

POLAR BOREALIS

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Art Credits

COVER – Eric Chu

Editorial

After a five month delay I am finally ready to release another issue of Polar Borealis Magazine. Am quite excited about this. Mundane problems had presented obstacles but after generous donations and a successful move from Surrey to Nanaimo I am back in harness as an editor. Makes me feel really, really good.

Sharp-eyed readers will notice this issue is an ensmallled version less than half the size of the previous issue. Less than half the budget too. This will be the look of Polar Borealis from now on. An average of seven stories and six poems per issue. This produces two happy results: more frequent publication and an easier task for the editor.

The stories I selected for issue #7 are the usual eclectic mix: a couple of pieces of whimsy, a first contact story, a fantasy, a love story, an “if this goes on” near future warning, and the most terrifying horror story I’ve ever published. The latter upset me so much I considered rejecting it, but as it is an exceptional piece of writing based on a true story, psychologically accurate and impeccably researched, I felt compelled to publish it. For one thing, it completely avoids the romantic hype sometimes attached to fictional treatments of this type of villain. It’s all too real. I expect many readers will be as upset as I was and possibly condemn me for publishing it. Fact is I believe it delivers a powerful message, a sobering reminder, on what the worst of reality is all about. Justification enough to my mind. It reduced me to tears. No apologies if it does the same to you.

Another factor in my re-energised, re-invigorated outpouring of editorial activity is the happy circumstance that three poems I published in issue #4 were nominated for this year’s Aurora awards. They are:

“Heaven is the Hell of No Choices” by Matt Moore

“Meat Puppets” by Lynne Sargent

“Shadows in the Mist” by Lee F. Patrick

I was in the audience of the awards ceremony at VCON 42 in Richmond when Matt Moore was declared the winner in the category of “Best Poem/Song.” Since the whole purpose of Polar Borealis is to promote Canadian authors, I must say I was most satisfied and thrilled to hear his name read out. Not to mention earlier hearing the names of Lynne and Lee when the list of nominees was read prior to the opening of the envelope. Kudos to all three!

It is my earnest hope that other contributors to this magazine will be nominated in the years ahead. I think that would be a great and wonderful thing. Nice to see my “hobby” effort having a bit of an impact.

Cheers! The Graeme

TRANSACTION DECLINED

by Garth Spencer

(Previously published in BCSFAzine in 2004)

Hrothgar Weems normally worked days but the temp. agency had given him an emergency evening assignment he couldn't afford to pass up. After a grueling six hours of transcription and word-processing corrections, and struggling with the client's unique brand of English, Hrothgar was exhausted and low-spirited; wending his way home at nearly midnight failed to lighten his mood, and he was brooding over his debts as he stepped out of the rapid transit terminal.

When a municipal clock struck the hour a tall, dark figure stepped into his path. Hrothgar trucked over to one side, mumbling "Scuse me."

The dark figure moved with him, and stepped into his space.

"Hey!" blurted Hrothgar.

Two hands clapped on to his shoulders and pulled him forward. Hrothgar, startled, raised his forearms and pushed off the hands with difficulty.

"Hey, back off! I don't want—"

One hand shot out, clasped itself around Hrothgar's throat, and pulled him off his feet. A fanged mouth approached.

"Oh, what the hell," Hrothgar thought, so he went limp.

The dark figure paused, and in the faint street light Hrothgar saw a frown on the distorted face. "What the hell is wrong with you?" the stranger asked.

Hrothgar found he was standing on his own again, and that his throat was free. He scratched it. "You're a vampire, aren't you?" he said thinly. "Or just one of those Goth wannabes?"

The dark man's eyes widened as the face frowned more deeply. "Goth bees?"

Hrothgar sighed. "Guess you're the real deal. Uh, some people actually want to be vampires. Not my party, but then not many things are." He straightened up and lifted his chin. "So, do you just need a blood donation, or must you take my life when you feed?"

The vampire moved away a little, looking slightly repulsed. "Whatever is the matter with you?" he asked. "This is the third time this year my prey hasn't run, or screamed, or even resisted the bloodletting!"

Hrothgar took a long look at the taller man. "Oh, I see," he said. "You want an answer before you give me one. Good enough. My deal is I'm just fed up. I

don't get a lot out of life; I've given up expecting anything out of life. If I live, if I die, it's all the same to me. Maybe you're meeting people who feel the same way I do. What do you think?"

"But why?" the vampire burst out. "How can you live, and draw breath, and ... and ..." Just at that moment he looked a lot like Hrothgar's maternal uncle whenever he was baffled and offended, usually by something Hrothgar said now that he thought about it.

Hrothgar shrugged wearily. "I dunno. Maybe I'm in the wrong line of work. Maybe there's too much plastic in my diet. Maybe I'm not making the right effort to gain a little satisfaction." He looked squarely at the dark, taller man.

The vampire looked squarely at Hrothgar.

After a moment the tall man stepped back, turned away, and started running.

Hrothgar watched the figure retreat, realizing that he had just freaked out a blood-sucking monster. Then he went to see if he could still catch the last bus home.

SCIFAIKU #1

by Roxanne Barbour

(Previously unpublished)

surrounding
molten sinkholes
rings of ice

DINOSAUR BONES

by Madison McSweeney

(Previously unpublished)

At the feet of the play structure, under the shadow of the slide, Chelsea was digging for dinosaur bones.

The dinosaurs, before the asteroid had come to wipe them out, had burrowed themselves into the ground and hid there, withering away into nothing while they waited for better times. If you dug long enough and deep enough, Chelsea knew, you would find them. Velociraptors and triceratops and pterodactyls—maybe even a T-Rex.

She plunged her shovel into the sand, pushing away the white grains that were burning in the sun, and hitting the cold, dark dirt below. Soon, she had an eight-inch deep hole in front of her. She pulled back and set to work widening it, carefully shaving layers of sand off the sides, scooping them up, and depositing them in a pile beside her.

Halfway through recess, a shadow came over her work site. She looked up to see Miss. Murphy standing over her. “Hi, Chelsea,” said the teacher.

“Hello, Miss Murphy,” Chelsea replied, impatient. Recess was only fifteen minutes each day, and she couldn’t afford any delays.

“What are you doing?”

“Digging for bones.”

“Bones?”

“Dinosaur bones.”

Miss Murphy crouched down beside her. “I think Nikki and Janice are playing jump rope over there,” Miss Murphy said.

“That’s nice,” Chelsea said.

“Would you like to join them?”

“No.”

Miss Murphy frowned. “Are you sure?”

Chelsea gritted her teeth. A minute had ticked by; one minute out of fifteen. One-fifteenth of her recess period, according to fractions. “I’m sure,” she said.

“Oh. Okay.” She paused. “Would you like me to find someone to dig with you?”

And let someone else take credit for her find? No way!

"I'm sure," she said. Miss Murphy walked away. Chelsea kept digging. In front of her, the hole widened; beside her, the pile of waste sand grew and grew. The clock ticked on.

With five minutes left of recess, her shovel hit something. She carefully scraped away layers of sand, and the thing began to reveal itself. It was white, and long, and straight. Chelsea dropped her shovel and used her fingers to wrench it out of the ground.

A bone.

She took a moment to marvel at it, before digging back in. As she continued to excavate, more and more bones were revealed, teeth and claws and wrist-bones and rib-bones.

The bell rang. Chelsea watched her classmates dart to the doors of the school and form an orderly line. Then, she heard a click. She turned back to her bones.

The wrist-bone, which had been sitting four inches away from the other bones, had moved, and was now attached to the rest of the hand. As she watched, the hand and wrist began to tremble ever so slightly, and one of the nearby claws shot forward and connected itself to a knuckle. Click. Then the second claw, then the third. Click, click. The hand was complete.

A foot away, an arm-bone began to quiver. The hand perked up and slid across the sand. Click.

At the entrance of the school, the students were already beginning to file through the doors. Chelsea ducked behind her pile, hoping she wouldn't be seen. The ground started to rumble.

The sand parted, and a three-foot long femur jutted out from the ground. Behind it, a spine and tail slithered up, followed by an assortment of rib-bones, hip-bones, ankle-bones, foot-bones, and neck-bones. Click-click-click-click. More claws swam up, snapping onto foot bones. Ankle-bones connected to leg-bones, leg-bones connected to thigh bones. Leg-bones affixed themselves to hip bones, which affixed themselves to the spine. Arms attached themselves to shoulders. Finally, a grinning skull with a long snout and rows of sharp teeth chomped its way up through the earth and screwed itself onto the neck-bone, completing the resurrection.

The creature stumbled to its feet, towering over the slide and the swings. Chelsea stared in awe.

A T-Rex.

The dinosaur gave her a razor-sharp, lipless smile. It flicked its great tail towards her. Chelsea approached and placed a foot between one of the notches

on the tail. The T-Rex snorted agreeably. More confident, she grabbed onto one of the jutting bones at the base of the monster's spine, and started to climb.

