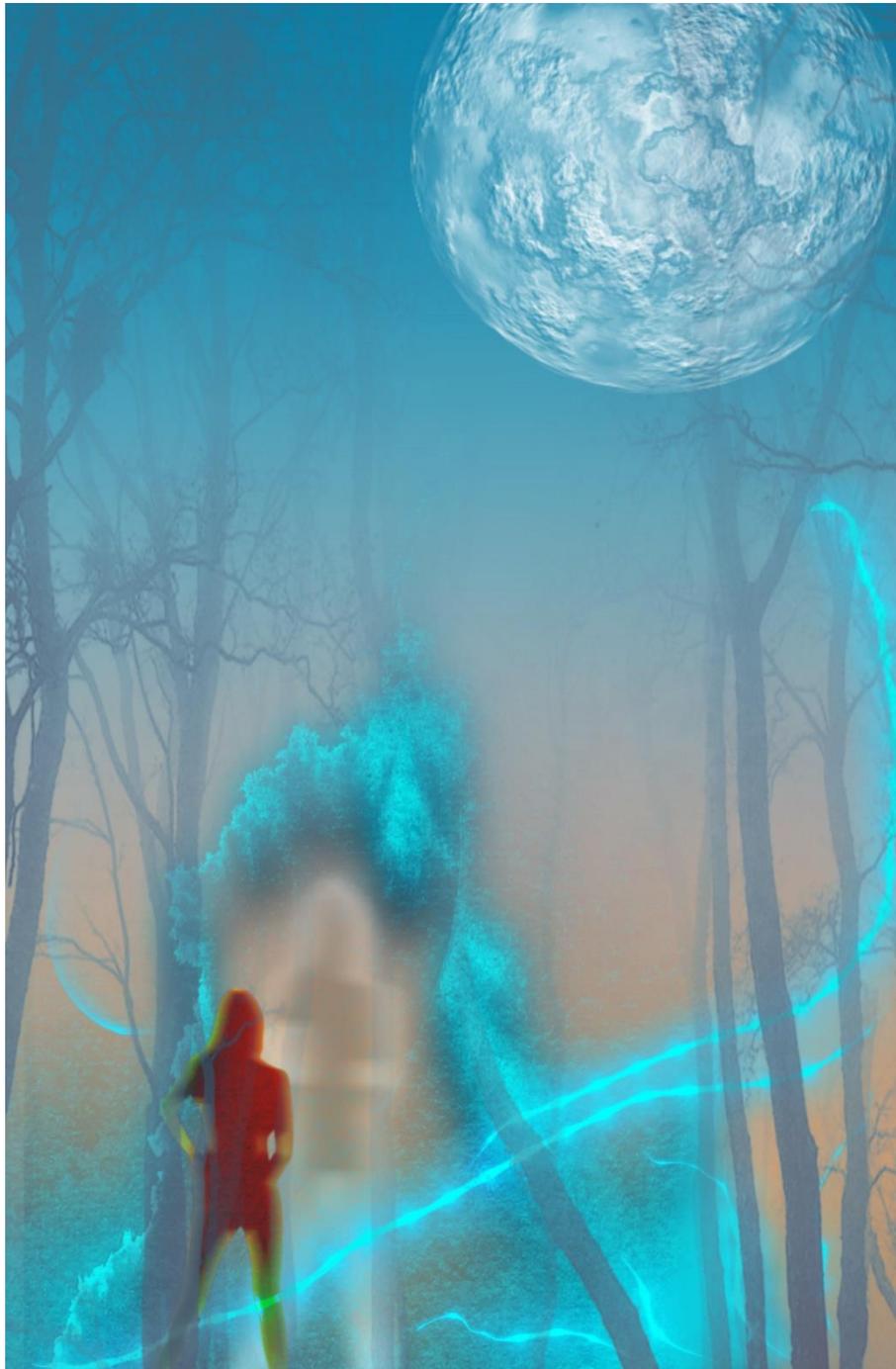


POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #20 – December 2021)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021)

Issue #20 – December, 2021 (Vol.6#4.WN#20)

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

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

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

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ART CREDITS

COVER: Gateway – by Swati Chavda

EDITORIAL

Twenty issues. Something of a milestone. Someday I hope to publish issue fifty. But, for now, publishing 179 poems and 196 short stories over six years gives me a feeling of quiet accomplishment.

Looking back, when I first proposed doing the magazine, some people thought I was crazy, including myself. Who would want to read such a thing? Readers in 104 countries, that's who. *Polar Borealis* #1, which has been available online from the very beginning, has reached 2,225 downloads. Oddly enough, it's not the leader. Issue #6 at 2,530 downloads holds that spot.

These figures may strike some as paltry, but I figure they're pretty good for an obscure semi-pro magazine. Certainly better results than any of the fanzines I used to churn out for a couple of decades long ago.

That *Polar Borealis* garnered me another Aurora Award for a second year in a row is a strong indication some fans appreciate the zine. As I made clear in my mercifully brief acceptance speech during the online award ceremony, the Aurora is really being awarded to the contributors to the magazine, the authors and poets whose creative talent make the magazine worth reading. The award is for them. But, since I am reluctant to cut it up into myriad tiny pieces to distribute among them, I am happy and content to accept the award on their behalf. They are the strength of the zine. I'm just the guy who puts it together.

I'm also happy to say that the sister magazine, *Polar Starlight*, devoted to speculative poetry, is off to a great start. So far four issues have come out, with a total 64 poems being published. Last time I checked, readers were to be found in 36 countries, and the first issue, published in March, has been downloaded 425 times. This is actually quite good for a poetry magazine.

The quality of *Polar Starlight* is due to its contributors, of course, but also to the guiding hand of editor Rhea E. Rose, a well-respected poet and author, who chooses the poems and arranges them according to a theme. As a result every issue is different and something of an adventure to read, given that Rhea's arrangement orchestrates your mood as you peruse the poems.

Both magazines have benefited from splendid cover illustrations contributed by numerous professional artists. Can't believe my good luck in that regard. Makes me very happy.

And, I have to admit, I am equally happy I finished the first draft of my science fiction novel. It came in at 72,401 words. I'm letting it lie fallow till January when I will begin work on the second draft. Hope to publish in 2023.

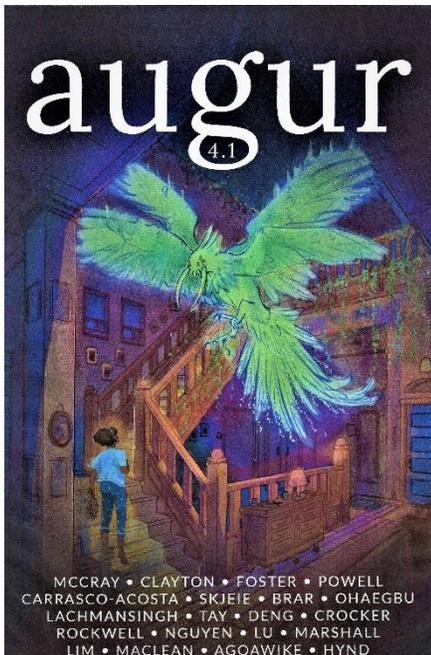
Cheers! *The Graeme*

THE CONFESSIONS OF HIGGS BOSON

by Sean Dowd

(Previously unpublished)

Forgive me Father for I have sinned
it has been... well that doesn't really matter anymore
I've opened the door
let in the hordes
of time travelling malcontents
the wormhole would have shut them out but jammed in place
I've left a trace of time travel open
Yes the genie is out of the bottle
cloaking devices and eddies in the space time continuum allow Pandora's box
so tricksters bend all futures past and place
eleven dimensions see the carp escape the pond
the Rubicon
cannot be uncrossed
Hitler happened
Genghis Khan has spawned
more life than all but Adam



Augur Magazine 4.1

Contents:

In the Shadow of the Field – by Anatasia McCray
Exposure – by Conyer Clayton
African Meetinghouse – by Kate Foster
In Slipstream – by Shantell Powell
Purgatory is High, Low, and Inside Me – by Emily Carrasco-Acosta
Barrels Full of Boiling Medicine – by Cooper Skjeie
Goodbye to Father and Forest – by Moni Brar
Moonshaped Midas – by Chimedum Ohaegbu
Scalp Detox on Sunday Morning – by Sarah Lachmansingh
Chrita Penanggalan – by Lisabelle Tay
The House at the End of the World – by Ashley Deng
The Oil Baron's Wife – by Sophie Crocker
Luna + Moth – by Vina Nguyen
And other stories and poems.

Find it here: [Augur 4.1](#)

THE ATTIC

by Greg Fewer

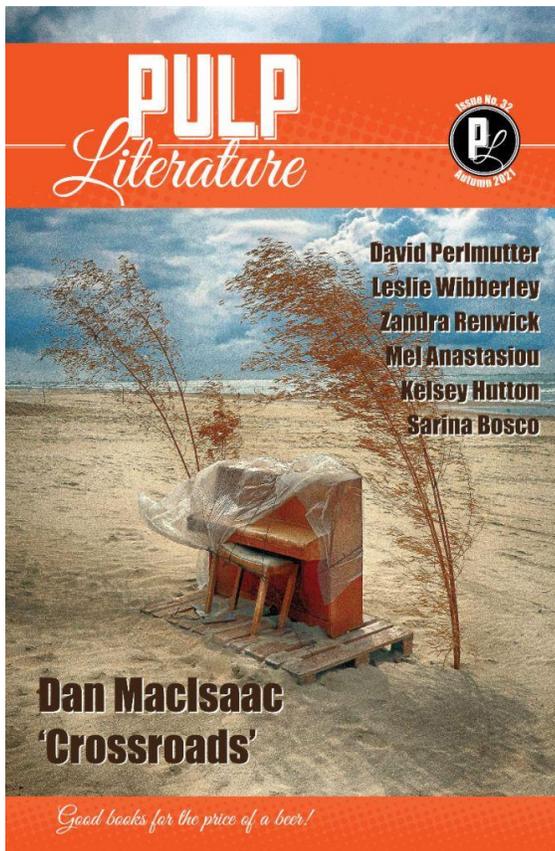
(Previously published in *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, 2019, Ed. D. Kershaw)

There it was again: a strange scrabbling above the ceiling! Rats? On my first night in the family mansion, which my uncle left me, I was trying to sleep in the guest room.

Leaving my bed, flashlight in hand, I went out onto the poorly lit landing and climbed up the ladder propped against the wall beneath the attic trapdoor. Reaching it, I pushed the trapdoor upwards and broke through a mass of cobwebs.

Something big and hard dropped onto me, stabbing my shoulder. Stiffening as I fell, I saw its eight red eyes follow me downwards. Not rats, then....

PULP LITERATURE #32 Autumn 2021



Cover: *The Pianist Who Serenaded the Mermaids with Chopin's Nocturne in E Minor* – by Tais Teng

Contents:

Crossroads – by Dan Maclsaac

Ghost Walking – by Mel Anastasiou

Just Another Date on the Highway Out of Town
– by Zandra Renwick

Come Back Around – by Sarina Bosco

Solstice – by Melissa Nelson

The Canadian Invasion – by David Perlmutter

Cold Blessing – by Kelsey Hutton

Attempted Murder – by Leslie Wibberley

My Name is Philomena – Robin Malcolm

*Another True Account of the Nature of Grit and How It
May be Ascertained* – by Frances Boyle

Recurrent Dream #79 – by David Barrick

Mammal Mouth (Linaria Vulgaris) – by Aldona Dziedziejko

Houses, Part II – by Matthew Nielsen

The Shepherdess: Intrigue – by JM Landels

The Pianist Who Serenaded the Mermaids... -- by Tais Teng

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #32](#)

NUIT D'AMOUR

by Heddy Johannesen

(Previously unpublished)

A moon,
alone,
fringed by lacy clouds
in the velvet sky.

Behind me
lies my shadow,
alongside me
stride my fears.

The raw truth
bites, I feel lonely
owning no fears.

Prey to the glaring sun
streaming into the room
as I recoil, blinded,
I leave your body, your even breathing.

My sins are burned to
smoke, ashes,
I am torn from their grip
I die, I own no fears, no sins,

I am a moon,
alone,
fringed by lacy clouds
in the velvet sky.

PONCE DE LEON WAS SUCH A BLOODY IDIOT

by Frank Talaber

(Previously unpublished)

I screamed in agony for a week; burning, every cell in my body on fire. The injections were easy enough, once a day for seven days. Being strapped up in bed beside several others screaming in a symphony of holy torture wasn't.

"How are you doing, Mr. James?" The nurse asked. "What a cute boy you are." And like the day before, incoherent drivel came out of my mouth. "Oh, good. I see the treatment is coming along well." She smiled, gave me the needle and quickly left the room before the screaming started.

