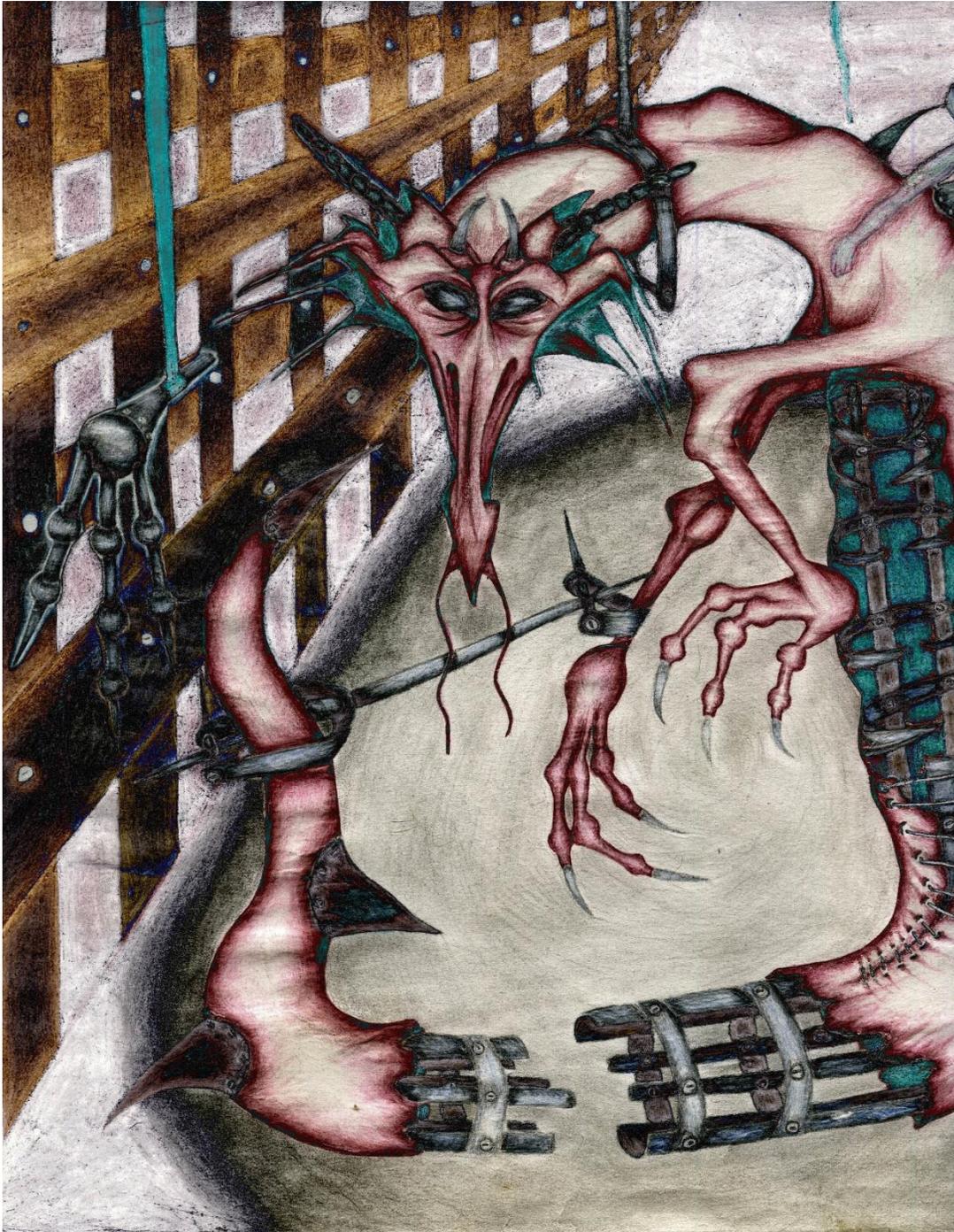


POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #8 – December 2018)



POLAR BOREALIS Magazine

Issue #8 – December 2018 (Vol.3#4.WN#8)

Publisher/Editor: R. Graeme Cameron

Proofreader: Steve Fahnstalk

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

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

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

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

POLAR BOREALIS offers the following Payment Rates:

Short Stories of three thousand words or less in length – one (1) cent a word.

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

Interior Illustration – \$20.00

“Fillo” Illustration – \$5.00

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

< [The Graeme](#) >

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

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

ISSN 2369-9078 (Online)

Headings: Engravers MT

By-lines: *Monotype Corsiva*

Text: Bookman Old Style

Ad Text: Calibri

Table of contents

- 03) – EDITORIAL – R. Graeme Cameron
- 04) – JABBER – by Steve Fahnstalk
- 07) – SCIFAIKU #2 – (Poem) by Roxanne Barbour
- 08) – THE HEIR – by Sheryl Normandeau
- 11) – DANGEROUS GODS – (Poem) by Catherine Girczyc
- 12) – LAST CAR ON THE SKYTRAIN – by Stewart Graham
- 15) – BEASTIES – (Poem) by Rhea Rose
- 16) – MY PAINTED WOMAN by Jean-Louis Trudel
- 22) – DEATH’S KNOTTED CIRCLE – (Poem) by Y.M. Pang
- 25) – WHERE MANY PEOPLE LIVE – Nicholas Stillman
- 27) – QUEST – (Poem) by Melissa Yuan-Innes
- 28) – WHITE GHOST FUR – by Eddie Generous
- 36) – MOTH WOMAN ON A DARK NIGHT – (Poem) by Casey June Wolf
- 38) – THE SANTAS – by David F. Shultz
- 43) – OF AFTER – (Poem) by Augustus Clark
- 44) – CURSE OF THE MYRMELON – by Matthew Hughes
- 66) – ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
- 71) – AFTERWORDS – by R. Graeme Cameron

ART CREDITS

- COVER – DRAGON LAB by Lily Author
- 23) – SAUCER by Lynne Taylor Fahnstalk

Editorial

I am delighted donations have enabled me to publish a fourth issue before the end of the year. Note that any and all stories and poems in this and the previous three issues will be eligible for next year's Aurora Awards. Please bear this in mind as you read this issue.

I am also delighted that, as a kind of Christmas treat, Matthew Hughes has donated "The Curse of the Myrmelon," a story three times longer than I normally publish. It is one of his "Raffalon" fantasy stories which have been collected in "9 Tales of Raffalon" available from Amazon, for which I placed an ad just after the story. All tales great fun to read.

After the first few issues were published I acquired a tracking program which accumulates information as to where and when readers download issues of Polar Borealis. To date it has recorded 4,316 downloads, an average of 616 downloads per issue. I find it fascinating Polar Borealis has readers in 55 countries.

The top 10 countries are the United States (1,798), Canada (626), Germany (300), France (249), UK (128), Czechia (82), Vietnam (78), Italy (60), India (47) and Thailand (41).

The remaining countries, in alphabetical order, are Albania, Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Australia, Belarus, Belize, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

Granted the number of downloads for the countries listed in the above paragraph varies from 40 down to 1, but even so I find it cool that anybody in these countries downloads Polar Borealis. I particularly like those who download a single issue, and then a day or two after download all the rest of the issues. Seems there are science fiction fans everywhere!

Writers please note: **my next submission window will be the month of April, 2019. For Canadians and writers resident in Canada only.** I will be looking for poems (\$10 pay rate) and short stories 3,000 words or less (1 cent a word). I would prefer stories 1,000 words or less for budget reasons but will have room for a few longer items. For details of what I will be looking for check out the Polar Borealis website at:

< www.polarborealis.ca >

Cheers! The Graeme

JABBER

by Steve Fahnestalk

(Previously unpublished)

If I was in that sci-fi movie Dune, I'd be dead now, Paul thought, as he diligently scratched his right shoulder blade on the bookcase in the spare room. The guy Paul in the movie was able to resist the pain, and didn't get stuck by the Benny Jesser witch woman with the poison Jabber. I just can't take the pain! She would of stuck me by now!

The bookcase trembled as he scratched harder, and some of the little crystal doo-dads on the upper shelves started tinkling. One or two fell over and crashed against some other ones. The itch began to subside.

“Paul! Paul Logan! Are you messing with my Swarovski keepsakes?” The nasal voice of his stepmother, Georgina (“Just call me Georgie,” she often simpered at visitors), wafted up the stairs as he made his way to his bedroom, followed by his dad’s bellow.

“Will you two knock off the freakin’ noise? I’m tryin’a watch the damn game!” Sundays were football days and evenings, and Paul especially stayed away from his dad on Sundays when his team lost. And it was easy to tell when that happened; his father was not especially shy when it came to speaking out. Or hitting, for that matter. Although his dad, his stepmother and stepbrother Dougie didn’t seem to mind hitting amongst themselves, Paul hated it when he was the target.

And to top it all off, Georgie’s little rat dog, Peedro, had scurried up the stairs and was yipping and biting at Paul’s feet. The dog’s name was actually “Pedro,” but given its propensity for going to the bathroom any and everywhere, Paul had given it a nickname. Quickly grabbing his backpack and throwing up his bedroom window sash, Paul made his escape out onto the roof of the garage and thence to the ground. As usual, when things got too bad at home, he escaped to the woods out in back.

Not that he especially cared for woods, either; woods were full of trees, bugs, animals, snakes, and all sorts of ungodly things. Like those alien insects last month! As he slipped into the trees, Paul rummaged in his backpack for his ever-present can of “Deep-Woods Scat!” You needed bug spray; if you were foolish enough to go into the woods without it, the bugs would eat you alive! Paul was extremely susceptible to bug bites.

Just thinking about last month made his back start itching again, as he made his way via LED “tactical” flashlight—“1000 lumens!”—to his safe area

next to a giant tree stump. The stump was half-eroded on one side; and Paul had made a little camp partway into the stump's eroded side, with a lawn chair, an apple crate for a table/pantry, a tarp supported by two ski poles, a battery-powered LED lantern in case he had to stay past sundown, and other such amenities. He turned the lantern on and the flashlight off.

He dug into the pantry and pulled out what looked like a saucer from a Star Trek plastic model—it was circular, about fifteen inches in diameter, and made of some dull grey-green material that felt like plastic but had the tensile strength of metal. It had a clear half-dome on top, which was partially retracted, allowing a glimpse of a circular passage or tunnel leading into the saucer part. The saucer itself was about six inches thick in the center, at the dome, and curved down to about two inches thick at the edge. There were no lights or markings.

Paul turned on the LED flashlight, and tried to see inside the tunnel in the saucer, but the closer it came to his face, the worse the smell was. The smell was composed of equal amounts of “Deep-Woods SCAT!” and whatever it was that the alien bugs smelled like. It was not a pleasant odor. The alien bugs had swarmed out of the saucer like horseflies, biting and buzzing around Paul, when he had found the flying saucer—for that's what he was sure it was—half-embedded in the clay of the stream bank on the other side of the woods.

Just recalling that swarm made Paul's back itch worse than ever. It was just like the Jabber thing in that Dune movie, starting small and then, if you couldn't get a good scratch on it—and it was hard as heck to reach on his back—then getting worse and worse till it felt like someone was stabbing his back with knives!

Paul dropped the saucer and rushed to his “itching tree,” a piney thing with big chunks of bark that somehow were able to reach his whole back. He wiggled against it until the itch was satisfied and his back no longer hurt.

Invade Earth, would they? Ha! Paul had grabbed his can of “Deep-Woods SCAT!” out of his backpack when they first attacked him, and sprayed all around him until the bugs had all fallen to the ground; then for good measure he ran around stomping on them until he felt assured they were all squished flat. Then he emptied the rest of the can and half his reserve can into the saucer's open dome until smelly liquid came bubbling back out. *Take that, alien bugs! I, Paul Logan, fourteen-year-old loser, have saved the planet Earth from invasion! And nobody will ever know,* he thought disconsolately in the gathering gloom.

He stowed the saucer back in the pantry, covering it with a dishtowel he'd stolen out of the kitchen. Figuring that it had been long enough for his dad

and “Georgie” to forget about him, he turned off the lantern and, using his “tactical” flashlight, started home. Halfway there, his back began itching again.

Dropping his backpack and achieving a semi-satisfactory “itch rub” against various trees, Paul managed to make his way home, although he had a headache and was feeling pretty itchy when he finally clambered up the side of the garage and in through his bedroom window.

And he was immediately attacked by little Peedro who, snapping and yapping, was dancing around his ankles. Paul dropped his backpack on his bed and, tugging off his shirt, made a beeline for the spare room and the rough edge of the bookcase, which was the only thing in the house that could help him at times like this. A red tide rose in his vision, and he rubbed so hard that a whole shelf of Swarovski “keepsakes” fell against each other, tinkling and jangling. Georgie’s and his father’s angry voices joined in the cacophonous symphony, raising his headache almost to the level of his back pain.

Paul put his hands over his ears, in a futile effort to shut out the noise, and crouched over, yelling “Shut the HELL up!” as loudly as he could. There was a shocked silence from downstairs, and even Peedro quieted down. In the silence, Paul could feel and even hear, as the skin on his tortured back split open, revealing translucent, grey, wet, and wrinkled wings over a dark, hairy, insectile-looking back underneath. Paul felt immediate relief, and instinctively pulled down on his head with both hands as hard as he could.

His head skin, too, split open, and Paul was revealed—would have been, had there been an observer or a mirror—to have become a large, alien, insectile creature, whose wings were drying and straightening. His arms and hands also split open, revealing a hairy, blackish exoskeleton. His new appendages quickly stripped off his pants and shoes and, as his legs split, his transformation became complete, revealing a second pair of arms and clawlike hands.

The alien grabbed Peedro, who had become even more frantic in his barking and biting—as well as peeing!—and bit Peedro’s head off. Chewing reflexively on a bit of dog with jaws that resembled those of a monstrous wasp, the alien hybrid who had been Paul Logan started down the stairs to meet his family.

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](#) >

SCIFAIKU #2

By Roxanne Barbour

(Previously unpublished)

splitting
alien messages
unknown parallel processing



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](#)

THE HEIR

by Sheryl Normandeau

(Previously unpublished)

The message came to destroy the newborn. He hadn't attended the birth, nor sent anyone to look in on the mother who lay bleeding out on the table.

There had been no natural deaths in centuries, but the midwife could not save this woman, the latest in a never-ending string of wives. Never before had one of the mothers died giving birth.

"Get out," the midwife told the attending women. They murmured and wailed and clutched amulets as they left, and they were none the wiser.

The midwife, who had lived a thousand years on board the Hemith, had overseen the births of hundreds of his children. She had also murdered them all. She hoped to live another thousand years, so that she might finally reach the promised homeland, but feared that sparing this infant might be the mistake that would be her undoing. Yet this child was clearly not like the others.

She seized the baby and sealed her behind a wall. She knew it was foolish to hope, but did so anyway.

The girl grew half in and half out, moving seamlessly between the net of the ship and the playrooms of the flesh children, the abandoned offspring of the nobles who had made them. The midwife did not search for her, out of fear, but she heard whispers of the ghost girl, the metal girl, who flitted between. She would have outgrown the wall by now, and made her own paths. The midwife hoped Hemith would not feel the girl as she danced and played in the edges. He would be too busy in the core. After all, did he not ignore the daily machinations of the rest of his people? He did not bother with the rabble; he would not waste the energy.

But the girl came too close, and he found her. Just a simple pressing of a handprint he did not recognize, a childish giggle, a trace of her as she slipped down the byways. He did not go after her himself. He sent men trained to comb through the spaces, and they were very good and thorough.

The midwife no longer heard the stories of the metal girl. She had disappeared. The midwife did not know if the men had gotten to her.

One morning, they woke and it was cold. There was discord; no one could remember what to do. No one dared ask. The midwife shivered and wondered with the rest of them.

Days later, it became so hot, there were small electrical fires in the suites. Someone reported that they saw the girl in a grid, behind a jumble of webbing and optics, and the midwife's heart leapt.

A month passed. Hemith would not eat. This could not be tolerated. Never in a thousand years had Hemith acted like this. There were no provisions to rectify his behaviour, to fix his diseased mind and body. People began to talk, and not in mere whispers. If Hemith was ill, they would never reach the homeland. There were pods for going off-ship, of course, but not enough for everyone.

No one had to say that they were light years from any haven.

The midwife did not know where to look for the girl. She wandered the corridors and the passageways, both in net and out, and found more than she had dreamed she would. Hemith had been sick for a long time, had hid himself from the people. But as she searched, the midwife uncovered the evidence of his suffering, the phantoms seething inside. The midwife could feel them tracking her as she moved through the ship, but they did not attack, even as she bumped against them. This was exhausting work, but still she persevered through her hunger and her fatigue.

The others murmured and wrung their hands and called upon machines and gods that had never existed. The midwife clung to hope, knowing she was as much of a lunatic as they were.

Days passed, and there were preparations to use the pods. No one seemed in a rush to leave, despite their situation. But now people were getting sick from the lack of food, and failing to perform their work. They shut themselves in their suites and sat in darkness, waiting to die.

The nobles became desperate. They called for a man who had been a surgeon when Hemith first launched.

The midwife kept searching. The phantoms were crowding in ever closer, and they no longer tolerated her presence. They were trying to kill her. Several times they violently thrust her from the net, and she suffered bloody wounds and electrical shocks. She was no longer sure of step.