One student was missing when Miss Murphy did the head count. It was Chelsea. Sighing, Miss Murphy went back outside.

Emerging into the sunlight, she opened her mouth to call Chelsea's name, but stopped dead before she did. A few metres away, stomping around the playground and snapping its jaws, was the skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The beast was ten feet tall, thirty feet long, and very much alive. And perched atop the monster's spine with her arms wrapped around its neck was Chelsea, grinning from ear to ear.



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

Our little quarterly journal, *On Spec*, adheres to a strong mandate that has served us well over the years. We discover and showcase quality works by predominantly Canadian writers and artists, in the genre we call “fantastic” literature. We foster the growth of emerging writers in this genre, by offering support and direction through constructive criticism, education, mentoring, and manuscript development. We try to publish as many new writers as possible, alongside works by established authors, and we also endeavour to support these writings with innovative cover art for every mind-bending and thought-provoking issue!

Current issue #108 Vol 29 #1 includes:

Fiction:

Medicus by Timothy Reynolds

Tamarack and the Stone by Allison Floyd

Tide Child by Sean Robinson

The Saffron Curse by Marcelle Dubé

A Fire Across the World by David Versace

Dirty Sheets in the Acreage by Chris Kuriata

The Cloaked Lady Butterfly by Lisa Carreiro

See: [On Spec Magazine](#)

POOR FLY

by Lena Ng

(Previously unpublished)

Children, children, hear my plea.
Cries for attention, routinely ignored.
What is play for you is cruel to me.

Tiny pin to you, sharpened sword to me.
Violent images flicker, their contents absorbed.
What is sport for you, is cruel to me.

A creature trapped unmercifully.
Its body carved, its contents cored.
Children, children, hear my plea.

Man's saviour paid a costly fee.
Crucifixion crowd jubilant, the screaming horde.
What is play for you, is cruel to me.

Innocence, grace, drown desperately.
Man's history dictates a savage reward.
Children, children, hear my plea.

Inherited sadism, your legacy.
Sword through body onto board.
Children, children, heed my plea.
What is sport for you is death for me.

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

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

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

CORRIDOR

by Dean Wirth

(Previously unpublished)

At first Luke hoped to regain something lost in his work by accompanying Niles into the wild, yet somehow his sense of equilibrium was gone as if the natural beauty surrounding them made him feel small and vulnerable.

They were supposed to be on a great getaway, a wonderful escape from their pressured, cluttered lives. Newly partnered in the firm Weller Associates, at lunch one sunny afternoon Luke had expressed an enthusiasm matching Niles' love for the great outdoors. Both unattached, they plotted this getaway over beer and pizza. If they were to be working together they might as well get to know one another. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now the towers of glass and steel were behind them. The rocky prominence of the Castle Mountain Ridge lifted majestically above them when they drove up the forestry road. Then they portaged the silver rental canoe over to the McPherson glacial runoff and set off on its cool, clear waters. They were on a quest to explore the rocky spine of the Pacific Northwest. *Too bad it's so uncomfortable*, thought Luke. *So cramped and cold*.

The child's home was by now a distant memory. He was a hundred years old if he was a day, and had no intention of going back, not for a long while anyway. He knew he wasn't old enough to enter the zigzag corridor, or so the adults claimed, but he also knew, with absolute conviction, that he was an adventurer, unstoppable and invincible. Yes, this was to be a great adventure.

"Come on, Luke, paddle harder for Christ's sake!"

Luke startled out of his reverie at the sting of Niles' words. He had been lost in thought at the bow of the canoe, contemplating the shimmering glacier water that buoyed them effortlessly like a watery hand as they raced along the current cleanly if unevenly. He hadn't been doing his share he realized, much to his chagrin.

"You're a bit of a dud," commented Niles. "Don't know why I brought you."

Not fair, Luke thought. *Not my fault I'm out of shape*.

Then Luke slipped on a slime-covered rock by the shore when the two were carrying the canoe past a short stretch of shallow rapids. Niles deluged him with curses and choice swear words, ripping and tearing Luke's self-esteem to shreds. Luke was so ashamed he nearly dropped the canoe.

"You're totally dickless. Next time I choose a partner who knows what he's doing," Niles commented as they placed the canoe back in the water. He seemed angry, brimming with contempt and frustration.

Not my fault, brooded Luke. Why do people always think it's my fault? And I'm stuck with this guy for two more days!

As they got underway again, the McPherson creek mirrored the canoe and its two incompatible occupants imperfectly. Luke felt very small indeed. The trip was supposed to be a much-needed breather away from tedious meetings, computer glitches, forgotten passwords and all the rest of the crap he had to put up with at work. It was supposed to be a fun trip, carefree, with simple concerns like finding camping sites, keeping clothes and matches dry, *and putting up with Niles Worth!*

Somehow, as Luke struggled with his paddle, he could feel Niles glaring at his back, silently threatening him, or so he was convinced. He remembered Niles had brought a large black commando knife, pepper spray and other assorted nonsensical junk that really served no purpose other than to impress the unimpressed Luke. Just how much of a bully was Niles, anyway? Luke had always loathed alpha males.

"Bears! Watch out for bears!" shouted Niles.

Luke frantically scanned both banks of the creek. "Where? I don't see any."

Niles snorted. "This time of year, grizzly mamas fresh out of hibernation are searching for food with their cubs. If you can't paddle proper at least keep your eyes open."

"I'll try."

"Yeah, right. You don't even have street smarts, let alone bear smarts. Useless tit."

Now that he had reached the end of the corridor and passed into the world beyond, the child was delighted with its newfound wonders. He found little difficulty in coaxing marmots out of their burrows. Without physically touching it, he playfully raised a tiger salamander up into the air and then gently placed it in the leaf litter from which it came. He revelled in the rustle of the quivering birch leaves, the whisper and smell of fresh pine. The ghostly winds passed

through the grasses and trees and the child himself, he could really taste and be the wind, it was something his people knew.

Luke thought he saw something (or nothing) beside a stunted pine by a large, smoothed rock in the open meadow to their right. A forest of birch hovered over the left side of the creek, casting the two in shadow. The creek rushed down from Castle Ridge and the men in their silver pea-pod canoe were making good time as they drifted on the fast current.

Luke once more looked over his shoulder and again sighted the tall, black shadow out in the field. For a moment he thought it was a bear since it appeared six or seven feet high, and maybe four wide. Yet it was so indistinct it couldn't be solid. In fact, it shimmered and shivered as if effected by the wind. A mirage, perhaps. Some trick of the light. Luke turned his attention back to paddling.

Had he kept looking he would have noted the shadow peaked at the top and from the middle bore straight down, slightly contracting and expanding as if breathing. He would have seen the ghostly mound of blackness move closer to the creek and keep pace with the canoe, as if stalking them.

There are two beings in that craft; they have food and provisions, the child thought. They navigate strangely. How odd their leathery skins are, and how weird those rotating sensory balls of jelly in their heads.

The runaway swam in sensory abundance as only his people could, effortlessly emitting thoughts and concepts that bounced back to him with vocalizations that spoke to his mind. With an invisible mental hand he encompassed whole trees like human child would hold a stone or clutch a frog. Should he reach out and pull the craft ashore?

He noted that one of the two adult aliens, the smaller of the two, was again staring at him and appeared alarmed by the sight of him. Somehow this being could see without possessing the slightest ability to probe its surroundings with its mind. How strange.

Their language was also alien to the child, but he grasped it intuitively and understood what they were saying. He decided to stop moving, so as not to alarm the creatures further. Not that he was afraid, for he knew his body was invisible because his shield absorbed direct sunlight. His blue skin was porous, like that of a newt, and would dry out in very little time without this

protection. The local biosphere was not his; he was an intruder, albeit an adventurer and explorer. Only in this large packet of black air was he comfortable and safe. It could not deflect rain, solid objects or attack from wild animals, but it served its purpose. He felt secure.

Curiosity led him to move closer.

“Do you see that?” Luke called out to Niles, who barely glanced where Luke pointed with his paddle.

“It’s just a shadow. A long shadow,” Niles responded. “Means it’s getting late. We better pull in and set up camp. You *do* know how to hammer a tent peg, I hope?”

He turned the canoe to the right on to the grassy shoreline, and they started lugged their backpacks and tenting gear onto land. A small, isolated stand of white birch nearby seemed the ideal place to set up their tent.

Of course, Luke slipped and fell flat on his back while struggling to pull the canoe fully on shore. Couldn’t help it.

“God damn it, do I have to do everything?” roared Niles. “You’re worse than useless. I should leave you here!”

Luke found it very peculiar that Niles’ tirade was somehow muted by a sudden, very strong sensation that they were being watched.

“He can see us!” Luke blurted out.

“Huh? What did you say?”

Luke was astonished to see a dark shadow looming behind Niles, even more astonished that up-close it appeared solid and three-dimensional.