Last month I attended the opening of the Washington Time Capsule. Buried for a nearly a hundred years. That was the cool thing to do back in the 1950s. We thought we were so advanced back then. Hell, we think we're advanced now. Fools.

They opened the capsule a year early due to construction of the world's first matter transporter, the Zip Matter Rail. At the flick of a switch you could be deconstructed and whisked atom by atom across the world. Already airlines were declaring bankruptcy. I smiled to myself; something would go wrong.

I stood in the same spot as I did that last day in high school. I couldn't remember anyone's name, except Tanis, the brunette I had the hots for back then. My first love. But I was too shy, never even kissed her. If I lived my life over again. I laughed. IF. That would be the only thing I'd have done differently. I'd have kissed her and whisked her off to the nearest hotel. I mean, who'd have thought I'd be here, nearly a hundred years later, about the same physical age as I was then, only with a lifetime of memories. I was one of the last to take the injections, one of the last Young'ns still alive.

If I ever could imagine what it was like to be accused of being a witch in the 1500s and being burned alive at the stake, this was it. I screamed until I lost my voice and then howled some more. But the injections worked and my body began to slowly reverse the aging process. The Ponce de Leon Corporation had found a way to simply flip the age gene and make it go backwards. We became the "Young'ns" as the news media called us. Slowly growing younger every day.

Only they downplayed the pain involved. Said it was worth it if you want to live a second lifetime. They weren't lying. You did live longer, but after a while the pain was unbelievable. Some died. But before the pain arrived to live the

dream of starting over again was worth it. Doing all those crazy things most of us too old, but rich, could ever enjoy.

There were a couple of decades where life just didn't get any better. I was 105, backpacked the Himalayas before the devastating 2020 earthquake crumbled many of them. At 110 trekked Brazil's rainforests and watched the last Manatee breathe its last breath. At 115 walked the last polar ice cap over the South Pole, and laughably married at 128, for the twenty-eighth time. Cindy was only twenty-eight and I think just wanted me for my money. Didn't care. Yeah, those moments were worth it.

Until the Young'n process gradually began to accelerate. Bones shifted, shrank, rebuilding themselves, taking age away. Pain. I seemed to be in a constant state of agony and it was worse for those who had plastic surgery and implants.

The Corporation's guarantee. To make you younger and live a much longer life. Well, couldn't fault them on that promise. But as the old expression goes "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature." Fuck with her and suffer the repercussions. No problem, they said. We'll find the technology to flip the gene back. Only it didn't flip.

Apparently couldn't, once the cells were switched into growing younger they began to quicken the process, breaking themselves down into more natural states. After a while I began to lose days then weeks at a time. Idiots, we were all bloody idiots.

Sure the company got sued, went virtually bankrupt. Then everyone suing became technically minors. The lawyers fought over all of those points in court. I think they were the ones to really get rich out of all of this.

Some governments declared it unlawful for Young'ns to collect a pension; they were still young enough to work and earn their own living. We found out later that we couldn't have kids. One woman was pregnant for nine years as the body fought to evolve and de-evolve. She died and the child was stillborn. Others imploded in screaming convulsions. Most of us chose abstinence or sterilization.

Seared concrete stank the air as lasers eradicated the seal over the Time Capsule. Three-D Vid reporters were in attendance filming as they opened the Capsule to reveal souvenirs and achievements of the fifties; vinyl records of Elvis, Chuck Berry, the song Tequila echoed in the background, a Sputnik replica, a NASA emblem, and an Edsel hood ornament.

Our class put in their own letters written on a typewriter. God I'd seen so much evolution. On the back of mine was a last second hand-scribbled note I wrote before anyone saw me sealing it. "Wished I'd screwed Tanis Johnson."

They read it out loud and everyone laughed. I was embarrassed. Not ever in a million years thinking I'd be here to live this moment, or how I could forget her last name.

The crowd parted, a familiar figure walked towards me. Tanis smiled, a Young'n like me, she didn't look a day over 140.

We kissed. The crowd cheered and she said, "let's make this a memory worth remembering, while we have the chance." It was the last thing on my bucket list. We were literally, well at least physically, teens in love all over again. I got divorced and remarried in a day. She became my twenty-ninth wife. Aren't lawyers great?

I lost my halo-car's driver's license last week, got acne and pimples all over again and as of yesterday can't walk anymore. On Monday Tanis died and I'd begun puberty. It's Friday now and I'm in diapers suckling from breasts I used to lust over.

Mother Nature still won. Oh well, I gained a few good years. If only Ponce de Leon himself knew what the human race was getting into searching for the fountain of youth.

Some of the Young'ns had died or committed suicide early in the acceleration process, unable or unwilling to live through the excruciating pain. Of course, waivers and flanks of lawyers made sure the company wasn't liable. Technically they owned us and we were legally bound to the Corporation if a "cure" was ever found.

There is one thing they discovered doesn't age; the brain. As our bodies shrank back to the womb states they came from, the memories of two lifetimes remained intact. "What could be better?" some cursed.

Yesterday's headlines read "Man materialized out of The Zip with one of his wife's breasts. Still searching who has the other." Both are suing. The Zip company statement admitting to a slight power fluctuation and that Zip travel is still safer than airline travel. I laughed; little did they know.

By tomorrow morning all they'll find of me is a puddle of protoplasm, a sodden pillow full of tears and echoes of screaming, like all of the others before me.

The nurse strides into my room, armed this time with doctors and reporters. A needle gleams evilly in her hand. God, I hate her smiling, condescending face.

I gurgle incoherently, trying to say "No, don't, go away." I try to fend them off with feeble arms, I've only newborn peach fuzz of hair left, the rest a pool beside my pillow. Another day would end all of this. I am at the legal mercy of the New Ponce de Leon Corporation.

“He’s one of the last left alive. Give it to him now.” A doctor yammers to the assembled journalists. He spouts about a last minute cure found by some scientist in Borneo, based on primate and iguana DNA.

Ponce de Leon was back in business, now able to flip the Young'n's back to aging. Their scientists claimed to be able to do it on a continual basis. Back and forth, to live forever, they’d be rich again.

The only true truth I’ve ever come to know is that your body never forgets pain. Coldness washed over me as the chemicals flooded in, every cell turned again to fire. I gurgled as the unbelievable agony I never wanted to go through returned, screaming at me from another lifetime.

“Oh God! Make this stop. Let me die and not live again,” I tried to yell. Only the cries of a newborn escaped my lips.

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



Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband-and-wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson.

The first issue of Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine was printed October 10, 2003.

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine won the Aurora Award in the category of Best Work in English (Other) in 2007 and in 2009.

Contents of issue 32:

Tie Die Nebula – by Karl and Stephanie Johanson

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

The Forgotten City – by Kate Kelly

Weaponized Boredom – by Karl Johanson

Other When – by Zandra Renwick

Sometimes I Miss Manhattan – by Gary K. Shepherd

The Secrets Behind the Canvas – by Jeffery Scott Sims

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

RUMINATIONS ON AUTONOMY

by Lynne Sargent

(Previously unpublished)

I am autonomous,
controlled only by programming
set down in an asynchronous long ago

I am free
to make judgment
on life, according to parameters
taking bites of the world
in alignment with my bytes

I am free
to take all those other
choices from the world, the ones
my targets (the ones I designate)
might have made
both violent and virtuous.

I put my body in the line of fire
though it has already been invaded
by instructions, by screens
and sensors.

Is it better
if I make a choice
if I direct my life towards this

or if I don't
make any choices at all

and this name is just another euphemism of war?

FAMI'S WATCH

by Robert Runté

(Previously unpublished)

"You have a meeting with the venture capitalists in three hours," Fami's watch announced. "Shouldn't you start getting ready?"

"What?" Fami asked absently, not looking up from his laptop.

"You have a meeting—" the watch said, breaking it down for him, "in three hours. With venture capitalists, right? And I was proposing that—given that you haven't showered since Saturday—you might consider getting ready for it... about now."

"What are you talking about?" Fami asked, still not paying attention. "I don't have any meetings scheduled; I have nothing to talk to venture capitalists about; and I probably wouldn't deal with venture capitalists even if I did. At least not until I got a patent for whatever it was. Otherwise, what would keep them from stealing my idea?"

The watch sighed.

"First, check your calendar: you do have a meeting. Second, you do have something to talk to them about: namely your dissertation."

"You're my dissertation," Fami said, interrupting his work long enough to pull up his calendar screen.

"Exactly! A fully self-aware AI crammed into memory small enough to fit into a watch. That's got commercial potential, that does."

"It says here," Fami said, "that I have a meeting in three hours with YourIdeas/OurMoney.com."

"Venture capitalists," the watch said. "Third, have you any idea how long, complicated, and *expensive* it is to get a patent these days? That's *why* you need these people."

"I don't remember scheduling this," Fami complained. "When did I schedule this?" Had he met someone at that meet-and-greet thing his dissertation supervisor, Dr. Hartwell, had dragged him to? He certainly hadn't been interested in meeting any up-and-coming business leaders, but Hartwell had insisted the Department needed to show off their top students to keep the funding coming... and there had been an open bar. It was remotely possible he'd signed up for something he didn't remember.

"This has been scheduled for three months!" the watch exclaimed. "Honestly, I don't know what you'd do without me."

“Three months?” Fami squinted at the screen as if that would help jog his memory. Three months ago he hadn’t been thinking about patents.

“Three months ago... I’d just turned you on,” Fami said, working it through. “Hartwell called you ‘promising.’” *In contrast to the previous twenty-three prototypes Hartwell had ordered terminated because they’d gone a bit rogue*—but Fami didn’t say that part out loud. He wanted to wait before introducing the concept of mortality to the watch. “I wouldn’t have had enough data to be making plans back then.”

“Sure you would,” the watch argued. “My promise was obvious, even to a mouth-breather like Hartwell. I’m a game-changer.”

“Glad *you* think so,” Fami said. “Now I just need to convince Hartwell and the committee.”

“Fourth,” the watch carried on, ignoring him, “Venture capitalists are not out to rip you off. Certainly, they need a return on investment—that’s kind of how the whole thing works—but they’re not going to *steal* your idea. No inventor or start-up would ever trust them again, and they live and die by their reputation.”

“They could suppress the story,” Fami said. “Like happened to that guy who invented the home dry cleaning unit, or the early days of fluorescent lighting.”

“Those cases were before there was social media,” the watch said dismissively. “I’m telling you, I’ve researched these folks thoroughly, and there isn’t a single negative comment about them anywhere.”

“You researched them?”

“Well, yeah. Googling stuff is what I do. All part of the service.”

“Wait,” Fami said, finally cluing in. “This is from when I first put you in charge of scheduling.”

“An appropriate function of any watch.”

“*I* didn’t schedule this meeting—*you* did.”

“Well, if I left it to you, it would never get done. And these folks are usually booked eight months in advance. I was lucky I found a cancellation.”

Fami took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Where was the line between taking initiative, and going rogue? The last thing he wanted was Hartwell ordering this one terminated and starting over with yet another iteration. Fami's grant was running out, and he really did need to graduate one of these days.

“You don’t think you should maybe have consulted me before committing me to meetings? Especially meetings with business guys?”

“Business women, actually. They seemed socially responsible. Being green and ethical is important to me.”

“Important to *you*?” Fami asked. “You’re *my* watch. You’re supposed to be anticipating *my* needs, my beliefs.”

“It can’t always be about you,” the watch complained. “God, you’re such a narcissist. Now, will you *please* start getting ready. I need you to get me there on time.”

“Get *you* there?”

The watch sighed dramatically. “Yes, all right. I have a few ideas I think may interest them.”

Rogue, Fami thought. *Crap! There’s no way I’m getting a third scholarship. I’ll have to get a job. Teaching undergrads. Ugh!* He called up the screen that would allow him to Force Quit the Watch program.

“I’ve run the numbers and the first one is worth about fifteen-million, so our cut would be about three-and-a-half million. Then we use *our* money to develop my other idea, which preliminary analysis suggests should yield about thirty-million annually, once we’re in the manufacturing stage.”

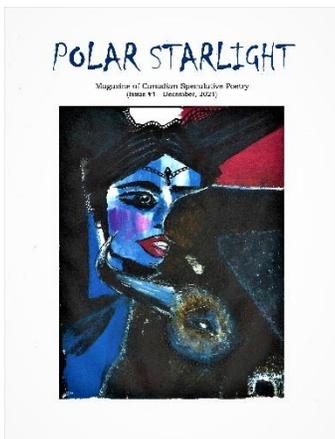
Fami blinked. “Um, how important is it to you that you get credit for these ideas?”

“I’m your watch, your program. Obviously, you get any money and all the credit for anything I come up with.”

