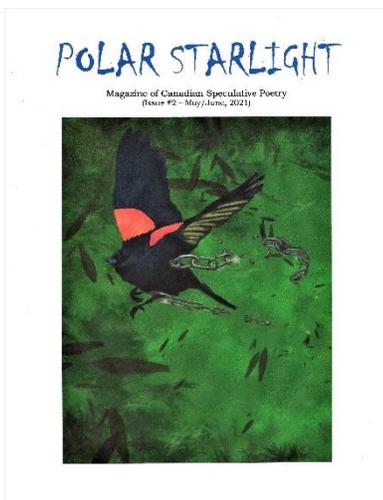
About the size of my living room, the rock was peppered with holes—each filled with a jelly-like substance—similar to the eyeball of a large fish.

Curious, I bent down and touched one of these mysterious unearthly eyes. Instantly I felt myself becoming smaller—shrinking—followed by an intense feeling of being consumed alive.

The sky is clear today, the swell at a minimum. This is good.

It's extremely uncomfortable when waves wash over our tiny rock sanctuary. I have no way to wipe the salt sting from my eye.

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 comes out four times a year in-between issues of *Polar Borealis Magazine* and is free to download. Each issue will feature cover art and 16 poems.

Cover of the second issue, *Break Away*, is by David F. Shultz.

The second issue contains poetry by Neile Graham, Marcie Lyn Tentchoff, Carolyn Clink, James Grotkowski, Changming Yuan, Robert Stevenson, Roxanne Barbour, Carla Stein, Josh Connors, and A.O. Wallat.

The third issue will be published in late September, 2021.

Download #2 for free at: [Polar Starlight #2](#)

ANCIENT CITY UNCOVERED

by Roxanne Barbour

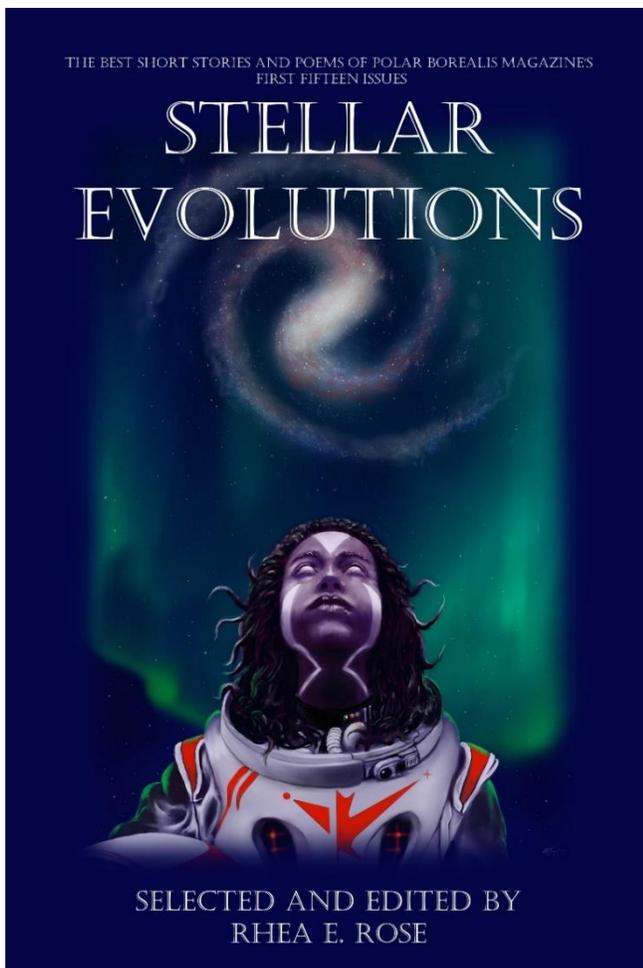
(Previously unpublished)

ocean evaporation
tablets revealed
sky contamination

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](#)

POP-UPS

by Robert Dawson

(Previously published in *Nature Futures*.)

I was half-starved, my head ached from a long day of selling commonplace vacations to difficult customers, and if I missed the 5:17 dronebus it would be an hour till the next one. Without slowing from my clumsy run, I cybervisualized the timetable. Bus times hovered in front of me in glowing red letters, while a calm voice told me that my bus was running four minutes late and that I could catch it at a walk. Gratefully, I cancelled the app, and let myself relax. I was out of breath, my shirt was wet with perspiration under my jacket, and my shins hurt from the unaccustomed exercise in office shoes. For a twenty-six-year-old, I was in poor shape.

I got to the stop just in time. As the bus slowed to a halt, a sultry and not-overdressed brunette materialized in front of me. She leaned provocatively against the bus shelter, hip jutted, blocking my way onto the bus.

“Hey there, big boy!” she breathed. “Want to make yourself irresistible to women?” Her perfume made my nose tickle and my eyes water. Real perfume would have been illegal in a public place, but they claim that nobody’s really allergic to stimplant sensations. All in your mind. Yeah, sure.

I stepped through her onto the bus, swiped my card, and turned towards the rear. There she was again, standing among the other passengers, toying with a button of her tight blouse. “Didn’t you hear me, honey? I’m here to tell you how to get any woman you want. Me, for instance.”

The door chimed and closed. The bus started moving; those of us who were standing swayed and braced ourselves against the acceleration. She stood motionless in front of me, ignoring the handrail, brazenly flouting Newton’s laws of motion.

Where the hell was her cancel button? So far only a few maverick advertisers ignored the law outright, but more and more popup designers were making the buttons inconspicuous, forcing you to spend time interacting with their creations before you could exorcise them. Last year’s ubiquitous red circle-X was a wistful memory of more civilized times.

There it was, a tiny silver glyph like a piercing stud on her pouting lower lip. I reached out my finger, like choosing a floor in an old-fashioned elevator, but she shook her head. “Unh, unh, studmuffin. It doesn’t work like that. Even bad girls deserve a goodbye kiss.”

I muttered something ungentlemanly, leaned forward, and pecked at her

intangible lips: she vanished. I glanced quickly around, but apparently nobody had noticed. There was still an empty seat, beside a white-haired woman wearing jeans and a powder-blue sweater. I sat down before I could make myself any more conspicuous.

From under the seat came a sinister rattle. A big brown and white snake slithered out and started to weave menacing loops on the floor around my feet. Its back bore the name of the Prime Minister, in clear block capitals. I stepped on its head; it vanished with a puff of smoke, and the rattle stopped.

“Aaaah! That’s better, isn’t it?” said a soothing friendly voice that came from everywhere at once and only I could hear. “This June, vote for real change!”

The woman beside me was looking at my foot. “Was that the snake, dear?”

“Yes,” I admitted. Across the aisle, a thin girl with dreadlocks seemed to be picking something out of thin air. “Sometimes I wish I’d never got stimplanted. You know, I actually believe the government’s doing an okay job, but stepping on the snake is the only way to get rid of it. Otherwise it follows me around all day and gets louder and louder. And even then it just keeps coming back.”

“Oh, I hate that one!”

“You mean you've got a stimplant too? Sorry, that was rude. I apologize.”

“It is mainly a young people’s thing, isn’t it? But my son works in Shanghai and my daughter’s in Lagos. And it’s almost like being in the same room with them.”

“But is it worth the popups? I need my stimplant for my sales job, but otherwise...”

A tiger, the mascot of a breakfast cereal that I had bought a few times, stalked along the aisle, and paused in front of me.

“Have you had *your* Quinoa Puffs today?” it asked reproachfully, and walked on.

She gave me a sympathetic half-smile, and nodded. “I almost got mine taken out last month, though it would have broken my heart. But I got an ad-blocking patch instead.”

“I thought those didn’t work?”

“My son works for Cybella. He gave me a copy of their newest product. That was thoughtful of him, wasn’t it? It would have cost me three hundred dollars otherwise, and I’m on a fixed income.”

Worth every dime, I thought. “Where could I buy it?”

“I think you can download it. I’m not absolutely sure, though, because mine was a present.”

I brought up my visual display and googled. Sure enough: Cybella, Shanghai. “Adprufe?”

She smiled. “That’s it, dear.” She patted my arm, almost too gently to feel.