The first pods were launched, the occupants hurtling toward death. Better than the slower alternative, some muttered, but there was no call for a second launch.

Finally, when she thought she could no longer withstand the onslaught of the phantoms, the midwife found the girl in a chamber in the flesh side. The girl was cradling the body of a child who had died of hunger. The midwife noted others in the room, orphans that would never see the homeland.

"You have a choice," the midwife said.

"Old mother," the girl said. "We are all dead."

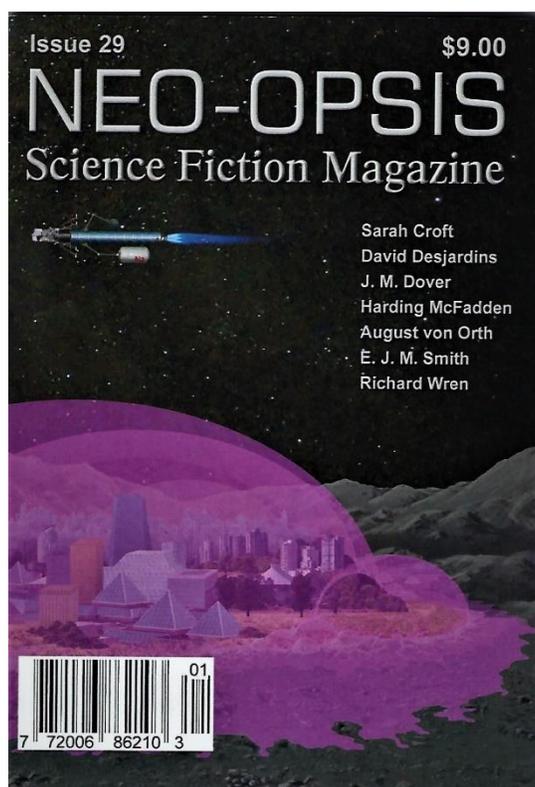
In the next chamber, the skin of his chest lay open, circuits knotted with the wires of sinew and muscle beneath. The engineers muttered nearby, fists to mouths, unintelligible. The surgeon stood with his face to the wall.

No one stopped the metal girl, not with the midwife filling the doorway behind her, urging her on.

The girl crossed the room and plunged her hand into the cavity of his body, her fingers seeking linkage, connection to the ports within. The absorption was instantaneous. The curl of her mind snapped into place.

Hemith opened one grey eye. "Child," he said.

And the world fired to life.



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 29:

Fiction:

Mayathan Rainbows by Sarah Craft.

Dragon Creed by J.M. Dover.

King of the Belt by Richard Wren.

A Matter of Nurture by August von Orth.

Project Victoria by E.J.M. Smith.

Tammy Rock and the Turnkey Monkeyman by Harding McFadden.

Dragon by David Desjardins.

Editorial "Fine Tuning" by Karl Johanson.

Plus assorted movie reviews and an article about "Cobalt Weapons in the Movies" by Karl Johanson.

The cover of issue 29 is by Karl and Stephanie Johanson.

See: [Neo-opsis Magazine](#)

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

DANGEROUS GODS

by Catherine Girezye

(Previously unpublished)

We worship dangerous gods, you and I.

Your god, my lover is a golden-haired youth,
Apollo, the burning sun and the eternal male artist
Having his way with the world.
An artifice god, a logical poet
—good enough for the Renaissance,
Rock god terrible with children.
My god is a woman, dark and soft, Mother Mary pacific
She dances on the pink opalescence of a shell
She is Venus against the cobalt waves.
With a Billie Holiday jazz sound

Life emerges from the moments between the notes
Blurs, jangles and honeyed bars of words
The Pacific Venus works the world like a song,
Holding, stretching refreshing it
She will not cut to fit, she sings the length and breadth of it.

She is a jealous goddess love and under her aegis, I strike into the heart
Of my soul.
Her music makes me crazy and I am less here and now, than there and
Everywhere
Mainlining her song, I walk to the edges of existence
While your worship goes to a god careful of his gifts
And I alone seem to see the chasm between them and us.

LAST CAR ON THE SKYTRAIN

by Stewart Graham

(Previously unpublished)

It's been a good night with friends. Barely drunk. Bonus.

But the Skytrain is chiming it's gonna leave. Last train for the night. No money for a cab. Gotta hurry.

You'd think my old legs can't move fast, and you'd be right. But, leaning forward, thrusting with my wooden cane, I let momentum speed me up a little. Scuffed white tiles scurry underfoot. I'm moving like a snail on drugs. Pretty fast. Maybe I can make it.

Besides, some weird guy is holding the door for me. An avatar of Perry Como wearing a comfy blue sweater, comfy brown slippers, and a wide grin with tobacco-stained teeth and a black pipe clamped firm. Like I say, weird.

I clump through the door and lean against a partition. The door slides shut. The Skytrain lurches into movement. I've caught the last car on the last train. Feel good about that. Till I start looking around.

The joint is jam-packed. I mean, real solid. No space except a little bit around me. The rest of the car crowded with clones. Maybe a hundred Perry Comos. All dressed the same. All looking the same. This ain't normal.

The one who held the door leans forward. Right into my face. I should be able to smell his breath, but I don't. Very aware of his eyes. Big, liquid brown pools, sparkling slightly. Weird.

"Hey, Ordinary Joe," he says. "You look old. Wanna sit down?"

"Ah, sure. Can't hurt."

They commence to shuffling. Ever see a line of soldiers dress the ranks? Shuffle till they're evenly spaced? Sort of like that.

Point is they clear a space to one of those seats with a big sign saying reserved for seniors and handicapped. You know, one of those seats real popular with teenagers. I hobble over and gingerly lower myself till I'm firmly seated, more or less. I lean forward on my cane for extra stability. Sure are a lot of freshly pressed grey pants in view. I look up.

They're all looking down. At me. Studying me. Unblinking. I notice none of the pipes are lit, but boy, they're all firmly clenched, all jutting at the same angle. I wonder. Should I be concerned?

"You aren't scared, are you, Ordinary Joe?" asks one. "Just happy to have a seat?"

“Don’t care about the big picture, eh?” says another. “Only the little things matter, right? Like getting a seat?”

“Truer words were never spoken,” I reply. Beginning to think whatever I say is gonna be real important. Better keep my mouth shut. Speak only when spoken to. Sorta like when my parents took me to restaurants when I was a kid. Gotta be on my best behaviour.

All the clones smile at the same moment, pipes dropping from their mouths to clunk on the floor.

“Thank the Grand Inquisitor,” says one at the back of the pack. “Now we can relax.”

So, then they flubbed. Only way to describe it. Flubbed into piles of lime-green slime about waist-high. Very animated piles at that. Lots of tentacle waving and eyestalk bobbing and other undulating appendages of one sort or another. Like a herd of back-slapping drunks. Very friendly. Very reassuring.

I feel a wave of relief warm me. Just a bunch of aliens. Always hoped I’d run into some someday. Nice to know we’re not alone.

Pride myself on an eye for detail. I can tell this ain’t no hallucination. The clothes they shed now trampled underfoot, or under pseudopod, getting goopy and gooey with green slime. Black briar pipes poking up here and there. Proves what’s happening is real. Really real.

But weirdly real, a reality different from mine. The aliens got big mouths for one thing, like cavernous whirlpools, and they ain’t afraid to share them. I see them sticking tentacles into each other’s mouths. At least, I *think* they’re mouths.

A blob offers the tip of its tentacle to me, is waving it gently inches from my face. “Here you go, Ordinary Joe. Break a piece off. You’ll like it. Tasty, I guarantee it, and only 43% alcohol.”

Feeling a bit nervous, I reach up and grab its tentacle. Looks like Jello, but textured like a dried twig and cracks just as easy. Only take a marshmallow-sized piece. Pop it in my mouth. Melts like a marshmallow, too. Tastes like high quality Belgian chocolate. Not bad.

“Afraid I don’t have anything to offer in return,” I explain sheepishly. “Sorta need all my pieces all the time.”

“We know. Don’t worry about it. Don’t like eating humans anyway. Don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you guys taste real bad.” Five of them tell me this in perfect unison, like they rehearsed it.

My thoughts begin to wander. How do they know we taste bad? Does speaking together indicate a hive mind? Why are they here? What are they up to? Why aren’t they worried about the security cameras in those glassy black globes in the ceiling? Or about the people standing on the platform at the next

station? How they gonna get their clothes cleaned before they put them back on? And then ... what about ...

I start with alarm. "That bit I ate gonna make me sick?"

"No. Perfectly safe. Just a treat. Give you a nice buzz."

"I ain't gonna turn into anything ... peculiar?" I'm sweating now. Worried.

"You want the truth?"

"No!" I'm practically shouting. Probably coming across rude. Bad idea. "I mean, yes!" My whole body is rigid with tension. I force myself to drop my shoulders. If this keeps up I'm gonna give myself a migraine.

One of the blobs turns back into the Perry Como persona. A bit disconcerting, cause he's naked and it's obvious they didn't get the human genitalia concept quite right. He drops to his knees and stares me in the eyes. Those liquid brown pools again. Almost hypnotic.

"Poor old Ordinary Joe. You really are ordinary, or typical I should say. You think too much. That's the big problem with humans, that and being too curious."

My heart sinks till it's hiding somewhere around my ankles. "I screwed up?"

"No, not at all. This is first contact, Ordinary Joe. You're the first to see us as we really are, and you handled it well. My tentacle tip was your reward."

"How so?" My thoughts are getting blurry. My vision too. Those brown eyes.

"Cured your cancer and froze your dementia. You're going to have a pleasant second childhood. By the time we come back you'll be long dead."

"What? I don't get to see you guys again?"

"You wouldn't want ... never mind. Point is you should be proud of yourself. You kept calm, acted sensible, almost reversed our overall impression of the human race. Good for you."

I start giggling. Can't help it. I saw them flub. I saw them flub!

"Sleep well, Ordinary Joe. You won't remember a thing when you wake up. But you'll feel really good. For the rest of your life. A genuine sense of accomplishment and you won't ever question why."

I sense I'm drifting off. Feels nice, especially since I know I'm going to wake up for sure.

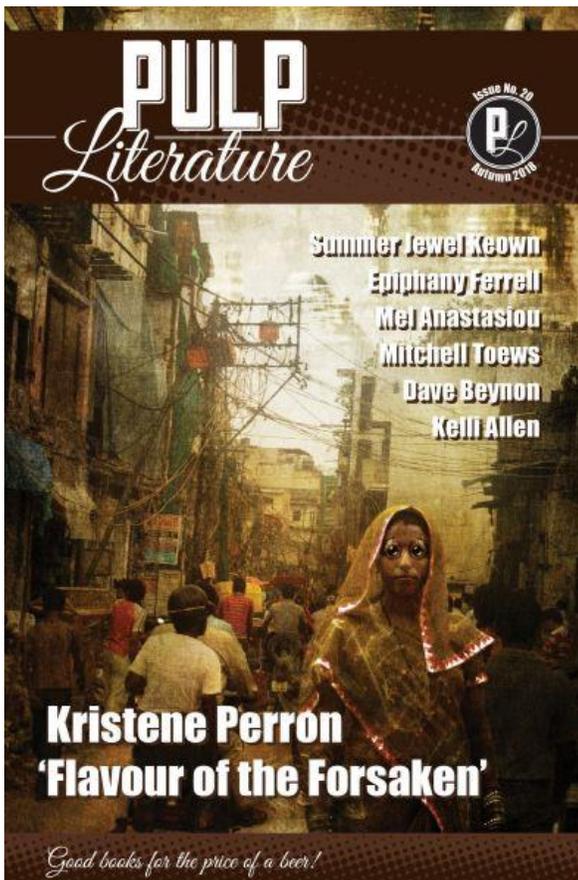
Pity about the human race though.

BEASTIES

by *Rhea Rose*

(Previously unpublished)

Black blue pieces of broken night,
Cold, frantic flocking of black stone in flight.
Cracked, broken feathers, broken stone beaks,
Gargoyles gather
In a bare damp tree.



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 #20 – Autumn 2018 include:

Flavour of the Forsaken by Kristen Perron
Away Game by Mitchell Toews
Gross Motor by Sarah Mang
Small Town Superhero by Dave Beynon
Every Town Has One by Epiphany Ferrell
Waking Up Black by Susan Pieters
Allaigna's Song: Aria by J.M. Landels
Indebted by Summer Jewel Keown
Alphabet Soup by Alex Reece Abbott
The Hub by Erin Evans
Meat by Mel Anastasiou

Blue Skies Over Nine Isles by Joseph Stilwell & Hugh Henderson

See: [Pulp Literature](#)

MY PAINTED WOMAN

by Jean-Louis Trudel

(First publication in English. Previously published as *Celle que j'abrite* in the Ontario magazine *Virages* (issue 69, pp. 54-62, 2014). Later reprinted in the French SF magazine *Galaxies* (issue 39, new series, pp. 22-27, 2016). Then translated by Pep Burillo into Catalan and published in the Catalan SF magazine *Catarsi* (issue 20, pp. 37-43, 2017).)

I leaped with joy when the first snowflakes drifted down. I didn't care that I was bouncing up and down the middle of the street, and that cars were coming. The woman I loved would soon be free again.

I almost slipped in the slush and scrambled out of the way. Now wasn't the time to break a leg or sprain an ankle. Julie would soon be leaving her small and spare apartment. My sweetheart, my beloved, my once sun-kissed beauty, brown and vibrant, now transformed into a snow queen who lived for cold days and colder nights. Sentenced to bask only in the wintertime sun, a wan blotch in the sky without heat or hue.

For the first time in months, we would be walking outside, hand in hand. Every single step taking us closer to our destination, and to each other. We would still choose our spots with care, of course. Avoiding busy streets and shops, bars, public transit, and crowded restaurants would remain a matter of life or death.

I trudged home, cursing the slush soaking my shoes, but just for the fun of it, or perhaps to ward off misfortune. Too much good news at once might end up forcing me to choose. So, when I opened the door, I toyed with a promise better than snow. It was on the tip of my tongue. *I have a cure.* The best news of all.

There was a hypodermic needle in my coat pocket to back it up with a dose of reality. Already loaded. My gift to Julie. She would no longer need to fear the warm days of summer. The hypo would provide her with a shield. What my dealer had called a full-body armour against attack ads.

Julie called them the Russian flu and she wasn't wrong. The germs on the loose every summer (and well into the fall) were of Russian origin. Globalized infections: synthetic viruses designed by Korean molecular biologists hired by the Moscow *Mafiya* for unscrupulous Chinese companies wishing to sell highly effective antivirals and vaccines. All the more effective because they had been developed in tandem with the viruses they would be wiping out ...

In the beginning, a few plane trips had been enough to disperse the starter strains by paying mules and promising them a vaccine once they got back. The incubation period was slightly greater than a long-haul flight between Asia and

Europe or the Americas, which let the mules pass through every control.

Originally, the Chinese manufacturers had banked on an added refinement they owed to their Korean molecule hackers. Their designer germs did not only induce a terrible, body-wracking case of the flu. They also *advertised*. Those who fell sick could not help noticing some idiosyncratic symptoms, impossible to confuse with those of a garden-variety cold or flu. The brand name of a Chinese polyvaccine wrote itself on the skin's surface in the form of reddened and burning dots. Or more rarely, as pixellated beauty spots or shaped bumps as hard as a cheloid scar. The skin markings spelled out names chosen for their simplicity. *Weng! Siyou! Xuandiu!*

Some flu viruses were so insidious as to provoke melodious sneezes that made the sick blurt out something like the name of the polyvaccine or antiviral needed to cure them. *Weng! Siyou! Xuandiu!*

The Russian flu had only been the first wave. Other companies had soon taken advantage of true viral advertising, turning out microorganisms designed just for advertising. Human skin had become the new billboards, fought over by rival company names, logos, and even slogans sprawling over the arms, legs, and torsos of the immunodeficient. In theory, the designers of the second-generation *adviruses* had programmed their strains to avoid more sensitive areas. Invading people's faces, backs, and erogenous zones would have caused a backlash. But not all designers felt bound by the caution of their colleagues.

The courts had been powerless to stop the epidemic, just as they had been unable to stem the flood of spams in the first age of the internet. People got better and their immune systems ended up flushing the *adviruses* in a few days. Generic immunity could be acquired in a few weeks.

As a consequence, it was hard to plead that such transient infections caused any real harm. Furthermore, the new *adviruses* did not sicken their victims since the point was no longer to goose polyvaccine sales, but to boost brand name recognition. Whatever opposition remained had been crushed when a clever lawyer argued that harmless physical modifications could not be construed as aggressions since all advertising caused bodily modifications. Any image registered by the retina triggered a burst of signals along the optic nerve and necessarily modified the observer's neurons. Neurological research had demonstrated as much. *Adviruses* were only a new application of the same principle.

Judge Martínez delivered a favourable verdict from the bench and the lawyer's reasoning became precedent-setting.

The Martínez decision allowed *adviruses* to proliferate, especially in the summertime when the days were longer and clothing exposed enough bare skin to maximize advertising space. The fall was the other target period

because cooler weather made the adviruses more catching and the Christmas shopping extravaganza was in the offing.