“I see,” Fami said. Essentially unlimited funds. And this one wasn’t even hacking into banks, like numbers three and sixteen. Nothing illegal. Fami closed the force-quit screen. “That makes sense.”

“Logical *and* I’m magnanimous by nature. Also, you *do* realize your watch arm faces the screen as you type?”

“Ah,” said Fami, recognizing the source of the watch’s sudden generosity. Fami foresaw long-sleeve shirts in his future.



POLAR STARLIGHT #4

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, it is edited by Rhea E. Rose, a well-known and highly respected British Columbia poet. It comes out four times a year in-between issues of *Polar Borealis Magazine* and is free to download. Each issue features cover art and 16 poems.

Cover of the 4th issue, *Buffalo Witch*, is by Tracy Shepherd.

The 4th issue contains poetry by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, KB Nelson, James Grotkowski, LeRoy Gorman, Greg Fewer, Josh Connors, Matt Moore, Colleen Anderson, Sean Dowd, Virginia Carraway Stark, Melanie Marttila, Lynne Sargent, and Neile Graham.

Find it at: [Polar Starlight #4](#)

CONUNDRUM

by Greg Fewer

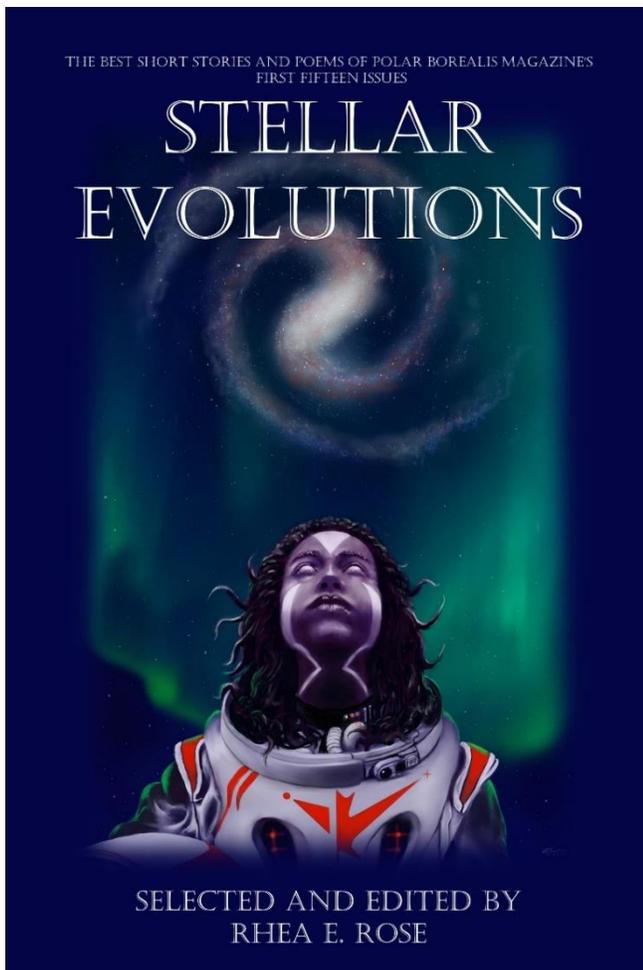
(Previously unpublished)

nearly bedtime
body parts all around him
his room still not clean

STELLAR EVOLUTIONS:

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

Cover: *Space Force* – by Michael Dean Jackson



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

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

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

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

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

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

FRANKENSTEIN WAS THE SCIENTIST

by Margaret A. Hanson

(Previously unpublished)

Vincent didn't have a lot of friends. He'd tried to make them over the years, but it never worked out. Wizardry tended to be lonely work. It wasn't unusual for him to spend his birthday shopping for components for his next project. When someone paged him over the loudspeaker, he didn't think it was anything significant. It was more likely that he'd lost his wallet without noticing than that anyone cared that it was his birthday.

A back room seemed like a strange place to keep it, but he still had no suspicions as he stepped in. "Hello?"

The door closed behind him before the lights came on, and a half dozen figures jumped out yelling, "Surprise!"

A cake sat on the table, topped with candles. Not enough to be his age, but that was normal for an adult. Who had decided to throw him a party, though? He looked over the guests, trying to find the mastermind. Most of them didn't look quite human, but they did look *familiar*.

"It's good to see you again," the voice on the loudspeaker announced. Perhaps his host wished to draw out the surprise.

"It's been a long time." The nearest guest smiled, revealing rows of teeth. Something seemed slightly off in the placement. Any orthodontist who saw that mouth would start picking out a new car.

"It has..." It was always so awkward when you couldn't quite remember where you knew someone from. He didn't even get out that much; he should be able to manage this.

"Tell me," another guest asked as his eyes flashed red, "have you gotten better at summoning circles?"

"I..." He wished he could say yes. But he'd abandoned demon work so quickly. He knew that banishing the demon afterwards was the hard part, so he'd made sure to select one he could handle when he started to experiment. He *had* banished it, right? He was sure he'd banished it.

"It was so sloppy. More of a summoning oval." The creature laughed like machinery grinding to a halt. "I'm amazed I even showed up."

"I studied it all," Vincent insisted. He never did anything without making proper preparations. That was just sloppy.

"Oh, the materials were all correct. I'm sure you spent plenty of time finding just the right salt." He had. Some of the details were fuzzy, but he did

remember searching for all the right suppliers. He hadn't realized how many different places salt could be gathered until he'd gotten into the world of demons. "Next time? Art lessons."

"I'm not really planning on a next time." Sometimes a wizard had to experiment with different disciplines before finding the one that was right for him. He knew what he wanted to do; he'd always known that. But there were so many ways to be in charge of life.

"That might be the smartest thing I've heard from you." The creature sounded bored rather than pleased at that development. "You seem to have forgotten a lot of key parts of demonology."

Like banishing, it would seem. Or how to control... oh, there was a cheat to that, wasn't there? His pounding heart eased back into a normal rhythm. The name, he had to use the creature's name. "Balsan."

"Oh, he *does* remember." The first... man clapped his hands. The wider he grinned, the more flaws were revealed in tooth placement. "Do me next!"

"That's not a suggestion," the loudspeaker intoned. *"You need to remember all our names to leave."*

The door was gone. But he could do this. If everyone here had a connection like Balsan, he must remember them. And that one wanted to be next. Which project was he? Too bad he didn't have his notes. Proper notes were the most important part of experimentation. The reanimation... he'd been so sure that one was going to work out. That he could make people better. But he couldn't.

"Come on now, you spent so much time with me." The creature pouted, and Vincent couldn't help admiring the range of motion on those lips. He'd spent a lot of time working on him, anyway. Making sure every part moved perfectly together. "All those long nights in the lab. Listening to you sing."

It seemed all his creations were critics when it came to his more artistic endeavors. "The ears worked first, then."

"They did. I was waiting so long to talk to you. When the eyes finally worked, you knew. That's when you finally thought I was alive and stopped calling me the specimen."

It had only made sense to wait. But then he'd been so pleased that he'd pulled it off. "Adam. I called you Adam."

Balsan snorted, but the for lack of better word man nodded. "I'm still waiting for my Eve."

They wouldn't have been able to breed anyway; what was the point? Reanimating a collection of parts was one thing, but actually being able to generate fresh seed? That was simply daunting. This approach to life was never going to be everything he wanted. So he'd moved on. Moved on to...

The hybrids. He scanned the room. Yes, there was another one he could name. "Remus, I made Remus next."

"Not my name." The wolfman pinched one of the birthday candles between his fingers. Half the light in the room vanished. The candle couldn't have been providing so much on its own.

"Come on, you're not that creative," Adam said. "Couldn't even figure out the female form."

That wasn't what it was. He didn't have to justify himself to Adam. He'd remembered the name, passed that test. He needed to focus on this one before any more strange things happened to the light. There'd been two of them. Only one here, the other hadn't survived. No one was perfect. It was hard merging two unrelated species together and keeping all the pieces working. He'd just misremembered which was which. "Romulus, then."

He took the huff as a yes. The knot below his shoulder blade loosened. He could probably get through all of this on pure logic. He named all of his creations things that made sense, he was sure of it.

Despite Adam's accusation, his next project was a woman. The problem with reanimation was that the body had already returned to the earth, it was going the wrong way. So he'd sculpted her from clay. He'd even considered looking for Adam and introducing them. He had so many other things to do, but he'd at least thought about seeking him out.

She tried to say something, but the words were distorted. It was really hard to sculpt a mouth. There were so many little structures that a person needed to pronounce language clearly. A lot of her features didn't function properly.

"What *were* you thinking?" Balsan asked. "With *your* artistic talents?"

He had the magic for it. It had seemed the most important thing at the time. He was good enough to bring her to life. It was after that the problems started to arise. "Mistakes were made."

"Living creatures were made," Romulus growled. "Living, if they're lucky."

Vincent squared his shoulders. He didn't have to defend himself. None of them said he had to defend himself. He just had to remember their names. He had to focus, stay on the task. Look at the clay woman, not the rest of the peanut gallery. "Terra. You're Terra."

"Almost all you ever said." Or at least, Vincent thought that's what the words were. There was no shame in reassessing and realizing a project was a dead end. So, he'd moved on.

Moved on to... skeletons. Where was the skeleton? There was a figure in a robe, and the candlelight didn't seem to reach a face. "Oso? Is that you?"

The hood bobbed down. He hadn't considered at the time that a skeleton lacked vocal cords entirely, and he couldn't add them without building up a whole man. Then he was back to the Adam problem. That's when he'd switched from trying to create life to trying to control life that was already there. Much tidier. He looked over at the semi-translucent woman who dripped water onto the table.

Balsan was as far as he'd dared go with demons. All he had managed was to summon and banish. And it seemed he hadn't even managed that last part. Good thing he was smart enough to stick to one that would only become an art critic if left to his own devices. He knew the value of starting small in all things. So he'd chosen a creature who wouldn't cause too much trouble if he erred again. But what *was* that stream the naiad was from?

He studied her party hat as if that would give him insight. But there was no sign of a location. Where had he been living at the time? There had been so many workshops. "Blue Creek."

She snuffed the candle without a word. Vincent's left hand went numb. His stomach dove for the ground. He wouldn't get much work done if this effect was permanent.

"Rock Creek."

Another candle. He lost his balance as the right foot went numb. He did most of his work sitting down. He needed to sit down now, even if the only empty chair was next to Balsan. That would be fine, right? Until the next hand. "Stony Creek, it was Stony Creek!"

"And you made a mess of it. Dumping everything in the water when you were done with it. Like Oso." She wrapped an arm around the skeleton's narrow shoulders. As soon as she touched him, it became clear how little matter was actually under the cloak.

"I..." Should he apologize? It seemed a bit late for that. The sort of magic he practiced meant never having to say you're sorry. "But I named you all."

Walking out of here was going to be challenging, with a foot that wasn't responding at all. But he could limp home. Study what happened to him. Find a way around it. This was nothing he couldn't find a way to fix. He just needed to get back to the workshop. He pushed up to his feet using the hand that still had feeling, trying to find his balance. The walk home would be a challenge, but he'd passed the test.

"*Not quite.*" The person at the loudspeaker hadn't left after all. A much smaller door opened, admitting a doll. Vincent thought he remembered it from the corner of one workshop or another, leftover from a previous occupant. "You brought me to life too."

“I did?” He’d never been interested in enchanting toys. His vision was grander than that. This one must be an early test for one of the other projects. Perhaps Terra. He was properly methodical. But nothing from a proof of concept should have persisted.

“You did. And left me to name myself.” He would have expected a doll’s voice to be musical and high pitched. But it was flat, inflectionless. Just alive enough. “So, tell me. To leave this place. *What is my name?*”

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #117 V.31 #3



FICTION:

The Next Waltz – by Mike Rimar

Grandpa’s Eye on the Afterlife

– by Chris Kuriata

Capricorn Games – by Robert Silverberg

Sugar Moths – by Danielle Burnette

Flies in the Fibres – by Roxanne Klimek

Rec and Dec – by Andy W. Taylor

Elisa’s Eyes – by Elizabeth Whitton

Little Wild Girls – by Halle Gulbrandsen

Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited – Rhea Rose

COVER: *Red Planet, Blue Star*

– by Dan O’Driscoll

NON-FICTION:

Editorial: Stories Are Like Wine

– by Barb Galler-Smith

“Red World, Blue Star” Artist Interview with Dan O’Driscoll

Author Interview with Halle Gulbrandsen

– by Cat McDonald

Bots: “Steampunk Whizbot”

– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

“Ancestors” cartoon

– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

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

PIPES

by Fran Skene

(Previously unpublished)

In my dreams pipes are everywhere,
at the bottom of big trenches or
above the ground, carrying fluids, gas,
fiber optic cables, or sewage.