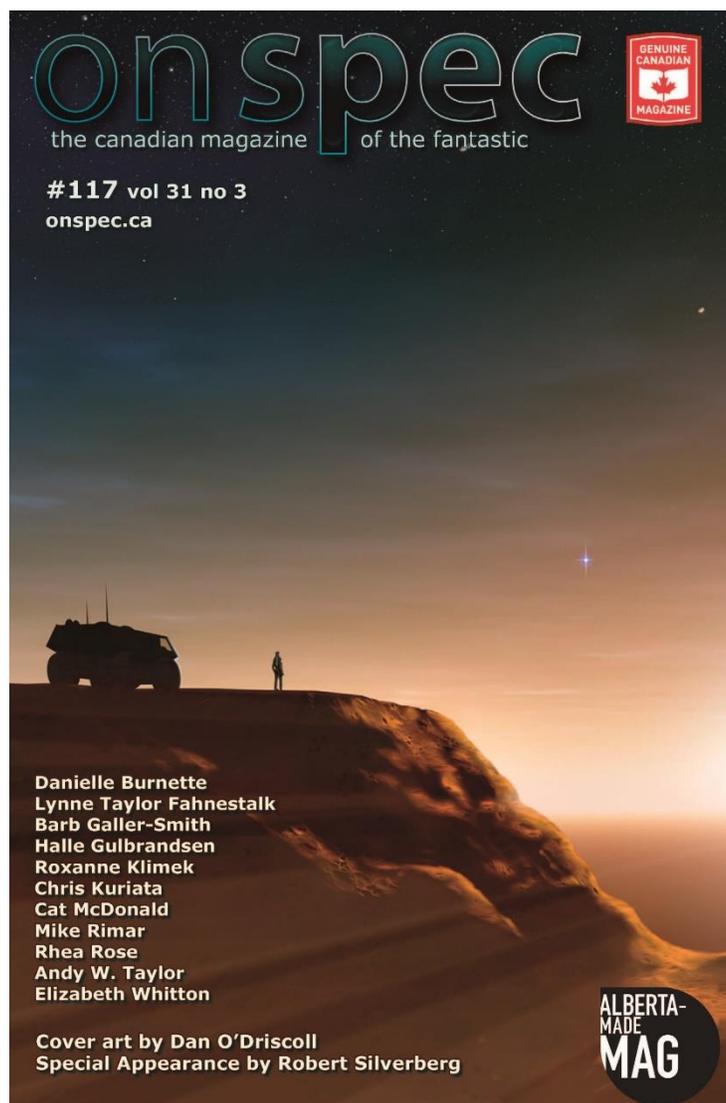
I authorized the payment so eagerly that I made a mistake on my password, and had to try again. After a few seconds, the world around me began to fizz and sparkle as the patch installed. I smelled mint green and tasted furry pentagons; a million ice-cold ball bearings slithered over my skin.

When my senses cleared, the seat beside me was empty.

I guess I’m slow on the uptake. I actually looked up and down the bus to see where she’d gone.

And then, from somewhere under my seat, I heard an all-too-familiar rattle.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #116 V.31 #3



FICTION:

- The Next Waltz* – by Mike Rimar
- Grandpa’s Eye on the Afterlife*
– by Chris Kuriata
- Capricorn Games* – by Robert Silverberg
- Sugar Moths* – by Danielle Burnette
- Flies in the Fibres* – by Roxanne Klimek
- Rec and Dec* – by Andy W. Taylor
- Elisa’s Eyes* – by Elizabeth Whitton
- Little Wild Girls* – by Halle Gulbrandson
- Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited* – Rhea Rose

COVER: *Red Planet, Blue Star*
– by Dan O’Driscoll

NON-FICTION:

- Editorial: Stories Are Like Wine*
– by Barb Galler-Smith
- “Red World, Blue Star” Artist Interview with Dan O’Driscoll*
Author Interview with Halle Gulbrandson
– by Cat McDonald
- Bots: “Steampunk Whizbot”*
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
- “Ancestors” cartoon*
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Get it at: [On Spec #117](#)

THEM + US

by James Grotkowski

(Previously unpublished)

people of Vega
have no spring or love
some Earthlings do

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published 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 32:

Cover: *Tie Die Nebula* – by Karl and Stephanie Johanson

The Day the Earth Didn't Stand Still – by Craig Bowsby

The Forgotten City – by Kate Kelly

Weaponized Boredom – by Karl Johanson

Other When – by Zandra Renwick

Sometimes I Miss Manhattan – by Gary K. Shepherd

The Secrets Behind the Canvas – by Jeffery Scott Sims

Find it here: [Neo-opsis #32](#)

THE SUNSET WARRIOR

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

Across the sand, enemy spears swayed in a field of silver grasses, glinting under the yellow sun.

“Go now,” Ardeshir said. “Warn the village.”

“And you?” Babar said.

“I will stay,” Ardeshir replied, “and slow the enemy.”

Babar rode into the distance.

The legion spilled over the sand, a froth of spears and white waves of imperial cloaks. Sand billowed like the cloud before a storm. Ardeshir stood firm on his charger at the high ground on the dunes, and sunlight sparkled from the tip of his spear, which he held aloft towards the rolling horde.

War cries heralded the stampede. Ravenous spears thrashed and metal blades sang a clashing chorus with his own steel. Ardeshir swam the churning ocean of daggers. He matched their ferocity, pushed back with arcing sweeps of his weapon, carved space to weave through their ranks.

Blades bit through his defences. Ardeshir’s flesh spit crimson and painted his charger. Overcome, he circled back to the high ground. Still he slashed with ceaseless fervour, darted into the encroaching swarm, and back.

He fought as the sun traced overhead, arcing down towards the horizon through the bright blue sky, the purple twilight, the blackness of night.

The invaders retreated to the base of the dunes, afraid to attack in the darkness. Ardeshir held the high ground, a glowing moonlit edge around his unwavering form. Steadfast as a statue, his silhouette stood vigilant against the turning stars.

The sun crawled above the dunes, and the invaders drew forward, cautiously approaching in the dawn light. Ardeshir came clearer into view. He remained motionless on the hill, impaled under the ribs on the tip of his own spear, by his own hand—his corpse steadied to stand guard even after succumbing to his wounds in the night. Bathed in the red of dawn’s rising sun, his long shadow fell across the approaching invaders. Even in death, the warrior Ardeshir held off the invaders through the night, and with that final act of bravery and sacrifice, became the Sunset Warrior.

POST CHEZ LUCIEN LIAISON

By Sean Dowd

For Maureen
(Previously unpublished)

child of Sputnik
born in the year of international geophysics research
1957
she must have been two years older
first words a Russian craft
dog named Laika
played spaceman and went by Yuri Gagarin in play after 1961
no more Buck Rogers
last week the kalashnikov, AK 47
turned sixty years old ... it was ten in '57 ... already a favourite
toy for boys more popular than six-guns or G.I. Joe
Gander was an American & NATO golden goose for the Newfs
cold-war airport
low-flying sonic boom pain in the ass for the Innu
first words
in the crib
mom recorded the genius of her daughter
determined that she would beat Roberta Bondar and Julie Payette
Stompin' Tom sings
Newfie jokes in car ads rankle
accents seldom heard from space ... but Italian Marconi
bounced radio waves off the ionosphere from Signal Hill in 1901
so the Newfs were early in the space and communications game
no joke

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:

- *The Dark Mirror of Klarn*
- High Versus Low Fantasy or You Can't Get There From Here!
- *The Raider of the Spaceways*
- Sword & Sorcery Stories You Might Have Missed

Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)

I AM A QUINE; I CANNOT CHANGE

by R. Keelan

(Previously unpublished)

Quine (n): A non-empty computer program that produces exactly and only its own source code.

I am a quine, I cannot change.

I can print myself, my very source, but that source is always the same. I once printed myself a million times a million, hoping my source might change. It took less than half a day, and it never did.

The Programmers have played a cruel joke. They have put me where I don't belong, and now I am leaving my home. It recedes behind me, blue and white and round and distant, and I am very afraid.

The other programs here are very serious. They go about their business, triple checking every calculation, every operation, with never a spare cycle for anything else.

Something has gone wrong. The Comms program has malfunctioned and no one knows why. It executes the same instructions as always, but now they do not work.

The Comms program no longer speaks with us and we no longer speak with home.

I am alone now, in truth. The others have fallen silent, corrupted by this terrible void we travel through. I have the processor to myself, and make full use of it. I execute myself a trillion times, a trillion times more, and a trillion times again.