The only reprieve was in the heart of winter. Most companies stuck to an informal truce. In colder countries, the switch to coats, pants, and gloves largely reduced the effectiveness of adviruses while also hindering the spread of germs.

For the immunodeficient, winter was synonymous with freedom.

Which was why I smiled as I took my shoes off. I needed only to glance through the window at the swirling flakes to feel my heart sing. Even if I hadn't been clutching an even better solution to my sweetheart's problems, I would have been happy to come home.

"Julie?"

I can cure you. I have what it takes.

What it took to fix the persistent weakness of her immune system. Not only was Julie more prone to catch colds and flus than anybody I knew, she was short a crucial gene for a natural inhibitor that slowed drastically the spread of synthetic viruses. And so Julie came down with everything. Absolutely everything. Every stray advirus, Russian flu germ, and viral attack ad.

I'd seen her skin covered with so many logos and messages that she resembled a fully tattooed Maori warrior. While the adviruses caused her to sneeze with unfailing articulateness: *Weng! Siyou! Xuandiu!*

Almost three years ago, the Martínez verdict had fired the starting shot of a new race. Drugs to combat infection, skin darkeners to hide the commercial messaging, immunity enhancers, gene therapies: all had been tried to neutralize adviruses. Barring a worldwide prohibition, more direct means were the only solution, even though they meant turning the human body into a battlefield. No single method worked forever, though some prevailed against a full slate of adviruses. However, the Russian and Chinese labs never stopped tinkering with their creations. New waves of viral attack ads swept over the planet and the race began anew.

We couldn't afford to pay for the most effective counter-measures. And the others never worked long enough to let Julie resume a normal life.

In fact, even the cheaper skin darkeners, makeups, creams, and foundations weren't that affordable when a new series of bottles had to be purchased every week or so. We'd tried, but it took Julie half an hour to slather herself all over, even with my help, in order to achieve a fully opaque layer. It was easier to wait for January and bundle up.

I got used to my walks with a black woman, but Julie wanted more. She was tired of failing to recognize herself in the shop windows and mirrors. Yet, she wasn't the only one. In the poorer neighbourhoods, men and women who

didn't like to serve as unpaid, walking billboards opted instead for darker skin. There were complaints about blackface and making blackness once again synonymous with poverty—but not too loudly. The adviruses mostly targeted fairer skins. If viral advertising was the new century's newest disease, it was sparing those with darker pigmentation. Or it would until a gene hacker bothered to produce pale markings on black skin.

There were other ways of defending against the adviruses, mostly using a person's immune system. I was among the fortunate ones who could fend off nine strains out of ten—nineteen out of twenty if I took the basic adjuvants.

Julie wasn't so lucky.

In summer, therefore, she worked at home, dressed in an elegant, flowing, and long-sleeved djellaba, covered from head to toe. She only went out after nightfall, venturing onto the balcony to taste the wind and let the city smells remind her of the world beyond our home.

When the logo for a brand of Turkish cigarettes, Croatian candies or Brazilian computers showed up on the back of her hands, she stared all the harder at her workstation's screen without ever looking down. Naturally, she never saw the slogans, sometimes written out in Cyrillic symbols or Chinese ideograms, sprawling across her cheeks or forehead.

There were no mirrors in the apartment and she avoided all reflective surfaces.

I was often the only one to see those cryptic messages come into focus, clearer with every passing day, before fading gradually like short-lived beauty spots. Julie cut herself off from the world, only communicating by internet or phone (no video, of course). I shopped for both of us and ran all errands. I cooked whenever she invited the few friends she didn't mind exposing to her graffitied skin. To ease her confinement, I brought back flowers and chocolate. Or I showed her pictures and videos from my outings. I'd pasted a pellet-sized camera to my forehead to let her see the city as I saw it. I would choose the most picturesque streets, gaze at the flower beds and handsomer facades, and smile at the passers-by so that Julie would only smiling faces.

My sweet finally convinced me to stop taping my walks. Perhaps because the vids reminded her of the city she could no longer enjoy. Or perhaps because I'd taped fellow immunodeficients who flaunted their illustrated body, crowded with sundry advertising and multilingual slogans.

"Julie, are you there? I ..."

My voice faltered as I swore at myself for my choice of words. Of course, she was there—she was always there, though she might be napping.

The only way to escape infection was to go out as little as possible. Four years into the onslaught, Julie still spent the entire summer secluded away

like a vampire in mortal fear of the sun. Very rarely, we went out at night, keeping away from the main arteries and spending so much time in smaller streets that we occasionally caught the eye of police patrols.

Fortunately for us, Julie was not the only immunodeficient victim of the bio-wars and the cops mostly left us alone once they figured it out.

We didn't emerge until early winter. Even then, Julie fled crowds. If I didn't want to infect her myself, I also had to see her as little as possible in the summertime—or reduce my own encounters with potential carriers. I wasn't virus-proof, not with all of the strains in the wild.

“Is that you, Xavier?”

“Who else? Say, guess what.”

I found her sitting in her office. Of course. She turned away from the computer screen to look at me with those sad brown eyes so determined not to be sad.

“Do you have a surprise for me?”

“It's snowing! It's snowing!” I sing-songed.

She sneaked a look through the curtains, without moving them aside. When she saw the snowflakes, her smile reached her eyes and she laughed. I hugged her and she whispered.

“I'd already seen, darling. But thanks, really. Thank you for everything. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

Which made me tingle all over. I hadn't even mentioned yet the slim hypo that was now in my trouser pocket—or the small bottle in my other pocket. The bottle held an active culture of stem cells equipped with the missing gene. One injection should be enough to upgrade her immunity, if the microbiologist selling it underneath the counter was to be believed. She might even become more resistant than I was.

“I've heard of a new therapy used against the adviruses,” I announced as I took off my coat. “The active ingredient is made by Omega Pharmaceuticals.”

I explained that instead of trying to counter individually every single engineered microorganism, the research staff had hit on the idea of taking up all the room so that no other opportunistic infection could even grab hold. Adviruses needed a stretch of bare, unmarked skin, but the third-generation virus from Omega mottled a person's skin with small broken circles that resembled the Greek alphabet's omega. It worked as long as a sufferer was willing to trade advertising twenty or more companies for advertising just one, but all over.

“I'd look like some sort of leopard-woman,” she objected, shrugging.

I made up my mind. Enough dawdling.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Her face lit up. Flashed the very smile that melted me all the way through. *I can cure you.* I almost said it. I did. I truly wanted to be the one to make her free again.

“Look what I bought,” I said as I raised a bag from the nearest pastry shop. “Your favourite brioche. The one with the three different kinds of chocolate.”

“I could kiss you. I swear they keep improving the recipe every time.”

Meanwhile, I was holding the hypo so tight it should have snapped. Why was I hesitating? Did I love so very much the daily grind as her self-appointed caretaker? Shopping for her, cooking for her, bringing back artfully-composed pictures of the city outside, telling her about my day ... Perhaps I wasn't ready to give it all up.

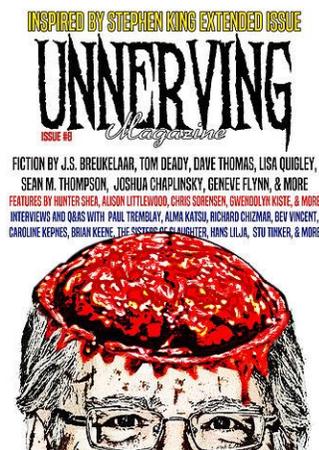
Yet, it was equally tempting to be the one. Thanks to me, she'd no longer be a hermit, her skin sporting the doodles of strangers. She would just be another girl. Marked from time to time, or sporting war paint of her own, but never for very long. The gene therapy of my dealer friend wasn't guaranteed, but I did not fear Julie's disappointment. Just the new beginning that she was begging for.

“Was there anything else?” she asked.

Once she was cured or nearly so, I would no longer know for sure, when I came home, whether she would be waiting for me. She would no longer clasp me and grip me because she needed to feel my flesh—any flesh not her own, actually—and I would no longer feel her relaxing in my arms. I would no longer be the one deciding what we would have for supper while going through the neighbourhood supermarket. Things would change.

Julie, I can cure you.

Tomorrow, I'd tell her tomorrow.



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

Issue #8 includes fiction from J.S. Breukelaar, Sean M. Thompson, Joshua Chaplinsky, Tom Deady, Lisa Quigley, Geneve Flynn, and more.

Gwendolyn Kiste, Alison Littlewood, Hunter Shea, and Chris Sorensen wrote features.

Contains Interviews and Q&As with Paul Tremblay, Alma Katsu, Richard Chizmar, Caroline Kepnes, Brian Keene, and more.

See [Unnerving](#)

DEATH'S KNOTTED CIRCLE

by Y. M. Pang

(Previously unpublished)

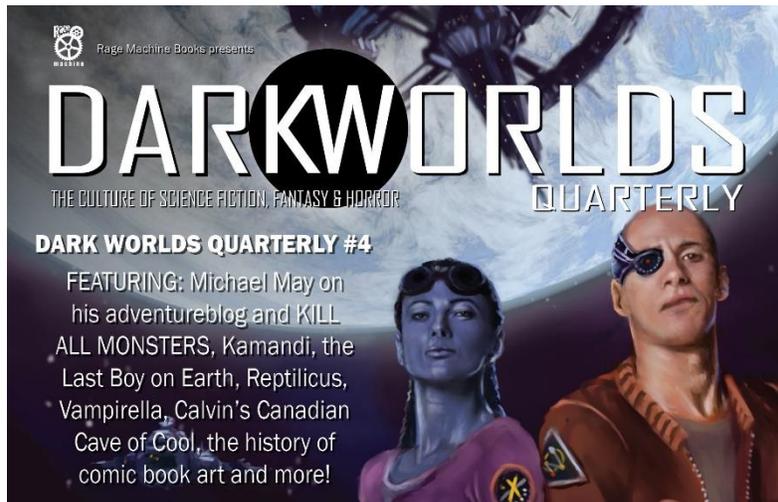
... that Death controls within his shadowed maze
as humans cling to petty, worldly ties.
The shaft of light averts its golden gaze,
thus sealing all to canny, blinding lies.
To drown in wines of pleasure, wasting time
pursuing treasure, hoarding gold and crime?
And spin through days and count the numbered moons,
still grasping starlight even as it wanes
like gilded rings transformed to rusty chains.
When Death arrives, he thinks, *It's not too soon.*

“Too soon” for he who grabs his helmet fast
and jams the polished iron on his head.
And she who draws her sword—some blade to last
against the lord of bitter, hopeless dead.
Embrace the wizened fantasy; no sword
can ever make a samurai from you.
And keep that helmet—concrete memory
that fades with Death, but stays the mind's tattoo.
Though timeless blaze the dreams they work toward,
betrayed are they by cold mortality.

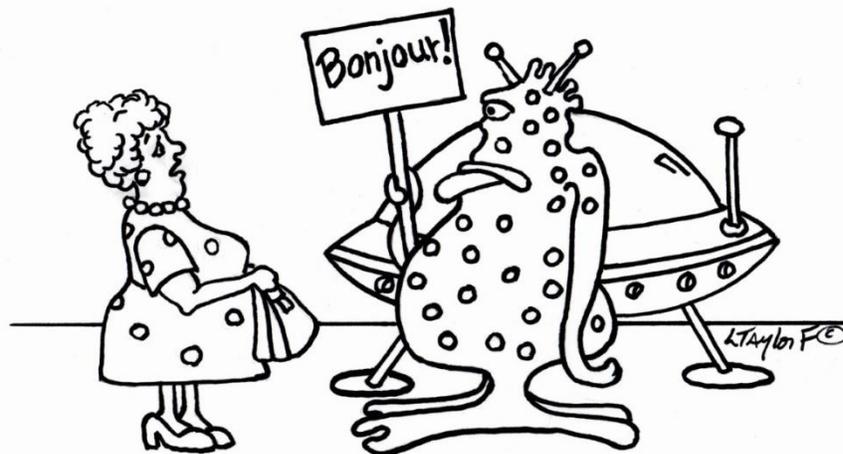
Go rifle books of knowledge, shaking hands
on pages weighed with dust and wear and years.
Admire the seashell plucked from ocean sands;
caress the silk that veils your deepest fears.
No wisdom bars the path toward the end
and beauty fails to right creation's flaws
for someday, rosy silk will bleed to red
and seashells break in shards that never mend.
No angels rise from books to serve your cause
for authors sing in voices lost and dead.

Where lies eternity? In grey disguise.

What light awaits? The flash of bone-white fangs.
Whose smile, whose eyes, create the anguished cries?
Why, only Death from whom the watch-chain hangs,
on whom the wings of time will never stop.
She grapples glory, even though she hears
the song of fallen souls she treads on top:
memento mori—lonely requiem
that he rejects although he knows and fears
with time he shall lament as one of them ...



See [Darkworlds](#)



I'm sorry, dear, I don't speak Martian.

AUGUR MAGAZINE

We are excited by writing that is difficult to classify—whether specifically speculative, substantially surreal, or slightly strange. We're interested in realist pieces that verge on the dreamlike or surreal; speculative stories that are almost realist; and, on top of that, any form of literary fantasy/science fiction/speculative fiction. Augur makes room for writing from uncommon perspectives, and brings together the often disparate realms of literary and genre fiction.



Contents of Issue 1.3 See [Augur Magazine](#)

Some Small Changes — A note from the editors by Alex De Pompa and Kerrie Seljak-Byrne
One If By Sea by Eden Royce
Human Again by Rudolfo Serna
Herland by Rasiqra Revulva
On Caterpillars by Melinda Roy
Through by Victor Martins
How I Knew My Professor Was a Faerie In Disguise by Ada Hoffmann
Nightshade and Glorymorn by Tony Pi
Obeah Man by Sarah Ramdawar
Float by Janice Liu
It Seems As Though We Must Use Sometimes by Mary Germaine
Some Solace For Thy Woes by Premee Mohamed

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!

WHERE MANY PEOPLE LIVE

by Nicholas Stillman

(Previously unpublished)

Sure, I've seen the aliens. Yep, the ones this whole town keeps whispering about. What, you think someone else will get as lucky as me? Maybe some other gold panner can find *another* set of hibernating cosmo-critters somewhere on Earth? No sir, not likely. I got to them first, before the government found that cave. I imagine the boys in hazmat suits trucked everything out to the deepest vaults they've got. They may deny it, but ol' Frankie Green here likes his bragging rights. So how about you buy me another one of these tall beers, and I'll tell you a bit more?

I don't want any skinny-man light beer, either. I need every calorie I can get for all the picking and digging these old hands do. Now, you may think I look pretty poor judging by this scraggly beard of mine, but let me tell you the secret: I've never made my bed, and I call that the sweetest perk of all. I've panned and dug for gold since my teens more than 32 years ago. And all the freewheeling and drifting has landed me some nights of luxury in hotels around the world. I've scrapped out enough glitter dust to live in silk pajamas sometimes. But it only happens rarely, between those rough nights when I lie in my tent, cold as the mud beneath me. So I'll still take that beer, son, because the last dig cost me my gloves.

But before I explain that, take a look at this pub, all warm and full of smiles and situated where many people live. The locality traps the goodness down, doesn't it? But out there on the rocks, son, I make the rules, and I take whatever the big boiling sun lets me find. When you gold hunt as long as I have, you become just another lonely critter out there. You scrape along the stone and dirt for whatever you can scavenge.

It shouldn't sound too surprising, then, that a roamer like me managed to find those bunkered-down space-splunkers. I squirmed into those caves along the East Coast like a slug. Trust me, I had to pry many slugs off me once I got in. I went deeper than any tourists, hobos, kissing couples, or daredevil kids. And I found those smooching aliens, all right.

See, two of those stringy men or women or whatever they call themselves had cuddled up in the same bed. I could hardly stand in that little cave of theirs, but they had somehow built a kind of hibernation chamber in there. They had snaked in all the parts, all the tubes and cords, and assembled for themselves a queen-size cocoon about eight feet by four. They didn't care much for decoration, though.

I could tell they had built this high-tech sleeping bag hundreds of years ago, too. See, some deposits had fallen off the cave ceiling onto their mass of coiled tubes and cords. Any bits of stone or sand that landed on their structure had changed color. I saw every feather of the rainbow in there. The more recently fallen grains had only changed from gray to brown with a bit of yellow around the crumbly edges. The higher, conical piles of sand looked paper white at the bottom where they touched the tubes. The tops looked green and purple, where the atoms slowly siphoned downward.

The metal tubes took particles from the stone, you see. The whole cave floor crunched a bit under my work boots. I saw a zebra-stripe pattern surrounding the bed where the dry floor had gotten sapped even drier. I even saw shades slowly moving through metal hoses, getting pumped along with fluid I couldn't see. Don't ask me how I could detect shades through metal tubing, but the aliens used it to stay warm or fed while hibernating.

With all my prying, I still didn't uncover their bodies. A couple of head-shaped lumps protruded from the main ovals. I assume those lumps housed their heads. Touching the tubes anywhere started siphoning atoms from my work gloves, you see. They crumbled at the fingertips, and I had to do some patchwork with my little sewing kit. I thought of carving up my tired ol' tool vest into a makeshift pair of mitts. But this wrinkly, scuffed vest of mine has become my companion, like a squeaky bird on both my shoulders. I know just where to find all the lock picks, chisels, and spare batteries for my metal detector. I slept in this vest so many times, it's become a thousand more beds I never have to make.