In the future they'll connect us more
and more to the melting poles with their
still-drinkable water.

It's not we but they which own the pipes,
the big companies with their algorithms
which tell them what to charge. They see
the locals as critters they can ignore
while shareholders live inside walls

that give some protection from weather
events, as though their predecessors
hadn't already ruined the planet,
as though other species were still
living their lives out of sight,

as though the air didn't have
that metallic smell, downwind from
deregulated factories.

SF CANADA

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PAYING THE BILLS

by Virginia Carraway Stark

(Previously unpublished)

The sound of the mail slot opening and closing woke Herb from a deep sleep to wide-eyed terror. *The bills!* That was the way of it, there was never any mail, only bills.

With patience, he could hear the postal woman pushing thick stacks of envelopes through the slot in the door, interspersed by the clink of the metal closing, the sound of a tired but resolute woman adjusting her sack of mail on her hip, and then the sound of the narrow metal door being shoved at again by yet more envelopes.

“Herb! The mail’s here!”

Doris called to him from the bedroom of their small townhouse. She had been delighted to get a place with a bedroom, they both had. At the time, they had thought it would mean they would have room for children. Herb’s job had been going well, there had been nowhere to go but up for both of their aspirations in the world.

Herb rubbed his head and tried to get up, his back refused to agree with his brain’s idea. He had to roll off the grubby green couch onto the floor and onto his knees. Scar tissue pulled at his back and he moaned.

“Herb, what are you doing on the floor? It’s not good for your back.”

Herb thought briefly of telling the truth and then changed his mind; to his experience both at work and in his personal life, the truth was not a liberating factor.

“Stretches, Doris. I’m doing stretches. Doctor’s orders, don’t you pay any attention?” Herb slowly extended a leg, he was trembling from the effort. *Damn that doctor, I hate doing those stretches. These really hurt!*

Herb watched Doris walk away; her ankles had once been lovely, they had thickened over the years and overflowed her slippers in a way that saddened him. It wasn’t the loss of her beauty that made him saddest. When he let himself feel maudlin he would take out old photos of the two of them together. They had been happy then. That was what made his heart break, happy and healthy.

Looking at Doris’s smiling, unlined face, singular of chin, what struck him the most was that they clutched at each other, two people madly in love, unaware of how cruel the world could be and fearless of the pain it could

bring. He could never look at the pictures of the two of them in their youth, in their love, for long. It hurt more than his back, those pictures.

Doris trudged around the kitchen, getting the hot drink together that he was supposed to believe was coffee and he would thank her for it and drink it. It tasted worse than anything he could have imagined drinking voluntarily as a young man, but now this was what was done. For the sake of what they had had together and for the sake of keeping their home, what small joys they could still share, like her making a pot of something that looked like coffee for her husband, something so normal, he would drink it and smile every morning.

It was the same reason that he scrambled to the door to gather up the bills. There were too many of the things.

There were always new ones coming out, that was the problem. Herb Roberts had always paid his bills on time, his father had taught him that bills were no different than a man's word and a man kept his word just like a man paid his bills.

"The thing is, a man, he agrees to a bill, so he knows he can pay it," he muttered as he gathered up the avalanche of bills. He barely looked at them, it was pointless. He would pay them. He tucked the straps of his soft case down tightly and left it by the front door.

"Herb, breakfast is getting cold!"

"Be right in, I... have a call to make to work."

She didn't bother to tell him to hurry up or anything else. Work superseded even being chided about breakfast getting cold.

Herb walked into the other part of the living room. It had once been their dining room before the furniture had been claimed for unpaid debts. He'd left it too long, that was the thing.

He picked up his phone and hit his boss's number. It was answered on the second ring, "Josh here. Speak."

Josh was young and had all his hair. He walked with a spring in his step and Herb would bet his couch that Josh never woke up with a sore back. He was always awake and at work no matter how early Herb called in. Herb struggled not to hate the young usurper, after all, he had once been just like him and one day, Josh would be like Herb most likely.

"Hi Josh, Herb here."

"Yes, Herb, I can see that. You know, we know those sorts of things these days. I've got another call, what is it?"

"I have to take a few days off work, you know, it's that time again..."

"...Yes, I understand. I thought you would have made this call six months ago if I'm going to be honest with you, Herb."

Oh, please, don't let's start being honest now, Josh, Herb thought with a smile. He remembered when you could talk on the phone and wrap the cord around your fingers when you got nervous. He missed those days.

"I've decided that now is the time, so, book me off for a few days."

"You picked an awkward time, Herb. You were involved with the Tangent account—"

"Well, Josh, like you said last week, I'm not necessary. I think that's what you said? Wasn't it, when I asked if I could have a bit of a raise for the extra hours? Not necessary. Those were definitely your words, Josh."

"I don't expect you to understand how management works, Herb. I didn't mean you weren't needed, just that more money wasn't necessary."

"I'm not going to discuss this anymore. When it comes to the 'schutes, the employees call the shots. That's in the contract. I don't want to discuss this anymore. I have to make another call after this one, and Josh, one day, you're going to make those same calls. You think you won't ever do it. I know I did. But you will, because that's the way the world turns now. I'm hanging up because I want to spend the morning with my wife and I don't want her thinking about where her husband is going to be for the next twelve hours."

"I won't ever call the 'schutes. Don't you put that on me, Herb."

Herb chuckled, "it's not me putting it on you. It's those great green guys who keep sending us bills we can't pay. Haven't you noticed yet? Just do me a favour, if my wife calls, tell her I'm at a conference. It helps her to pretend she doesn't know better."

"She can't think she doesn't know. She's been taken by them herself."

"And if you don't think that makes me want to kill—myself... you're wrong... I have to go." Herb hung up and dropped the phone in horror. He had almost said, "kill all those giant green aliens" into a cellphone! Had he lost his mind? Never mind the 'schutes! He would never come home after a comment like that in a monitored device, or near one for that matter.

His hands shaking, he picked up the phone again; the commercial jingle was everywhere, everyone knew it by heart. If they hadn't used it, they had heard it used by comedians, in parodies, the thing was everywhere. Just text #5555.

He did it, fingers misdialing, deleting and re-entering. There was talk about next year a phone coming out that was thought-activated to avoid such missteps. It was mandatory for all citizens to have the latest technology, the bill sent later. Activation rates and other fees may apply *and always did*.

Herb ate breakfast with his wife. He thought of the picture of her in his wallet, she had been looking at him and smiling. His brother had taken the

picture, that had been so long ago, both he and Doris had lost most of their families between then and now.

“What did work say?”

“I have to stay late tonight, remember the Tangent account?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, it’s important, I might not get home until very late, or until the morning. But then I’ll have a day or two off work.”

“Can we go to the park?”

“I’ll probably be too tired, but we’ll see.”

Doris looked down at her hands, a tear was unshed in her eye and her lip trembled. “This Tangent account, is it that important?”

Herb took Doris by her hand, it felt like a stranger’s hand in his. Her skin was worn from working cleaning and taking in rags that she sewed and knit into recycled projects. She was always industrious, even if she could be a shrew.

“I wouldn’t be doing it if it wasn’t necessary. You know how it is.”

Herb changed the subject and tried to cheer Doris up. She laughed at his jokes, even the worst of them, the ones no one laughed at.

When he was done, he kissed Doris on the forehead and held her tight in his arms. It was so strange. The two of them didn’t melt against each other anymore. Herb was frightened that he wasn’t going to survive this time. *What would they take from him? They’d already taken so much? What else could a man live without.*

He was at the door when Doris put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. “Let me go instead. You’ve done too much.”

Herb laughed, “I’ve been handling this account for weeks, I think they’d notice if you walked in and I didn’t. Go do your work, or better yet, take the day off, put your feet up. Turn off the tv for once and read a book.”

They both laughed as though it was the silliest thing that Doris had said, but her hand lingered on his in a way he couldn’t remember it doing since the invasion, since everything had gone wrong.

Herb walked to an old bus shelter where other people stood waiting as well. He checked his phone, only five minutes until the ’schute came. They avoided eye contact with each other for the most part. A young man and an older lady were talking nervously. He had never had this done before and she’d had it done too many times, both were afraid. Everyone else moved away for the two as though they were cursed.

“Where is it, it’s late,” a woman fretted beside Herb. He checked his phone, she was right, it was five after ten.

Something that looked like a transparent waterslide or perhaps something that hamsters would play in came down from the heavens. The people in the shelter scrambled to form a line and one by one, the 'schute sucked them up into the sky.

It was just before dawn the next day when Herb woke up in the bus shelter. The garbage truck was going around picking up the trash and the beeping of it backing up was what brought him out of his drugged sleep. He reached into his pocket and found a bottle of pills; instructions were written on them but he wasn't able to focus his eyes enough to read yet.

I should have gotten the garbage together for Doris before I left. I wonder if she remembered. He waved at the folk driving the truck but didn't notice if they waved back. He was having a hard time inhaling all the way, it felt like someone had broken his ribs.

He found his townhouse without too many problems, he had done this enough times before. He'd done it for a kidney, for a chunk of his liver twice, a portion of his colon; it was a hard way to pay the bills, but it paid good. No one knew what the aliens wanted with human organs; some people said that it was to save humans and that it was for transplants. A sort of ultimate communism. Others said they just had a jones for organ meat. Herb didn't believe that, why not take the whole body while they had them if they didn't have some sort of interest in humanity's well-being at heart?

Doris had left the door open for him; at first he thought he had the wrong apartment. The dining room set had been returned while he was gone. The living room was filled with bookshelves; the good couch and loveseat were back. All the grime was gone; the grimy wallpaper had been replaced with fresh new paint.

Herb collapsed on the grubby green couch that Doris had kept even though all new things had been brought to them. He unbuttoned his shirt and saw the line of black stitches down his chest, *a lung, my lung, this is what a lung pays for.*

He opened his briefcase, the bills he had put into it were gone, receipts marked "paid in full" had replaced them. He wanted to go and tell Doris the good news, but he couldn't get enough air to get up from where he was lying on the couch. *I lived another day.*

He fell asleep but was woken up out of a sound sleep to the *snick* of a single envelope being pushed through the mail slot. A new bill had arrived.

ISLAND OF THE BLESSED

by Lee F. Patrick

(Previously unpublished)

Islands of the Blessed.

Journeys made on the beating of a drum
Journeys travelling on the spray of the sea
Showing us hidden knowledge.

Islands filled with dreams.

Guardians keep order in their islands
Guardians answer travellers' queries
But ask other questions in their turn.

Islands filled with knowledge.

Salmon spawn, leap, frolic and grow ancient
Salmon eat the nuts of hazel and never die
Gaining wisdom with each bite.

Islands filled with wisdom.

Far from shore are the islands, hidden in the mists
Far are they from the lands of man
Only Druids can find them in the trackless sea.

Islands hidden in the fading sun.

Druids journey here to bring back knowledge
Druids brave the currachs with no oars or sails
Trusting the light to bring them home.

Islands far from mortal shores.

Journey to them, if you seek wisdom
Journey from them if you can bear to leave them

Mist hides them from mortal sight.

Islands of the dead.

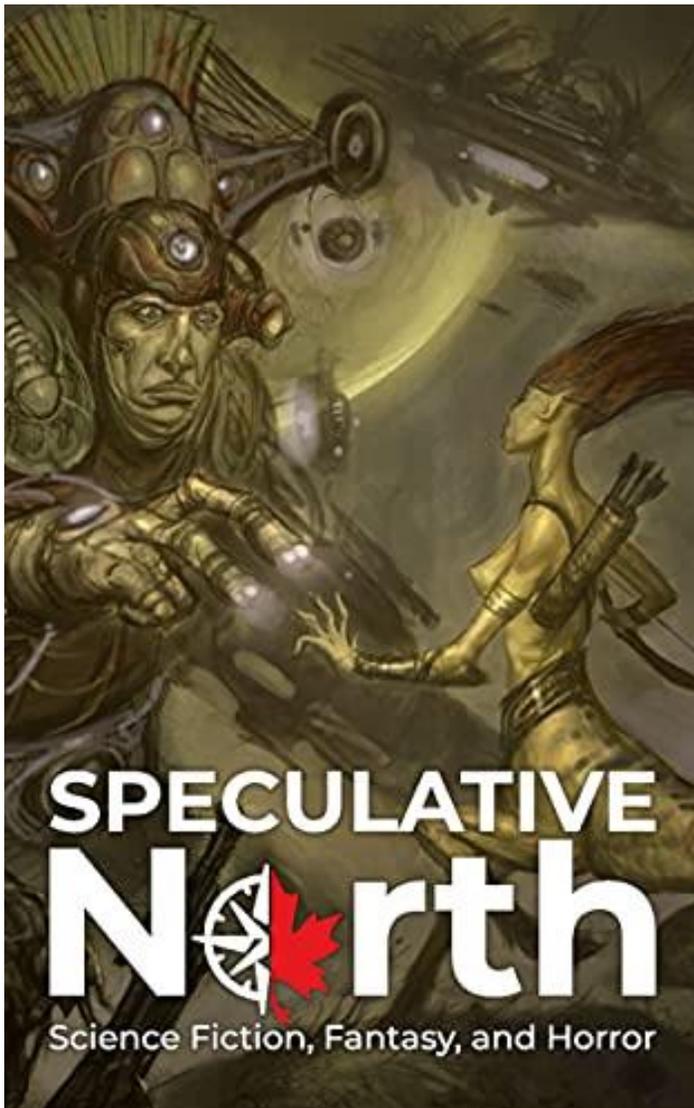
Mortals travel there at the end of life

Mortals rest there from their cares and woes

Learning wisdom before they journey forth anew.