“We’re not alone,” said Luke, pointing.

Niles whirled about to confront whatever Luke was looking at. “What the hell?” he muttered, dumbfounded.

“What is it?” asked Luke, desperately attempting to get back on his feet.

The child tensed, frozen in anxiety now that he knew both aliens were aware of him not twelve feet away from where he stood. He sensed an anger in the larger adult, full of hate and rage. He could not understand why the big alien was so hostile. Surely a small child like himself could not be considered a threat.

“Some idiot in one of those new-fangled military cameo cloaks,” Niles said, pulling out his knife. “He’s looking at us, sizing us up, the bastard!”

The child knew the knife to be a weapon, knew the angry one was dangerous, and began to be very frightened.

“Come on, speak up, or I’ll cut you!” Niles strode aggressively forward, knife held firmly by his waist, prepared to thrust and jab.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Luke protested, trying to catch up to Niles to prevent the fight, but he wasn’t fast enough.

The child stood quivering in fear and panic as the large hostile adult bore down on him. Niles stabbed blindly into the black gaseous shroud, missing the child, the lack of resistance to his thrust causing him to stumble and knock the child down.

At that moment the man-sized air-package vaporized to reveal a small blue-skinned boy sprawled on the ground. The alarming thing was he had no eyes. A nose, mouth and mussed up hair, but no eyes! Niles, now kneeling on the grass beside the boy, stared in shock. Then he could see nothing, nothing at all, and dropped the knife to clutch at his eyes.

“Luke! I can’t see, I can’t see, I’m blind!” Niles moaned, rocking back and forth, clawing at his eyes. Then he pulled his hands away from his dead eyes and patted the ground in search for his knife, found it. Luke gaped in fascination at the unfolding scene, unable to move.

“You little bastard, you did this to me!” Niles yelled, reaching forward with his other hand to grab the boy’s leg. He raised his knife high. The child squirmed, and suddenly Niles shot a hundred feet into the air, then slammed viciously back to earth, utterly crushed and killed in an instant. Niles lay on his crumpled back, terror etched on his face. The fight was over.

The child stood back up as his protective shield of impenetrable black returned.

Luke stirred to action and rushed to Niles’ corpse, checking for vital signs, pumping the chest, but to no avail.

“He attacked me, mister,” the child blubbered, approaching. “I had to defend myself.” His black air envelope fell over Luke.

“Back away! You’re blocking the light!” The boy obeyed. Yet still Luke couldn’t see. Not a thing. Absolutely nothing. He realized the truth.

“Now I’m blind! And he’s dead. What have you done?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the child wailed. “My air-protect must have blanked your seeing organs, and my feelings killed your friend. Had to do it. He was going to hurt me. I should never have come to this place of light and beauty. I’m sorry.”

Luke was still unable to cope with his predicament. *I don’t know what to do*, he thought. He lumbered unsteadily to his feet. “Who are you? Where are you from?”

“I’m from another world, right next door to yours, but nobody ever comes here, and now I know why. But I can help you.”

“Help me? You take away my vision and now you say you can help me?”

“I can teach you to see without your eyes, like me. It’s not very hard, you know. Everybody does it where I come from.”

I don’t believe you, kid. “How am I going to get home like this? What are we going to do with Niles?”

“I can help you bury him, I can bury him myself, I can move dirt and rock easily as I moved him.”

A whirl of wind came down from above, sucking up earth and rock, lifting the body separately and gently lowering it into the hole. The revolving column of dirt and rock hovered over the body for a moment, then dropped to fill in the grave. Luke witnessed it through osmosis, by grasping the child’s shoulder. As soon as he let go, he was blind again. Luke said nothing, he understood immediately what was possible.

Luke framed his next question more carefully. “Where did say you come from? Another world? I don’t get it.”

“I can’t explain it, but I can take you there. You can learn to see like me. And move things with your feelings. Want to come?”

Luke was silent for a long moment. *I guess I don’t have much of a choice,* he thought. “Okay.”

“I came here to escape something, but I want to go back now, if only to show you.” And with that the child reached up with his little hand to grasp Luke’s fingers. Luke could “see” again.

“Is there a sort of craft or ship or something behind the trees?” Luke asked as they moved away from the creek.

“No, all you have to do is walk with me in one direction a bit, and another a few more, then a sequence of multiple directions and you’re there. It’s a crisscross path that’s very simple but you have to get it just right or you go nowhere.”

“Like a password or a lock sequence.”

“Yeah, sort of.”

Leaving Niles in his final resting place, under the rustling leaves of the stand of birch, felt really weird to Luke in that he experienced no remorse, only a sadness that Niles could no longer share the getaway. On a happier note, Luke didn’t feel sightless at all, for new doors of perception had opened to him. Sure, he was legally blind, but he could “see” the smooth grasses and the gentle lapping of the creek’s water against the shore in vivid, intense detail.

Through the kid his vision was crystal clear.

They stepped into the corridor, a frog-skinned child with no eyes leading an awestruck man with useless eyes. They walked one way, then turned in a different direction, then back again, constantly zigzagging, always staying within the boundaries of the corridor, till finally they emerged in the child's world.

Luke was amazed. He saw more in this dark world with his *feelings* than he ever could with human eyes.

Luke nodded in satisfaction; he was going to learn a few tricks ...

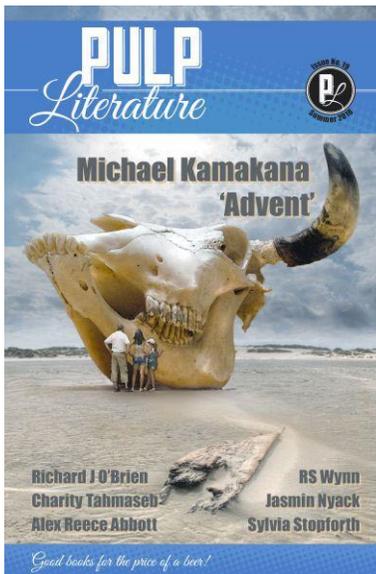


THE GOD OF SALT AND SALTUSES

by Neile Graham

(Previously unpublished)

Rebel bird of paradox, the transformer, transplanting
Antagonist of his own fictions, unpredictable as seasons
Venal, voracious, vandalous creator, mischievous glutton of
Everything lustrous, everything slick with life's fat. His
Naked hunger, stealing water, fire, the sun, his own hero,
Absently generous, planting life in other rivers, never
Gentle, never exactly kind: exactly human, exactly beast
Ever tricky, ever fickle, ever shining with stolen light.



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

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

Contents of Current issue #19 – Summer 2018 include:

Advent by Michael Kamakana
The Machineries of Progress by Mel Anastasiou
My Brother Paulie by Alice Reece Abbott
Guardian by Susan Pieters

The Slade Transmutation by Richard O'Brien
Ordinary by Sylvia Stopforth
Allaigna's Song: Aria by J.M. Landels
He Has This Thing by James Norcliffe
Potato Bug War by Charity Tahmasseb
Lullabye, Valentine, Paper Crane by R.S. Wynn
Towing the Mustang by Keltie Zubko
Blue Skies Over Nine Isles by Joseph Stilwell & Hugh Henderson

See: [Pulp Literature](#)

JUST A SINGLE WORLD

by Bernadette Gabay Dyer

(Previously unpublished)

Mars always had a strange, mystifying attraction for her. Even as a child of ten she talked about seeing unexplained long stretches of an alien landscape. She was so positive that the landscape was real that people had a hard time shrugging it off as no more than a lucid dream. She even described the exact brick and mortar rusty shade of red that at times would unexpectedly engulf her in a cloud of thick dust which settled into her pores and threatened to choke the life out of her. Then without warning it would retreat to expose a landscape measured by endless mountain ranges, larger than any on earth.

The first time that she had found herself on this alien world, a rusty sky had hung menacingly over the broad horizon, the landscape appearing splintered into the recesses of cavernous caves and multitudes of gigantic rocks and boulders. "I must be on Mars," she thought, shielding her eyes from the glare, and realized that her clothing was stained in magenta, and that her long hair, now coated in a varied palette, had fallen into rat tails.

She looked around furtively, hoping to find something that would make sense of what was happening to her, but all she could remember was a faint voice that had whispered something in her ear. She couldn't recall what it had said. She opened her mouth, hoping that by some osmosis her mouth might repeat the words, but all she heard was the sound of silence. Hoping to find the source of the phantom voice, she turned entirely around, only to find that the landscape looked exactly the same in all directions. Ankle deep in maroon red particles as brittle as salt, she stood stock still in contemplation. "How did I get here?" she wondered, then was startled to find herself back on Earth.

Yet, again and again she visited Mars. She was never afraid, for she felt she belonged in that barren paradise devoid of the distractions of foliage, water sources, animals and even insects. It occurred to her that her visits had a purpose, but what that purpose was she did not know.