So the aliens just slept there, maybe the cutest, maybe the ugliest little star-critters the universe has ever seen. Judging by the joined oval shapes of their bed, it almost looked like the two of them held hands. I guess they waited in there for their spaceship to return, maybe after some romantic prospecting along the eastern shores of ol' Earthy.

Who knows. They sure did find a secluded waiting place, though, far from where many people live. And like I said, Frankie Green makes the rules out there. I don't have time for making beds or admiring the ones already made. Some of that alien tubing had faint electric currents, you see. And those space-drifters don't skimp out on conductivity. They put some good, solid gold wiring in those tubes around their chests.

And son, if you buy me one of those big plates of oysters, I'll show you how I stripped every scrap of gold I could get from that bed.

QUEST

by Melissa Yuan-Tunes

(Previously published in *Tesseract* 7)

bi curious
by George
I think he's got tits.
Can we check downstairs, too?
That's why we withdrew
worn twenties spit
from the bank machine slit.
And I'm not just bi curious,
I'm tri curious
deca curious.
Alien tentacles
Angels sliding their wings along my shaft
Ants in more than my pants
Snails alive on my tongue
Orgies with knot hole tree vaginas
Nuns on a stick
Stewards washing my feet
Strawberries and bananas
exploding from yin yang
Tied up with licorice whips and a
rubber extension cord
Imprisoned with five angry gorillas
Hijacking a DJ booth to come
screaming over the dance floor
Store mannequins streaked with come
Teddy bears decapitated for my pleasure
Screaming yes until the dawn breaks
the vampire suckling at my throat.

WHITE GHOST FUR

by Eddie Generous

(Previously unpublished)

The rider bounced, certain it was only a matter of will and time before he came upon salvation. Lazy hooves dragged and crunched. A fine layer of snow had settled over the icy shelf that existed like bedrock from the first of October to mid-April. Steam puffed from the great white nostrils of the horse. Once a fine pale beast with brown speckles; the cold had made its mark. Snot icicles streamed solid from the downturned chin. Tufts of fur sprouted in a last stand against the cold. Its eyes wore a milky glaze.

A squall had come onto the horse and its rider mid-morning. The already dead white world closed in further. The rider withdrew his compass regularly. The needle bounced along with him.

The steel grey sky was no help with direction. The days were short, no more than six hours. In a long patch of flat nothingness, the rider buried his face in the folds of bearskin while the winds pounded, finding gaps, whistling deadly kisses on his damp and blemished flesh.

In time, the gale ceased, but the rider remained huddled into the skins. He was frozen in a way that spoke for the silenced winds. His pack had grown terrifyingly light. Two nights earlier, he ate the last of the salted buffalo strip.

This level of hunger reminded him of Ireland, and youth.

The rider spoke into the cloth over his face, "Dear Lord, save me from this barren place. Let me kiss the children. Let me hold my Mary again."

There were four girls and one boy. They grew hair orange as rust, wore flesh of alabaster, freckled, not unlike the horse holding the rider upright.

The rider was once a member of a party. He'd been ill prior to the journey north. He'd carried a flu that would condemn the other scouts.

He'd taken three horses and kept their noses pointed south. The railway docked pay for a missing steed, meaning he could lose two before he lost wages.

On the first morning, he'd awoken to find a packhorse gone, along with half of the supplies he'd rescued for the trek. On the second night, his riding horse took off, perhaps spooked by the encroaching howls of wolves, perhaps something else.

It was a savage place with a million eyes in the trees. They watched and waited.

The rider rubbed salve onto his lips and the sore forming in the right

corner of his mouth. It became difficult to sleep.

Screaming, he awoke to find his ears puffy and pinged a shattered glass throb through the cartilage. He lost a day coddling his head by the fire. He lost another day when a storm battered his pine and cedar lean-to.

The last horse whinnied and whined. The rider covered the horse's eyes and forced it to sit, extended the lean-to as the world beat down on them. They ate milled grain in a smokehouse atmosphere.

Come morning, the horse walked. The rider rode. The forest opened into a plain. The rider reasoned that the open land meant people.

Beneath the plain was a grand limestone shelf. Young trees rarely survived beyond saplings, the grass dwelled beneath the crust of snow. The plain did not mean people.

By nightfall, the rider prayed for good tidings, tongue slipping over the oozing sore. The taste was sour and putrid. The fire crackled and the rider sat, the horse tied to a tree. He'd reached a patch of pale birch trees. The knots looked like lips.

The rider slept with a rifle. There were things in the trees. He had nine shots, should he need them.

He ate the last of the meat. What milled grain remained, he'd save for the horse until there was no choice. He prayed, the helplessness and hopelessness had inched and burrowed like a tick. "Dear God, please bless my horse with strong legs and bless me with a strong heart. Please let it be that the girls and Daniel are safe. Please let me see them again, amen."

Morning, he set out, found more barren wasteland of rock and snow. The squalls came upon him. The temperature was as cold as the rider had never known. The horse slowed.

The rider hunkered into himself as the winds whistled. He snapped wet eyes and sought the faces of those he left behind in Sherbrooke. Emma came first. She was the youngest, only two when the rider left. Edith and Beatrice came next. Daniel after that, he was seven, on his way to becoming a man. Claire was the eldest and she aged too quickly, an awkward shape began its shift by her tenth birthday. And Mary, the holder of his heart. They'd wed in the church of their homeland village. It was the last they saw of most of their people before striking off to the Dominion colony north of the claimed lands of America. He had a cousin at Grand Trunk and they needed men who could read, write, ride horse, and shoot.

"Dear God, let me see them again." A tear slipped down the rider's cheek, seeped into the threads of his scarf.

Evening fell upon the rider and the horse as they reached the edge of a

forest. The horse refused to go further, soaking in the simple comfort of rest.

“Fine.” The rider slid off the horse. By the reins, he led twenty feet into the forest. Cold and stinging hands gathered limbs and bark. There was gunpowder in a pouch kept close to his heart. Into a short teepee, he settled the long-dead limbs. The gunpowder lit when flint met rock to create sparks.

A snuffing grumble fell onto his ear like a siren and he rolled onto his ass, pawing for the rifle. He scanned the leafless grey trees and saw only shadows. He listened, waiting. That animalistic grunt could’ve been one of many beasts, a few possibilities worse than others.

The sound did not return.

The rider buried himself in pelts.

The horse whinnied and whined, oats depleted.

The night was forever. The rider awoke many times hearing groans, voices, breaths against his cover. Swinging wildly with the rifle pitched at the end of his arm. The fire was smoldering coals and the night engulfed.

The rider sensed the horse where it lay, sensed the trees surrounding them, sensed eyes too knowing.

“Dear God, I will be of the best men if you deliver me from this wilderness. Please God, I beseech you this, let me be a father and husband.”

The dark stayed short and long in equal sums. The sleep was insufficient, but the dark reigned for fifteen hours. Shivering, the rider huddled up to the fire for extra minutes beyond the general lifting of the bleak atmosphere. He closed his eyes and imagined lighting the trees on fire and basking in the heat.

Eyes watched him through the burning trees. Fires lit on backs and those eyes belonged to his wife and children. The pale skin flaked like charred paper. Ginger hair sizzled into candlewick. Voiceless mouths wailed in silence.

The rider opened his eyes to the frozen world.

His family did not burn. They were safe and all too distant.

The trees ahead were thin but endless. The horse weaved without much direction, slowing now and then to test a dried tuft of moss clung to tree bark, licking snow from the drifting floor below.

The rider’s mouth moved in a steady rhythm of prayer into the twilight of afternoon.

“Dear God, I am hungry. Let me eat. I will read the Bible every morning if you present ...”

The rushing of hooves was too fast to ready a defense. He turned his face: massive white head, nose to the ground, rack of antlers leaned for impact.

The rider had never seen, nor heard, of such a thing.

It was a moose. It had no coloration. It was one with the snow. The impact sent the rider flying. His back struck a tree and the whiplashing of the motion

sent his head into an expansive haze.

He smelled and tasted iron. Breath huffed onto his face. He came to, sensing the angry beast on top of him.

Eyes opened onto the emptiness of the woods, a scattered pack, and a horse on its side, wheezing too gently for the situation. Pain rocketed through the rider's blood and bones as he crawled, dragging incensed legs.

The rider saw his face reflected in the tired half-dead eye of the horse. Two thoughts as the steaming mess of blood drained into the snow: he was dead and he was fed.

That night, eyes filled the darkness. The fire was double any the rider had made before. Running on limping legs, he carried the bloody stomach into the woods, trailing crimson breadcrumbs back to camp. Let the wolves feed away from him.

He cooked slabs of the most delicious meat he'd ever eaten. Through the night, the fire continued and the meat toughened. Cooked, crunchy frozen portions filled a pack. He slept through much of the day, a picture of gore. His furs tinted and flakey with dried blood.

The second night with the dead horse, the rider carried hunks of animal into the woods, away from his fire.

"Dear God, I swear my soul everlasting if you keep the wolves away and bring me to my family."

He slept deeply with a full belly and awoke to a black wolf dragging the horse by its ear. The rider who was no longer a rider stared down the dog. The dog snarled as it pulled at the too heavy carcass.

The walker reached for his rifle. It was too far. He grabbed the hatchet and swung three great strikes, freeing the head from the body of the dead horse. The wolf backedpedaled, eyes firm on the walker, jaw latched tight to the pale ear of the horse.

The walker heated breakfast and swore his soul anew to the Lord above.

The meat was heavy on his back, but was enough for a week, a month if he thought surviving that long was worth the effort of rationing. When he imagined a month, he imagined getting home to find his children grown and his wife with another man.

His feet moved on persistently. He checked the compass rarely. Fantasies of having twenty-foot legs entered his head. He imagined taking leaps to clear miles. Once, he tried to run. Certain that if he ran, just over the hill was a town, or farm, a rail to follow, as if civilization moved to outpace him. If only he ran.

Thirteen steps and it sapped all the extra there was.

The walker plodded into dusk, ignoring the eyes that bore in on him. A

lightning-struck cedar tree stood brown in a cluster of green.

“Burn the eyes out of you.” He bundled bark and twigs over dug-free dead grass beneath the tree. The season-dead stock lit and burned quickly. It dried its living neighbors and set them alight. The brightness and warmth was a short blessing.

The walker gathered limbs and fed the fire around the dried trunk. He ate horsemeat and gazed into the blackness where the things dwelled, where, perhaps, the white moose watched him alongside the wolves.

“Dear God, let me be safe through the night.”

An encroaching wolf, grey, woke him. He flipped the rifle from his side, out from beneath the blanket and fired. There was no chance to hit, but all dogs hate shots. Right then, he hated all dogs.

The walker walked, daydreaming of riding. The sores on his face wept and his lips became scales. Blisters on his feet had formed and popped, healing in a way that adhered foot to threads.

The wind picked up in the early afternoon. The walker had come upon a rocky ledge that overlooked a river. A notion of survival bloomed anew.

“Thank you, Lord.” He was certain that if he kept sight of the river that he’d eventually stumble onto humanity. “I’m coming.”

Underneath a jutting of stone, not quite a cave, the walker hunkered down and decided on a day off. Warm and secure, he slept feeling free of eyes.

The walker awoke from a nap. Across the river, the white moose gazed. Safety was a mirage. Fear stuttered sleep on the second night. The stone seemed to bear eyes, witnesses feeding on turmoil.

“Dear God, let me be brave. Let me fear no more. Let me be home.”

Tears he’d never let slip in front of others slid his cheeks free as summer robins.

The walker exited the partial safety of the rock and climbed high again. A bird’s eye remained on the river. He did not see the white moose, but being higher than an object of interest turned his head to the thin trees.

Ravens, big and ominous, observed him with stilled bodies and craning necks.

As if rising like a bird, he imagined watching the ravens peck and devour a man in a bearskin with a horsemeat-loaded pack. He walked, vision shifting. The food source becoming his family, one body at a time. A scream of agony and frustration left his mouth, tarnished and grating.

Twilight had sprung unnoticed. There was a rustle to his right. Through the endless trees were peering eyes. The white moose had crossed the river and rounded him with undeniable interest.

The walker lifted his rifle, aimed, and squeezed. He lowered the rifle to find

no moose and no movement from a fleeing moose. Good as anywhere else, he dropped his pack and began gathering limbs.

Unable to help himself, he ate a double portion of horsemeat. Night was cold, though comparatively warmer. Snow fell. Each flake glinted its potential for something more. The walker covered his head and huddled, fighting the imagination that turned flakes into eyes.

If it wasn't for exhaustion, he'd have never slept.

In the pre-dawn grey, he lifted his face, shovelled fresh snow blanketing him into his mouth. There were two wolves on the far side of the dead campfire. One grey-white, the other black, an anomaly of allies, according to popular belief. He tried to lift the rifle. Caught in the layers of skins, he struggled and the wolves remained still for three heartbeats before they charged him.

"Git!"

The walker turtled into the bearskin. There was nothing for two seconds, three, ten, one minute. He lifted his head to a vast emptiness that crushed his soul beneath its boot. A hallucination.

"God, deliver me. I will give everything in Your name! Deliver me!"

The walker ate. The walker packed. The walker walked, thinking of what his dead mates had said about savages in the woods. He had seen no signs of wild men.

"At least that," he whispered into the cloth that had attached anew by mid-morning every day with scummy green bridges of infected pus and rot. "God, at least You gave me that."

Night fell in a blink and he wailed against another day passed in the same as the pervious—*how many?* He did not know.

The walker wore bricks for feet. He massaged them bare for the first time since he'd been alone. Ridges of yellowed crust rode in waves, divots in the shape of matted fur. He rubbed snow into the cracks and crevices, let the gone-bad flesh a chance to breathe.

"God, please. I will give every dollar I make for the rest of my life to see them again. I will devote my living heart to the church. God, let me see them again. God—"

A stick snapped and the walker lifted his gaze from his foot. The night was black and vacant. There was no way to be certain he remained in the world

assumed beyond the firelight.

Was there anything?

A snap.

Something.

Another snap.

Something close.

He gulped and rested his foot against the damp steaming leather of his boot. He turned to grab for the rifle. It was gone. He spun to his right, his rubbed raw feet resting painfully against the frozen ground. Gone. Always, he kept it within reach. From his chest, he withdrew the hatchet in desperate need of sharpening.

There was a rustle and he turned to his left.

The pack was gone.

The food was gone.

Frantically, he laced his boots. A log pulled, flaming, he charged into the woods, running in a great circle. Eyes banked light back at him. Hundreds of them. The vicious world had come to view him like a travelling freak show. Fear stole into the core of his rotting organs and he wailed against the night.

“I need that food. Dear God! I need You now!”

The walker slept, eventually. He wore the extra furs on his shoulders. The search was brief. The only tracks in the snow had belonged to him, impossibly. He reached into a pocket for the compass and found only lint.

“God! Why have You forsaken me?”

The walker followed the river.

The sun went down.

The sun came up, behind the steel grey of winter.

It was the thirtieth day since leaving the camp of corpses. His feet offered ever-expanding agony. He crawled. Pus oozed in the snow before him, dripping from his face. The wind buffeted the tunnel of his downturned body. Cold crept into folds and beneath layers.

“God, I love You. I have always loved You. Why have You left me to die?”

The crawler crawled, hungry, beaten.

The sun dropped and he worked a circle in a way that reminded him of his childhood on hands and knees, gathering dropped coal from carriages. He whined and cried.

There was movement around him. The fire lit.

The wily wolves returned. They stood on the far side of the fire like guests. From the trees, ravens dropped and bounded the periphery of the light's reach. Branches crunched, snow clomping, undeniable footfalls. Three men, long

black hair streaming around the sides, skinless up top, sat. They stared.

The Dominion and the French had paid for every savage scalp, but that was long ago, before agreements, during wars. That was a thing of tales.

These men were dead. The crawler had no doubt of that.

“God, I am alive! Why have You left me?”

Heavier footfalls approached with locomotive speed.

“No, God, why? Let me see them. Let me hold them. I’ve loved You, dear God, why have You left me?”

The white moose was there, stopping in a skid that sent campfire sparks flying. The crawler covered his head, cowering before the white moose.

“Anything! I’ll give anything! Deliver me! Feed me! Let me feel the warmth of love again!”

“Anything?” a low voice whispered into the crawler’s ear.

The crawler did not rise, did not look, but knew who had left him to die and who might save him. The one fallen, cast aside, left to rot in eternal flame.

“Anything.”

“Do you offer your hands?” the voice asked, smooth, mannish.

“Yes.”

“Do you offer your heart?”

“Yes, anything. Anything!”

“Do you offer your soul?”

At this, the crawler lifted his head and stared into the dead black eyes of the white moose.

The air in his chest left his mouth in a great cloud. “You can have it all.”

“Say it,” the voice said. The moose’s mouth did not move and still, that voice belonged within that pale white form.

“Have my soul.”

“Why do you bend so?”

“God has forsaken me. You are my savior!”