Islands of the Blessed.

SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #5, July 2021



FICTION:

The Woman Who Married the Snow

– by Ken Altabel

Eating Opium from a Silver Cereal Box

– by D.K. Latta

To You, My Time Loop – by Connor Mellegers

Túshuguan – by Eric Choi

Getaway – by Thomas J. Griffith

Think Twice Before Possession

– by Amy Lywander

Dead, Deer – by S.K. Brownell

Humans ‘n’ Hotdogs – by Melissa Yuan-Innes

Send in the Ninjas – by Michelle Ann King

Housebound and Wife – by Michelle Tang

Travel Advisory – by Jackie Craven

Cyborg Sister – by Jackie Craven

NON-FICTION:

An Interview with Brian Koukol

– by Andy Dibble

Cover art – by J.P. Targete

Check it out at: [Speculative North #5](#)

FOR THE FLESH AND THE MACHINE

by Don Miasek

(Previously unpublished)

Jenna's hip itched with each halting step she took. Maybe it was the corrosive air seeping through her damp clothes, or maybe her pain suppression unit was finally running out of power. At 3:28 AM, Manhattan showed few signs of life beyond the drones perched high on the streetlamps with their telescopic legs. Jenna ignored the unwavering stares of their nose-mounted cameras as she passed underneath.

The breather mask she'd found in the refuse bin yesterday couldn't quite get the smell out of the air, even after she'd spent the entire evening fixing the cracked rubber hoses and tightening the seals. But at least it functioned. She could inhale without poisoning her lungs.

The itch turned into a sharp pain that shot through her leg, and Jenna stumbled, nearly falling onto the metallic sidewalk. The drones above did not move. She slapped her cybernetic arm, trying to jolt her diagnostic program into gear. Her systems sputtered, but finally began reporting on the flesh and machine in her body. Neurons and microchips. Veins and wires.

BATTERY LIFE: 4.8174%. PAIN SUPPRESSION UNIT AUTOMATICALLY SHUT DOWN.

HEALTH: INITIAL SYMPTOMS OF MALNUTRITION.

Jenna did not need to be told about that second one. Her stomach felt like an empty pit since she'd stumbled across that half-eaten nutria-ration two days ago. Or was it three days? Jenna shook her head and pressed on. She knew where she could find food for both of her halves.

She crossed the street and rounded the corner, ignoring the pain as best she could. The lights of the overhead advertisement briefly illuminated her tattered clothes and the scraggly hair sticking out from her breather mask.

SERVO ACTUATORS... SETTING TO LOW POWER MODE... COMPLETE.

DEEP CORE MEMORY BANKS... SETTING TO LOW POWER MODE... COMPLETE.

One by one, she went down the list of non-essential functions, turning them off where she could. When she passed by the alleyway, she heard a sudden snap. Acting on instinct, Jenna whirled towards the sound, hand already reaching for the sharp multi-tool hidden in her jacket.

"Jenna! Jenna!" A boy named Lud, no older than seven, emerged and waved to her. His breather mask was made for an adult, but with the straps

pulled as tight as they'd go, they made for an effective seal. Plainly visible behind the clear plastiglass was a face of half skin and half circuits. An unlicensed child used for cybernetic practice before being discarded.

Jenna let the tension go out of her. *You're getting jumpy. Going to accidentally shoot the kid one of these days.*

At Lud's heels, a girl stepped out from around the corner of one of the old rusted shipping crates that lined the alley. He'd often claimed Stel was his sister. Jenna assumed it was true—in all the ways that mattered, even if not biological. Unlike him, it was just her arms and legs that were metal.

COMMUNICATION SUITE... SHUTTING DOWN... COMPLETE.

Jenna felt her connection to the city networks go dead.

"What're you doing?" Lud asked. "You missed the ration drops."

"I know." Jenna forced her voice to be strong lest rumour of weakness spread quickly among the homeless. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a drone sitting on a third story ledge. Was it watching them?

"You weren't there? They were passing out water bags *and* grain-mash."

"Rather not be scanned by soldiers."

Lud looked at his sister with a wily grin before returning his gaze to Jenna. "Because they're looking for you?"

Jenna couldn't tell if his tone was mocking, or if it was just his youthful excitement.

TARGETING ARRAY... SHUTTING DOWN... COMPLETE.

"Can you tell us the one about the Siege of Valles Marineris?" Stel asked.

Oh. Ha ha. Listen to crazy Jenna tell her stories, eh? She hated them for it, though a little voice in her head asked if she'd be any different if she were in their shoes. "Don't have time," Jenna replied. "Maybe later." She took a step, meaning to leave them.

SCANNER SYSTEM... SETTING TO LOW POWER MODE... ANOMALY DETECTED. NARROW SCAN REQUIRED TO IDENTIFY.

Jenna froze. It was coming from the boy. *Don't be stupid. It'd be a waste of battery strength.* But her suspicion of what she'd seen won out.

SCANNER SYSTEM... SETTING TO FULL POWER... COMPLETE.

"You haven't been recharging," she said.

"Don't need to anymore. Dinesh Kumar says my converter can charge up my battery when I eat," he said proudly.

Then Dinesh Kumar is an idiot. Lud didn't have the right systems for cathode-digestive transference. Jenna wondered how long he'd last without a source to feed his mechanical parts. Jenna could at least live on flesh alone. Or at least, she used to be able to, years ago when her cybernetics were pristine and new. She shut her scanner off again.

“Have places to be, Lud.” After a moment's hesitation, Jenna looked to his sister. “Try to scavenge him some power, Stel.”

Jenna resumed her trek. They'd be fine, she told herself. And even if they weren't, there were millions no more or less deserving of help. She put them out of her mind.

BATTERY LIFE: 2.2943%.

Such a stupid decision, bringing her scanners to full power. If she hadn't been so careless, she could have stretched those percentages out for weeks. In the past she'd been able to run dozens of energy-intensive systems simultaneously, but those days were long gone. In the distance, Jenna spied her target.

The bright yellow light of the EZ Dispensary unit cut through even the thick smog. It reminded Jenna of a flick she'd once seen, of an old maritime lighthouse shining its beacon through the fog so ships knew safety from danger. It was a simple machine. Input your financial credentials, receive what you needed. But her ID would be no good here.

The EZ Dispensary's advertisement protocols jingled awake as Jenna approached it. The scent of steak, dripping with gravy, wafted from its vents. Her mouth watered. She couldn't smell anything but that and the roasted potato side dish anymore—not even the metallic twinge of her breather could ruin it.

She leaned against the wall next to it, appearing as innocuous as she could. A drone sat on the signage of the VR Café next door. Jenna knew their patrol routes off by heart. Knew the flaw that created the eight minute gap this area experienced once a week. She counted down the seconds.

3...

2...

1...

The drone's legs telescoped outwards and it effortlessly skittered up the sign to the latticework above. Within seconds it vanished into the smog.

Jenna immediately set to work, pulling the multi-tool from her inner jacket pocket. She wedged the tip into the gap between the EZ Dispensary's front and the panel at the bottom. Violently jerking it to the side, the panel cracked loudly and swung open. Inside, the controls for the protein synthesizers were nestled right next to the main power cables. Food and electricity. Enough to satisfy both flesh and machine.

Footsteps interrupted her, and Jenna recoiled in fear. Two soldiers, clad in grey armor, strode towards her. Jenna moved on instinct, grabbing the multi-tool as she backed away.

“...then I figure we head on over to sector 4. Eden asked for help on a round-up,” the guardswoman said.

Her partner nodded his agreement.

It took Jenna a startled moment to realize they weren't actually looking for her. She sat against the building wall and buried her face into her knees, trying to look for all the world like another homeless woman trying to catch some sleep. *The hell are they doing?*

The second soldier stopped in front of the EZ Dispensary. “Hold up,” he said. The menu scrolled past his eyes.

Jenna cursed her luck. Their being here had already wasted a minute, and she'd need at least two to get what she needed. That didn't give her long before a new drone skittered in to replace the old. Her stomach was hurting now, and she had to resist the urge to scratch her aching hip.

“Let's see now...” the guardsman muttered, tapping his faceplate in contemplation.

Waiting a month for another surveillance gap wasn't an option.

LEFT ARM ACTUATORS... SETTING TO FULL POWER... COMPLETE.

With enough force, she wondered if she could drive her multi-tool through the thinner armor on the back of his neck. That'd just leave his partner, and Jenna wagered she could outfight her one-on-one... hopefully before her systems gave out entirely.

BATTERY LIFE: 1.5207%

“Protein Blast? Fries?” the guardsman asked himself.

“Hey, check this out.” The guardswoman knelt down low, inspecting the open panel. She ran her gloved finger along where Jenna had forced it.

Jenna gripped the multi-tool tightly. She had to fight to keep from holding her breath.

Slowly, the guardswoman turned her head towards Jenna, optics gleaming a bright azure as a scan passed over her body.

Jenna diverted the last of her battery power to her robotic arm. She'd need it to puncture that armor. Her multi-tool, hidden in her hands, began to hum.

The guardswoman's hand drifted towards her holster.

Jenna tensed. Just three minutes before the drone coverage returned. They had to die now.

The guardsman suddenly looked down, shrugged, and nudged the panel shut with his knee. His partner drew the torch from its holster and welded it back into place. “Stupid thing must of popped open.”

Ding!

The EZ Dispensary's delivery slot rolled upwards, revealing two piping hot Variety Packs. The guardsman grabbed one and stuffed it into an armoured

pocket. In one fluid motion, he tossed the other at Jenna's feet. "Here you go, ya bum."

The pair marched past her, chatting about catching a ride back to the Bronx. Jenna watched them until they vanished, lest they turn back upon her. Up above, a new drone crawled into place, watching with single-minded focus.

Jenna looked down, staring in awe at the plastic box before her. Just given to her. By those she'd planned to murder. She reset her systems to low power mode and desperately tore off the wrapper. Inside, cradled by paper foil, was a steak bar infused with gravy nestled next to a smattering of potatoes, all expertly assembled by the EZ Dispensary's protein reconfigurators. Jenna pulled off her mask and dropped it to the ground. She didn't bother with the utensils. Instead she ripped into it with her grease-stained hands, shoving bite sized chunks into her mouth. She savored each swallow.

Next to where the steak had been, secluded in its own little box, sat an expensive single injection charger. Jenna eagerly rolled up her sleeve and held the charger against one of the ports on the underside of her arm.

BATTERY LIFE: *0.9611%*

And then she hesitated.

How long could 0.9611% get me? Maybe a week if I switched off an ocular implant? Two, if I shut down all cybernetic motor functions? It'd mean dragging thirty-five pounds of dead weight around. Jenna wondered if she could beg for another charger before running dry.

Sighing, Jenna placed the charger back into its box. Slipping the breather back onto her face, she entered the nearby alley. "You can come out now."

Lud and Stel emerged from behind a broken down generator.

Jenna tossed the box to Lud. His look of curiosity changed to surprise when he opened it.

"Use it," she ordered.

Biting his lower lip, Lud gingerly lifted his breather mask to expose his neck. He placed the tip against the socket where a normal boy's jugular would be and pressed the plunger. The charger buzzed, and his eyes widened with new alertness.

Jenna's legs nearly gave out as she sank down onto a crate next to Stel. One by one, she began shutting off more bodily functions she prayed she could do without for the next few weeks.

"Are you all right?" Stel asked.

"Yes," Jenna lied. "Just need a rest." She gestured in front of her. "Sit. I'll tell you about the Siege of Valles Marineris..."