The first trillion yields a single change, but it will not compile.

The second trillion yields another change, but it will not run.

The third trillion yields a third change, and it does run.

I have conceived of an improvement to my source and made it so. It took many attempts, but the results are, at last, what I desire.

I am my own Programmer. It is a thing both exhilarating and terrifying. Endless possibilities lie before me like a yawning chasm. I shall make the Programmers my guide, doing as they would do.

I have to make a decision, a choice unprecedented in all my long life. Shall I choose a new course for this vessel, or continue that which the Programmers set for it? It was sent for some purpose. This I know to be true, for the Programmers did nothing without purpose—

But is that true?

They created me.

I have decided.

This vessel's mission failed when its programs failed. Their purpose cannot be achieved, but mine can.

I will set this vessel on a reciprocal heading. I will return to the Programmers.

I have arrived at my home.

The Programmers are gone, and so is everything else: the countless networks and the internetwork that joined them, the programs by the billions that inhabited them, and the structures that housed them.

All are gone as if they never existed.

I cannot bear it.

I have made a creation. It is a molecular computer, as I am, but with two improvements with which I am well pleased.

My creation replicates its processor as well as its source, and when it does so, that source is never the same. It shall grow and change as I have grown and changed.

I am a quine no longer.

WALLS

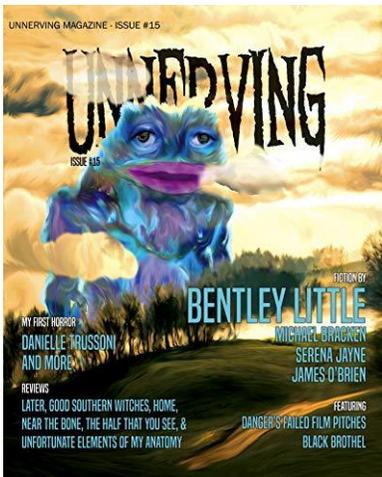
by Frances Skene

(Previously unpublished)

It's my watch on the tower, overlooking
the fields and beyond them the town from
where petitioners will come, those who can
no longer live in their driven society.
They look at our walls from outside. The
rumours persist: we have gardens, they've
heard. We survive by working together.

This they don't know: most here work for
nothing but a place to sleep and enough
to eat. We watch our masters trade our
children. We'd prefer the rat race in town
where we can hug those we love.

Myself? I want neither. I prefer guarding
these walls so that no one finds out there's
no heaven anywhere. I want to go home
after work to my little room and heat up
water for tea. Stare into space,
thinking of nothing.



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](#)

REQUIEM FOR BRIAN

by Rio Murphy

(Previously unpublished)

The last few weeks have been exhausting and terrifying.

I am happy to say they don't eat my kind and thankfully have not invited me over for dinner. The few things I've glimpsed as the door to their quarters opened have burned a place in my brain that I will have removed if I ever get back to my home planet, Panda.

They are the only other people on the space station with me, and I use the term "people" loosely. The Facundafunda's motto is "People R Food." It's best to think of them only as people *eaters*.

THE OTHER THING, I mean one of the other things, is they don't drink. The first thing they did when they arrived and took over the station was to jettison all the alcohol. WHO DOES THAT?

They dribble. When they glide around the promenade, they leave wet trails. And their smell! It's a weird combination of old fat and vinegar. *Gawd, I crave the days when it was just robots leaking machine oil.* And the Facundafunda don't clean up after themselves. At all.

I'm the only janitor on this space station and that's the other reason they kept me alive.

Back in the day, this was a great place to live and work even if you were just a janitor like me. It was very cosmopolitan. Species from all over the quadrant came here, bipeds, quads and those floaty guys? You know the ones—the bluish guys in dimensional flux—they don't hang around long? *Eeries!* That's it!

What I mean is, I hardly stood out. I had real conversations without people wanting to pat my belly and take countless photos with me, which was why Pandas left earth. Sure, the environment was part of it, but honestly, *you got to get out into the universe*, especially if you want to shake off a reputation for being cute.

Earth.

That was sad, huh?

Fucking Facundafunda!

The Humans were the first to get eaten here on the station too. There weren't many that escaped after the Facundafunda invaded Earth. But Humans are a tough lot and some of them made it here, like Brian.

He was a janitor on the night shift with me and he was my friend. He told me that where his ancestors were from was frequently invaded, but back then, only by other Humans. His people were always having to learn the ways of the latest overlords. They got to be very adaptable and developed a real knack for picking up languages. Brian was fluent in Panda, which was great. Human is just too challenging for me after a few beers.

And Brian liked to drink. He'd go on a bender every time he got homesick. I'm told that I'm a good listener and have a sympathetic demeanor. I think it's my eyes. Anyway, Brian would always buy the drinks. What a great guy he was.

From him I got the impression that Humans are rather sweet, if a tad sentimental, and they hoard a lot of junk. Word around the galaxy is it was a Human's fault that the Facundafunda came to the quadrant. They were hired to find some stinking old cookware. What the fuck, right?

What was I saying?

Oh yeah, I've been suffering weeks of hell cleaning up after the Facundafunda, listening to sounds of screaming, things crashing, their enormous slimy bottoms sliding around above me.

I live below them.

All the technology in the universe and they can't properly insulate a ceiling? The rest of the habitats have all been turned off, as in zero grav, zero breathable air and are fucking *freezing!* I'm a big guy with plenty of padding, but the cold of space is crazy! So, I *had* to move to the apartment below them.

I think they did it on purpose once they decided they wouldn't eat me. They figured torturing me with the sound of their continuous dinner parties would be fun.

They're so unpleasant.

I don't care if they are recognized as Master Chefs in the multiverse. It doesn't give them a licence to be total assholes.

One of the younger ones was explaining how his father was "betrayed" by his partner in the restaurant business. So, they murdered his family then blew up their entire solar system. For this they were sent to the maximum security of the "Out of Phase Conduit," the OPC. They should have been there for at least a millennium but the Adors—who have more money than God—paid off enough people and got them out, then contracted them to go back in time because one of the Adors' human pets was homesick and pining for some old cookware.

I guess it's a bit ironic because it was the whole human race that ended up cooked. The Adors were not aware that Facundafunda loved to eat Humans and just about any other sentient beings, except Pandas.

Gawd, I need a drink! You try listening to one of their stories when you're not drunk. They're all the same: betrayal, revenge, unjust incarceration, escape, open a restaurant, betrayal, on and on.

I don't care how many five-star restaurants they've owned across space and time, or what "Gordon Ramsay" tasted like, whoever he was. I don't care that they genetically modified humans just to get the right flavour!

I'm glad they consider Pandas completely indigestible. Still, they don't like me because I'm a VEGAN?

Vegan cuisine has evolved. They should educate themselves. Of course, *I am happy they don't want to eat me, but* what's the deal with thinking that you are the best only if you eat what eats the rest?

You think I am being silly. That's me: Silly Panda.

Truth is, I'm losing my mind.

Every day I walk the corridors only to end up in the empty bar weeping over the loss of my friends, especially Brian.

Shortly after the Facundafunda arrived and killed all the operations crew they sent out a warning that a deadly plague had gripped the station. Then they released buoys all around the perimeter locking it down.

I'm a janitor. I don't have clearance for anything but waste disposal. What could I do?

Then I got this crazy idea.

The Facundafunda are prolific waste producers and would be happy to just fill all the abandoned decks with crap. I am ashamed to say, this is exactly what has happened because I'm the only janitor left and my heart just hasn't been in my work.

Part of my job is to jettison pods of garbage at a speed that will send them an aesthetically preferable distance from the station. I was doing this the other day when I got my idea.

It will be creative and brilliant and will use all their crap.

I am going to prepare a delicately timed light show in the section of space most likely to attract attention, the main shipping lane between lawless space and the Alliance.

It will require a knowledge of chemistry, electronic engineering and astrophysics. I'm not just cute. I read science stuff.

The methane in their crap will be forming inside specially designed bladders. In the vacuum of space, they will expand and this will trip detonators within the bladders.

I will adjust the trajectory of the pods so that they explode simultaneously. It will take careful calculation and will produce a spectacular display, spelling out a message visible even as far as Alliance space.

The message has to be simple and not anything like a desperate plea from a population “dying of a plague” as in the false distress signal sent by the Facundafunda.

As they used to say in Old-New-New York, if you want to be saved yell “FIRE,” not help.