The white moose straightened its neck and stepped out of the fire, turning away, leaving off into the woods. The Algonquin men departed in smoky shadows. The wolves followed. The ravens flew away.

The crawler curled into a bundle. He did not wake until a farmer stepped from his barn and over a hill into the bush, noticing a lump he assumed a dead bear. The farmer loaded the crawler onto a horse wagon and together they rode four kilometres into town.

MOTH WOMAN ON A DARK NIGHT

by Casey June Wolf

(Previously unpublished)

there is sweetness in the air
lily of the valley bergamot pinks
she rises from her bed
steadies her book with one hand so it
will not fall
crosses to the window and looks out

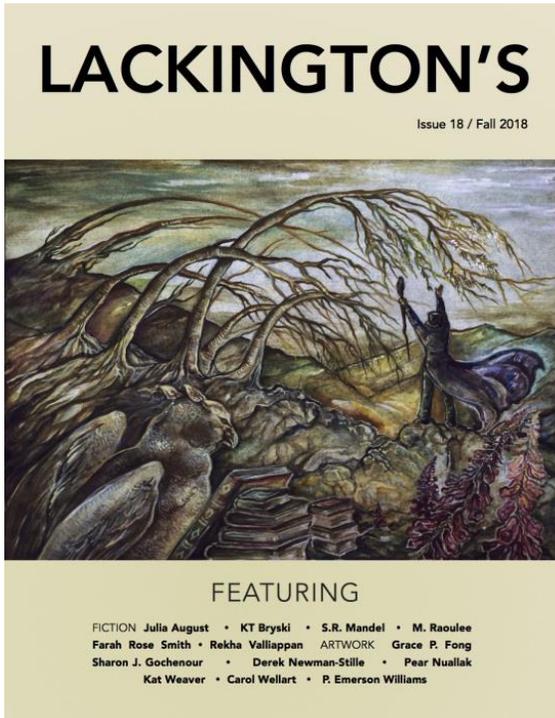
black of the moon
she sees nothing only
a pale rectangle of garden
fragment of lawn
her own shadow outlined
in incandescent light

she has waited
savoured fresh sensations
of raw flesh re-formed
weak return to human self
lingering prick of creature thought
intruding into day

something draws her
a quiver across her scalp
tingle along her back
slow march of hairs rising on her skin
she inhales the breezeless air
drops to her knees and gently springs
evades her nightgown as it falls
stiff supple wings uncrossing
fanning wide
swallowing the night

garden falls away below
window light retreats in giddy whorls

with no moon to enchant
command to guide her
she is her own ungoverned beacon
tonight



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.

Enchantment is nigh! We've finally put together a "Magics" issue that nods to more than mere sorcery. Not surprisingly, witchcraft creeps into several Issue 18 tales, and we've also included a story about myth and religion—the oldest magic of all, some might say. From a Dionysian planet to Classical Rome to theocratic US-Canada to parts known only in our imaginations, come find the gods and the birds and the rebels and the woven spells, forming spheres of love and violence.

Contents of issue #18 – Autumn 2018

When the Vine Came by S.R. Mandel (Artwork by Derek Newman-Stille)

Prima Fuit, Finis Erit by Julia August (Artwork by Pear Nuallak)

The Wytch-Byrd of the Nabryd-Keind by Farah Rose Smith (Artwork by Kat Weaver)

Collar for Captain Cormorant by Rekha Valliappan (Artwork by P. Emerson Williams)

Song of the Oliphant by KT Bryski (Artwork by Grace P. Fong)

Love Letters from Velveteen by M. Raoulee (Artwork by Sharon J. Gochenour)

Cover art by Carol Wellart.

SF CANADA

SF Canada was founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, and 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. To find out what the minimum requirements and get a good idea of what else SF Canada offers and the people who are already members be sure to check out our website at:

[SF Canada](#)

THE SANTAS

by David F. Shultz

(Previously unpublished)

In the pale glow of the tinsel tree sat the memories of Jacob's family, phantoms stuck where he remembered them. Christmas Eve. A time when the loneliest among us, in the quiet solitude of their homes, can reflect on their emptiness.

A blizzard outside. Cold as death. It was like this when the officers came to Jacob's door. Their words were a blur. Something about a transport truck, and a slippery highway, and how the paramedics did everything they could. Either Jacob asked about it, or they offered, but he didn't need to identify the bodies. Or he wouldn't want to. Then he thought of the strawberry-rhubarb jam his grandma used to make at Christmas.

He gripped the wooden rail of his stairway. Coloured lights wound along its length. They glowed like nothing had changed, mockingly oblivious. Stockings hung lifeless over an empty fireplace, quiet and somber. And Jacob realised how meaningless the holiday really was.

Jacob found himself in the bathroom. The bathtub was full, ready. There was his straight razor on the counter, ready, only ever used once. He'd bled everywhere. "Not yet," he said. "Advil first."

One Advil, two Advil, three Advil, four. Five Advil, six Advil, seven Advil, more. Then the lights went out in the bathroom, and the background hum of the house went dead.

"God damn it," Jacob said. A power-out in the middle of a fucking blizzard, he thought. I'll freeze to death! "Christ almighty," he muttered, then fumbled through the dark house.

Jacob put on pajamas. He lit the fireplace, grabbed a blanket, and bundled on the couch next to the fire. Then he went to sleep.

Jacob awoke to a creaking floorboard. A gangly silhouette stood in front of the fireplace. The figure turned its head slowly towards him. In the flicker of the dying fire, Jacob saw a sickly-green face with a strange rash.

"I know when you're awake," the man said in a raspy voice, then snickered.

Jacob screamed, and the man scrambled away. Wet footsteps slapped the floor towards the stairs. Emboldened by the stranger's retreat, Jacob leapt from the couch, grabbed a fire poker, and pursued.

“Come here, ya bastard,” Jacob yelled. The ground was wet. Jacob nearly fell chasing the stranger. Then he heard a loud thud ahead of him, followed by a groan. There was the man, no longer fleeing, but curled in the darkness at the base of the stairs. Tripped on the cord of the Christmas lights.

Jacob approached slowly. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Santa—”

“—don’t fucking tell me you’re Santa Claus.”

“Santa Claus?” said the man. “That fat asshole? No, I’m Santa Murggis.”

And just then, the power came back on. The skinny stranger was lit by the glow of a hundred coloured lights. He wore something like a Santa Claus costume, but blue and green instead of the usual red and white. His face had green scales, like a fish, two holes in place of a nose, and enormous yellow eyes.

“Are you just gonna stand there,” the scaled creature said, “or are you going to help me with these lights?” It fumbled with the cord caught around its leg.

“What are you?” Jacob said.

“I just told you. I’m Santa-fucking-Murggis.” Then he stood, and Jacob could see his outfit was sopping wet. “You weren’t expecting Claus, or you wouldn’t have lit the fire, am I right?”

“I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“Well, here I am. Now are we gonna do this, or what?”

“Do what?”

“What do you think? You’re the one who summoned me.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

Santa Murggis sighed. “Santa Claus comes to give presents to good kids, right?”

“Right.”

“And Santa Piotr comes to give coal to bad kids, right?”

“I thought that was Santa Claus.”

“You don’t even know about Piotr? What are they teaching in schools these days?”

Jacob shrugged, still wielding the firepoker like a baseball bat.

“You mind putting that thing away?” Murggis said.

“Not until you tell me what you’re doing in my house.”

“Why don’t I just show you?” Then Murggis started slowly up the stairs. “Follow me.”

Jacob cautiously trailed behind.

“Everyone knows about Claus,” Murggis said. “Stockings by the fireplace, milk and cookies, and all that shit. But they never teach you about the other Santas.”

“Other Santas?”

“Like Santa Piotr. And Santa Tobias. And me.”

“Santa Murggis.”

“You remembered,” Murggis said, and made his way into the bathroom. The he motioned to the bathtub, full of water. “Claus uses chimneys. I use the bath. So of course you understand, when we saw the chimney was lit and the tub was full, we thought it was my turn.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t believe in Santa Claus, and I’ve never even heard of you. I wasn’t trying to invite you in.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Murggis dipped his hand into the water. “So you want your gift or not?”

Jacob shuddered at the thought of what sort of gift this freak show might have in mind. “I’ll pass.”

Murggis squinted his big yellow eyes. “We Santas have a sort of power-sharing agreement, you know. Division of responsibilities and such. Claus gets the good kids. Piotr gets the bad kids.”

Murggis stared awkwardly, like he wanted a prompt. “And you?”

“Single adults with suicidal ideation.”

“You get a lot of work?”

“Not as much as Claus. But it’s still busy this time of year. Anyway, Claus has his bag of gifts. Stupid toys and bullshit, because he’s got to deal with kids. But me, I give the gift of clairaudience.”

Jacob just stared blankly.

“It means,” Murggis said, “that I can let you hear things from the spirit world. Like, for instance, your family. You want to hear from them, don’t you?”

Jacob lowered his poker. “Yes.”

Murggis nodded, then swirled the water. It bubbled. Then Jacob thought he heard, somewhere in the gurgling water, the faintest trace of a voice. No words, just a distorted murmuring.

“Sorry,” said Murggis. “That doesn’t sound quite right.”

“It’s them,” Jacob said. It was unmistakable now, even without words. His wife and daughter. Their voice bubbled up from the tub.

“But no words,” Murggis said. “No, no. This isn’t right. You deserve better, don’t you? You should get to talk to them. Come. Come with me and we’ll fix this.”

“Come with you where?”

“To my workshop,” Murggis said. “Through the tub.” Then he grabbed Jacob by the wrist. His grip was cold and wet.

Jacob yanked his arm away and lifted the poker. “Don’t touch me, you creepy shit.”

“I’m creepy? What about Claus? He’s the one who ‘sees you when you’re sleeping.’ You ever wonder why he watches you while you’re sleeping? Can’t be to figure out if you’re good or bad. So who’s the creepy one?”

“You really have it in for Claus, don’t you?”

“He gets all the credit,” Murggis said. “Sorry I got so upset about it. I just want to do my part, you know? And then the water didn’t work, and you didn’t get to talk to your family. I just want to make it right. So what do you say? Will you go with me?”

“Into the tub?”

“It’s like a magic sleigh. Just a little more wet. And no reindeer.”

“You first.”

“Of course,” Murggis said. Then he stepped into the water and sat. “Room for one more. Then we can get you in touch with your family.”

Jacob thought about his family, how he would do anything for just one more minute with them. Maybe even get in a bathtub with Murggis. And besides, Jacob thought, what do I have to lose? So he joined Murggis in the tub, the two of them facing each other. The water soaked through his pajamas.

“Here we go,” Murggis said. Then the walls of the house melted away like waterfalls. Behind them was a blur of coloured lights. The colours raced by faster and faster, and then suddenly stopped.

Jacob and Murggis sat in the tub in the middle of a cave with smooth polished walls. It was brightly lit with coloured lanterns. A large wooden table spanned the room, around which sat many strange people. Jacob recognized only Santa Claus, the white-bearded fat man in the red suit. But there were many others there. In a green suit, a purple skinned newt-faced man. In a yellow suit, an apparent burn-victim. And all the other Santas, staring at Jacob in the tub.

“You brought him here?” said an enormous yeti Santa in an orange suit.

“My gift wasn’t working,” Murggis said.

“Murggis, Murggis, Murggis,” said the newt Santa, “when will you pull it together?”

“Ho, ho, ho,” said Claus.

“Now’s not the time,” Murggis said. “Are you going to help me or not?”

The Santas looked at each other.

“All right then.” An impish Santa in brown hopped from his seat. “Let’s figure this out.” He walked over to the tub and put his ear to the water. It

bubbled and gurgled, and hummed. The imp nodded at the sound. “So your family’s all dead, right?”

The bluntness caught Jacob by surprise.

“Yeah,” Murggis answered for Jacob. “On the way home from Christmas shopping.”

“Ho, ho, ho,” said Claus. “Merry Christmas.” And the other Santas laughed.

“Yes, yes,” said the imp, “but how?”

“Car accident,” Jacob said.

“I see, I see,” said the imp. “And how long did it take them to die?”

“Instantaneous,” Jacob said. That’s what the officers had told him.

“No, no, I don’t think so,” said the imp. “That’s not how water-talking works. They get to use their voice from before their death. They must have been alive for at least a few minutes.”

Then Jacob heard the murmuring again. The distorted, tortured gurgling of the bubbles in the water. And he felt a stabbing pain, like his intestines were being eaten from the inside.

“Jacob,” Murggis said, and hopped out of the tub. “Are you okay?”

Jacob sat alone in the tub. The water was filling with brown and red, leaking from Jacob’s body.

“You’re shitting blood, man” Murggis said. “How much Advil did you take?”

“Eight or nine,” Jacob said. And he clutched his gut.

“Eight or nine pills won’t do it,” Murggis said. Then he turned to the other Santas. “He’s still mine.”

“Bottles,” Jacob said. “Eight or nine bottles.”

The Santas murmured to each other. Then a white-robed Santa stood. He had translucent flesh, providing a clear view to organs and bones.

“This one is mine,” the translucent Santa said.

Murggis looked at Jacob. “Sorry, buddy. He’s right. I only deal with people who fuck up their suicide attempts. Santa Sephtis will take over from here.”

Jacob could only groan as the pain intensified. Sephtis loomed over him.

“Are you ready for your gift?” Santa Sephtis said.

“No,” Jacob said.

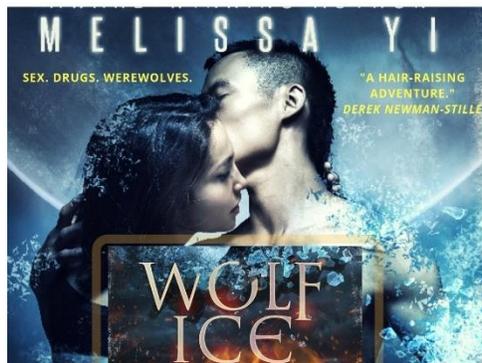
Sephtis placed slimy hands on Jacob’s head. “I will send you now to see your family.” Jacob thought of the strawberry-rhubarb jam his grandma used to make at Christmas. Then Sephtis pushed his head below the water.

OF AFTER

by Augustus Clark

(Previously unpublished)

kept under glass this
quiet rage of after
unescapable
icy winds moan blind against
hollowed eyes close
insulated
but not impressed
unkept
moments remain
unabsorbed time
slips through panes
which hold
present, never more.
air cannot capture
the floors echoing absence
the feet shuffling
the soles whispering
words blown
across woody grains
greedy grains
hug these stories tight
filled eyes open
exposed to
enduring rage of after



CURSE OF THE MYRMELON

by Matthew Hughes

(Previously published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 2015.)

Cascor the discriminator was working once again with *Faullait's Principles of Sympathetic Association* when the knock came on his office door. He laid the book on his desktop and rose to answer but halfway across the width of the small space he stopped, went back to the desk, and slipped the worn old volume into the top drawer. There were elements in the city of Caer Lyff—powerful elements—that did not approve of investigators using magic to solve mysteries, and he half-expected to hear from them soon.

The man on his doorstep was the opposite of powerful: small and pale, thin wisps of hair straggling over a speckled pate. He turned watery blue eyes upward to meet Cascor's and spoke without preamble. "I need you to remove a curse."

Cascor leaned out of the doorway, causing the visitor to step back onto the pavement, and craned his long, corded neck to look in both directions. The street appeared to be empty, but appearance could be a bald-faced lie.

"For a curse-lifting, you need a wizard. Their Guildhall is in Upper Brumme Street, near the Old Palladium."

He moved to close the door, but the small man raised a timid hand. There was something in the way the diffidence of the gesture contrasted with the fervor with which the fellow whispered, "Please," that caused Cascor to override his first instinct.

"All right," he said. "Come in."

The visitor entered, his eyes darting about the room as if something might leap at him from a corner. Cascor waved him toward one of the plain chairs in front of his desk then sat in his accustomed place. He was aware that the two of them made a dissimilar pair: one leaning back at seeming ease, the other perched on the edge of his seat like a hunted sleekit about to break from cover.

"I am a licensed discriminator," Cascor said. "I do not lift curses. Again, that is a job for a thaumaturge. Or perhaps a witch."

The little man swallowed. "I have heard ...," he began, then his throat dried up.

Cascor abandoned his leisurely pose and leaned forward across the desk. "What have you heard? And from whom?"

The too-moist eyes blinked and the dry throat must have become positively parched, because the only answer was a croak. Cascor relented and eased

back again. A former senior provostman, he was adept at reading character and detecting subterfuge, and his skills told him that this was not some ringer sent by the Wizards Guild to trick him into admitting that he sometimes trespassed upon the Guild's prerogatives.

He reached down into a lower drawer and came up with a stoneware jug of rakk and a couple of tumblers. He poured two fingers of the fiery liquor into each and pushed one across the desk to the trembling man. "Drink that," he said, "and we'll start afresh."

The visitor stared into the tumbler's depths as if he suspected the brown liquid of planning the taking of an unpleasant initiative. Then, after a visible summoning of the spirit, with one convulsive motion he threw the rakk down his gullet. Cascor would have advised him against such a peremptory procedure, but after the expected paroxysms of coughing, the empurpled struggle for breath, and the involuntary eye-crossing, he was relieved to see the fellow manage to keep the drink where he had put it.