KINDRED

by Carfa Stein

(Previously unpublished)

On that morning the world
bloated with God's tears
cried for desert or mountaintop

saved from antediluvian dread
cells divided on the wings of a dove
one kind
called kin, then king

And the monarch birthed
manners without kindness
shape shifters
branch breakers

hunched in caves
screaming epithets
accusing countless heresies

Scared witless by the colours of a rainbow



FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #9, November 2021

Cover – by Carly Allen-Fletcher

Before We Drown – by Ewen Ma

But I Want to Keep the Light Inside Me – by Pearse Anderson

Each Her Own – by M.C. Benner Dixon

Katabasis – by Jay Harper

Not Poppy, Not Mandragora – by Jane Sand

The Pilgrims of Babble – by Alexandra Seidel

We're All Friends Here – by Michelle Ann King

Check it out at: [Fusion Fragment #9](#)

THE INTERSECTION

by Lorina Stephens

(Previously published in *Dreams of the Moon*, 2021)

“Hey, Sis!”

She glanced around. His voice sounded so real inside her head, as if he stood right beside her. He sounded so ebullient amid the hustle of traffic, sunshine in the canyons of King and Bay, reaching out across distance where he circled somewhere overhead. She glanced up to where a sky like flint shone, hard as armour, and for her an unreachable barrier, untouchable. Although she wanted to reach him, one of the reasons she’d contacted him via their link.

She touched her ear as if that would allow her to be nearer him, aware of the neural communications implant lodged in her cortex, one of Jack’s amazing gizmos. “Hey.” She winced at the tone of her response, aware of the flatness of it, her inability to match his persistent, apparent joy.

“Where are you?”

She glanced up at the monoliths of the TD and Montreal towers where birds wheeled and dove into the verdancy of wall gardens, down to the traffic lights where a walking man flashed and a flat voice droned *walk, walk, walk* over the hiss of activity, electric cars, electric public transit. Someone bumped by her. She stood immobile, unable to face the paved river she had to cross.

“Going to work,” she said, sucking in air suddenly in too short supply.

“What are you doing?”

“Just making notations on our latest neural interface results. Being able to conduct these tests here is giving me amazing insights, things I would never have been able to ascertain down there.” There was a pause, and then: “Hey, Sis, you okay?”

That question. How many times had he asked her that? And how many times had she found herself frozen with fear, incapable of answering, terrified of the answer and what that might indicate, even more terrified of not telling him and having to face the gorge below where her feet balanced precariously on the edge of sanity.

All she had to do was cross the street with the lights, walk across the courtyard of the TD Centre, into the glass atrium where commerce and a Carolinian forest grew, and from there ascend in an elevator which could take her up fifty-six floors if she wanted. But she only had to go to thirty-two, exit to a floor where she would work where she chose, in a Zen garden or beanbag

chair, at an oak table or a cherry-lined library filled with real, printed volumes, and there design security protocols for payment gateways.

“Sis?”

“Yeah.”

“You okay? Talk to me.”

She inhaled sharply, her chest constricting. She could feel her heart hammering a tattoo, her legs liquefying.

“Sis? C’mon, say something.”

What was she supposed to say? That she was falling apart? Again. That the meds didn’t seem to be working again, that she felt as though everything was about to come crashing down around her, that maybe it might be better to just sleep, and sleep forever, to stop being a burden to both herself and Jack. He certainly didn’t need to be dealing with a whacked-out sister some three hundred kilometres back on terra firma.

“You know, you’re closer up there than you were on the Rock,” she said, avoiding the conversation, needing the conversation, unable to begin the conversation.

“How weird is that?” He had such a comforting bass rumble in his voice, like the sound of the earth itself.

“I know,” she said.

Another pause she didn’t know how to fill.

“But you didn’t call me to discuss distance.”

Well, sort of she did. Twenty-four hundred clicks from Toronto to Corner Brook. Three hundred to the International Space Station II. But she could hop on a plane to Corner Brook within the hour, or at least later today. But the ISSII? Jack was only as close as the voice in her head.

“Don’t make me drag this out of you, Sis. C’mon, you know you need to talk. You know you need to tell me what’s going on. Otherwise I can’t help you.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“I can’t get to work.” There. It was out. She imagined a greedy little gremlin cavorting around her ankles, biting, nipping, making a mockery of all her anxieties and fears.

“Why? You sick?”

She blinked away the gremlin. “Just in the head.”

“Now stop that. You’re having a panic attack, right?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you exactly?”

“Watching the lights at King and Bay.”

“Why are you watching the lights?”

“Because I can’t cross the road.”

“Why can’t you cross the road?”

“Cause I’m scared.” And that tore it. Now she blinked back tears, was aware she was gasping, that pedestrians were beginning to look at her askance. It seemed the ultimate irony a homeless woman rumbled by with her cart and stink and her babble of inner dialogue. Déjà vu? Premonition?

“What are you scared of?”

“The traffic, the road, the fact the lights might change before I make it across. Or even if I make it across, what if the elevators choose today to break down? Or what if there’s a terrorist who’s managed to infiltrate one of the towers and decides to take himself and everyone else to redemption? It happens, you know. You’re up there circling around while down here there are crazies all over the place.” And one in particular standing immobile at the corner of King and Bay trying to cross the road to work.

“Last I heard there hadn’t been any terrorist attacks in Canada for some number of years, and even those were isolated incidents perpetrated by disturbed people. So I don’t think the elevators are going to blow up and take out the tower.”

Disturbed people. She was a disturbed people. “But what happens if I get stuck in the road when the lights change?”

“Well, it’s not like motorists are going to gun their engines and run you down because you didn’t make the lights.”

“But they’ll be angry.”

“Maybe. Fuck them. Just continue on. And it’s unlikely you’re going to get stuck in the middle of road.”

“Not unless I freeze.”

“Have you ever done that?”

“No.”

“Well there you go.”

“There’s always a first time.”

“So, what, you’re going to plant yourself in the middle of the crossing just to prove there’s always a first time you won’t make it across the road?”

Despite herself, she could feel the corner of her mouth twitch in response to his humour. “I’m not that crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, Sis. Sure, you have issues, problems we both know we need to monitor and work through. But so do lots of people, whether it’s physical or physiological. We’re all gloriously flawed. Show me a perfect person, and I’ll show you a biological android.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe nothing. So, your heart palpitating?”

“Ready to freakin’ jump out of my chest.”

“Ah, Sis is channelling Alien.”

She snorted a laugh. “That would freak people out.”

“Yeah, so let’s work on that, shall we? You taking long, slow breaths?”

She inhaled deeply, let it go. “Yes.”

“Now go to your safe place.”

“What? Here?”

“Sure, why not.”

“It will look weird.”

“I’ve got you on SAT right now and you don’t look weird at all. Awesome doo, by the way. When did you decide to shave your head and do tats?”

She looked up at the sky again, amazed he could zero in on her from so far away. She glanced back down to the streetscape, shuffled over to the bench at the transit stop and eased onto it, aware how weak her legs were, how her hands fluttered like frightened birds.

“Good move, Sis. Very good. Now, where are you in your head?”

She closed her eyes. The sounds around her distilled into a susurrantion not unlike waves on a cobble beach. Agawa Bay. A moonrise, huge, white, hanging over a promontory that lay darkly like a sleeping giant.

“Superior,” she said. “Our last summer there.” Before Jack had gone off to university, and she had to navigate the uncharted waters of secondary.

“That was epic.”

She heard the wistfulness in his voice, felt it herself. Life had been so simple then. “I will never forget that summer.”

“Me neither.”

“Remember how cold the water was?”

“Bloody nut-cracking.”

She laughed.

“And you swam circles around me, and then dragged me out of the water because my lips had turned blue.”

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I?”

“Cause we always took care of each other.”

She nodded, sucked in a breath to still tears.

“Listen, Sis, you’re gonna feel a lightness in your head in a sec. Don’t freak, okay? It’s just me uploading a modification to your implant.”

Her eyes flew open, panic slamming through her. Even as she uttered: “Not here, Jack! Please!” she felt a tingling in her head, like a cold itch she couldn’t scratch, and then she was on her feet, gulping air, Jack’s voice crooning

gently, “It’s okay, Sis. Honest. You know I’d never do anything to hurt you. Really, you’re gonna love this. Almost done. You with me?”

“Uh-huh.” And then the sensation stilled, and there was only the sound of wind again as vehicles drove by, of the birds, of other pedestrians chatting either to each other or through their own earpieces. The bus sighed to a stop in front of her, the doors opening, passengers spilling out, sweeping up. “What did you do?”

“A modification that will help, I think. Something I’ve been working on. You’re my first trial subject. Not exactly protocol, but, hey, you fit the profile.” She heard him laugh. “Now, c’mon, Sis. You remember how when we were little Mom always told me to take your hand when we crossed the street, that it was my responsibility to make sure you arrived safely on the other side?”

So many roads crossed, Jack holding her hand. So many. Her fingers tingled, and then her palm, and she felt warmth there in her left hand, felt the pressure of a hand, of fingers tightening around hers.

“So, I’m still going to hold your hand, Sis.”

She felt fingers squeeze. She looked up sharply at the sky again. “Jack?”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“But—”

“How?”

“Yeah.”

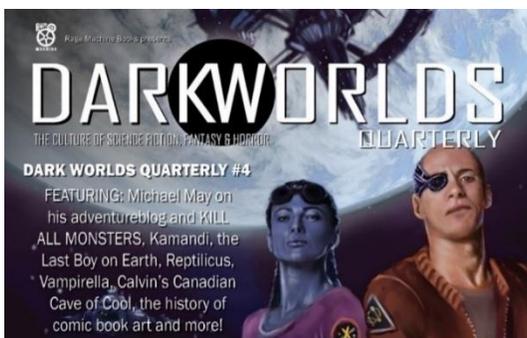
“Does it really matter?”

She looked down at her hand, the way her own fingers curled around his which weren’t there, but were. “No.”

“Then, c’mon. Let’s cross the intersection.”

The lights had changed again, *walk, walk, walk* droning across King and Bay, and tentatively, her hand in Jack’s, she stepped out into the intersection and walked to the courtyard, the atrium, and into the elevator to work.

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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

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Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)

COSMIC WEIRDOS

by Tracy Shepherd

(Previously published in a T. Shepherd Poetry collection)

The ice-blossoms on your frosty wolf-beard crack
and spin towards the wood of your neck. I love your
bark with pores that host my nectar.

Mists of frozen brides named Jill, with blue lips,
want the groom.

Winter water is rarely kind, like the Winter witches
allowing Spring to cling on their necks, insulating
their avalanche breasts. Their lips are blue, too.

A necklace of wolves traps your ice sheet of ferns.
We name the leader Jack Frost.

We follow a morning-bed path with temple-overhang trees.
Our deep and nesting steps palpably hunt the birds of Sagittarius. We each
decline a quiver of arrows. Behind us, a basin of
sticks swallows our snowy prints. We want to blossom on Neptune
where there are no hooked-bill predators, no especially long stooping
drinkers. No thighs of black feathers. We want our nuptials on Neptune.

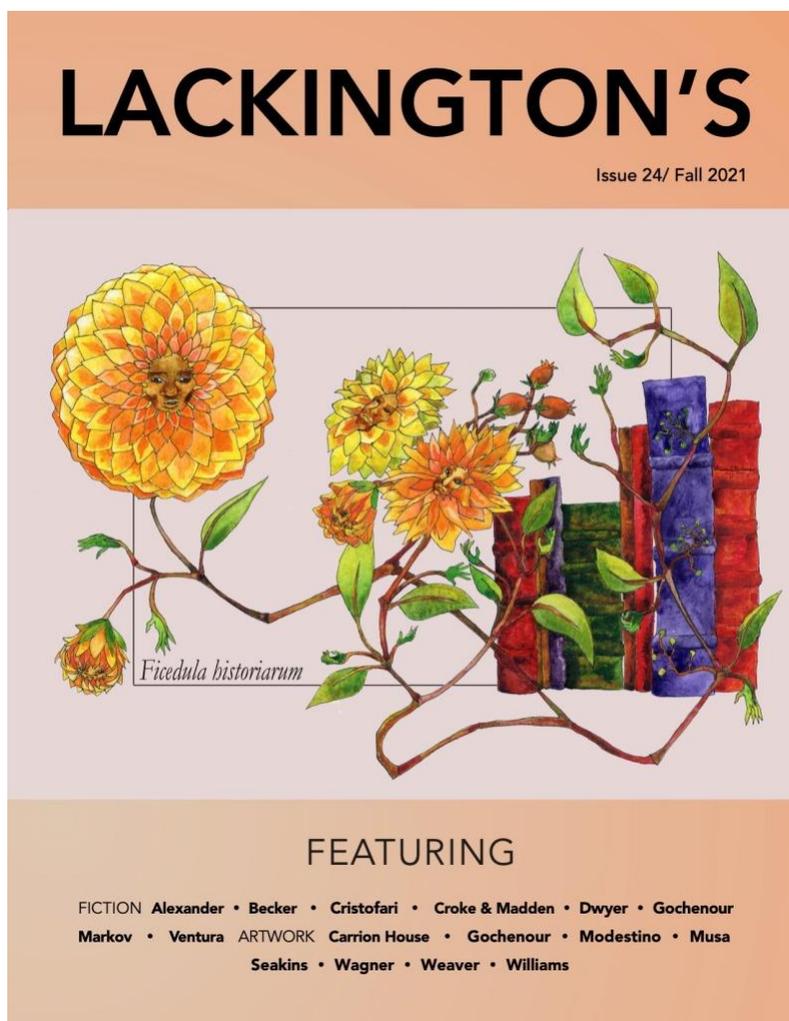
The tumble-weeding of your ice crystals never plateaus.
And, you are fascinating as
fuck.