Like an ant dwarfed by an Olympic stadium, she always trudged onward not knowing if going right was better than going left, or if certain directions were to be avoided. Like falling snow, the cadmium dust changed the face of the landscape from moment to moment, and she believed she had no choice but to press on over endless obstacles.

In all her visits she was never hungry or thirsty, though time passed slowly, for something in the very atmosphere must have sustained her. The weight of being the lone human on the planet encouraged her, made her want to explore further. Despite falls, scrapes, and bruises she never slowed down. She sensed how bedraggled she had become and knew that she no longer resembled the young girl who sometimes lived on a blue planet that hung like a tiny lantern in the distant sky, and it set her mind to wondering. Was that planet keeping secrets from her? Was it watching her?

Sometimes she dimly recalled that her father, an archeologist, had traveled all over Earth with her in tow. His devotion to her never dimmed through years, though he lived in sadness and sorrow knowing that his daughter often disappeared, only to return looking contented yet curiously worn and stained with scarlet dust that spilled from her clothes and shoes, with no palpable explanation to account for her condition.

And she knew that some day, she would not return home.



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.

Here's our "Gothics" issue at last, with nine stories that celebrate and/or interrogate this ever-evolving tradition, be they set in 14th century France, or 21st century Germany.

Contents of issue #17 – Spring 2018 include:

A thousand Tongues of Silver by Kate Heartfield
Satia Te Sanguine by A.J. Hammer
Letters Written to the Dearest Deceased Frances Blood
by R.M. Graves
Nothing Must be Wasted by Arkady Martine
Swans and Roses and Snow by Laura Friis

At the Hand of Every Beast by Premea Mohamed

Verwelktag by Steve Toase

Cavity in a Hurt by J.M. Guzman

A Game of Lost and Found by Mike Allen, Vajra Chandrasekera, Amal El-Mohtar, Natalia Theodoridou and J.Y. Yang.

See: [Lackington's Magazine](#)

HISTORY WAITS TO BE WRITTEN

by Lisa Timpf

(Previously unpublished)

there's a history waiting to be written
out among the stars
pages and books of it
vast sweeping flows
endless as the rushing sea

for always there will be those among us
who feel compelled
to push the boundaries further
and further yet
to seek and survey
and to blaze new trails

perhaps there is a child already born
who might, centuries from now,
be known as an adventurer the like
of Columbus or Cartier
and whether they travel
on a vessel powered by solar sails
or a fuel of the future
surely they will face
perils and hardships
both known and unknown

what systems and star lanes
lie yet to be charted?
what small steps and great leaps
wait their turn to be chronicled
in the centuries to come?

there's a history waiting to be written
out among the stars

HUMANITY

by Monica Sagle

(Previously unpublished)

Adam spotted Jenny waiting on the beach and his heart raced. He waved, ran down the trail, and across the white sands to meet her.

They strolled hand in hand along the shoreline, stopping occasionally to skip stones across the water.

Adam drew her close. "I wish you would come to see me more often."

She bowed her head and pushed her toes into the sand. "You know it's too risky."

He shrugged and sighed. "Forget I said anything. Come on, let's swim."

They chased each other, laughing and splashing, playing in the rolling waves.

Exhausted, they lay on the shore, their toes caressed by the lapping waves. Adam gazed into her black eyes and swept long black hair from her smiling face. *She is so beautiful. Do I dare? Yes.* He kissed her, and savored the essence of the ocean and sun on her lips.

She pushed him away. "Don't. You know we can't be together in that way. Do you want your line wiped out? The entire village?"

"The whoonns' wouldn't destroy their own control group, would they?"

"Yes, they would, and me for contaminating it."

He turned away, sitting with his arms crossed over his knees. *Can I risk my family?* He shook his head. "There has to be a way for us to be together."

She gazed out at the horizon and then pointed. "Do you see the buoy? The one with the light flashing?"

"What about it?"

"I can swim to that buoy in five minutes. It would take you an hour. I can run ten times faster and process data a hundred times faster than you do. You are what you are, and I am ... what I am." Her dark eyes gazed into his, her hand warm on his arm. "Please Adam; friendship is all we can share. Would you lose this?"

"I see." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We can't be lovers because my great grand-parents refused the alien implants." He seized her hands in his. "I could go with you ... to the city I mean. The whoonns'. They could change me to be like you."

She shook her head. “Maybe, a few generations ago. Not anymore. They’ve gone too far. We are ... I am no longer ... human.”

He turned away. Pain gripped his heart and tears stung his eyes.

“Adam.” She caressed his shoulder. “Look at me.”

Adam drew a shaky breath; his chest tight, then turned his head.

The illusion was gone.

Her eyes, black with flecks of brilliant light, sparkled like a million stars against a black sky. Her long black hair, now strings of light, filled with energy racing up and down the strands, and her golden body pulsed and glowed with strength.

“You must understand, Adam. I do love you, and because I do, I can’t allow you to sacrifice yourself or your community. The scrap of humanity I have left won’t allow it.”

He pulled away and turned his tear-filled eyes to stare at the ocean. Agony pierced his chest. His throat swelled and tears flowed upon his cheeks.

The sounds of sand shifted beneath her feet, the slight crunch fading as she walked away. He didn’t turn. Instead, he fought back sobs and watched through tear-drenched eyes, the light on the buoy blinking. On, off, on, off, on, off

THE CREATIVE INK FESTIVAL

When: March 29-31st, 2019

Where: Delta Burnaby Hotel and Conference Centre, 4331 Dominion Street, Burnaby, B.C.

Guest of Honour: Kelly Armstrong

Keynote Speaker: Jonas Salk

See: [Creative Ink Festival](#)

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

THE STRANGEST COINCIDENCE IMAGINABLE

by J.J. Steinfeld

(Note: A short fiction by J.J. Steinfeld with the same title—first published in *The Medulla Review*—is based on this previously unpublished poem)

The creature from a distant planet
until today, disguised as a handsome
figure of how we appear, a little taller than average,
a smile that would disarm you on the spot,
for fifty Earth years revealed his visage and identity
to no one, not to world leaders or the humblest denizens
and this creature wandered about seamlessly,
seeking information and insights, adhering to immutable
instructions from the severe and demanding authorities
who had selected him as the first to visit Earth
and held from even so far away the power
to extinguish the creature's life and form.
The creature is sad and drowning in melancholy
and an Earthlike madness formerly inconceivable
not from missing his home planet
or disoriented by the harsh pretense
of fifty day after day falsified Earth years
but having fallen in love against all instructions
mutating the immutable from the stern and demanding authorities
and showing his true visage to the Earth woman
who had redefined the galaxy for him
and upon seeing his disguise disappear
authenticity on display in sudden honesty
she laughed and laughed
revealing she too was from another planet
not a desired yet prohibited Earth woman
and he this lovestruck creature was a replica of the eternally
mocked animal that inhabits her planet's vile peripheral region
where two hideous moons overshadow all—
isn't that the strangest coincidence imaginable
she said, then reverting to her own language
words that frightened more than saddened
but the laughter was universal.

LESS UNLIKELY EVERY DAY

by Mark Shainblum

(Previously published in FaceBook.)

This was originally published as a post on my Facebook page in July of 2018. As I explained at the time “Less Unlikely Every Day” is fiction but it isn’t exactly a story. It doesn’t pretend to have all of the core elements of a good story, like plot or characterization or ... well, style. Stylistically it’s nothing like most of the fiction I’ve ever written.

I’m sure I also got many factual elements, like Parliamentary procedure, completely wrong. But I put it out there on Facebook anyhow, naked and afraid. (And Graeme Cameron kindly offered to actually publish it in Polar Borealis.)

Why? Because basically, this is a science fiction writer’s panic attack in prose form. This is what happens when you’ve been professionally trained to view the world through “if this goes on ...” lenses. That’s our job. Not necessarily to accurately predict the future, but to warn against possible futures we may be building.

This is a terrible story, but it may be a necessary warning.

The Prime Minister wasn’t the man he’d once been. The reflection looking back at him from the mirror was puffy and tired. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks and jowls sagged. His infamously perfect coif was no longer quite so perfect, streaked with gray and lopsided, and thinning in the front.

He sighed. It didn’t seem so long ago that Barack had mock-jealously made fun of his boyish good looks.

No, the Prime Minister thought, pushing thoughts of the former President away. Obama was gone and there was nothing he could do for him. Breaking down in front of the House, on today of all days, was not an option.

The Prime Minister sighed again, plastered a terrifying Jack Nicholson smile on his face, and tilted his head to the left.

“It’s showtime,” he said.

The House of Commons looked wrong. All the breakaway Conservatives, who had reformed themselves as the Progressive Conservative caucus, were

sitting on the far side of the NDP, as far as they could get from their former colleagues without falling into the Ottawa River.

The leader of the rump Conservatives had lodged a furious complaint with Elections Canada over the PC's "theft" of the Conservative name, but so far, the civil servants in charge didn't seem to be in any great rush to resolve the trademark dispute.