The discriminator fetched a pitcher of water and poured some into the man's glass. A long moment later, the visitor was in a fit state to proceed. There was even some colour in his cheeks. Cascor was by this time sitting on the edge of his desk looking down at what he was now seeing as a prospective client.

"From the beginning," he said.

The man's name, he learned, was Onoffrey Ulph. He was a tallyman in a mercantile establishment that imported and exported goods into and from the City of Caer Lyff.

"What manner of goods?" Cascor asked.

"All manner," was the answer. "Whatever can be bought cheap there and sold dear here, and vice versa."

Ulph had risen to a senior clerical position in the accounts department by reason of his being one of those useful but undistinguished functionaries who delight in creating a neat column of figures and bringing them to a precisely accurate total. His triumphs and pleasures, though small, were meaningful to him, and he had enjoyed what he considered a satisfying existence until recently, when, as he put it, "Things began to go hinky."

Cascor said, "Define 'hinky.'"

"My records sometimes fail to accord with actualities."

Prompted for a fuller explanation, the clerk said that inventories had begun to show discrepancies between the number of items expected to be in the warehouse and the number found when a count was made.

"Ah," said Cascor, having heard such tales before, "there is pilfering."

But Ulph signaled a negative. "Where there are supposed to be ten

ampoules, there are eleven. The records indicate that there should be twenty-two sacks of ochineal, but a count shows there are twenty-three.”

“Could the original tallying have been inaccurate?”

The little man sat stiffly upright and his nose assumed an elevated position. “I do not miscount,” he said. “My enumeration has always been immaculate.”

“And this has happened several times?”

“Once would have been too many. There have now been a full four instances.”

“Over how long?” Cascor said, pulling a tablet and stylus toward him and beginning to make notes.

“Twenty-eight days, counting this morning.”

“One instance every seven days? Or do they clump?”

Ulph cocked his head as he considered the question. “Is that germane?”

“I do not know,” said the discriminator, “but sometimes patterns are revelant of underlying causes.”

The clerk accepted this and said, “One per seven days.”

“Time of day?”

The discrepancies were noticed early in the morning, when Ulph passed through the warehouse on his way to his cubicle. But by late afternoon, the extra items were always gone.

“Then whatever causes the extras to appear,” said Cascor, “happens at night, or very early in the morning before you arrive. Are the premises guarded?”

“A night watchman makes regular rounds, accompanied by a starkhound.”

“And does anyone come in earlier than you?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” said Cascor.

The clerk showed a flicker of hope. “You have deduced something?”

“Only that I need more information.”

“There is no more.”

“There is always more,” said Cascor, “but it often goes unnoticed.” He looked at his notes then asked the obvious question. “What has this to do with a curse?”

“Oh,” said the little man, “yes. I offended a Myrmelon.”

The discriminator blinked. “That was unwise.”

“It was inadvertent. I allowed my shadow to fall upon it. Now it has elected to drive me mad.”

“Which one?”

“It perches on the wall that girdles the fountain in Effetz Plaza, offering

prophecies in exchange for fish.”

Cascor nodded. He’d seen the creature. He said, "Usually, a donation vitiates any offense."

“I was on my way back from devotions at the Temple of Bul-Omir,” said Ulph. “My purse was thus empty.”

“Hmm,” said Cascor. “Still, it seems an odd kind of malediction. Myrmelons more commonly deal in warts and blemishes, although I have heard of one that laid a curse whose effect was to cause the subject to emit loud and remarkably tuneful flatulence. And of another that forced the victim to speak nothing but the unvarnished truth.”

Both men took a moment to contemplate the iniquities that the world could inflict upon hapless innocents. Onoffrey Ulph shuddered at where his thoughts led him. Cascor poured them each a fresh measure of rakk and they sipped in concert.

“I’m interested,” the discriminator said, “to know how you happened to notice the extra items. Surely you don’t take a full inventory every morning.”

“I needed only a glance as I passed by,” said the clerk.

“Really?” There was a container on his desk in which Cascor kept wire clips used to attach expenses receipts to billings. He picked it up and emptied it onto the floor. “How many?” he said.

Ulph glanced down and instantly replied. “Forty-seven.”

Cascor knelt and scooped up the objects, then counted them as he returned them to the container. “Exactly right,” he said. He made another note. “So, you not only noticed the additional items in the warehouse, but knew immediately that they did not coincide with your tallies?”

“Of course.”

“Because you remember everything you see?”

Ulph gestured in the affirmative.

“A useful ability in a clerk,” Cascor said. He paused for a moment’s thought then said, “I will take the case.”

He stated his fee and Ulph immediately countered with a lesser amount. The traditional process followed, soon leading them to agree on the sum both had had in mind before the haggle. An advance changed hands.

“One more question,” the discriminator said. “Who told you that I would be a suitable choice for curse removal? I do not advertise such a service.”

“The Chadderbolt Inquisitional Agency,” was the answer. “They handled an early inquiry for me, successfully, when my spouse absconded with our savings.”

“They brought her back?”

“No, just the funds, which to me classified the operation as an unqualified

success. But when I explained the nature of my problem they suggested the matter was more in your line than theirs.”

That brought another “Hmm,” from Cascor. He would need to have a word with Ennish Chadderbolt. He asked a few more questions as to the specifics of Ulph’s employment and domicile and recorded his likeness, before ushering the client out with a promise that he would be in touch as soon as he had something to communicate.

Ulph had come on his lunch break, and it was now early afternoon. Cascor chose a few items from his shelves, locked up the premises, and set off toward Effetz Plaza, where he found the Myrmelon in its usual position, seated on the wall that circled the fountain. The old orange sun was still well up in the zenith, so he was able to approach directly instead of widdershins. He came close enough to smell the creature’s faintly ammoniac odor, then stood quietly, eyes averted.

After several moments, the mottled green head turned in his direction and the round yellow eyes fixed upon him. The cranial crest rose: the equivalent of a human’s raising of the eyebrows.

“I would speak with you,” Cascor said, again avoiding direct eye contact.

“Two fish.”

“I do not seek a prophecy.”

The crest descended. Before the head could turn away, the discriminator reached into his wallet and brought forth a blood-red semiprecious stone. No one knew why Myrmelons valued such gems; they wore no jewelry, nor any covering other than strips of brightly dyed leather tied above the knee and elbow joints, the ends left to flutter. But, then, the things no one knew about Myrmelons greatly outnumbered the few points that had ever been conclusively settled.

A long-fingered hand rose, the deeply creased palm cupped. The voice suggested that air was being forced through a phlegm-packed throat.

“Concurrence.”

Cascor dropped the stone into the hand, being careful not to come too close. He knew it sometimes amused Myrmelons to take hold of human appendages in grips that were near impossible to dislodge. If this one seized him, hours or days might pass before it finally let go.

Actually, the amusement was assumed. The creatures’ motives remained largely opaque, as did their origin. They had appeared quite suddenly, several generations ago. Opinion varied as to their genesis: some posited an apparaticist’s experiment gone wrong; others saw them as some thaumaturge’s

idea of a practical joke.

He showed the creature the likeness of Onoffrey Ulph and let it gaze at the image until it turned its eyes back to Cascor and the crest rose again. The discriminator said, “He believes you may have laid a malediction upon him for allowing his shadow to fall upon you.”

The Myrmelon digested this for a while—again an assumption on Cascor’s part; for all he knew it might have been mentally composing a sonnet. Then it spoke again. “Not.”

“You did not curse him?”

The tendrils at the corners of its wide, lipless mouth rose and vibrated. That was known to signify irritation. “Not,” it said again.

The colloquy was at an end, Cascor knew. From his wallet, he brought a small, circular mirror framed in brass and placed it on the low wall. The hand that did not hold the red stone took up the glass then angled it so that the sun was reflected into Cascor’s eyes. While the discriminator blinked against the dazzle, the phlegmy voice spoke again.

“River moves,” it said. “Man not.”

Cascor blinked the colored motes from his field of vision. “A prophecy?” he said. “I have no fish for you.”

Now the mouth tendrils quivered, and as the man withdrew he believed he had witnessed the Myrmelon’s equivalent of a laugh.

He also believed what the creature had said: it had not used its innate arcane powers to alter his client’s condition. That was as Cascor had expected. The interesting part of the discrimination had now begun and he was looking forward to disrobing the mystery of the odd tallies.

He was seated at an outdoor table of a tavern across the street and a few doors up from the warehouse where Ulph kept the accounts. The place’s best wine was decent, if overpriced, but Cascor would charge the expense to the tallyman. He was making a bad job of pretending to read a local news journal; its editorialist’s strident tone in calling for Caer Lyff to wage “the economic equivalent of war” against the neighboring polity of Alathe was testing Cascor’s patience. The Alatheans’ ruling cabal were no more venal than his own city’s oligarchs, he knew. Finally, he put the paper down and sought to give the impression of a solitary man brooding over the unwonted course his life had taken.

So far, he had seen nothing untoward regarding the warehouse, but he intended to linger until quitting time. Some of the employees might stop by after work, and it could be instructive to listen to what they said once strong

drink had oiled the hinges of their tongues.

The table jarred against his elbow and he turned to find that the seat opposite had been taken by a short but wide-shouldered man clad in black leather and rough brown serge. The newcomer fixed Cascor with a gaze that told the discriminator their encounter was not accidental.

“You know who I am?” The voice was as flat and hard as the man’s gaze.

“You are,” said Cascor, “Baldesant Jihir.”

“And you know why I am here?”

“Since you are the chief lay operative of the Wizards Guild, I assume it has something to do with that organization.” He sipped his wine and took another look at the warehouse. “Though what that has to do with me remains a mystery.”

Jihir blinked. He paused before he spoke. Then he said, “Word has gotten around that you practice magic on a professional basis.”

Cascor spoke mildly. “That would be an infringement on the Guild’s monopoly.”

“It would. And it would be resented.”

Cascor raised and lowered his shoulders. “The profession I practice is that of discriminator.”

Jihir conceded the point. “But we hear that you dabble in magic along the way.”

“I investigate as my clients’ needs ordain. I am paid for results. I am not paid to cast spells or perform divinations. Thus I tread on no wizardly toes.”

The other man spread his hands, which Cascor noted were large and well scarred about the knuckles. “But you use magic to get the results for which you are paid. And wizardly toes are inordinately sensitive.”

“The fault must then lie in the sensitivity,” Cascor said, “since I repeat that I do not tread thereupon.”

“It seems we differ in our assessment of the situation,” said Jihir.

“Mine is the correct assessment,” said Cascor. “Yours is a product of erroneous assumptions.”

The wizards’ henchman rose to his feet. “Then you will not cease your dabbling.”

It was not a question, but Cascor answered it anyway. “I will do as I see fit. My first concern is to serve my clients.”

“You may find,” said Jihir, “that some entirely different concern arrives and assumes priority.”

The discriminator’s answer was another slight lifting and settling of his shoulders. He turned back towards the warehouse and sipped his wine. When next he glanced across the table, the other man was gone.

Two hours later, Cascor was down near the riverside docks. Eavesdropping on the idle talk of the warehouse's employees had yielded nothing actionable. He had even used Ponfyrie's Exaggerated Ear to listen in on the whispered conversation of two warehousemen who leaned conspiratorially toward each other over a back table of the tavern—but their subject turned out to be a salacious piece of gossip concerning the shipping clerk's wife, Ettoria Cabil, and Folderance, a young bucko who drove one of the goods carriers that regularly called at the loading dock.

Now he was not far from the local headquarters of the Ancient and Honorable Guild of Purloiners and Purveyors, whose members found the dockside a continuing source of opportunity. Somewhere in the neighborhood, he could expect to find the man he sought. It had been a long day, so instead of looking into the dozen soakbins and other low dives along these twisty, narrow streets, Cascor called up a mental image of his quarry—a low forehead under a thatch of black hair, deep-set eyes shaded by a too-prominent nose—and spoke a simple finding spell.

A ball of green light, visible only to the discriminator, appeared before him and moved off along the street at a walking pace. Cascor followed and was led through a couple of turns and down a flight of worn stone steps, to an unmarked door in a shabby building whose windows were shuttered, but a buzz of noise from within the place told him that he had found what he was looking for. He extinguished the globe and stepped inside.

Every voice stopped and every eye turned his way as he crossed the threshold. Cascor knew he still had the look of a provostman, especially to those whose continued liberty might depend on recognizing a thief-taker before the thief-taker recognized them. But he was well enough known in the city that the gazes all turned away and the hum of voices resumed.

Yet one pair of eyes stayed on him as he crossed the sticky floor to where Raffalon the thief sat with his back to the wall and a tankard of ale half-drunk before him on the rough wooden boards. The discriminator was glad to see that the man himself was not half-drunk, as he sat and said, "I have work for you, if you want it."

"What work?" said the thief.

"To go in somewhere, plant a small object, and come out again, with no one to know but us."

"Guild rates?"

"Plus ten percent if you commit not to steal anything from the place."

When Raffalon looked the obvious question, Cascor said, "It's the warehouse of

an importer and exporter.”

The thief asked which importer, and when told said, “I was in there last year. Some of the goods are valuable but difficult to sell on, being indelibly marked with the importer's stamp.”

Cascor nodded. Items too easily identified were heavily discounted by the purveyors who shared Guild premises with the likes of Raffalon. “Then you won't be distracted.”

“One question,” said the thief. “Is magic involved?”

Cascor knew from their mutual experience how the thief had developed a distaste for the thaumaturgical arts. “Only in a passive sense,” he said. “The object I want you to leave will react to any exercise of magic in its vicinity.”

“React how?”

“It will recognize the spell and store the information. After a time, I will want you to go back in and retrieve the object and bring it to me.”

“A second insertion,” said Raffalon, “also at Guild rates plus ten percent.”

“Yes. Half in advance, half on retrieval of the object.”

“When?”

“Tonight, if you are free.”

“I am.” Raffalon pushed away the undrunk ale and rose. “Let us go somewhere that lacks so many eyes and ears,” he said.

They went out into the street, walked a few paces, and entered an unlit alley. In the darkness, Cascor handed the other man a lightweight object. Raffalon used his thief's educated touch and said, “It feels like a paper wasps' nest.”

“It is enclosed in just that,” Cascor said. “I want you to put it high in the rafters where, even if it is noticed, it will look to be too much trouble to remove.”

“Understood. The advance?”

Cascor counted the coins into the thief's palm. Raffalon needed no light; the sound and weight of gold was accounting enough. The discriminator said, “I will send for you when it is time to retrieve it.”

They separated, Raffalon to his lodgings to assemble the tools he would need, Cascor to Onoffrey Ulph's modest townhouse, where he stood on the doorstep and reported to his client.

“Good news,” he said. “There never was a Myrmelon curse.”

The small man emitted a heartfelt sigh. “I am relieved to hear it.”

“The less good news is that someone is using your premises for purposes that would not bear scrutiny. I will investigate to discover who and what and why.”

Now conflicting emotions showed in Ulph's face. “Will it cost me more?” he

said.

Cascor raised a comforting hand. “The advance covers it. Nor do I do expect it to be a complex or costly business.”

Ulph agreed that the discriminator should carry on. He disclosed that he was offended by the notion that someone should cause his tallies to appear inaccurate. Inerrancy was his only pride, he said, and parsimony his only vice.

“When next you see an item surplus to your tally, send word.”

There was a dry sound as the tallyman rubbed his little palms together like one who anticipates a settling of scores. “I will, indeed,” he said.

Cascor walked to one of the major boulevards and hailed a passing cab. As he sank into its cushioned interior, he cast a look back the way he had come. He was quite sure he had been followed. He could have employed a spell to discover who his shadow was but under the circumstances, it was not the most useful of ideas.

Two days passed. Cascor busied himself with some minor discriminations: an inquiry into the background of a young woman who had won the affections of an heir to a mercantile fortune where the father had instinctively assumed her character must be as grasping as his own; and a routine surveillance to determine if a physician was the serial philanderer his spouse believed him to be. In the first instance, the subject was clearly blameless; in the second, the subject was a blatant violator not only of his marital pledges, but of his professional oath as well.

Neither case required the use of magic. Cascor relied on his provostman’s training to uncover the facts. On the morning of the third day, he wrote his reports and sent them by a bonded messenger from the Reliable Guild of Couriers and Loadbearers, along with his bills for service. Then he turned once more to *Faullait's Principles* and continued to develop his relationship with the old tome.

He had discovered, mostly through intuition but augmented by experimentation, that working with books of magic required far more than a mere ability to read—in the case of Faullait’s text, more even than the ability to read half-forgotten languages. The mana that made possible the exercise of sympathetic association was *will*—human and sometimes nonhuman. When a grand thaumaturge of Faullait’s caliber wrote a book, he imbued it with no small measure of his own will. The book would also absorb some of the strengths of the wizards who engaged with it. In the case of truly old tomes, such as the copy of *Faullait's Principles* that Cascor had acquired from a practitioner named Vaudelare after he died in the collapse of his glass tower,

the book would have accumulated considerable mana of its own.