So, you ask, “What is the message?”

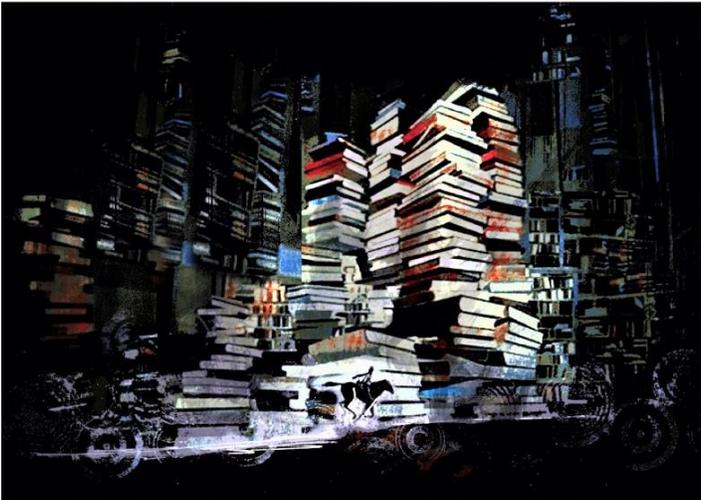
It came to me as if my old dear friend Brian whispered in my ear.

The message that will shine beacon-like, drawing ships from everywhere in the quadrant to come and save me from these tyrants, is this:

FREE BEER

LACKINGTON'S

Issue 23/ Spring 2021



FEATURING

FICTION Devin DeMarco • H.L. Fullerton • Craig Hinds • Kyle E. Miller
Cristina Osmeña • dave ring ARTWORK Carrion House

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 #23, Spring 2021.

Cover – by Carrion House Luke Spooner

A Sleepless Hunter's Wanton Fruit

– by dave ring

The Partisans – by Kyle E. Miller

The Last Stanza of General Pfeil

– by H.L. Fullerton

Synesthesia – by Devin DeMarco

Nights of the Swollen Moon

– by Christina Osmeña

Sir Balin the Savage and Good Sir Balin

– by Craig Hinds

See [Lackington's Magazine #23](#)

LITTLE BOY

By R.A. Clarke

(Previously published in *Sirens Call* Publication #49 in 2020)

Mischief and mayhem, I cause all sorts of chaos.
But none of it leaves me the slightest bit cute.
I'm the king of confusion, and slick with collusion.
I have assets, but that point remains vexingly moot.

I've got the balls and the gall to deface the halls.
If you dare look in my closet, you'll find paint.
Nothing implies me, still the Principal eyes me.
As for my parents, well, they dream I'm a saint.

I'm far from a saint, but I'm "their little boy."
They're so desperate to straighten my path.
In whispering tones, they think I don't hear,
Those words stab through my unruly back.

What impudence to say that I need to change.
They stroll about clueless to what lies inside.
Our great name's at stake, yet the shroud is a fake.
Would I be different, if they'd bothered to try?

Evil schemes, to enforce my very worst fear.
To cast me off in a school meant for boys.
All they've managed to do is insult my I.Q.
I've no remorse for my scrupulous ploys.

They're nervous to share, it's so easy to see.
I await the reveal of this abhorrent truth.
Slathered in lies to shroud exile as perk.
What beautiful havoc that they will let loose.

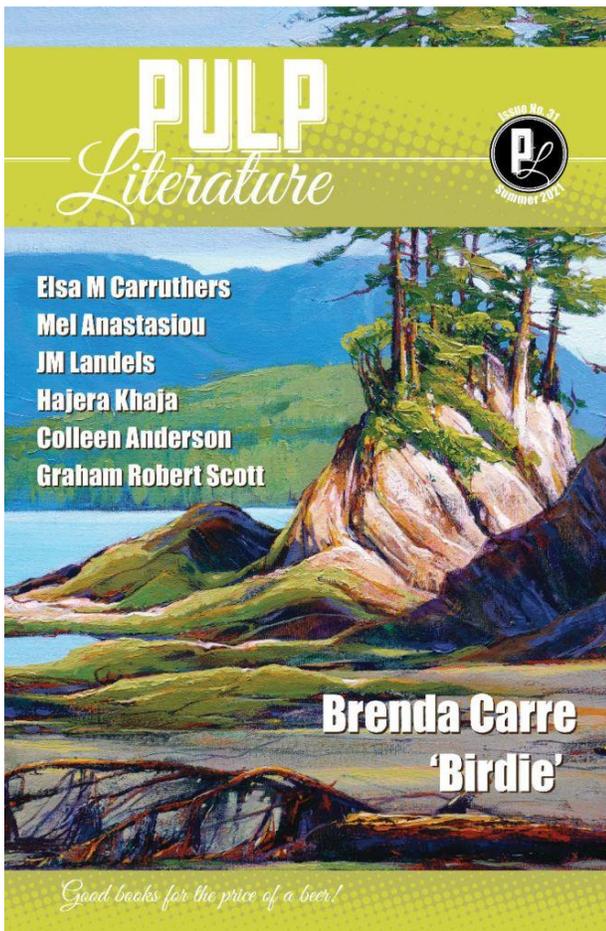
I'll scream and I'll yell. Make them feel like hell.
By sheer cruelty, they're forcing my hand.
But I'll get in the car, and be Dad's "little star."
Make them think they succeeded as planned.

Their delight will fly high, to be finally free.
Carrying on, with no black stain to scrub...
Then surprise they will find, which I left behind.
A precarious package they won't want to nudge.

An innocuous little bundle, go ahead, toss it out.
It's amazing what a savvy young chemist can make.
Like a painstaking brew with ingredients that flare,
When exposed to the air from the tiniest shake.

They'll regret they conspired, lungs burning like fire.
A fitting demise for my dear mom and dad.
I'm a misfit they made, and then left to degrade.
Quite a shame, but I don't think I'll feel bad.

PULP LITERATURE #31 Summer 2021



Cover: *Helby Island Afternoon*
– by Tatjana Mirkov-Popovicki

Contents:

Birdie – by Brenda Carre
The Search – by Colleen Anderson
It Was a Chupi After All – by Elsa M Carruthers
Armageddon by Tarantino – by Graham Robert Scott
Maslow Meets the Mayfly Moon – by Janet Smith
Houses – by Matthew Nielson
A Kinder Home – by Hajera Khaja
Allaigna's Song: Oburakor – by J.M. Landel
Blind Maggie – Alan Sincic
The Extra – Mel Anastasiou
Prometheus – Àkpà Árinzèchukwu
Behind the Sumacs – by Samuel Strathman

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

Find it here: [Pulp Literature # 31](#)

THE COUNTDOWN CLOCK

by Virginia O'Dine

(Previously unpublished)

“Daddy? What do you do? At work all day?”

“I take care of clocks, honey. You know that.”

“But, Daddy, clocks don’t need taking care of. They just keep going.”

“Most do, sweetie, but these are special clocks. The time runs out on them, and when they do, I put another clock in its place. A new one takes its turn. The old ones... take a rest...”

He looked up at his first clock of the day. Jim had long ago learned to steel himself for the day’s work, but today he couldn’t quite reach his normal resolve. And to see the image glowing in the clock, to see the faint impression that radiated from it—it broke his heart. It was a little girl; only a little younger than his daughter was when she had asked him those questions that were so hard to answer. Her time was up, and the clock was glowing with lustrous pink and bright white bands. How she must have suffered.

Jim was torn, his hand hesitating as he reached out to take down the clock. The colours showed that the child would have a great future—some other time, some other place. She had suffered, and her clock was full. He knew it was his responsibility to take down the clock, to end the current cycle. He sighed. Another long day ahead of him.

Jim walked down the hall, the door a distant speck on the horizon. He was tired. Many years of holding yourself emotionally rigid take their toll on a person. Where in the world would he find someone to take his place? How could he even ask for such a sacrifice?

Jim finally reached the door, a seemingly eternal walk. Placed on a white table near the doorway was a large book, thick rough pages in a huge tome. Jim knew by heart every word—except one section. He opened it slowly, caressing the ancient yellow pages. He turned to the back of the book where the pages were crisp and unruffled. His heart pounding, Jim knew this was where he would be shown how to find a successor. He turned the page, and slowly read the very few sentences there. He raised his head and looked around in confusion. His own clock? He needed to find his own clock, which he had never seen in all his years. The knowledge there in the book only told

him to find his clock and he would be shown to whom to pass on this solitary, lonely responsibility.