The Prime Minister cleared his throat. "Mr. Speaker, I come before the House today with the saddest, perhaps most *tragic* news ever to be brought to this Parliament. A Parliament that a former President of the United States, a true friend of Canada, called a 'temple of democracy.'"

There was scattered hand clapping and a low muttering from the Conservative benches.

"There was nothing inevitable about this speech. As recently as three years ago, it would have been impossible for me to even *conceive* of what I am about to say. But *unlikely* isn't *impossible*, and today I must talk about the impossibility parked on our doorstep."

The Prime Minister didn't like how gravelly his voice sounded. He composed himself, took a sip of water, and faced the Speaker.

"Mr. Speaker, for the first time since 1812, Canada faces a military threat on our southern border."

Boos and hisses rose from the Conservative benches, drowned out by applause from the government side and its NDP, PC and Green coalition partners.

"I do not make this assertion lightly. I am not, as some members of the Opposition have claimed, trying to sneakily turn Canada into a major military power as a vanity project. The truth is, we have *always* been a major military power. We punched far above our weight in two world wars, in Korea, in the former Yugoslavia and in Afghanistan. Our peacekeeping forces brought order and stability to conflict zones around the world. We *invented* UN peacekeeping!"

There was more applause and cheering from the government and coalition benches.

"But 'major' means very little when you live next door to the pre-eminent military power in the history of the world."

The Prime Minister took another sip of water.

"The United States is, quite simply, more than a match for the next six global military powers *combined*, including Russia, China, the UK, France, Germany and Japan. You'll notice that Canada isn't even *on* that list. For

many years Canada sheltered under that awesome might, protected from invasion by close, fraternal relations with the United States and a continental defense policy.”

The papers in the Prime Minister’s hands shook.

“Sadly, those days seem to be receding into history. With the questionably legal abrogation of the NORAD treaty by Presidential decree, joint air defense of the North American continent has fallen into disarray. Since the treaty’s effective end two years ago, Russian probes of Canadian air defenses have increased by one hundred percent, probes which frequently cross Alaskan airspace with no challenge from American forces.”

“You lie!” Came a shout from the Conservative backbench.

A Progressive Conservative MP shot to her feet. “Point of order, Mr. Speaker! The Member for Sagamootch-Green Lake has just called the Prime Minister of Canada a liar in the House!”

“Recognized,” said the Speaker. “Will the member for Sagamootch-Green Lake withdraw his comment?”

“Never! This whole house is a sham! A kangaroo cabinet! You’ll all get yours when our *real* President gets here!”

“Sergeant-at-Arms, please remove the Member for Sagamootch-Green Lake from the House for use of unparliamentary language.”

The Prime Minister sat down as the unseemly scuffling match across the aisle progressed. The Leader of the Opposition caught the PM’s eyes and gave a sad little “What can I do?” shrug. The Prime Minister gave him an invisible finger and looked away.

When the Member for Sagamootch-Green Lake was finally dumped, unceremoniously, on the floor outside the House of Commons, the Prime Minister rose again.

“Once we boasted of sharing the world’s longest undefended border with our American friends, but sadly, those days are also gone. The President has—without Congressional authority—built up United States Space Force troops in Washington State, Montana, Michigan, Minnesota, upstate New York and Vermont. These troop concentrations are individually several times larger than the entire Canadian Armed Forces, and are a direct threat to our three largest population centres, Vancouver, Greater Toronto and Montreal. They also threaten the population centres and oilfields of Alberta.”

More muttering came from the Conservative back benches.

“Do the honourable members of the Opposition doubt my word about something any Canadian can see for themselves with a click on Google Earth?”

The Opposition leader rose unsteadily to his feet. For a second, the Prime Minister felt sorry for the man, chained like a rock to the most reactionary elements of his party. But then, he could have always joined the Progressive Conservative rebels, so fuck him.

“The Conservative Party does not doubt that the U.S. Army has fortified those positions,” said the Leader of the Opposition. “We simply accept the explanation that they are there to protect the northern United States from invasion and infiltration through our sometimes ... *porous* border.”

Despite himself, the Prime Minister laughed out loud. “Do you even *hear* yourself? First of all, the United States *Army* is nowhere near the border. They’re in their barracks, legitimately refusing to obey manifestly illegal orders. No, it’s an illegal and extra-constitutional *militia* calling itself the United States *Space Force* that is threatening us.”

“The Space Force is a legitimate ...” muttered the Leader of the Opposition.

“It is *not* legitimate!” Roared the Prime Minister, pounding his desk. “It’s not one of the established branches of the American Department of Defense, it doesn’t answer to the Joint Chiefs, and its members take an oath of allegiance to the President *personally*, not to United States of America! That is, in my book, a textbook example of an illegal militia! We do not recognize it as a legitimate military branch, and its members will be considered illegal combatants if they ever engage in military action against us.”

The Opposition Leader’s jaw dropped. No one had ever seen the Prime Minister lose his cool in the House like that before.

“Sit down,” the Prime Minister growled, and the Leader of the Opposition sat down.

“And if this weren’t provocation enough, the President of the United States now seems to believe that he can dictate domestic policy to Canadians and the Government of Canada. Under intense pressure several years ago, we dismantled our dairy and poultry marketing boards. As expected, this led to chaos in the market and the bankruptcy of more than half of our dairy and poultry farmers. And yet the President still refuses to lift his punishing sanctions on Canada’s agricultural, automotive, lumber and manufacturing sectors. Tariffs of more than 40% remain in place across the board!”

Cries of “shame” and “terrible” echoed through the House.

“We suspected the President had other demands up his sleeve, and sure enough, last week he quietly communicated to me that if we expect the tariffs to ever go away, we’ll need to dismantle, and I quote ‘Our socialistic medicine care system.’ Apparently, it sets a ‘bad example.’”

The House was dead silent. The Leader of the Opposition stared at the Prime Minister and shook his head.

“Does the Leader of the Opposition have a question for me, Mr. Speaker?”

The man shook his head, more slowly this time, and stood up. He trudged sullenly past the NDP and stopped in front of the Progressive Conservative caucus. Hoots and shouts of glee erupted from the government and coalition benches.

Rona Ambrose, the interim PC leader, eyed him with distaste and then nodded curtly. She pointed at the backbench. He sighed, trudged to the back, and stood in front of the curtains, his arms folded across his chest.

“Needless to say,” continued the Prime Minister, “We do not take orders from the President of the United States. A president whose very domestic legitimacy is being challenged in the Supreme Court. Neither will we be cowed by his illegal, amateur militia, however strong they may look on paper, a so-called *Space Force* without a single spacecraft, rocket or satellite.”

Rona Ambrose leaned forward, as did the leaders of the NDP and Green Parties. They knew what was coming.

“That is why today I am announcing a major, emergency purchase of eighty *Rafale* air superiority fighters from France, plus a further thirty-five Eurofighter Typhoons from the Eurofighter Consortium. Strategically and logistically, it would be preferable to go with a single airframe, but the capacity to build as many as we currently require, as fast as we require them, simply doesn’t exist. At least, not outside the United States. And for obvious reasons, we can’t put our eggs in *that* basket.”

The House erupted in the laughter.

“This will be a huge burden for Canadians, a massive increase of our defense budget, and those resources will necessarily have to be shuffled from other departments and programs. Commensurate increases in our land forces, and purchase of at least three missile boats for each coast will add to that burden. Canadians can expect more hard times ahead, on top of the hard times we have already experienced due to the illegal tariffs and trade sanctions levied against us by the United States, in violation of multiple WTO rulings.”

“It will take several years for all of these aircraft to be delivered, even under a crash program. The first batch of ten *Rafales* will arrive from France by the end of this year, diverted from a sale to Indonesia. In the interim, Canada has gratefully accepted the stationing of three French Air Force fighter squadrons in Quebec and Ontario, two RAF and two Luftwaffe squadrons in Ontario, and one squadron each from the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal New

Zealand Air Force in British Columbia and Alberta.”

The government and coalition parties erupted into shouts of glee, while the remaining Conservative MP’s were staring at the Prime Minister bug-eyed.

“Yes, I said *has*. They have already been in place for over a week. Further squadrons from the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark have been promised, but are still being organized. As such, any military action against Canada will necessarily also be considered an attack on our NATO and Commonwealth allies.

“Even though the United States is still, technically, a member of the NATO alliance, NATO command has agreed that an attack on Canada by the illegal Space Force militia would trigger the Article 5 collective defense provision of the NATO treaty. And yes, even the *American* military commanders assigned to NATO agreed with this interpretation.”

A collective gasp went up from the House.

“Yes. You heard that correctly. The *real* American military has given a warning to the bullyboys of the Space Force. For the moment the United States Army is content to stay in its barracks, but they do not promise to *remain* there if Canada is attacked from American soil by a criminal paramilitary organization.”