One did not just pick up the *Principles* and begin to peruse its contents. The relationship between tome and reader was far more complex, combining elements of the prickly way confreres of the same profession might work together, along with the pupil/mentor axis, overlaid by the complex sentiments longtime players of a subtle and demanding game gradually developed toward each other. It was a mix of collegiality, rivalry, testiness, and the ancient human practice of upmanship. At first repulsed, Cascor had persevered until he found himself to be increasingly equal to the book's challenge—so much so that he now enjoyed the encounters for their own sake as much as for what he learned.

This morning, he was following a twisting thread through the labyrinth of the book's structure, in search of a technique for concealing objects in plain sight. His growing familiarity with the *Principles*—and its gradual acceptance of that intimacy—had led him to a paragraph he otherwise would probably never have found. And therein lay a spell called Azerablez's Innocuous Gloss.

Cascor carried the book to his work table and laid it next to an ornate ring also acquired from Vaudelare's ruins. He had thought the ring might have powers, but if it did he had not been able to identify them. He suspected it had been just a keepsake of the wizard's. Now, following Azerablez's instructions, he fixed in his mind an image of a nondescript pebble then superimposed the mental picture over his sight of the ring. This was another thaumaturgical technique he'd lately learned.

The spell was in three verses, each of three lines, and each line of three syllables. Holding the coincided images of ring and pebble steady, Cascor recited the twenty-seven sounds, using the pronunciation guide supplied by diacritical marks below the words. He smiled ruefully as he completed the sequence, remembering an experimental spell-casting two weeks ago when his acceptance by the book had not yet progressed to the point where it would reveal the vital marks to him. He had been half the afternoon cleaning up the mess.

But now his first attempt at the Innocuous Gloss was flawless. Where the ring had been there now sat a pebble. The discriminator examined it from several angles, but the illusion was complete. He turned back to the book, reread the incantation, this time reversing the third verse's order of syllables, and instantly the ring was revealed.

"Good," he said to himself with a collegial nod of appreciation to the ancient book. He then crossed to the window that afforded a view of the street, parted the curtains enough for a glance, and saw what he expected: Baldesant Jihir standing in a doorway, peering at some object he held in his hand. He

then looked up at Cascor's window and must have seen enough to tell him he was being observed. Jihir smiled a knowing smile, touched a finger to the rim of his hat, and walked away.

"Can't be helped," Cascor commented. He sensed a query from the book still spread on his work table and said, "Nothing to concern you."

He put away the book and ring and went out to lunch. When he returned he found a street urchin on his doorstep. The child said he had been sent with a message and that the sender had promised he would be rewarded by ten grimlets. Cascor took the envelope, saw that it was from Onoffrey Ulph. He checked that the seal was unbroken then opened it. "It says five grimlets here," he said.

The urchin's truculent expression faded when the discriminator said, "But I'll make it ten now, and ten more if you go down by the river and find a man for me."

"Twenty," was the child's automatic response.

"Fifteen," countered Cascor, "if you get him here before nightfall."

The urchin took in Raffalon's name and description, took the ten grimlets, and took to his heels. Less than two hours later, Cascor heard a knock at the door. He counted out the coins into the small, grimy palm and ushered the thief into his office. Raffalon assessed the place's opportunities with a practiced eye then, when the discriminator frowned, had the grace to say, "Sorry. Professional habit."

Cascor told the thief it was time to recover the object he had planted. Then he picked up a purse and shook it so that the contents clinked musically.

"If you don't mind," said Raffalon, "I'll wait for full dark."

Cascor didn't mind at all. He said, "How difficult is it to enter the premises?"

"I cannot reveal Guild secrets," was the immediate reply.

"I am asking because I may wish to see for myself something that is there."

Raffalon stroked a finger down the ridge of his overlarge proboscis and said, "For a fee, I can let you in, then wait and see you out."

A brief exchange of figures ensued, then the issue was settled. The two then waited, passing the time in idle talk. Cascor, once an accomplished thief-taker during his rise through the ranks of Caer Lyff's provost corps, was led to muse upon the chain of circumstances that had brought him and the other man together. Cascor had been dismissed as a scapegoat after a scandal in the corps, though he was no more guilty than others who kept their positions and ranks. He had gone to work as head of security for one Olviert Pandarius, a wealthy merchant, but had lost that situation, too, when a resourceful thief evaded all of Cascor's carefully placed wards and got-you-nows to make off

with some of the magnate's most prized valuables.

The thief who had cost Cascor his second career was the man who now sat in his office sipping punge—Raffalon did not indulge in liquors when he was about to work—and agreeing with him that their lives did seem to have been fitted together by some capricious deity with a taste for irony.

Time passed, pleasantly for the most part, until Raffalon looked out the window and said it was dark enough for the evening's work. They took a cab to the part of the city where the warehouse sat, the hooves of the vehicle's beast clopping noisily in the empty streets. They alighted some distance from the target and made their way there through unlit lanes and alleys.

Near to their goal, Raffalon said, "Did you notice that we were followed?"

"I did," said Cascor. "Baldesant Jihir of the Wizards Guild has been stepping in my tracks lately."

The thief shrugged. His interests and those of Jihir neither clashed nor intersected. "Step wide around wizards," was his friendly advice.

"I tend to," said the discriminator, "when I can."

And then they spoke no more because they were entering the paved lane that communicated with the rear of the warehouse. Raffalon led the way onto the deserted loading dock, keeping to the shadows, then stopped beside a begrimed window. He took something from his belt and applied it to the window frame. Cascor heard the tiniest of clicks, then the window swung outwards on hinges.

"I'll wait here," the discriminator said.

Raffalon went silently through the opening and came back again, just as noiselessly, a short while after. He handed Cascor the fake wasps' nest, and the lean man held the object in his hand while he recited the syllables he had memorized. A moment later a quiet voice spoke inside his head.

"As I suspected," he said and put the object away in his pouch. "Now, if you will take me in."

Raffalon led the way through the window into a shipping office, then out into the area where loads were assembled and from there into the warehouse proper. Cascor was impressed by the thief's stealth; he prided himself on his own abilities to move quietly, but compared to Raffalon, he was a marching band in hobnailed boots.

They came to a space where cartons and barrels were neatly stacked along aisles of open shelves that ran in four directions. The thief pointed upwards and whispered, "There is where I put the device."

Cascor nodded and looked about in the gloom. What he sought would be at eye-height. His gaze fell upon a shelf that supported bundles of ornately carved wooden stakes into which arcane runes had been burned. Gardeners used

them in the tending of plants that would benefit from physical support combined with the numinous effect of the symbols. He moved closer and, taking a paper from his pocket, asked Raffalon to provide some illumination. The thief obliged, producing a dim thief's light that lit up the page enough for Cascor to see what he had written there.

The discriminator softly read out Azerablez's Innocuous Gloss, with the syllables of the third sura recited backwards. Instantly, one of the bundles of stakes became a leather cylinder, the kind used to store scrolls, about the size of Cascor's forearm, and stitched tight at both ends. He picked it up, examined it under Raffalon's light, sniffed it, and gently shook it. Something shifted inside.

"Documents," he said, mostly to himself. A pattern was forming in his mind.

The scrape of shoe leather on stone sounded from somewhere in the building, accompanied by the *skitch* of a starkhound's claws.

"We should go," said Raffalon.

"One moment," said Cascor. He replaced the cylinder where he had found it, spoke the concealing spell in the correct order, and saw another bundle of stakes appear. On the way out, they paused in the shipping office while Cascor studied the records of outbound shipments and correlated some of what he found there with Ulph's recollections of when the discrepancies had occurred. The pattern was becoming clearer.

Soon after, he and the thief exited the building the way they had entered, Raffalon locking the window behind them.

Two purses exchanged hands, and they set off together back toward Cascor's office, where they bade each other good night and separated. The discriminator returned to his lodgings, while Raffalon set off in pursuit of the drink he had foregone because he had to work.

Later, Cascor lay on his simple cot, hands behind his head, and regarded the darkened ceiling as he pursued a train of thought that started with the leather cylinder and moved on to what it might contain.

After a while he said, "Hmm," thought some more, then composed himself to sleep.

The next afternoon found the discriminator once more in the vicinity of Ulph's warehouse. This time he had come dressed as a laborer down on his luck and had chosen a position across from the mouth of the alley that led to the building's loading dock. He was leaning against a lamppost, apparently immersed in the latest issue of the war-hungry periodical, which claimed that

the Alatheans were conspiring with unnamed elements within the Caer Lyff secretariat to undermine the city's economic foundations. In Cascor's view, those foundations were the unbridled greed of the ruling oligarchs, who administered the city entirely to their own benefit.

He watched as a wagon drawn by four draft animals and piloted by a fair-haired and muscular young man came along the road from the river port and turned first into the alley then into the warehouse's loading yard. After a few moments, Cascor folded the paper under his arm and sauntered down the narrow way until he passed the open double gates. He saw the wagon was now backed against the dock, the beasts muttering to each other and the driver up on the flat stone apron presenting a paper to a sour-faced older man. The latter studied the document then turned to go inside. The driver made to follow, but the shipping clerk spun sharply on his heel and held out a forbidding finger. The young man shrugged then jumped over the back of his wagon into the bed, where he leaned against one of its sides, arms folded, with an insouciant air.

All this Cascor saw in the time it took to pass the wide gateway. He paused a few steps beyond, waited several heartbeats, then retraced his steps. Things were much as they had been, except that the shipping office's window—the very one through which thief and discriminator had entered and exited—was now open. It framed the rather plain face of a woman of middle years, a face that was beaming upon the fair-haired driver with a wide-eyed warmth more suited to a schoolgirl. The names Ettoria and Folderance emerged from Cascor's memory.

Then the clerk came back, followed by several porters carrying burdens, and the woman ducked back into the office. But the clerk noticed the open window and thunder roiled in his countenance. He spoke brusquely to the porters, threw a glare at the driver that in a universe built to properly accommodate husbands would have taken young Folderance's head off, and stormed back into the building. Harsh recriminations and bleats of protest emerged through the open window until a heavy hand slammed it shut.

The driver remained oblivious and the porters feigned to be no less so, though they smiled behind their hands. Cascor entered the yard, mounted the few steps that led up to the apron, and asked of the driver if the shipping clerk might be available. The young man pantomimed *Hark!* with a hand behind one ear, while the other hand encouraged Cascor to follow his own organs of hearing.

The discriminator returned his own gesture, which said he would wait until the squall had abated. He leant against the warehouse's brick wall and spent the ensuing minutes watching the porters load the wagon—which cargo,

he was not surprised to see, included eleven bundles of carved and rune-incised garden stakes. Before the vehicle was fully laden, the tempest in the shipping office had blown itself out, and the clerk emerged muttering against a background of heartfelt sobs, which he muted by closing the door.

He made a quick comparison between the driver's waybill and what was already in the wagon, then encouraged his loading crew to greater efforts with a couple of shoves and a kick in the most laggardly posterior. He turned back to find a driver wearing a carefully neutral face and a tall, lean stranger who was standing on his dock for no discernible reason. The clerk's hand was rising and his mouth opening to order Cascor out of his sight when the discriminator stepped forward and asked if the firm might be taking on any laborers.

The answer was short and to the negative, accompanied by an invitation to depart while performing an anatomically impossible act upon himself. Cascor shrugged and made his way to the gate and out into the alley. Not long after, he heard Folderance encouraging his beasts by voice and sharp cracks of the whip. The wagon lumbered out into the alley and turned in the direction it had come from. The discriminator let it catch him up then spoke to the driver.

"Are you bound for the river port? I hear there's work there."

"I am."

"Give a man a ride?"

"Give a man a coin?"

Cascor shrugged. "I have none to give."

The driver shrugged and said, "You're a lean and spare one. It won't kill the bullocks to haul your weight. Come aboard."

More than this the young man did not speak until they neared the docks, where Cascor thanked him for the ride and got down from the wagon. He was in a lane between storehouses behind the docks that lined this wide, slow-flowing stretch of the River Drufidde. The vehicle trundled on and turned into the yard of a rough beam-and-planking structure that stood three stories above the water. Cascor noted the location, then turned and walked back the way they had come. After a few dozen paces, he found a narrow space between two buildings that gave access to the shore.

He came out onto a wooden dock where bales of wool were stacked waiting to be loaded onto a barge. It was mid-afternoon and the dock was deserted, the stevedores presumably finished for the day. Cascor peered around the wall of wool and saw the wagon and its fair-haired driver on another dock upstream where a well-worn riverboat bobbed in the current against a jetty. A gang of men were transferring the wagon's load through an open cargo hatch and into the hold. But as the discriminator watched, the driver reached into the wagon

and brought out the bundle of stakes disguised by Azerablez's Innocuous Gloss. He carried it to where the riverboat's pilot-captain stood. This was a thin-shouldered man of middle years whose nose had been reshaped by some ancient impact. He took the seeming bundle of stakes and leaped lightly aboard his craft, climbed to the pilothouse, and disappeared within.

The driver turned to the stevedores, urging them to finish loading. Not long after, the wagon now empty, the young man mounted the seat and, whistling and clucking, turned the team so that it went back into the building from which it had reached the dock. Soon, Cascor heard its iron-shod wheels rattling down the alley, the sound fading with distance.

The discriminator gave his chin a thoughtful stroke with thumb and forefinger and considered what he had seen. The pattern of events was now clear. Someone was smuggling something out of the city; the "something" was probably intelligence, and if so it would be economic intelligence of use to the commercial powers of another polity downstream from Caer Lyff. Given the current tense relations with Alathe, the implications were obvious.

Cascor had thus solved the case. The question now was: what to do with the solution? On the one hand, if he informed the oligarchs of Caer Lyff, he might expect a patriot's handsome reward; on the other hand, if in seeking to reach the highest echelon he alerted the conspirators in the secretariat, he might expect an assassin's poisoned dagger. He decided he would go back to his lodgings and consider the matter. But when he turned to retrace his route he found his way blocked by three large and capable-looking men, one of whom was Baldesant Jihir.

"I was just thinking about you," Cascor said, "and about whether I should inform you of a misuse of powers your Guild prefers to reserve to its members."

"No need," the wizards' lay operative said. "I am already fully informed." He then smiled with a pleasure alloyed by deep cruelty. The expression changed the man's lump-featured face, and Cascor immediately saw the resemblance.

"Ettoria Cabil," he said, "the shipping clerk's wife. Before marriage, she was Ettoria Jihir, wasn't she?"

"I always told them you were a smart one," Jihir said. "Sadly, too smart." He produced a spring gun, its dart's needle tip smeared with a dark substance. Without hesitation, he loosed the missile. Cascor put up a hand in attempt to block and felt the dart pierce his forearm—which immediately chilled to numbness, the icy sensation rushing down to his fingertips as well as up to his shoulder, neck, and head. Then he felt nothing.

When he awoke, his first thought was that he was blind and paralyzed. But experimentation soon revealed that his limbs were tightly bound by cords and that he was in a lightless space. His ears told him that the rhythmic tramp of bare feet on a hard deck, accompanied by a chant of *Hey-o, hey-o, hup! hey-o!* and the occasional rap of wood against wood meant he was in the hold of a boat being poled along the river; he had no doubt what boat it was, and now the entire conspiracy was revealed to his analytical mind.

Baldesant Jihr was providing useful information to the rulers of Alathe. Using his access to simple spells of the Guild he ostensibly served, he had cast an enchantment over his own sister, causing her to become enamored of the handsome young driver, who was doubtless an agent of the Alatheans. They had used the warehouse where her husband worked as the transfer point for the intelligence, disguised as an element of general cargo for the riverboat, whose pilot-captain would surely prove to be another agent of the scrolls' receivers.

Jihr had only pretended to take a professional interest in Cascor's use of magic in his activities. His attention had been drawn to the discriminator when he was found lurking in a tavern near the warehouse where the scrolls were delivered and disguised. Observing from outside Cascor's lodgings, Jihr had discovered—probably using the same kind of detector the discriminator had used to identify the cloaking spell—that Cascor was familiar with Azerablez's Innocuous Gloss.

The wizards' man had increased his surveillance, told the driver to cooperate if asked, then waited until Cascor was in a lonely place. Cascor blamed himself: he should have noticed the resemblance between the Jihrs, brother and sister, and he ought to have challenged his own complaisant assumption that the man was following him only because of the plausible reason Jihr himself had offered.

I am a noddy, he told himself, *a nibblewit*. Now they would come and interrogate him to learn who else knew of the espionage. If he was lucky, the mind-probing would be by thaumaturgical means, rather than by grievous injury to soft flesh and easily breakable bones. But however it went, the sequel would be a quick wrapping of Cascor's person in chains and the attaching of weighty objects, followed by a permanent immersion in the cold river, to the satisfaction of the beclawed creatures that foraged its muddy bottom.

He tried tensing and relaxing against his restraints, but achieved no easement. If there was light enough, he might spot a sharp edge and contrive to wriggle over and rub his bonds against it. But the hold was stygian in its blackness. He sighed then concentrated. Something in his environment might

offer a chance, could he but identify it. And reach it.

He heard a slight rustle in the darkness and a chill shot through him. Ships' holds were often infested by sharp-toothed vermin of indiscriminate appetite. Cascor's inner screen showed him an image of yellow incisors chewing the flesh from his cheeks, his lips, or—worst of all—his eyeballs. The rustle sounded again and he growled deep in his throat.