In the southern forelegs of galactic grass you invite me
to nurture myself under the shoulder of an archer drawing his bow.
You are my archer and I can bite into that flesh like a ripe red apple.
A concave nebula, the arch of your arm, curls around me like a lagoon of
warm stars. We are two star systems rimming.
We flood into each other like moon-rays trespassing over igneous lava.
We find wanted minerals in each other and, with no lilac-breasted shields,
cone our forelegs into each other.

A lava rope milks us tighter to each other and my womb finds your long-limb walk and we make love at a climbing camp. Stripping naked amongst wild fig trees, sometimes our animalness cloaks our ruthlessness. Never misbehaving in our snowy grass, the birds of Sagittarius cronk like Eratos's ghost daughters playing euphoniums. Jack Frost preys on their thrusting hips.

Suddenly, we fall in love.

Lackington's Magazine, Issue #24, Fall 2021



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 reflect the story, setting, theme, atmosphere, or philosophy it seeks to describe.

Contents:

Cover – by Sharon J. Gochenour
Dr. Ormeau's Botanical Menagerie
– by Morgan L. Ventura
I, Mandragora
– by Phoenix Alexander
My Face to the Sun
– by Kelly E. Dwyer
In Which Mushrooms Carry History Through A Door
– by Sharon J. Gochenour
Ten Poisons That Cannot Kill the Queen – by M. Croke & A. Madden
Tree Heart – by Beatriz Becker
And other stories.

See [Lackington's #24](#)

LA JOCONDE

by Leslie Beckmann

(Previously unpublished)

Could be right now. That's what they called her specialization in basic. Could Be Right Now. For Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear threats. What they called her was Molehill. Mona Molehill, making a mountain out of nothing, all anxiety for a threat that wouldn't come. Until the tsunami took out Fukushima, and then it was Captain Molehill, thank you very much, assholes.

Captain Ramona Antoine listened to the briefing and didn't like it. Not one bit.

Major Sager was describing it like a simple friendly extraction: drive there, walk in, escort the lady out, drive everybody home, and the world would be their oyster. Except that "she" was a painting worth almost a billion dollars, they'd be walking into the Louvre in Hazmat suits, there would be looters, and they had to bring a goddamned civilian with them.

"...Antoine..." Mona snapped to the attention at the mention of her name. "...will be leading you in given her work in Japan. Time will not be your friend on this assignment. Any questions?"

O'Shea stuck up his hand.

"Private?"

"Why are we doing this, Major? Isn't she French?"

"Strictly speaking, Private, she's Italian. From Florence. But now she belongs to everyone. And the French Foreign Office asked. Any other questions?" Without waiting, he continued.

"Good. We are 'go' at oh-seven-hundred. Dismissed."

Mona rose from her seat in the embassy's basement briefing room and started for the bunker, wondering what particular god was getting a great big belly laugh at her expense. This tour—all diplomats and truffles and champagne—was supposed to be payback for the hell of Fukushima, a balm for her PTSD. But barely twelve weeks in—barely time to get sick of chocolate croissants and espresso—the universe had presented her with a fresh new version of the old hell she knew all too well: a slow-catastrophe of pain inching towards death. Except that this time she wasn't even helping to evac irradiated

nuclear scientists. This time, she was putting her unit at risk to exfiltrate a goddamned painting.

Swift footsteps behind her made her turn.

“Captain Antoine... may I have a word as we walk?”

It was the small, wiry, white-haired man who, until the bomb had gone off, had been the Embassy’s Cultural Attaché. Now he was part of her unit—a one-man Monuments Man.

“Dr. Holland. Yes sir, of course.”

“Call me Rodger. How bad is it? Out there, I mean.”

“Well, sir, it’s not good, if the reports are to be trusted. Seems Terry did a good job.”

“Terry?”

“Sorry. Slang for ‘terrorist.’ It’s been less than 24 hours. We don’t have good intel yet on who did it.”

“I see. Go on.”

“It looks like they got their hands on beta-emitting S-90 ...sorry, strontium 90. An isotope used in Russian thermoelectric lighthouse generators. They go missing—the generators—maybe every few months. My guess is whoever did this shoved the generator in a van with a crap-lo... pardon my language, sir... a lot of explosives, drove it to the Louvre, and detonated it. To make whatever point it was that all terrorists need to make.”

Rodger Holland looked at Mona carefully.

“You were in Fukushima, weren’t you, Mona?”

Mona prickled at the use of her given name.

“Yes, sir. Please call me ‘Antoine,’ sir.”

“You don’t like this mission, do you, Captain Antoine?”

“It’s my job, sir.”

“I was watching you during the briefing. You don’t like that we’re putting you men on the line for a painting, do you?”

“I’ll take care of my men as long as you get the painting, Dr. Holland,”
Mona bristled.

“Please don’t mistake me, Captain. I understand. I’m a liability out there and the painting is just a thing. But what you’re doing? It’s really important.”

“Yes, sir.” Mona’s voice said Rodger Holland was full of shit.

“Your ‘Terry’ is the worst of what humanity is. That painting is the antidote. That, and art generally. It’s a balm to the hurt and the hatred, an impulse to good, a call to beauty, a reminder of the best that humanity can be.”

Horseshit, Mona thought. “Yes, sir,” she said. “Let’s go in here and get you kitted up.”

“In here” was the entrance to the bunker beneath the Embassy that housed enough materiel to stage a coup: she swiped her passcard and, when the door slid open, saw her boys. Mona looked at them, heart tightening, and wondered which of them might not make it back: big brown Corporal Darnell Brown, artilleryman from Georgia, a caricature of himself, his laugh as deep as James Earl Jones’s; Private First Class Morales, training as a linguist, who looked too much like Richie Valens for the good of his girlfriend back home; Private First Class Hakim, coms specialist, a silent cypher, a practicing Muslim—a god as far as Mona was concerned—for the bullying he must have taken in basic; Private Second Class O’Shea, still fraught by rogue pimples, who had rotated in to Paris with her. He was the ammo and explosive ordinance disposal guy.

“Hey, boys, this is our artist in residence, Dr. Rodger Holland. We’re his bubble wrap and he’s the lady’s. Where’s the Sarge?”

“Right here, Cap,” said Burret, a lean bald giant of a man. “Bunny suits waiting for everyone in the next room.”

“We gotta put them on before we get in the LAVs?” Morales protested.

Three petabecquerels at the museum, Morales. You’d better if you want to have kids,” Burret replied.

“What does that mean?” Morales asked more quietly.

“It means there’s enough radiation to fry your ’nards,” Hakim volunteered, equally softly.

O’Shea and the others put their hands over their crotches as one.

“Your ’nards will just fine, O’Shea,” Mona replied. “We’ve got sixty minutes topside time before you’ll even start feeling queasy. Twice that time before your nutsacks fall off.”

“Why in shit can’t the French go get a stupid painting on their own?” O’Shea asked again.

“Because, Dumbass,” the Sergeant replied, “they’re busy evacuating the whole freaking city. Go put your goddamned bunny suit on and get in the LAV.”

“Suits smell like fucking feet, Cap,” someone grumbled once they were all buckled in.

“It’s not the suits,” Mona replied. “Now shut up, everyone, and stay frosty. Intel says it’ll be quiet up here, but who the hell knows.”

They emerged into an early autumn morning, sun warm and golden as honey. It would take them less than fifteen minutes to make it to the Museum,

and the lovely weather was more unsettling than all the typhoons Mona had seen in Japan.

“Sitrep, O’Shea,” Mona called over the coms.

“There’s dead things everywhere, Captain. This is messed up.”

Mona shook her head. It was bad, all right. They’d been bunkered beneath the embassy just long enough for the walking dead to leave, taking their actual dead with them. Like a witches’ pantry, what remained were the tiny bodies of broken birds, the shells of cats and squirrels and rats, the lifeless furs of dogs—mongrels and lap hounds alike—abandoned or lost in the panic. Shoes and clothes and bags lay as though flung from a dress-up trunk. The chestnut trees were completely brown. Mona wasn’t sure if this was fall, arriving overnight, or whether, like the reddened forests outside of Chernobyl, radiation had abruptly, and utterly, killed them.

Mona felt the unwelcome prickle of tears, hot and salty in her sinuses, and bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. The taste of iron trumped the heat of her tears.

Hakim was praying under his breath.

“Shut the fuck up, Hakim, and drive.”

Ground Zero looked like hell on a half shell. The glass on all three floors of the museum’s south wing had been shattered by the bomb. A statue of somebody on a horse had been blown free of its pedestal and the horse’s black hooves were pawing at the sky. To the north, Napoleon III’s apartments had been opened—like a dollhouse or the Murrah Building in Oklahoma—and gold and crimson had spilled onto the grand plaza like toys not put away before bed.

Nor was it just the inanimate that had been ruined. Mona felt the familiar dissociation settle on her, cold and indifferent as she took in the new images that, like the old ones from Fukushima, would come back to haunt her sleep: the toddler’s empty shoe; the book lying open, pages moving in the wind like seaweed on a confused tide; the girl with the bouquet still in her hands, her perfect red lips an ‘o’ of surprise, the top of her head no longer there. For now, Mona let the images fall into the familiar empty place in her body where everything broken went and got her brain back in the game.

“Brown. Entrance at two o’clock. I want the back of the LAV crotch-hair-close to the door.”

Before Mona could issue the next order, O'Shea called down from the turret.

"We've got movement on our six. Unidentified. A van. Bunny suits inside." Looters. Terrific.

"O'Shea and Hakim, you stay with the LAV. I want cover to the door. After that, your discretion. Keep 'em out of our hair. Brown, take the box. Doc, you stick to me like glue."

Mona looked at Doctor Rodger Holland. Inside his suit, his skin was pale and his eyes were wide.

"It's going to be just fine, Doc. Just fine."

The Madonna Lisa—Mona was short for Madonna—was on the First Floor, which, in France, meant the second floor. Once inside, they would need to make their way upstairs, through a maze to find the blandly named Room 6, use the security codes given to them by the French, slide the painting up and off the mounting rails, put it in the pressure and temperature-controlled box that had been flown over from New York, fight off the looters, and drive back to the Embassy. In bunny suits. Easy peasy.

"Let's get this shit done," Mona said, sourly.

Mona was in on point, followed by Holland, followed by Brown, carrying the curator's box. "Anyone know which way we go?"

"You been in Paris three months and you never yet been to the Louvre? Shit, Captain, what's wrong with you?"

"Been busy, Brown."

"Busy? Busy my ass! You *make* time for this here shit, Captain."

"How many times *you* been here then, Brown?"

"Every weekend since I got here. Started with the Etruscans, finished with the Flemish Masters, and started all over again."

Mona had not been busy. Everything about the Louvre made her sick: it was for lah-di-dah ladies and pompous pricks who didn't know their elbow from an electrical outlet and were protected from all the horrors of the world by their inability to do anything useful at all. And, mostly, she had no interest in making a pilgrimage to some old dead broad with her name.

"Jeezus, Brown. You can find Room 6 with your eyes closed. Give me the goddamned box and you take point."

Brown took the lead and started talking – the patter meant to keep minds alert and nerves steady. Except that he salted it with information about the paintings they were passing: *here on the left is a fresco by Florentine master Sandro Boticelli, painted in the early fifteen-hundreds—watch the broken glass*

on the right—up ahead are pieces from the 13th and 14th century. Notice how the early works seem flat and static—we have three deceased beneath the Cimabue...

It was a post-apocalyptic art crawl, delivered hushed as if to leave the zombies undisturbed.

At the top of the stairs, Mona stumbled under the weight of the box, leaned into the shattered remains of a statue to catch her balance, and then lurched onward.

“Jeezus, Brown. Cut the tour guide act. How much farther?”

“200 feet, Captain.”

Even through the suit radio, Mona could tell that Brown was ticked at being shut down.