“Traitor!” Came a shout from the opposition backbench. “You’re suborning a military coup in the United States! Our closest friend and ally!”

The Speaker rose. “Will the member for Ransack-Mumfrey Wood-Tellamere withdraw her unparliamentary attack?”

The Prime Minister waved. “Let it go, Mr. Speaker. We can’t dump the entire Opposition in the hall.”

“Moreover, I have a very pointed message for the President of the United States, for however long he holds that disputed title. You have forced my hand. You have made me do something future generations of Canadians and citizens of the world may never forgive me for. Effectively immediately, Canada is announcing our withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

The House was nothing but noise. Even the NDP and the PC’s were taken by surprise, because this had been played very close to the Prime Minister’s chest.

“There are already French and British nuclear weapons on our territory, in secret locations, with secret methods of delivery. There will soon be domestically manufactured Canadian nuclear weapons in place on a schedule that we will keep to ourselves, thank you very much. We could *always* have done this, we have been a nuclear-capable country since the end of the Second

World War, but we *chose* not to be. Canada was among the first nations in the world to renounce the use of nuclear weapons or the stationing of nukes on her territory. We were among the first signatories to the NPT. But that's over now. Call us hypocrites if you must, but *never* doubt the resolve of the Canadian people to remain *sovereign and free!*"

"As I said once before, in a very different context, Canadians are nice, but we will *not* be pushed around."



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 28:

Stories:

Dissonance, by Ron Friedman.

Hindsight by Hall Jameson.

Time Beasts by Barbara Davies.

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

The Flight of the Osprey by Robert Dawson.

Wild Irish Rose by Julie Frost.

Fuchsia Thought by Corey J. White.

He Was So Old, by Lee Widener.

Poems:

Foreshadowing by Lisa Timpf.

More than Dreams Alone by John Grey.

See: [Neo-opsis Magazine](#)

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

There is a write up on the 2017 convention Tsukino Con in Victoria, BC.

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

Next short story submissions window for Neo-opsis Magazine will run May 15 to June 15, 2019.

LEARNING TO RUN

by Colleen Anderson

(Previously unpublished)

Shoes have always been vehicles
They began with fitting me for a journey
An elegant veneer, like glass, like mink
That transported me to a fantasy fête

When the curfew fell I fled
A breadcrumb trail replaced with a shoe
A clue for the prince who followed
Looking for the one that got away

Those court shoes galvanized my stepsisters
Mutilation the fad as they sawed and hacked
What they lacked—tiny feet to fit the trend
And unadorned were the feats of hard work

Shoes can be prisons, confining one's nature
Gentle diligence and loyalty remained
Hollow as an abandoned slipper that led
To my capture gilded in gold, azure silk, brocade

I am a kept woman closeted with collections
Confections, sapphires, rubies and pomades
Shelved and viewed for special occasions
Until I tear off my shoes to run free

THE LONELY MR. FISH

by Lily Author

(Previously unpublished)

Jason woke up to a shrill shriek that pierced his eardrums, then discovered his boner in his right hand. The two events were unrelated, but neither was unusual.

“Get out of bed!” his mother shouted behind the closed bedroom door. The boner shrivelled and vanished.

He groaned and rolled to his side. Sunlight blasted his eyes. He threw the covers over his face.

“It’s almost noon!” his mother yelled. “Get up now!”

“Ma, it’s Saturday.”

“I can’t understand a word of your mumbling. I’m opening the door!”

Panic swelled in his chest. “Ma, no, I’m naked!”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

The door swung open and bounced once against the wall. A disorganized collection of school-related papers teetered on the desk and threatened to fall. Sunlight blasted from the window and dust motes danced in the beam.

His mother bent down to pick up discarded clothes from the floor. “Get out of bed.” She flung a pair of underwear over one arm.

Jason groaned into a bed sheet.

“Now you listen to me.” She pointed a finger at him. “Tara forgot her costume.” A pointing finger swivelled and aimed at the doorway. “I have to drive to the school.” Finger jabbed toward the ceiling. “And Mr. Fish needs his lunch.”

Jason propped himself up on his elbows and squinted. “What about Dad?”

“Tied up at the office.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Some kind of emergency.”

“What about Mrs. Flores?”

“It’s her weekend off.”

“What about—”

“Jason!”

He winced, then sighed. “Kay, I’m moving.” The sheets rustled as he threw them off and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“I thought you said you’re naked.”

He crossed his arms. "I thought you said no chores this weekend."

His mother shot him a death-glare. "Things change. Get dressed and give Mr. Fish his lunch."

Jason huffed. "Why can't he do it himself?"

She stared. "We provide room and board every May long weekend! What is your problem?"

Her voice edged too close to a grounding order. He raised his hands in surrender while silently vowing to complain to his father later.

She rolled her eyes. "A plate and bowl are on the kitchen counter. Ketchup, too. Bring the bottle. He likes a lot of ketchup."

The dresser drawer slammed shut with a kick of his heel. He threw a pair of jeans and a T-shirt on the bed.

"He's a creep," he muttered.

"He's a *boarder*."

And he gives me the creeps, Jason silently added.

"I don't know what your problem is and I don't want to hear it. Mr. Fish paid well in advance and ..."

Jason tuned out most of the ensuing lecture.

Grandfather you never had. He twirled his finger, asking his mother to turn around. *A nice old man*. He tugged up the jeans. *He's quiet and doesn't ask for anything*. He stretched the T-shirt over his head.

"You need new clothes." His mother's eyes narrowed in a familiar way.

"No, I don't." He nodded at the pile of dirty clothes she held close to her chest. "Drop 'em. I'll put it in the laundry room later."

"Don't forget."

"Yes, mother," he mumbled as he brushed past her, then left the bedroom.

"I'll be back in time to make dinner," she yelled after him. "And give Mr. Fish his lunch!"

"Okay! I will!"

Thunder grumbled outside of the house as the teenager took the stairs two at a time. He counted seconds. Lightning flashed half a minute later when he entered the kitchen. A car engine roared, then faded. *See ya later, Mom*.

Fumbling on a wall, he found the switch, then light filled the kitchen. Dripping rain cast thin shadows from the window. The lunch sat on the kitchen counter, as promised.

He inspected the thick ham sandwich in the centre of a decorative tray and raised an eyebrow at the bowl of chicken noodle soup. A yellow sticky note on the bottle of ketchup read, *Don't forget the ketchup*. He rolled his eyes.

Somewhere, a phone rang. He searched the kitchen. A cell phone rattled on the top of the fridge. He reached up and grabbed the device.

“Uh, hello?”

“Jason! You found my phone!”

“Dad?”

“Listen, tell your mother I might be late for dinner.”

Jason held the phone between his ear and shoulder. “Mom’s not going to like that.”

A tuneless low whistle crept into the kitchen. It came from the direction of the back stairs to the one rented room on the third floor.

“Did you hear a word I said?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m listening.” He put the bowl on the plate and hoped Mr. Fish wouldn’t notice a few missing drops of soup.

“Tell your mother I left my phone at home. Better yet, show her. I’ll try, but I probably won’t have a chance to call and let her know when I’ll be home.”

Jason tucked the ketchup bottle under his arm. The bowl zoomed to the edge of the plate. He rushed to keep everything level. “Okay, Dad, I got it.”

His father’s sigh of relief came through. “You’re a good boy. We’ll do something tomorrow.”

“Like what?”

“We can go fishing.”

Jason frowned. “Nah.”

“Why not?” his father wondered.

“I always get bigger fish than you.”

His father snorted. “I *let* you catch bigger fish.”

Jason chuckled. “Sure, Dad.”

The upstairs whistling grew louder and warbled out of tune.

“Dad, I have to go.”

“All right, son. I’ll see you tonight.”

The call ended. Jason listened to the whistling as he wondered what to do. The phone dug into his ear and glued to his skin. The ear canal burned with pressure. With two hands gripping the plate, he shook his head hard. The phone remained unmoved.

The whistling stopped. The sound of the fridge turning on made Jason jump. Rain splattered on the kitchen window.

“Oh, no,” he whispered to himself as his heart raced. “Not creepy at all.”

Slowly, carefully, he bent his knees, and lowered until his ear was next to the edge of the kitchen table. With a quick jerk of his head, the phone pried off

the skin of his ear, and flung to the table. It spun several times, then clattered to a stop. Soup spilled out of the bowl and cascaded down his hands.

“Screw this,” he muttered as he put the plate on the table.

The whistling resumed. Jason cringed. He grabbed the towel from the fridge door handle and mopped up the mess. *More laundry*, he figured. He tossed the towel and it landed in a wet heap near the entrance to the kitchen.

This time, he decided to tuck the ketchup under his arm first. Then, with fading patience, he picked up the plate with the bowl. *Don't spill, don't spill, don't spill*. The darkness of the hall loomed ahead. Refusing to look up, Jason took baby steps out of the kitchen.