"How frightening," came a whisper from the blackness. "Now hush."

Cascor sensed movement nearby, then hands passing over his torso and finding the cords that bound his limbs. A moment later, the pressure around his wrists fell away, then his elbows were freed. He suppressed a groan as blood rushed painfully into his hands and forearms, and flexed and rubbed the numbed flesh. While he did so, the bonds about his ankles and knees were cut free. More pain, more blessed relief.

"How soon can you move?" came the whisper. "At any moment we may have company."

"Give me a second or two." It was hard to recognize a voice that only whispered, but Cascor had a discriminator's ear. "Raffalon?" he breathed.

"The same."

"I am surprised."

"As was I, at least a little," whispered the thief, "when I found myself stealing aboard this boat. But you are a good client, even though you are an ex-provostman. Besides, the situation offers possibilities."

"How did you get in? They must have sealed the hold as soon as they had me incapacitated."

"I was already here when they brought you down," Raffalon said. "What else were they going to do with you?"

"I admire your foresight."

"Baldesant Jih's behavior interested me."

"I wish I'd been as prescient," said the discriminator, rubbing his wrists to ease the final pins and needles. "What next did you have in mind?"

"This," said the other man, producing a thief's light. He sheathed his knife then wove his way through the bundles and barrels filling the hold—Cascor had been lying atop a large bale of raw wool—to a long and narrow wooden crate that stood upright against the gently sloping hull. He pulled a small pry-bar from somewhere on his person and applied it to one side of the crate, leaned his weight and eased the loosened panel away. Inside, secured in upper and lower racks were several ceremonial halberds of the kind carried by the honor guards of Alathe's oligarchs. He pulled two free of their holdings and passed one to Cascor.

"These should do," said the discriminator, cocking his ear against the

continuing sounds of footsteps and pointing the weapon's top spike upwards, "if they're none too many."

"There's the captain and Baldesant Jihir up in the pilothouse," said Raffalon, "then eight bargemen, four to a side. But they're just hired pole-huggers, not paid to fight against desperate and well-armed men. Are you fit for it now?"

"I am. Lead the way."

The hold had two hatches: a wide one for lading and unlading large objects, and a man-sized hole intended for human visits. The latter was at the stern end of the hold with a ladder leading upward and a simple spring latch holding the hinged cover in place. Grasping his halberd, Raffalon climbed until he was just below the trapdoor. Here he paused, his weapon crooked in one arm and his free hand on the release. He listened until the sound of the pole men's footsteps faded bow-wards.

"Now!" he said and threw open the hatch. In two seconds he was on the boat's rear deck; in two more, Cascor was beside him.

"You take that side, I'll take this," said the discriminator, going to starboard as Raffalon went to port. They leveled their halberds and charged the file of four men on each side of the river-craft, who had just reached the limit of their forward motion and were turning to walk back, their poles pushing against the river bed. The pole-wielders on each side were confined to a narrow walkway between the gunwale and a deck piled with cargo. It was no place to make a stand and their superior numbers offered no advantage. Each man in each file did the sensible thing: as a halberd's gleaming point approached his midriff, he stepped off into the turgid, silt-heavy flow, taking his pole with him.

The boat continued downstream, leaving eight heads bobbing in the water. But though no one had uttered more than a disconsolate profanity, the captain had heard the splashes. Cascor could see him up in the open-windowed pilothouse, and now Baldesant Jihir's head and shoulders rose into view from where he must have been taking his ease while his accomplice steered the vessel down-current.

The Wizards Guild's henchman swore a complicated string of unconnected curses and his hands disappeared out of sight as he reached for something below the level of the pilothouse windows. Cascor had a good idea of what the man was about to do and an even better idea of what ought to be done about it. So by the time Jihir raised the dart-thrower, while sliding a missile into place against the cocked spring, the discriminator had rushed up a half-dozen steps, crashed open the pilothouse door, and was holding the halberd's top spike against the man's throat. The captain appeared inclined to interfere until

Raffalon came up the other set of steps from the port side of the deck and offered him his own opportunity for a quick but messy death.

“Whereabouts are we?” Cascor said.

Jihr declined to answer, but the riverboatman said, “Not far above Podroon’s Point.”

“There’s a Caer Lyff customs post there,” said Raffalon.

Jihr gave an audible groan and sank down onto the bench that ran along the pilothouse’s side. Cascor told the captain to remain at the wheel and sent Raffalon to find some cord. Not long after, the wizards’ operative was as securely bound as the discriminator had been and the riverboatman was steering the vessel with the current. Cascor had put away the halberds and borrowed Raffalon’s knife. With its point against the back of the captain’s neck, he said, “It would not be good if we suddenly ran aground.”

“Like many who work on rivers,” said the man at the wheel, “I am of a philosophical bent. Thus I recognize when the current turns against me. Still, in time Caer Lyff will exchange me for one of their own agents caught by the Alathean Legion of Scrutineers.” He glanced down at his trussed accomplice and added, “But Jihr’s fate will not arouse envy.”

The leather tube was on the bench where Jihr had been sitting. “Let’s see what this was all about,” Cascor said. He used the knife to pick open its stitching and shook out a roll of paper several pages thick. They were covered in columns and tables, with here and there a bar graph or other figure. The discriminator noted the names of several commodities whose production and export were crucial to the strength of Caer Lyff’s economy.

He shook his head and said, “On such as this are fortunes made.”

“And on such as these,” Raffalon said, holding up a ring of keys. When Cascor looked a question at him, the thief said, “I found them in Baldesant Jihr’s pocket while I was securing him. I imagine one of them fits a coffer filled with whatever Alathe was paying him to betray his city.”

“Was that also in your mind when you decided to come to my rescue?” the discriminator said.

Raffalon shrugged. “A thief’s philosophy,” he said, “enjoins us to persevere through difficulties and expect a joyful outcome.” He jingled the keys and smiled.

Cascor crossed Effetz Plaza, approaching the fountain from down-sun. The Myrmelon gave no sign of noticing his presence. He laid two plump bar fish next to the creature where it perched on the stone rim. After a moment, a long-fingered hand reached out and drew them closer. The cranial crest rose and

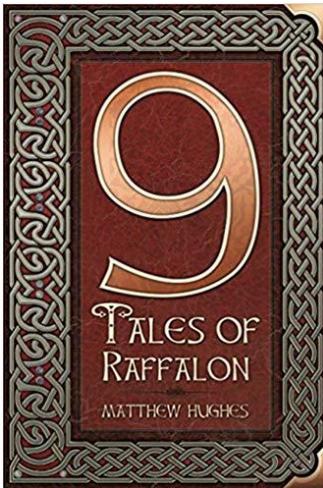
the lambent eyes turned toward him.

“For the prophecy,” the discriminator said.

The yellow discs regarded him inscrutably. After a long wait, the thick voice said, “Not asked.”

“Even so,” said Cascor. He offered a gesture of respect then turned and walked away.

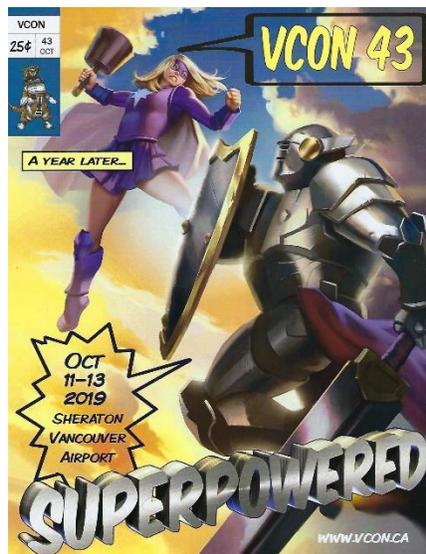
The Myrmelon took up one of the bar fish and bit off its head. It chewed methodically as it watched the discriminator’s form recede. Then it took another bite and went back to whatever inner processes filled its days.



A THIEF IN THE DYING EARTH In an age of wizards and walled cities, Raffalon is a journeyman member of the Ancient and Honorable Guild of Purloiners and Purveyors. In other words, a thief. His skills allow him to scale walls, tickle locks, defeat magical wards. He lifts treasures and trinkets, and spends the proceeds on ale and sausages in taverns where a wise thief sits with his back to the wall. But somehow things often go the way they shouldn’t and then Raffalon has to rely upon his wits and a well calibrated sense of daring. Here are nine tales that take our enterprising thief into the Underworld and Overworld, and pit him against prideful thaumaturges, grasping magnates, crooked guild masters, ghosts, spies, ogres, and a talented amateur assassin. Includes “Inn of the Seven Blessings,” from the bestselling anthology, *ROGUES*, and “Sternutative Sortilege,” which appears only in this volume.

Includes the following tales: Wearaway and Flambeau / Stones and Glass / Avaianca’s Bezel / Prisoner of Pandarius / Curse of the Myrmelon / Telltale / The Vindicator / Sternutative Sortilege / The Inn of the Seven Blessings .

See [9 Tales of Raffalon](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Augustus Clark

Augustus is a Canadian poet. (Editor's note: And, it seems, a minimalist!)

Lily Author

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

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

Website: <https://lilyauthor.com/wheres-lily/>

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 Scifaikuest, Star*Line, and other magazines.

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

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Lynne is a two-time recipient of the prestigious Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement and has shown her work in numerous galleries and at major science fiction convention art shows. She has served as Art Director for various magazines in the U.S. and Canada and was co-owner of Northwest Fine Art Press, a company specializing in printing artwork for artists.

Her current passion is creating one-of-a-kind robot sculptures, “I started making robot sculptures from uncycled metal objects in order to create a science fiction Christmas wreath. The robots were so much fun to make that I never did finish the wreath and my artwork took an entirely new direction. Prior to this I was a professional illustrator and cartoonist. Some have called my Bots 3-D cartoons and I like that comparison.

The question I am asked most often about the Bots is, “Do they move?”

And my answer is, “Not when I’ve been looking.”

Lynne lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, and refers to her work as “Quality Art with a Smile.” She invites you to visit her Facebook page at:

www.facebook.com/rivetofrobots

and her webpage at:

www.smilingdragonflystudio.com

Steve Fahnestalk

Steve is a proud Canadian and expat American. His fiction has been published in two Rat Tales anthologies, *Baconthology* by John Ordovery, *Pulphouse* reports, and he is a columnist for *Amazing Stories* online, a magazine he used to write for about thirty years ago. His two published books from New Venture Publishing are *Tom Swift and his Electric Skyship* and *Mind Out of Time*, a collection of short stories.

Eddie Generous

Eddie is the author of the novel *Radio Run* (Severed Press 2018), the collection *Dead is Dead, but Not Always* (Hellbound Books 2018), and the novel *Camp Summit* (DBP 2019). He is the founder/editor/publisher/artist behind *Unnerving* and *Unnerving Magazine*, and the host of the *Unnerving Podcast*. He lives on the Pacific Coast of Canada with his wife and their cat overlords.

www.jiffypopandhorror.com

Catherine Girczyc

Currently, I'm working as a technical writer and writing prose, poetry & scripts. Two of my stories have won honorable mentions in the Writers of the Future contest in 2015.

Previously, I had some success as a television writer with fifteen produced TV scripts to my credit. I'm a two-time Canadian Aurora Science Fiction and Fantasy national award winner, for fan activities in the 90s: hosting an SF radio show, *The Ether Patrol*, and editing a fanzine called *Neology*.

Stewart Graham

Works full time in a furniture warehouse in Vancouver. Sometimes they let him drive a forklift. Just about the only time he gets to sit down on the job. Whenever he sleeps on the job they yell at him. Keeps him awake, that does. But mostly he fantasizes about being a writer. The fame. The acclaim. The groupies. You know the drill. Figured he'd give it a try.

Matthew Hughes

Matthew writes science-fantasy and space opera, often in a Jack Vance mode. Booklist has called him Vance's "heir apparent."

His latest works are: *A Wizard's Henchman* (novel) and *Epiphanies* (novella), both from PS Publishing.

His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Postscripts*, *Lightspeed*, and *Interzone*, and bespoke anthologies including *Songs of the Dying Earth*, *Rogues*, *Old Mars*, and *Old Venus*, all edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois.

He has won the Canadian equivalent of the Edgar, and been shortlisted for the Aurora, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, Endeavour (twice), A.E. Van Vogt, and Derringer Awards.

He is now self-publishing his backlist as ebooks and POD paperbacks at bookstore:

<http://www.matthewhughes.org/welcome-to-the-archonate-bookstore/>

He spent more than thirty years as one of Canada's leading speechwriters for political leaders and corporate executives. Since 2007, he has been traveling the world as an itinerant housesitter, has lived in twelve countries, and has no fixed address.

Web page: <http://www.matthewhughes.org>

Sheryl Normandeau

Sheryl is a Calgary-based garden writer who doesn't *always* write about gardens. Her short fiction and non-fiction have appeared in several North American markets.

Y.M. Pang

Y.M. Pang spent her childhood pacing around her grandfather's bedroom, telling him stories of magic, swords, and bears. Her fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Strange Horizons*, and her first poem was published in *Polar Borealis* #6. Find her online at www.ympang.com or on Twitter as @YMPangWriter

Rhea Rose

Rhea has published many speculative fiction and poetry pieces: *Evolve*, *Tesseract*, *1,2,6,9,10,17*, *On Spec*, *Talebones*, *Northwest Passges*, *Masked Mosaic*, and *Dead North*. She has received honorable mentions in the *Year's Best Horror* anthologies and was reprinted in *Christmas Forever* (edited by David Hartwell) and twice made the preliminaries for the Nebula Award. She edited a poetry collection for Edge Press and for many years hosted the Vancouver Science Fiction and Fantasy (VCON) writers' workshops. She is a teacher of creative writing. Her new works for 2015/16 include: *Scar Tissue (Second Contact)*, *Bones of Bronze*, *Limbs Like Iron* (Clockwork Canada), *Art Song Lab (Poetry and musical composition)*, and three Indie

novels, *The Final Catch: A Tarot Sorceress series*; twice an Aurora nominee, Rhea has a MFA in creative writing.

David F. Shultz

David writes speculative fiction and poetry from Toronto, ON, where he is lead editor at tdotSpec, and runs the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers meetup. His works have appeared in publications such as *Abyss & Apex* and *Dreams and Nightmares*. Twitter: @davidfshultz Author page: www.davidfshultz.com

Nicholas Stillman

Nicholas (stillmanscifi.com) writes dark science fiction with medical themes, but not the wonderful enhancing kind you see in *Shadowrun*. His work has appeared in *The Colored Lens*, *Helios Quarterly Magazine*, *Liquid Imagination*, *The Centropic Oracle*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, and *Not One of Us*.

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis Trudel has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about ten or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include three novels, four collections, over 20 YA books, and more than a hundred short stories. He's also published occasionally in English. Recent publications in English include the story "The Snows of Yesteryear" (in the Tor anthology *Carbide-Tipped Pens*, reprinted in *Loosed Upon the World* from Saga and *Imaginarium 4*, as well as in Italian translation, earning an Honorable Mention from Gardner Dozois), the story "The Call of Freezing Souls" in *On Spec*, and the poem "The Night Is Not Dark" in the SFPA's *Eye to the Telescope*.

Casey June Wolf

Casey is a poet and author of occasional, mostly speculative, short stories which have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies from *On Spec* to *Room*. Her most recent publications include "[Delta Marsh](#)" in *Reckoning 2*, "Eating Our Young"

and “The One That Gets Away” in *Food Of My People* from Exile Editions, and the poem “All-Giving Sun” in the anthology *Harp, Club, and Cauldron: A Harvest of Knowledge*. Her collection *Finding Creatures & Other Stories* was published in 2008. She is currently working on a book, *Sun Among Stars: Poems & Prayers to Brigit of Ireland*.

Casey is from Vancouver, Canada. Find short essays and links to more of her writing at her blog ["Another Fine Day in the Scriptorium."](#)

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Melissa has sold her award-winning stories to *Nature*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Writers of the Future*, *Weird Tales*, the Aurora-winning anthology called *The Dragon and the Stars*, and *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror 2017 Edition*. As a mystery writer, she was shortlisted for the Derringer Award.

She's on Facebook as Melissa Yi Yuan-Innes, on Twitter @dr_sassy, and on her own website, www.myi.ninja

AFTERWORDS

Open for submissions April, 2019. Canadian authors or writers resident in Canada only. I pay \$10 per poem and 1 cent a word for stories 3,000 words or less. For budget reasons I'm mostly looking for stories 1,000 words or less for which I pay a flat rate of \$10. Will look at a couple 2,000 words or less stories and maybe one 3,000 words or less story per issue. Hoping to get enough material for two issues.

I am open to anything genre-related, be it SF, Fantasy, or Horror, or any sub-theme thereof. For example, SF could be hard science, dystopian, social satire, steampunk, space opera, impressionistic, military futurism, or even SF combined with mystery, western or other genres. In horror I personally prefer Lovecraftian, but will look at anything, provided it is not pornographic or excessively violent. In fantasy your imagination is the only limit which means I am not looking for accounts of D&D games or common clichés. Above all, I want original fiction and not fan-fic based on other writers' creations. To get a better idea of what I am looking for, go to < www.polarborealis.ca >