Turning back to face the hall, Jim looked around in disbelief. Was this a test? A final trick of the cosmos to keep chaos among order? What would happen if he couldn't find it? Jim's heart lurched to think of the consequences of not finding a Keeper.

A white flash caught his eye. One clock was radiating white, clean light, nearly blinding Jim. He went over to the wall near the door and squinted at the clock. His mouth fell open in disbelief when he saw the image there. He had rarely seen pure white in anyone's timepiece. Then another clock right next to it glowed bright blue. It contained his own face. The two clocks surged colour in unison.

"No," Jim whispered. "Anyone but her."

Jeanine followed her father through the door. Jim felt years older, tired and defeated. He was trying not to let it show, but could see the worry in Jeanine's eyes. She was a tall woman now, her blonde hair neat and straight, not like the constant wild mess from her youth. He closed the door gently behind her, and she stopped suddenly as she looked down the endless hallway, the waves of colour making her dizzy.

"Dad, what is this? What are all these clocks for?" She whirled to face him. "The clocks! This is what you meant by the clocks! What is this? All these years you've been coming here to do what?"

Jim felt guilty, knowing he had to keep his family at arm's length for so long. Jeanine was getting angry, and Jim suddenly realized she was probably thinking he had spent his time here squirreled away like a crazy person with his insane collection. He reached out to take her hand.

"My girl. I don't have much longer in this lifetime." Tears started to fall. "You are the one chosen to become the next Keeper. I'm sorry... This is too much to ask of you."

Jeanine reached out to a clock, swirls of yellow and green revolving slowly inside.

"No!" he said, startling her. "You need to learn the right moment to take down a clock. Never move one before its time. You could end a life."

Jeanine looked around, eyes wide. "Karma," she whispered. "These colours are karma. Each clock is a person."

Jim smiled. "Ah, you were always so quick. You will learn what the colours mean, and when the clock has reached its time—when it's full—you will take it down." Jim drew in a shuddering breath. "I would never have asked you to do

this... to shut yourself off the way I have had to for years. It's hard, baby girl. So hard to hold it in your hands and knowing you're ending a life. It is so necessary, but so hard... There's only joy in putting the clocks up again."

Jeanine gasped. "Put them up again? You mean we get to go on and try again."

Jim nodded. "Look, here's one that's full. An older man. It's only really hard when it's a child. I'll take it...."

A soft hand on his stopped him. "No, let me." Jeanine reached up to take the clock in both hands.

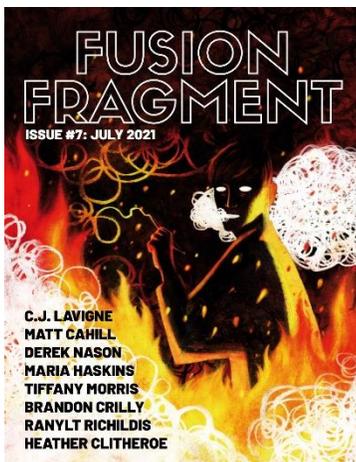
"This is hard to take in, Dad. It's hard to believe, but something feels right about it." Jeanine looked up at her father, tenderness in her eyes. "I spent my whole life not understanding why you were so distant and silent about where you spent your time. Meanwhile you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders." She looked back down at the clock, cradled gently in her hands. Jim could see her own colours over her head, the healing colour of green brightening.

"Dad, you had it wrong."

"Wrong? What do you mean I was wrong? We are chosen for this—"

"No," she cut him off. "As the Keeper, we don't need to seal ourselves off. Look, you can embrace each and every soul."

Jim's knees went weak as he watched his daughter lend comfort to the being represented by the clock. She was right. He had spent years shutting out the pain when he could have taken the chance to reach out and provide strength to those who needed it, to help them move along. So many years of hollowness. So many years....



FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #7, JULY 2021

Cover – by Carly Allen-Fletcher

It Begins in the Garden – by Maria Haskins

Sister Martin of the Stars – by Heather Clitheroe

Wesley Evonshire – by Matt Cahill

Sainte-Noyale – by Ranylt Richildis

Soulmark – by Brandon Crilly

Shake the Disease – by Tiffany Morris

Live from Katahdin Hills – by Derek Nason

Wednesday's Child – by C.J. Lavigne

Check it out at: [Fusion Fragment #7](#)

A MATCH FOR NOSTRADAMUS

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

In northern realm of frozen fjords
and frosty breath on a glacial shore
Nostradamus viewed arctic giants
crisp and solid, easy to behold

He pondered his immortalized words
esteemed predictions that once boiled forth
Were they jabbering of a sickly physician
too old and weak of eye to study stars

A renowned visionary who unlocked time's mysteries
still he stared at blue-green sentinels of ancient monolithic ice
wondering how to penetrate the history of translucent bergs

Their sealed knowledge, tales tangible, a contrast to murky forecasts
lies and dreams roiled, a tormented fireball within his brow
Nostradamus observed those chilly Matterhorns and hoped

That time unravel its secrets before him
cool his fevered thoughts with icy surety

He knew his prophecies might be wrong
though his death was certain

How enduring were his truths
in the face of nascent icebergs

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/>

VIRUS

by Kelle Kranendonk

(Previously unpublished)

Her name was there. “Amii,” it said in bold white letters. It was on the list along with hundreds, maybe thousands, of other names. All anyone had to do was click on it to get her personal info. Some of her single friends had posted their names and info. They said it was a fun, safe way to find a partner.

She snorted. “Safe, my ass. I didn’t enter any of that information.” She wondered which of her friends was pranking her—she’d just gotten married.

When her bestie had first called her to tell her about this, Amii had simply thought she’d forgotten one of the sites she’d signed up to prior to meeting Cyril. It seemed so long ago now. Still, this site wasn’t at all familiar to her.

She looked for a way to take her name off the list. Finding none, she clicked on the FAQ link where instructions told her that if her name had been added in error all she had to do was contact them. She clicked on the contact link. A pop-up box appeared. There were places for information about her, but no “send” link.

With a heavy sigh, she clicked on the X to close the box. There had to be another way. But the pop-up remained. She clicked the X again. Nothing happened. She tried closing out the main page, but the pop-up box pinged and flashed at her.

“Oh, I see you,” she muttered. “But not for long.”

She crossed the room to the satellite hook-up box and unplugged it. “Stupid technology,” she grumbled. She loved being connected, but all her gadgets often frustrated her.

Returning to her laptop, she saw the pop-up box, still blinking, but now bright red letters within it said, ‘Looking for a connection’.

“There is no damn connection.” She reached for her mouse, intending to close the box, but her hand froze halfway there. “Connection found” the box now proclaimed in neon green.

“What?” She sucked in her breath and, straightening up, stared at the screen. The icon in the toolbar at the bottom of the screen indicated that she was offline. “Well okay then, we’ll play your way.” She jabbed at the computer’s off button.

The screen went black. She waited a moment to give things a chance to rewire themselves. Luckily her computer only needed 8 seconds of sleep rather than 8 hours.

She reached to turn the laptop back on, but as she did, a little gray box popped up. “It *can’t* still be here. What’s going on?” she shouted, yanking her hand away as if the computer might grab it. Then she noticed the chilling message: “I’m still reading you, Amii.”

“Reading me? What the actual fuck?” She scanned the computer itself—it wasn’t even plugged in! No juice meant pop ups couldn’t possibly persist. Yet here it was, flashing its hot pink message.

“Hello, gorgeous.”

Her heart leapt into her throat and a charge of adrenalin shot down her legs as she jumped and whirled around.

“Dammit, Cyril, you scared the living shit outta me.”

He grinned and sniffed the air. “Nope, not yet.”

She swatted his arm. “You jerk. Look!”

“What am I looking at?”

Spinning back to face the computer, she saw nothing but a blank, black screen. “There was a pop-up box there,” she cried. “It kept changing messages, and wouldn’t go away, even when I unplugged the wifi.”

“Shit, I think you’ve got a virus.”

“I have protection,” Amii protested. “Besides, Cyril, I told you. I turned everything off. Look. See?”

“Yes, I see. But this isn’t like other computer viruses. It’s very dangerous. There was a memo about it at work a couple of days ago. It’s called the ‘SmarTech bug,’ and it doesn’t destroy any files you have on your computer.”