The narrow back stairwell provided a small amount of light. Jason squinted and gripped the plate. The soup swayed for a second, then settled inside the bowl. The ketchup bottle slid down the underside of his arm. He squeezed his elbow close to his side and held it in place. Each step on the staircase creaked as he took them one at a time. Halfway up the stairs, a trembling monotonous voice called out.

“Diane. Diane. Diane.”

Jason paused and inhaled for five seconds.

“She had to go, Mr. Fish! I'm bringing your lunch.”

A chuckle wafted down the stairs. “Thank you.”

Jason swallowed his nagging fear and concentrated on the stairs.

Mr. Fish stood in front of the closed door of the rented room. He started whistling again as he stared beyond the teenager, beyond the stairs, and at nothing at all.

“Here you go.” Jason cleared his throat. “Sir.”

Mr. Fish frowned with confusion. His watery eyes showed no recognition. “Who are you?”

“Jason.” The plate shook in his hands.

“What are you doing here?”

“My Mom had to go so I have to give you your lunch. Okay?”

Mr. Fish's head tilted to one side. “Is it Saturday?”

“Yes, sir.” Jason held out the plate and bowl. The ketchup slowly slid down and bounced on the floor. “If you could just, uh, I'll get that. Take this, okay?”

“What day is it?” Mr. Fish demanded, urgent and worried.

“Saturday,” Jason enunciated. “Please. Take your food.”

The frown dissolved into a carefree smile with the twinkling eyes of a favourite grandfather. “Yes, of course.” He took the plate and bowl. “I meant to say, what year is it?”

Jason kept staring as he reached for the ketchup. “2018.”

Mr. Fish smiled, loose and uncommitted. “I see, I see. Please come in. There's a place for you at the table. Could you open the door for me?”

“I have to do some chores.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

“Please?”

“I really have to—”

“*Please?*”

The old eyes became more watery.

“Yeah. Okay.” Jason reached around, twisted the knob, and pushed the door open. The stench of stale mothballs hit him. “There.” He covered his nose. “I have to go now.”

“I need ketchup.” The old man whispered like a child.

“Oh, right.” He thrust out the bottle. “Go on. Take it.”

“I don't have a free hand. Can you please put it on the table?”

Jason exhaled. “Fine.” He rushed into the room. “Holy ...”

Black and white photos with frayed or curled corners were taped all over the walls. Vintage photographs of naked women tied up in awkward positions. Ropes were wrapped around legs and went higher ... and higher ...

“Do you like them?”

Jason held the ketchup close to his chest. “Maybe.” He continued following the ropes in the photographs.

A chair dragged on the carpet.

“I find them at flea markets,” Mr. Fish explained. “You can put the ketchup down now.”

“Oh. Right.”

Without looking, he put the bottle on the small wooden table. It landed with a thud. He winced and looked to Mr. Fish. The old man smiled and opened the ham sandwich.

“Sometimes I find them between pages of old books.” Globes of ketchup splattered on slices of ham. “People hide them in odd places. Sometimes you have to hide.”

Jason went back to staring at the photos. “My parents are going to ground me for life.”

“Why do you say that?”

The teenager pointed at a photo of a woman who hung upside down. “Are you kidding me? I can hear my Dad now. Too old for you, young man. Go to your room. Okay, so maybe that last part is my Mom.”

Mom! Jason realized he forgot to mention her to his father.

“I was younger than you,” Mr. Fish commented. “Which one do you like the best?”

He paused while he wondered what to say to Dad later. “Um, the ropes?”

“Ah. I like the bars.”

“Really?” Jason scanned the wall. “I guess they’re okay.”

“I won’t tell your parents,” Mr. Fish said between slurps.

Jason faced the old man. He was sipping soup from the bowl. “Oh, man, I’m sorry. I’ll get you a spoon.”

“No, stay,” Mr. Fish ordered. “I don’t need a spoon. Sit down and talk with me.”

Jason traced a finger along a chair. “I don’t think I should be here.”

“Why not?”

“Because. I have chores.”

The old man stared at the soup bowl and asked, “What year is it?”

“2018.” Jason rubbed the back of his head. “Do you feel okay, Mr. Fish?”

A silly smile beamed in response.

“I don’t feel any different.”

“Well, maybe you should talk to my Mom.” *Or a nurse. At a hospital. Like, the Emergency Room.*

Mr. Fish laughed. “Oh, no. That won’t do at all. She’s much too old.”

Jason didn’t disagree, but still ...

“Look, we can talk some other time. Today’s not good.” He inched towards the door. The closed door. “Hey, when did the door close?”

“Do you feel like you’ve reached a point where there’s nothing left?”

Jason blinked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Ketchup oozed out the sides of the sandwich as Mr. Fish pushed the sandwich into his mouth.

“I’ve travelled all over this country,” he continued as he chewed. “I’ve tried everything. What’s left to try?”

Jason raised a brow. “Did you want something else for lunch?”

Ketchup escaped the corners of Mr. Fish’s mouth as he grinned. “No. This is good. Tell me, do you like girls?”

Jason frowned. “Yeah.”

Mr. Fish nodded at the table. “Are you bored?”

Jason gave in. The old man wanted to talk and there didn’t seem to be a way around that. He sat down across the table. “Sure, sometimes. I mean, school’s boring, but have to stay in school, I guess.”

Mr. Fish’s chin pointed at a wall. “Do you want to keep one?”

Jason's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"I can't..."

"Why?"

"My parents."

"Don't tell them."

Jason blew out a gust of air. "Okay."

"Which one?" Mr. Fish asked, his voice eager.

"Um ... that one?" Jason pointed at a woman with her arms held back by thick ropes that forced her chest forward. And she was smiling at the camera without any sign of pain.

Mr. Fish leaned forward and his voice lowered. "Have you tasted flesh?"

"Flesh?" *What the ...* What do you mean?"

"Meat."

"Like steak?"

Mr. Fish leaned forward more. "The meat of a girl."

Jason's mouth hung open.

The old man waved of at the wall. "I'll give you that photo. With the ropes."

"Thanks, but—"

"Your sister."

What the hell? "What about her?" he demanded.

Mr. Fish grinned. "She's plump."

Jason eyes narrowed. "Mom says that's baby fat. So what?"

Mr. Fish nudged the plate. "You've thought about it, haven't you?"

Jason slammed his palms on the table, pushed down hard, and stood up. The chair knocked over and bounced on the floor. "Jesus, you're sick! She's my *sister*. She's nine years old!"

Mr. Fish wrung his bony hands. "No, no. I didn't mean, no. Please. Sit down."

Jason regarded him with disgust. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Confusion riddled the old man's face. "I don't know," he said to the wall. "Is something wrong with me?"

"You're talking about hurting my sister."

Mr. Fish sighed. "You don't understand. I'm talking about feeling good. What makes you feel good?"

"Not hurting my sister, for starters!" Jason snapped.

"Don't you like girls?"

“Of course.” Jason rubbed his forehead with the heel of a palm. “But there’s a difference. Tara’s just a kid. You should know that.”

“Children,” Mr. Fish muttered in an awed voice. “I remember. I was a child. I was five years old. There was a boy. The priests, no, never mind. I remember now.” He relaxed and smiled. “Thank you. I remember everything.”

Jason’s eyebrows raised. “You’re welcome?” he spat with sarcasm.

Mr. Fish placed the bowl on the plate. “I suppose I was having a crisis, but it’s gone now.”

“Right,” Jason measured the distance to the door, “a crisis.” *Whatever.* “You’re okay, then?”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re not going to hurt my sister,” Jason warned.

“No, of course not.”

“You won’t tell my parents I was here?”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

“Okay.” Jason edged around the table.

“I promise.” The old man drew an ‘X’ on his chest.

As Jason manoeuvred around the table, a plan formed in his mind. *Call 911. Get advice. Call Dad. Maybe call him first? Mom will freak. Call her second. Phone. Phone!* He nodded to himself and sprinted to the door.

A heavy weight smashed into the back of his head. His mind spun and he dropped to his knees as he wildly grabbed for anything with leverage. Black spots dotted his vision. The walls blurred. The skin of his palms burned. He smelled carpet.

The breath of an old man warmed Jason’s ear.

“I want to thank you,” Mr. Fish whispered. The broken pieces of a chair rustled on the floor. “My memories. I forget everything all the time. You reminded me, and so I thank you.”

“My head hurts,” Jason mumbled. Pushing down on the carpet, he attempted to push himself up. His palms stung in protest and his knees weakened.

A bony, claw-like hand rubbed his cheek, and he flinched. His head throbbed harder.

“Help me.” His voice slurred. “I’m hurt.”

The sole of a shoe dug into the vulnerable space behind his left knee, then ground down.

Jason screamed.

Another shoe slowly crunched the fingers of his right hand.