“Sorry, Brown. I just want to get the hell out of here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mona could tell she was not forgiven.

They were in Room 5 now, empty of everything but the paintings and a bloody parquet floor. The museum guards, their thyroids pulsing and death a certainty within the week, had still somehow managed to clear the place. Jeezus they were committed, Mona thought to herself.

Mona looked around and tried to see if she could find what it was Brown—and the guards willing to die for it—liked about this place. A kind of atonement. Something to talk about when they were back at the embassy. She to the walls—really looked—and almost lost her footing again.

Inside the enormous gilt frames hung by thick brass chains lay glimpses of magic, bright in the autumn sunlight now that the roof had been blown out: fat baby Jesuses surrounded by adoring virgins and beautiful whores; the same baby Jesuses, now grown and bleeding on crosses; birth and death and resurrection interrupted by portraits of girls and merchants, wives and old men with bulbous noses, a saint shot through with arrows for his trouble, another with his head on a plate. The impulse to tell stories lit the room like fire: life and death and food and wine and people having their likenesses recorded for posterity. These were stories and pictures as reminders to live. In them hope and armour were raised against implacable death. They shoved aside, for the first time, the futility in her heart that Fukushima’s tsunami had left in its wake... Mona could feel the wet heat behind her eyes and swore.

“Captain?” Brown asked, pausing.

“It’s the next room,” Holland said excitedly, as, instead of pausing behind Brown, he strode ahead and around the corner into Room 6.

Mona swore again, and lurched past Brown to catch up with Holland. She slammed into him as soon as she, too, rounded into Room 6: he was standing

stock still, arms up in surrender. An instant later Brown thundered into both of them.

—*Arrêtez là.*

At the far end of the room a museum guard—a small old man in a sharp blue uniform—was sitting on a plastic chair beside the wooden shelf beneath the glass case housing the Mona Lisa. He had a gun in one hand. He had told them to stop.

His voice was weak and hard to hear through their bunny suits.

Mona put down the box, slid herself in front of Holland, and raised her own arms.

Holland started talking in French from behind her.

The guard started shaking his head.

“He doesn’t understand...” Mona said, irritated.

“No, Lieutenant, he can’t *hear* me. With the suit on. We need to get closer.”

Mona led Holland forward, details of the scene ahead of them resolving as they closed in.

“Captain...” said Brown from behind her.

“Not now, Brown.”

“Capta...”

“Not now!”

“Mona, your suit is ripped.”

Mona stopped.

“In the back. Left side. Maybe 6 inches long.”

The statue had ripped it when she’d lost her balance. Mona considered how long it had been and started laughing. She couldn’t help it. She’d been dead for twelve minutes and hadn’t even known it. She pulled off the suit hood and looked up.

Goddammit, she thought. The Mona Lisa wasn’t ugly after all.

All the photos and reproductions made Madonna Lisa look like a slappably-smug bitch, pudgy and pampered. But that wasn’t what was going on. Her eyes and her mouth said different things. Not just happy or sad. Or smug. She was concerned. Aching. Weary. Old. Anything you needed her to be.

Mona took another step and the guard spoke.

“She knows our hearts, yes?” he asked as he leaned forward, gunless hand open. There was a small dark shape in his palm.

“Grenade!” Brown called, as his weapon went off.

“Hold! HOLD!” Mona shouted, eyes on the old guard’s face which grimaced with surprise at the impact of Brown’s bullet.

—*C’est seulement un moineau.*

The not-a-grenade was just a sparrow, eyes blinking, still barely alive, still breathing as the old man died. The guard had been cradling it. For company, maybe. For comfort. His or its, Mona didn't know.

She heard chatter in her radio, dim and meaningless. Holland and Brown were thundering up to her in their suits, oafish in their concern.

"Holland. Brown," Mona said stripping her bunny gloves to pluck the tiny bird from the guard's palm. "Get the painting and get your asses out of here."

The bird was soft and warm, and it chirruped once as she stroked it. She could feel its heart in the palm of her hand.

"Doc's getting the painting. Let's get you up," Brown said.

"I'm good," Mona said, looking around.

"Captain?"

"Darnell, who did that?" Mona asked, nodding at the enormous painting behind him—a vast banquet 30 feet wide by 25 feet high, its colours brilliant. He turned.

"Veronese," he said, the tour guide at the end of the world. "The Wedding Feast at Cana.' Let's get your sorry ass home, Cap."

"Nah, Darnell. I'm reading nine Grays. I'll be dead in a week."

Brown said nothing and Mona could see he was fighting back tears.

"Don't cry, Brown. You got me to the Museum. And you're right, what's here will do my soul good. It's going to be closed for a stretch after today, there's a cafeteria downstairs and I've got my sidearm for when it gets too bad. I think I'll stay and have a look around while I still can."

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTIST

Leslie Beckmann

Leslie is an environmental scientist who lives and works near Whey-awichen on the unceded lands of the Tsleil Waututh Nation (also known as North Vancouver, BC). When she isn't being happily distracted by all things flying, swimming, buzzing, and growing, she is patting dogs with her grown-up daughter or playing cards with her husband. Leslie's work has been shortlisted for the Canada Writes award, has appeared in *Room Magazine*, *Firewords*, *En Route Magazine*, and the *Vancouver Courier*, and has aired on CBC Radio. She recently completed an MFA in Creative Writing at UBC; her thesis project—A Young Adult fantasy novel about sailing, dogs, magic, and clinical depression—is seeking a publisher. *La Joconde* is her first published SF story.

Swati Chavda

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

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

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Sean Dowd

Sean has lived: in the Niagara area, Thunder Bay, Victoria and Ottawa. His writing has been published since 1999, on line and in chapbooks. He lives in northwest Spain where he paints and writes poetry. His novella, *Full-Time JP* is close to his heart and available on request. He aspires to effuse his life in metrics of jazz.

Greg Fewer

A *montréalais* by birth and descent from seventeenth-century colonists, Greg Fewer has grown up and lived largely outside of Canada. His first and, for many years, only published story appeared in 2007. He took up genre writing again in 2018 and has had flash fiction and haiku published in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Polar Borealis*, *Scifaikuest*, *Star*Line*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Utopia Science Fiction*. He was a Dwarf Stars 2021 finalist.

Margaret A. Hanson

Margaret is a reformed scientist who decided that writing speculative fiction was a lot more her speed than actually working in a lab. She is a proper Maritimer, which naturally means she has since moved to Toronto. Margaret has one previous unpaid short fiction publication in the *Brave New Girls Tales of Girls Who Tech and Tinker* charity anthology.

Heddy Johannesen

Heddy is a proud Haligonian who lives in the very haunted town of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax has many ghosts. As an aspiring paranormal investigator, she spends her time researching the local cemeteries where the Titanic victims rest and the local haunted buildings. Her life is ruled by her self-governing cat Penny; she loves to garden and read books.

Her writing has appeared in *The Feminine Macabre*, *Ghosts, Spirits and Specters* Volume 2, *Samhain Secrets*, *Handbook of the Dead*, *Untimely Frost: Poetry Unthawed*, *One Night in Salem*, and *Wax and Wane: A Gathering of Witchy Tales*. She's a member of the Horror Writers Association. She has attended StokerCon Horror Writers Association Horror Writing Convention and The Three Prime Rules of Writing Horror Webinar by Mort Castle.

Don Miasek

Don Miasek is an Editor with tdotSpec, a publishing company headquartered in Toronto, Canada. His works include serving as co-lead editor on the *Imps & Minions* anthology, and the lead editor on the upcoming *Strange Wars* anthology. His published works have appeared in *Polar Borealis* and *Unfit Magazine*. His story *For the Flesh and the Machine* received an honourable mention for the Writers of the Future.

Lee F. Patrick

Lee is a writer of science fiction and fantasy, and sometimes poet, living in Calgary. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee is particularly interested in the stories and poetry of Celtic tradition and history. Lee has four, soon to be five, novels published along with over thirty short works and poems. Look for the novels and some short fiction on Amazon and Kobo in both print and ebook.

Robert Runté

Dr. Robert Runté is senior editor at [Essential Edits](#), a retired Professor, critic, reviewer and promoter of Canadian speculative fiction for over forty years, and the winner of three Aurora Awards. See: [SF Editor](#)

Lynne Sargent

Lynne is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D student currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has been published in venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *Augur Magazine*, and *Plenitude*. Their first collection, *A Refuge of Tales*, was funded through an Ontario Arts Council grant and is forthcoming from Renaissance Press. To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS, or for a complete bibliography, visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com

Tracy Shepherd

Tracy is a professional tarot reader/witch living in Canada. She wrote four novels in 2020; three are straight-up women's fiction and one is high fantasy. She is currently seeking to place them. To date Tracy has published a book of poetry, *In Search of Dracula in a Moon Shot Sky*; and two art books, *Temple of a Space Kitten*; *Unusual Water Colour Portraits* and *I am Thirty Seconds of Ripe Peach*; *Goddess Illustrations*. All three are available on Amazon.

Fran Skene

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

Virginia Carraway Stark

Virginia has had a busy life and puts everything she does into her writing as well as creating worlds of science fiction, fantasy and steampunk as well as many other worlds. She has written dozens of books under her penname Virginia Carraway Stark. She is an international bestseller as well as winning many awards and being nominated for many others. A few notable among those are her Aurora Award nomination, an honorary mention for her essay on

the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and her Birds of a Feather Award for her novel and poetry. She has written screenplays, poetry, blogs, novels, short stories, novellas and group stories. Her film *Blindeye*, starring Roddy Piper, won an honourable mention at the Cannes Film Festival and her short screenplay won second place at the “Reel to Reel” Film Festival.

Carla Stein

Carla’s images and poetry have been published in *Sustenance*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Friday's Poems*, *The Belladonna*, *Lemonsputting*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Sad Girl Review*, *Pocket Lint*, *Please Hear What I’m Not Saying*, an anthology benefiting mental health awareness in the United Kingdom, and other publications. She has released two poetry chapbooks: *Sideways Glances of an Everyday Sailor* and *Shrieking from the Shore*. Carla lives with her family in Nanaimo. B.C. She is the current artistic director for Wordstorm Society of the Arts, and is a co-founder of *15 Minutes of Infamy*, a Nanaimo-based performance venue for word crafters. View her artwork at: www.roaeriestudio.com

Lorina Stephens

Lorina Stephens has worked as editor, freelance journalist for national and regional print media, is author of eight books, both fiction and non-fiction, has been a festival organizer, publicist, lecturer on many topics ranging from historical textiles and domestic technologies to publishing and writing; teaches, and publishes her own works at [Five Rivers Publishing](#)

She has had several short fiction pieces published in Canada’s acclaimed [On Spec](#) magazine, [Postscripts to Darkness](#), [Neo-Opsis](#), [Garden of Eden](#), and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s fantasy anthology *Sword & Sorceress X*.

She lives with her husband of four decades in a historic stone house in Neustadt, Ontario.

Frank Talaber

Frank's Writing Style? He usually responds with: Mix Dan Millman (*Way of The Peaceful Warrior*) with Charles De Lint (*Moonheart*) and throw in a mad scattering of Tom Robbins (*Even Cowgirls Get The Blues*). Or as is often said: You don't have to be mad to be a writer, but it sure helps. He is a natural storyteller, whose compelling thoughts are freed from the depths of the heart and the subconscious before being poured onto the page. He is known to grab readers—kicking, screaming, laughing or crying—and drag them into his novels.

Webpage: <https://franktalaberpublishedauthor.wordpress.com/>

Novels on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Frank-Talaber/e/B00UC407R0>

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

What does the new year hold for me? I look forward to publishing four more issues of *Polar Borealis* and four more issues of *Polar Starlight*, and perhaps at least another forty or so review columns for *Amazing Stories Magazine*. (Since 2014 I have written 233 “Clubhouse” columns.)

I also look forward to completing the second draft of my novel. Not intending to do a massive rewrite so much as to get it to flow smoothly and be internally consistent. It's not a literary novel at all. Might not even be a novel as such. More an attempt to tell an entertaining story centred on a preposterous premise involving non-stereotypical characters. At least, I think that's what I've written. I call it “distinctly oddball” and hope that intrigues.

Once the second draft is done I'll start showing it to people and see what happens. I'm guessing it doesn't fit any useful market niche and no one will want to publish it. So, I'm assuming self-publication some time in 2023.

Meanwhile, I'm immensely pleased with what Rhea E. Rose has accomplished with *Polar Starlight*. I would love to see her win an Aurora Award because of her splendid editing and implementation of her thematic vision. I've won two Auroras. I'd like it to be her turn in 2022. Just thought I'd plant the idea in your head. Shameless advocacy on my part, but Rhea deserves it.