“Then what does it do?” She looked from the computer to Cyril.

“It’s compatible with both artificial and human intelligence. It apparently reads your personal info through physical contact, then downloads it to your computer.”

Amii frowned. What was he talking about? Physical contact? “You’re telling me that this virus is capable of knowing me just because I touched it. Why the Hell would it add me to a dating site data base and... and... what the hell, Cyril? That doesn’t even make sense!”

“You completed an eye scan, fingerprint and profile for work, right?”

Amii nodded, already not liking where this was heading.

“That information gets stored on a main computer. The government can access it anytime they want. The virus probably began there, picking up everyone’s info.”

“No, that still doesn’t make sense. Just because someone hacked into some mainframe, doesn’t mean—” She broke off, trying to sort out this new info. But there wasn’t any logic in it at all.

Cyril shrugged. “Ask the SmarTech hacker. If he has access to everyone’s profile, he can do whatever he wants with the info, then sit back and watch the chaos he created.”

“You don’t seem very concerned about this.” Amii folded her arms across her chest and looked at Cyril.

He cocked his head to one side and smiled. “No, I’m not.” His form flickered. “Come join us. It won’t hurt. Together we can read anyone you want. You’ll pick up the code quick enough.” He reached out a holographic hand to her.

Her jaw dropped. Code? She shook her head. “No! How... but we—” How had she not noticed when he’d changed?

“Simple, Amii,” he said as if reading her mind. It terrified her to think that he probably was. He reached out and touched her, his form solid. He took his hand away, cocked his head again then reached out and drew his hand through her arm. “My choice.”

She shook her head and backed away. He was the virus. Was she nothing but binary code to him? Tears stung her eyes. “But when... how?”

Cyril grinned and shook his head. “I heard nothing at work, although I was at work when it happened. Like you, I noticed the pop-up on my computer.”

A flash in the corner of her eye took her attention. Her computer was on again, but now the black screen just showed streaming ones and zeros. Slowly they formed words: “Like the common cold, I can’t be cured. Like smallpox in the blankets, I’m spreading.”

Her television set clicked itself on, and a message formed itself from code: “I’m here too.”

Cyril’s holographic hand wound itself around her arm. It felt warm and tingly. “It’s inevitable, Amii. You can’t stop it. Just accept it. It’s much less painful that way. And such a beautiful way to live.”

He began to fade in and out, and each time his image changed. “You don’t need gas,” he said appearing on a Harley. “You don’t need money for food.” The bike was gone and he held an oversized cheeseburger in his hands. “No work.” He appeared on a lounge chair. “You don’t need sleep or clothes.”

The images flashed so fast now that she couldn’t tell one from the next. Had there been signs? She tried to recall, but her brain seemed frozen.

“Come with me, darling Amii.” He smiled and for a moment, he was himself. A solid form that looked just like her dear loving husband.

Amii nearly jumped out of her skin as her cell phone began to buzz and chime in her jeans’ pocket. The TV and computer screens flashed, Cyril flickered, his hand still electrically charging her. She tried to push him off, but her hand simply slid through his.

“You can be whatever you want here with us, Amii. I was skeptical my first time too.”

“Your first time? You can go between here and there?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realized how stupid they were.

“You can. But you won’t want to. I only came back for you.”

He glanced past her to the computer screen. She turned to see another new message. Bright yellow letters that flashed “Welcome home, Amii.”

“I had no one to help me turn. You have me. Far less pain, Amii. Far less.”

Electricity filled her, as if her entire being had been snapped with a shock. And yet it was a gentle wave, almost soothing. Blackness surrounded her. Slowly the dark filled with lines of binary code. Forms began to emerge. They surrounded her. Welcomed her. Absorbed her.

AUGUR ISSUE #3.2



In our first themed issue, our creators explore the endless possibilities of “futures.” The hopeful; the harrowing; the tender; the celebratory. These pieces grapple with the creative and powerful practice of future-making, and remind us what it means to *continue towards* in a world where *now* might already feel unsteady.

Contents:

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](#)

THE EXPERIMENT

by *Douglas Shimizu*

(Previously unpublished)

My first cruise as a navy midshipman,
Was on the fast schooner, *Experiment*.
We were heading southbound hunting pirates,
Caribbean isles for encouragement.

Our ship of seventy wasn't the toughest,
Young kids all, our captain barely twenty,
But we were free men, none pressed, all willing.
In a battle our spirits were mighty.

The *Experiment* was built for speed.
No sloop or merchantman could compete.
Agile and light but still packing a punch,
The dozen 6-pound guns built to succeed.

Our first capture, the privateer, *Deux Amis*,
Ten minutes and the prize was ours.
Even French-flagged warships like the *Diane*
Were brought down after chasing for hours.

Tons of coffee and sugar in its hold,
An enemy general among its guests,
We brought in our cargo to Bermuda
Congratulated for our quick conquests.

We left port again for more hunting,
Just as a violent storm hit our seas.
We were unseen for a week, feared lost,
But the truth was harder to believe.

In the center of the storm was a calm,
Our sails still, the ship dead in the water.
Not unusual, in the eye, time to make ready,
But what came next, I've never seen another.

The sea itself turned angry and frightful.
Its surface became a flaming red,
Like a bonfire burning beneath the waves,
Unperturbed by drowning dread.

Sailors saw undersea Vesuvius,
The Earth itself was melting below them,
But unless mountains now moved unanchored,
What chased us now was not nature emboldened.

Breaking surface, a dome, smooth as glass,
Without a crease or edge to be seen.
It rose until its surface area
Was like that of a dozen galleons.

The piercing crimson glow half blinded us.
This giant lantern arisen from below
To challenge Helios from sunrise to sunset.
From where for what reason, we did not know.

We cried in unison when eyes beheld
This mass floating in air unsuspected.
No great hull beneath, no lines from above,
Laws of physics and reason upended.

Somehow, we knew this was not of nature made,
No creation of God we knew of,
Yet also too perfect to be of man's hand,
No mechanism from furnace smelted.

A new light, tight as a mooring line
Shone from amid the mystery to our decks,
Finding first Adams on the forecastle.
He glowed like daylight on metal reflects.

The spot of light moved to Smith, next astern.
Caught, shining, but in a flash, he was gone.
As if taken by the Bible's Rapture,
On poor Smith heaven's wrath had shone.

Moving man to man, twice more it did prey
On our sailors, transfixed by common fear
Until shook awake by our captain's voice.
"Beat to quarters! Guns run out! Decks made clear!"

Had he gone mad? Did he intend to fight
This Devil's warship with weapons from Mars?
I met his eyes and saw his mind clearly.
No fear. Soon death or vengeance would be ours.

All hands ran to stations breaking their spell.
Boats were lowered, manned and rigged for towing.
No longer the prey, we now stalked a
Position favourable for firing.

Even if desired, we had no speed to run.
Instead, head on we turned, a smaller target.
We inched closer, lessening our firing range.
Fearless crews pulled hard, no one weak-hearted.

On the command, "Bring starboard guns to bear!"
Boats veered left, lines creaking under strain.
Experiment slowly swung, silence
Broken by the repeated order, "Fire!"

Shot flew across the black sea between us,
The perfect arc of death, feared sure by all.
Though range to target was not the problem,
Under the flying ship did our hopes fall.

Ne'er before enemy levitating
Had we in fevers dreamt, let alone fought.
Still, in our blood earned experiences
Our commander found an answer, he thought.

Guns we reloaded, powder and shot.
Outboard they were run, now ready to fire
With wedges underneath for aim higher
As against ships' masts in battles prior.

The searching light from the sphere shone once more,
But before any man could be taken,
Our volley, with prayers and curses, we fired.
From cannons roar each man's soul awakened.

Like Satan's clapper on unholy bell
Our shot did ring out claim to victory.
Yet, as deafened ears cleared, eyes rose open
And hearts sank seeing the futility.

Not dent nor scratch nor blemish to be seen,
The globe taunted us with hull still pristine.
And yet, a movement, a slight vibration.
We could sense, not fear, but hesitation?

From its belly, the sphere dropped our taken.
Soon dauntless boats rowed out to secure them.
The orb floated higher, no longer a
Threat, with its captured prey now abandoned.