He screamed louder. For a moment, he believed the entire neighbourhood heard him. They'd come running. He saw the lights of a police car flash. He'd meet his parents and they'd carry him into an ambulance. He'd outlive the old man and he'd tell the story many times, for years. He screamed and screamed.

Mr. Fish hiked his pants and crouched down. "You can stop. No one's here."

No one would be there for hours.

Jason swallowed hard and licked his dry lips. His right hand swelled and cracks of blood spread down his fingers. He'd lost all feeling in his left leg. His vision blurred even more as fat tears gushed down his face and dribbled off his chin. His bladder twisted.

A warm trickle slid down his inner thighs. Blood mixed with urine and formed a dark outline of his broken body. He didn't smell mothballs anymore.

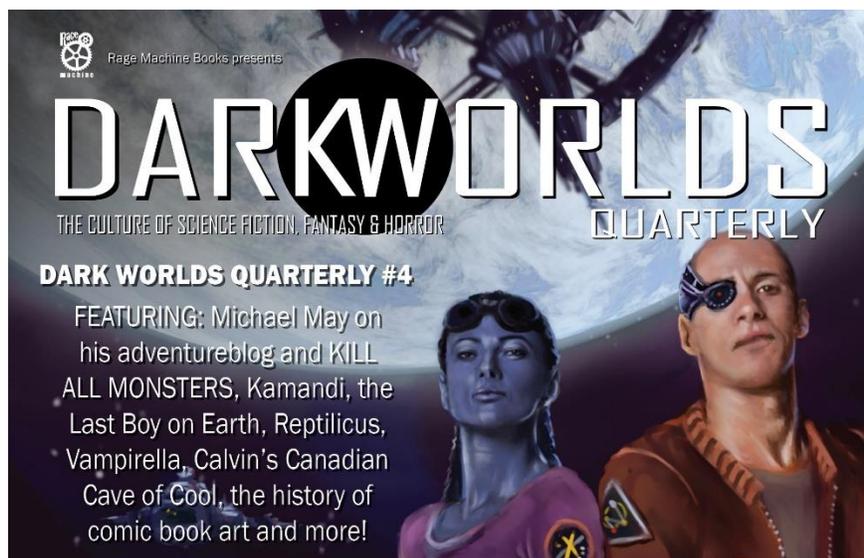
"Let me go," Jason pleaded between sobs. He licked snot from his upper lip. "Please let me go."

Mr. Fish stroked Jason's damp hair. "I can't do that."

"Please!" Jason cried. "Please let me go."

"I can't."

"Why won't you help me?" Jason begged.



See: [Dark Worlds Quarterly](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Colleen Anderson

Colleen's poetry has twice been nominated for the Aurora Award, the Rhysling, and won second place in the Crucible and Rannu competitions. She has co-edited two anthologies and edited *Alice Unbound: Beyond Wonderland* (2018). Her poetry has been featured in such places as *Grievous Angel*, *Polu Texni*, *The Future Fire*, and *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*. Colleen's collection of short fiction, *A Body of Work*, was published by Black Shuck Books, UK in Oct. 2018.

Lily Author

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

After receiving a [MS](#) diagnosis in 2004, Lily's focus changed, and now she dedicates her time to a writing career.

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Roxanne Barbour

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

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

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

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

Eric Chu

Eric has been in the film and animation business for over 30 years. Working as a layout and storyboard artist, he quickly became known for reworking story lines to fit his own bizarre sense of humour. He worked on such projects as *Droids*, *Beetlejuice*, *Captain Power* and countless others. In 2002 he did concept designs for the new *Battlestar Galactica* where he was responsible for visualizing the look of the new Galactica, the Cylons, Raiders, Basestars and so on.

He works out of Paranoid Delusions, Inc, a Vancouver-based design company which he founded in 1985. He describes it as “a creative studio where ideas are isolated, incubated and bred to wreak mutant havoc on the world. We oversee every developmental stage of our creations, from initial conception to design, modeling, re-animation and more.” Typical Paranoid Delusion Inc. services include design, illustration, animation, live-action films, and toy design.

Currently, he has several projects in various stages of development, including working with Jamie Anderson on the upcoming puppet-based SF series, *Firestorm*, a return to the old Gerry Anderson shows he grew up loving as a kid.

Bernadette Gabay Dyer

Bernadette is a member of SF Canada, as well of the Writers Union of Canada. She is a novelist, a poet, a short story writer and a storyteller, as well as an artist, who resides in Toronto and works for Toronto Public Libraries. Her historical novel *Chasing the Banyan Wind* will be launched this November.

Neile Graham

Neile is a Canadian writer who lives and works in Seattle, where she is a workshop director for the Clarion West Writers Workshop for speculative fiction—work that won her a World Fantasy Award. Her publications include three full-length print collections, most recently *Blood Memory*, and a CD, *She Says: Poems Selected & New*, and has poems in various on-line and print journals, including *Strange Horizons*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and *Kaleidotrope*. Two new collections, *The Walk She Takes* and *Stone*, are forthcoming in 2019.

Madison McSweeney

Madison is a writer from Ottawa, Ontario. She has published short fiction and poetry in *Women in Horror Annual Vol. 2*, *Unnerving Magazine*, *Dark Horizons: An Anthology of Dark Science Fiction*, and *The Fulcrum*, as well as Weirdpunk's Books' upcoming zombie punks-themed anthology. She has also published arts coverage in a variety of outlets, and frequently writes about the horror scene and Canadian music.

Mark Shainblum

Mark Shainblum is an award-winning science fiction author and comic book writer. He co-created the Canadian superhero series *Northguard*, and co-edited two SF anthologies, *Arrowdreams: An Anthology of Alternate*

Canadas (with John Dupuis) and *Superhero Universe: Tesseract*
Nineteen (with Claude Lalumière). A third anthology (with Andrea Lobel) is due
from CZP in 2019, *Other Covenants: Alternate Histories of the Jewish People*.

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 efanzines.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 nineteen 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), and *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies internationally, and over fifty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

For his most recent publication, *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), see:

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

Lisa Timpf

Lisa Timpf is a freelance writer living in Simcoe, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in a variety of venues, including *Star*Line*, *The Martian Wave*, *Scifaikuest*, *New Myths*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: My Very Good, Very Bad Dog*.

Lena Ng

Lena is a writer and poet from Toronto, Ontario. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in several anthologies and magazines including: *Just Desserts* (Wolfsinger Publications, 2016), *World Unknown Review* (Editor L.S. Engler, 2016), *Devolution Z* (Jan 2017 issue), *Monsters Among Us* (Bloody Kisses Press, 2017), *Polar Borealis Magazine* (Issues #4 July/Aug, 2017 & #6 April/May, 2018), *Gathering Storm Magazine* (Issues #2 April, 2017 & #4 Aug, 2017), *Antimattermag.com* (Oct 4, 2017), *The Quilliad* (Issue 9 Oct, 2017). *Under an Autumn Moon* is her collection of horror/fantasy short stories. She is currently seeking a publisher for her first novel, *Darkness Beckons*, a gothic romance set in the Victorian era.

Monica Sagle

Monica is a writer from Southern Alberta, and a lover of Dragons. She writes Sci Fi and Fantasy, and is writing her second novel. She is a member of CSFFA and is a regular attendee at When Words Collide in Calgary. She belongs to the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers group in the Crowsnest Pass and several online critique groups. Her story *Storm House* was published in *A Haunting of Words Anthology* by Scoutmedia in 2017. She rounds out her life with a patient husband, three needy cats, learning ASL (American Sign Language) and gardening.

Dean Wirth

Dean's influences include Lovecraft, Mary Shelly and Warren Magazine (artists and writers). He is married and lives in Alberta with three dogs (Buster, Hunter and Kiwi), Hedgehogs, Box Turtles and a Uromastyx. He is quite sane; thanks for asking.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

I must admit I'm astonished to have finally completed this issue. It seemed like it was taking forever, but actually it took me only six days of concentrated effort. Mind you, I had already selected the stories and poems months ago, and done much in the way of preliminary planning in bits and pieces over time, but the actual editing and layout was accomplished in an unexpected surge of enthusiasm that took me by surprise. I think finally settling into my new home had a lot to do with it. Not to mention a generous donation which helps my publication plans considerably.

I quite like the reduced size I've adopted. Seven stories and six poems is a lot easier to handle per issue than twice that many. With any luck, given the reduced costs, I'll be able to easily publish three issues per year, and probably more. For instance, this is the third issue for this year, and I intend to make it four by putting out a December issue. Since the cover art, stories and poems have already been chosen, in theory I shouldn't have any problem at all in putting issue #8 together.

One thing for sure, I don't have to worry about a lack of contributors. I have enough material on hand for two further issues. Once they're done I'll be opening my submissions window again. Can't say even approximately when yet, just that I'm looking forward to another deluge of manuscripts when the time comes. I don't know which is the more exciting task: first-reading or editing, both are loads of fun. As long as I enjoy publishing this magazine, I will carry on. Could be at it for years yet.