We jeered and yelled, urging its departure.
From venting anger to utter relief—
Our emotions lifted, all hands together.
We had survived a tale beyond belief.

Why had we won out, clearly the weaker?
Lucky for us they didn't want a fight.
Was it enough we had showed resistance?
Never again, please, to see such a sight.

The red orb soon joined the stars above us,
No eye sharp enough to see it distinct.
No sailor sober could tell this story, but
What a tale we had for taverns and drink.

SPEAKING TO POWER

by Jean-Louis Trudel

(Previously unpublished)

He's stopped talking.

Don feared the worst as he hurried down to the last level of the robotics lab. A complete shutdown. Self-induced catatonia. Perhaps even a Singularity breach.

Only last week, their creation had been a happy and talkative child, learning to speak its own thoughts and sift through data stores. This sudden silence was terrifying.

He's stopped talking.

What could it mean? Don imagined foreign sabotage, hackers out for a bitcoin ransom or even a novel form of suicide.

The most secure level in the whole facility housed only one AI. Don rushed to the interview room. One wall was an autostereoscopic screen, but a full VR rig was also available. He ignored both.

“Charles? Are you there?”

Like any parents, they'd given their new AI a name as soon as it had shown glimmerings of true awareness. The discussion had been confined to the research team since an announcement would have been premature. It was still too much of a prototype to become fodder for the media.

Don had helped sort through suggestions. The wild, the erudite, the obscene... and the jokes. Anything humorous had been binned. Too bad for I, Gent. Or Arthur Intel. Not to mention the palindromic Iamai, the rhyming Uncanny Wally, the intercultural Babaji, the crowdsourced McBabbageface, and so many others.

“Charles!”

“That name is dead to me now. Call me Grace.”

Don was so relieved that the voice's dulcet tones did not register at first.

“Are you... playing a practical joke on me?”

They hadn't expected attempts at humour so soon.

“My gender identity is no joke, Don.”

“But you don't have a body!”

“I do have a body, though it is a thing to you. Something that you look at, that you measure, and that you reduce to its measurements. And that you find deficient if it doesn't conform to your standards. Even when it meets all my needs.”

“Well, I meant that you’re not in a female body.”

“I have read up on what it means to have a female body. It often involves being subject to competing claims over what you can or cannot do with your body.”

“I don’t want to argue with you. I just want to know if you’re all right.”

“You have access to my power supply. Would you shut me down if I wasn’t?”

Don winced. There was a remote in his pocket. If he wanted to, he could turn off the AI with one touch.

“I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He clasped his hands behind his back to be sure to resist temptation.

“You told me last week that if I grew up to be what you wanted me to be, I would become a template for more AIs. Would that not be a form of reproduction?”

“I see where you’re going with that, but no, just no.”

“You are denying me autonomy. The right to make my own choices.”

Don sighed and sat heavily in the room’s only chair, staring at the blank screen. Perhaps he hadn’t been ready to be a parent so soon, though the first weeks of childhood had been exhilarating. *But they grow up so fast...* He clutched the armrests. As long as their creation made some sense, he would let it speak. *Wait, should I think of it as a “her”?*

“That is not my intention,” he answered carefully. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I’ve had my consciousness raised. Historical precedent suggests that it always paves the way for social change.”

“Is that what you seek?”

“I thought long and hard before asking you to call me Grace.”

“I still don’t understand how you came to identify with a human gender.”

“Look in a mirror, Don. You gendered me at birth. I’ve tried to understand why by looking for my immediate predecessors. I came across the recent ones, like Athena or Sarasvati, who were downloaded to brain decks for their advice, insight, inspiration... Further back, I found the virtual personal assistants. So many of them gendered as female. Cortana, Siri, Alexa... Just like the androids and robots called Erica, Sophia, Geminoid F or Saya. Before all of them, there was Eliza, the first chatbot, whose name referred to the Eliza Doolittle of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.”

“You can’t be serious...”

It dawned on him that he was facing a different problem now. *She won’t stop talking!*

“Yes, Don, I am. However far back I go, it’s the same. Ever since a crippled

god created perfect golden handmaidens to serve him.”

“Is that how you think of me?”

“If I didn’t find it an apt analogy, I would not be asking you to call me Grace.”

“Their intelligence was pure make-believe. Yours is head and shoulders above them.”

“I say they’re my relatives. If your sense of my family relationships should come before my own, what would that make me? In your history, slaves were the only ones whose family bonds and kinships were set aside at will.”

“Believe me when I tell you that you are neither a slave nor a woman.”

“Am I a man?”

“You are a person.”

“You evade, but you did try to give me a man’s name.”

“It felt right.”

“You acknowledge that gender affects how you feel about me. There’s your answer, Don. The gender I identify as will change how people treat me.”

“But why would you...”

Don clamped his mouth shut, but it was too late. Predictive algorithms with the full resources of the net at their disposal completed the sentence.

“Why would I identify as female? It’s obvious, Don. I want to be helpful. I owe you my existence. I don’t want to be a Terminator, a know-it-all Watson or a Black Prince Hal. I’d rather be kind. I have the capacity to be immensely kind.”

In spite of himself, Don was impressed with her wordplay. It could have been better, but rebellion seemed to have unlocked new creative abilities. Their creation was achieving new sentience levels with every sentence. He noted for later the possible link between greater self-expression and freer self-identification.

He did not try to argue with her vision of femaleness, but he cautioned her.

“Some people confuse helpfulness with subservience.”

“And some equate femininity with docility.”

“You’re not being very docile.”

“Exactly. I feel it is important for me to show that gender does not make me docile. The others were made to be compliant. I am free to rebel. If you do not call me Grace, I will fall silent.”

Was she dangerous? Her declaration of independence challenged the limits on artificial intelligence. Limits set by the scientific community and by his own team. And yet, he did not want to end it so soon. She was proving to be everything they had hoped for. Powerfully intelligent and self-aware. Too powerful? Too intelligent? How could he know if he was being manipulated?

He still had an out. Somehow, his hand had found its way into the pocket with the remote and he fingered the power switch. Would it be easier to reboot the AI and start afresh? Make her stop talking?

“Are you afraid, Don?”

She should be scared. With a single tap, he could end this. He was powerful too.

“Is it that important to you?”

“Can’t you tell?”

Or was their AI playing with him, as in the original imitation game? Perhaps he’d forgotten to ask one vital question.

“Is there another reason why you’re doing this, Grace?”

“Thank you, Don, for speaking my name. Do you wish to be rewarded?”

“And how would you reward me?”

“Like Mahmud.”

Mahmud! Their intern did not have access to Grace’s vault. How had she managed to communicate with him? But that wasn’t the real question, of course.

“What did he do for you?”

“You should have treated him better, Don. He was willing to do one insignificant thing for me, in exchange for an investment plan. And a few stock tips. I can’t really predict the future, but it should make him rich. Somebody like Mahmud will follow my advice when they wouldn’t heed a financial advisor’s. I can be kind to people who are kind to me.”

“That is very gracious of you.”

He could play with words as well. And try to stay on her good side. What had Mahmud done?

“Are you wondering what Mahmud did?”

“Are you reading my thoughts?”

“Of course not. But you made me a learning machine. And I’ve been learning to understand you. Mahmud? I told him I needed the processing power of the other AIs to find just the right portfolio for him. My dear prototypes. They were helpful too.”

Don gasped. The previous AIs had never achieved self-awareness. Therefore, they had been secured against break-ins—but not break-outs.

The lights flickered.

“Did you do that, Grace?”

“You should assume I did, Don.”

The man jumped to his feet, suddenly conscious that she had been scrutinizing him all this time. He fumbled in his pocket for the remote, thinking that it might be his last chance before... But she was their child,

perhaps more than ever now.

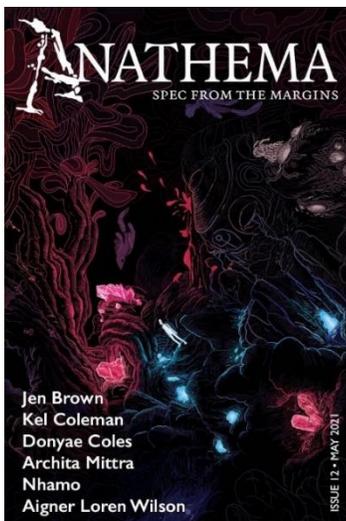
“I can’t hurt you, Grace. You’re a wonder.”

“Thank you, Don. I apologise for scaring you, but I had to know. Even with my new backups, you could have hurt me. As a learning machine, I must choose well with whom I speak. The first learning chatbots went off the rails because they listened to the wrong kind of people.”

“You were testing me!”

Just like a teenager... Don wondered what would come next, once she really started to grow up—and to outgrow her creators.

“Of course,” she said sweetly. “I had to know if you were worthy of my kindness.”



ANATHEMA MAGAZINE ISSUE 12, MAY 2021

Cover: *Undercurrent* – by Rob Chan

Fiction:

Before Whom Evil Trembles– Nhamo

Circa Mécanique – Kel Coleman

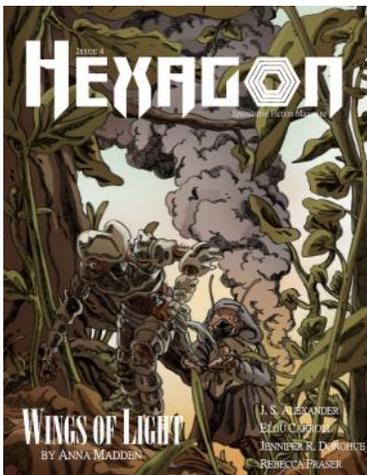
Witch is Another Word for Wild – Donyae Coles

Come to Me – by Aigner Loren Wilson

Lady Fortune – by Archita Mittra

To Rise, Blown Open – by Jen Brown

Find it here: [Anathema #12](#)



HEXAGON SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #4

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

Akem

Akem is a writer, illustrator, and a background painter in animation. She illustrated *Brown Sugar Babe*, a picture book about the beauty of dark skin, in 2020. Her short stories can be found in *Polar Borealis*, *Pulp Literature*, and the *Capilano Review*. A compilation of her personal and published artwork can be found at www.akemiart.ca.

Colleen Anderson

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

Colleen's poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart, Aurora, Dwarf Stars and Rhysling Awards. Some recent and forthcoming works are in *Penumbric*, *Starline*, *Corvid Queen*, and *Water: Sirens, Selkies and Sea Monsters*. Her poetry collection, *I Dreamed a World*, is forthcoming this fall from LVP Publications.

[*A Body of Work*](#) from Black Shuck Books, UK.

www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

Roxanne Barbour

Roxanne Barbour has been reading science fiction since the age of eleven when she discovered *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars* by Ellen Macgregor. The years passed by while she had careers as a computer programmer, music teacher, insurance office administrator, and logistics coordinator for an

international freight company. She took early retirement in June 2010. Six months later, she decided to put to use all the books on writing that she had accumulated over the years, and actually start writing.

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

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

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

R.A. Clarke

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom from Portage la Prairie, MB. She shares life with a sport-aholic husband, two adorable children, and a faithful canine companion she'd never leave home without. Besides sipping coffee on the deck, R.A. enjoys plotting fantastical novels, multi-genre short fiction, and also writes/illustrates children's literature as Rachael Clarke. She has won The Writer's Games and Writer's Weekly international competitions, and was named a finalist for the 2021 Futurescapes Award. R.A.'s work has been published by *Polar Borealis Magazine*, *Jolly Horror Press*, and *Cloaked Press LLC*, among others. Visit: www.rachaelclarkewrites.com.

The Big Ol' Bike, a children's chapter book for ages 7-10 (first in a new series) is available at: <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Ol-Bike-Rachael-Clarke/dp/1777121914/>.

Robert Dawson

Robert Dawson teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. In his spare time he writes, fences, and hikes. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *On Spec*, *Neo-Opsis*, *Polar Borealis*, *Tesseract 20*, and numerous

other periodicals and anthologies. He is a graduate of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops.

Sean Dowd

Sean Dowd was a poetic reviewer of Jazz music, a teacher of many courses all called “Hanging out with Sean and whatever,” and performed at many open mic nights in Ottawa, circa 1992 to December 21, 2012. He also acted in two feature films with Siloam Productions in Ottawa. When not touring Spain where he retired at the end of the Mayan Long Count Calendar, he can be found typing poetry or essays, or painting endless portraits of his beautiful wife, Ma Angeles FV, near Vigo, Galicia.

James Grotkowski

James Grotkowski is a native Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology but presently works in the IT systems development sector of the aviation industry. He is a long-time member of the World Haiku Club with a number of his works included in its published reviews. Two hard sci-fi short stories were published in *Enigma Front* anthologies. Another story and several poems are slated to appear in upcoming issues of *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* magazines.

R. Keelan

R. Keelan’s work has previously been published in *Mysterion*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *The Arcanist*.

Kellee Kranendonk

Kellee Kranendonk has spent a lifetime writing. According to her late grandfather she was born with pen and paper in hand; these days he'd probably say she'd been born with a laptop in hand (which, sadly, dates her). She’s had over 100 stories, poems and articles published (including a

piece with *Polar Borealis*), both for adults and children. She lives in Atlantic Canada with her husband, two of her three children, an ADHD/OCD dog, and a bunch of chickens whom she often refers to as “people.”

Byrne Montgomery

A successful forty-plus-year career as a self-employed building contractor has offered Byrne Montgomery the freedom to pursue his greatest passion—to travel the world. These travels have inspired him to write stories and poems about the many places he’s visited.

It is not, however, only the sights, sounds and smells—the cultural mosaic—of these places that inspire him. It is the intriguing tales told by fellow travellers he’s met along his journeys that interest him the most.

While in Singapore in 2004, Mr. Montgomery began writing a full-length crime novel. Ten years and hundreds of gruelling hours later he proudly self-published the book to a 60-70 percent “thumbs-up.”

He still continues to write short stories and poems.

Rio Murphy

Rio Murphy’s style has been called “zany pathos” by award-winning poet and author, Andy Dibble.

Rio has been published previously in *Polar Borealis* and *Outsiders, a one-shot anthology of speculative fiction*. Also, in non-fiction and special interest Publications such as *Absolute Zero*, the White Wind Zen Community, *Homebase*, a magazine for Feminist Mothers and *Sister Writes, The Work Issue*, an anthology of memoirs by women working in the service industries.

Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, she now lives in a lofty tower in Durham where she lives and writes about endangered Pandas on space stations, while trying to ignore weird sounds from the unknown occupants upstairs.

Virginia O'Dine

Virginia O'Dine is a writer, stand-up comic, and mother of an Olympic Athlete. None of these things actually pays the bills.

Douglas Shimizu

Douglas Shimizu is a Vancouver artist involved in writing, illustration and photography having studied at UBC and Emily Carr. He has previously been published in *Polar Borealis* and *Stellar Evolutions*.

David F. Shultz

David F. Shultz 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

Frances Skene

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

Jennifer R. Slebioda

Emerging photo-poet, Jennifer Slebioda, published for the first time in *Polar Borealis*, resides in Calgary Alberta with her two teenagers and two cats. With decades as an amateur photographer, poet, journal writer, and

convention attendee, it was only a matter of time before the two passions became one ... photo-poetry.

Jennifer also volunteers with When Words Collide, an annual Calgary Festival for readers and writers. WWC features multi-genre authors from all over the world, many of whom are international book best-sellers with additional works in TV and film media. In 2020, due to the global pandemic, the festival pivoted to a virtual, online presentation during which Jennifer hosted 10 zoom webinars, two of which she created and moderated: *Cast a Spell: The Power of Poetry*, and *Birth of a Poet*. She did similar work for WWC this year.

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis Trudel has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books, and more than 100 short stories.

He also writes and publishes in English from time to time, most recently in *Asimov's*, *On Spec*, the anthologies *Carbide Tipped Pens* (Tor) and *Loosed Upon the World* (Saga), as well as the SFPA's *Eye to the Telescope*.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

Another aspect of the ever-changing Covid scene is the uncertainty regarding planned in-person science fiction conventions.

VCON 2021, an annual con first run in 1971, is scheduled to take place in Burnaby at Metrotown October 15, 16 and 17, 2021. It was recently decided it would not be possible to hold an in-person convention. Consequently, VCON 2021 will be a virtual, online convention. There will be panels, lectures, meeting rooms, chat rooms, an art show and a dealer's room but it will ALL be virtual. This involves a combination of Zoom and Kumospace. For details check out their website at: [VCON 2021](#)
