

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #21 – May, 2022)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Issue #21 – May, 2022 (Vol.7#1.WN#21)

Publisher/Editor: R. Graeme Cameron

Proofreader: Steve Fahnstalk

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

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POLAR BOREALIS offers the following Payment Rates:

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

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

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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ISSN 2369-9078 (Online)

Headings: **ENGRAVERS MT**

By-lines: *Monotype Corsiva*

Text: Bookman Old Style

Ad Text: Calibri

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EDITORIAL

I'm kind of excited. Voter packages of nominated works are now available at <https://prixaurorawards.ca> (you must be a member to access them). Membership fee is only \$10.00 CAD. This will entitle you to vote starting June 11th. Please note: membership is open only to Canadians.

Anyway, I'm up for *Polar Borealis* again. Wouldn't mind winning for the third year in a row. On the other hand, I'm even more excited to see that Rhea Rose is nominated in the same category for her editing of my other magazine, *Polar Starlight*, which is entirely devoted to poetry chosen by her. She's done an excellent job and I think it would be splendid if she won an Aurora for her first year editing *Polar Starlight*.

Polar Borealis is nominated for issues #17 to #20, and *Polar Starlight* for issues #1 to #4. You can read both magazines for free at: polarborealis.ca/currentback-issues/

Meanwhile, also in the same category, the 27 reviews of Canadian Speculative fiction books and magazines I wrote last year for Amazing Stories (online) Magazine are up for an Aurora as well. That makes me happy. After all, it is proof that somebody has been reading them! You, too, can read these and many other reviews of mine at <https://amazingstories.com/author/r-graeme-cameron/>

And now, most exciting of all (if you happen to be a Canadian keen on composing SF&F and Horror poetry), ***Polar Starlight Magazine is open throughout the month of May to submissions of genre poems*** 60 lines or fewer. They must be original and not previously published. You may submit up to 5 poems. Any poems chosen by editor Rhea Rose will earn a flat payment of \$10.00 CAD, regardless of length. The selected poems will be published in issues #7 and #8 of *Polar Starlight* in the second half of 2022. A number may be selected for subsequent issues.

Also, it is entirely possible some will be chosen by me for publication in issues #23 and #24 of *Polar Borealis* later this year. The same payment rate of a flat \$10.00 CAD would apply.

Send your submissions to me at polar.borealis.magazine@gmail.com and I will forward them to Rhea. Expect to hear from us in early July.

Yes, it is exciting to be nominated for awards because of one's publications. But it is even *more* exciting to publish other people's creative imaginings for the entertainment of eager readers. Immensely satisfying to do that. Gives me a great sense of accomplishment. Heck of a hobby!

Cheers! *Graeme*

ABANDONED ON EARTH

by Josh Connors

Helplessly abandoned here on earth.
An alien in his own skin.

Everyone here isn't here by choice.
Everyone here was abandoned just like him.

He's told to find what makes him happy,
But that model is out of make.

He's told to cling to what makes him real.
Something, anything, avoid feeling nothing.

He's told death is an option,
But he'll choose to stay, to feel the pain.

He's told a family will give him purpose.
He's told he should own a house.

He knows the more rooms he has the louder
The echo of loneliness will sound.

He's told two contradictory statements,
And either way he'll never win.

He's a loner, he's sick,
He's an alien in his own skin.

SF CANADA, founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. If you are a Canadian Speculative Fiction writer/editor/publisher who meets the minimum requirements, you can join and benefit from the knowledge of more than 100 experienced professionals through asking questions and initiating discussions on SF Canada's private list serve. Be sure to check out our website at:

<https://www.sfcana.org>

AURORA BOREALIS

By Caitlin Marceau

The lights dance overhead, illuminating the dark in pulsating streams of violets, greens, and electric blues. He flicks open the top of his Zippo, striking the flint wheel with his thumb, a small fire springing to life, before lighting his cigarette and taking a drag.

“Here?” the woman asks, annoyed.

He exhales a cloud of smoke in reply.

It’s cold and he pulls his jacket tight around him, the shearling-lined leather doing its best to guard him against the bracing cold. He pulls the collar higher to better conceal his neck and he digs his hands into his pockets, cigarette held between his blue-tinged lips. He stomps his feet in the snow, the white powder crunching beneath his boots as he tries to return some feeling to his legs.

“How much longer?”

“As long as it takes,” she says, breathing into her mittened hand, trying to stay warm.

“They could cut it short and let us go home.”

“It’s a tournament, Johnathan. Kind of a dick move to ask them to cut it short because you’re chilly. You knew where you were going. You should have dressed warmer.”

“Those little fucks could play their games anywhere they want, but they’ve dragged us to the middle of an arctic wasteland because they like how ‘the pretty lights dance.’ Selfish little beasts.”

“Don’t talk about them like that,” she hisses. “You know how they are about rude humans. Besides, you didn’t have to guard the fae. You volunteered for it.”

He snorts. “Volunteered” isn’t the word he’d choose to describe his employment with the fairy folk. If he’d been pressed to describe it, “forced labour in exchange for his wife getting to keep their baby and not a changeling” is the vernacular he’d have picked.

“I volunteered for what was supposed to be a thirty-minute game. It’s been over two hours of this shit and I’m cold, Julia.”

“Then you shouldn’t have signed up to guard them. You know they enjoy their fun.”

He huffs in annoyance and lets the butt of his cigarette fall to the ground, the shortened end glowing red in the dark. He crushes it into the snow with the toe of his boot, blowing the last of the smoke out from between pursed lips.

“You should pick that up,” Julia says, voice quivering. She looks quickly between the discarded trash and the flashes of colour against the blackened sky. “Fast, before they think it’s meant as a sign of disrespect.”

Johnathan chuckles and pulls his pack of smokes out from his pocket, slipping one into the corner of his mouth, dry lips wrapped around the cold filter. He lights it with the Zippo, stuffs everything back into his jacket, and crosses his arms in front of his chest. The lights strobe faster, more aggressively, and the frigid air somehow becomes even colder. There’s a whirring in the distance, like voices talking fast, and a chill runs down Julia’s spine. Johnathan doesn’t seem to notice the sudden change around them, and she takes a step back from the man.

“Please,” she asks again, “pick it up.”

“No.”

The voices get louder and more ferocious, and she can hear them as loudly as her own in the back of her brain. Johnathan, on the other hand, inhales from the cigarette without concern. The wind howls through the cracks in the ice, stirring up drifts of snow which make the air thick. Yellow light flashes across the sky—lightning—and it slices through the aurora borealis before the sky is suddenly black and silent.

“Pick it up, beg for mercy, and promise to make them offerings of milk and honey the *second* you get back home,” Julia says over the rush of the wind.

“No,” he repeats. “I’m not holding onto a damned cigarette butt because these self-important assholes are obsessed with me being rude. It’s bad enough they tried to take—” he stops himself short before taking a breath to clear his head. “No, if they can’t get over themselves, then maybe they deserve to be eaten by frost giants or whatever the hell they’re worried about. Because I’m sure as hell tired of being at on-call and protecting their as—”

A horrible tearing noise fills the air. It’s wet and low and fills Julia with dread in the pit of her stomach. She watches as Johnathan’s head detaches from his neck, the fairy too small for her eyes to see. The lit cigarette falls from his surprise-widened mouth as his head rolls into a nearby snowbank, his body crumpling to the ground in a heap. Blood soaks through the white powder and freezes on the ice around where he once stood.

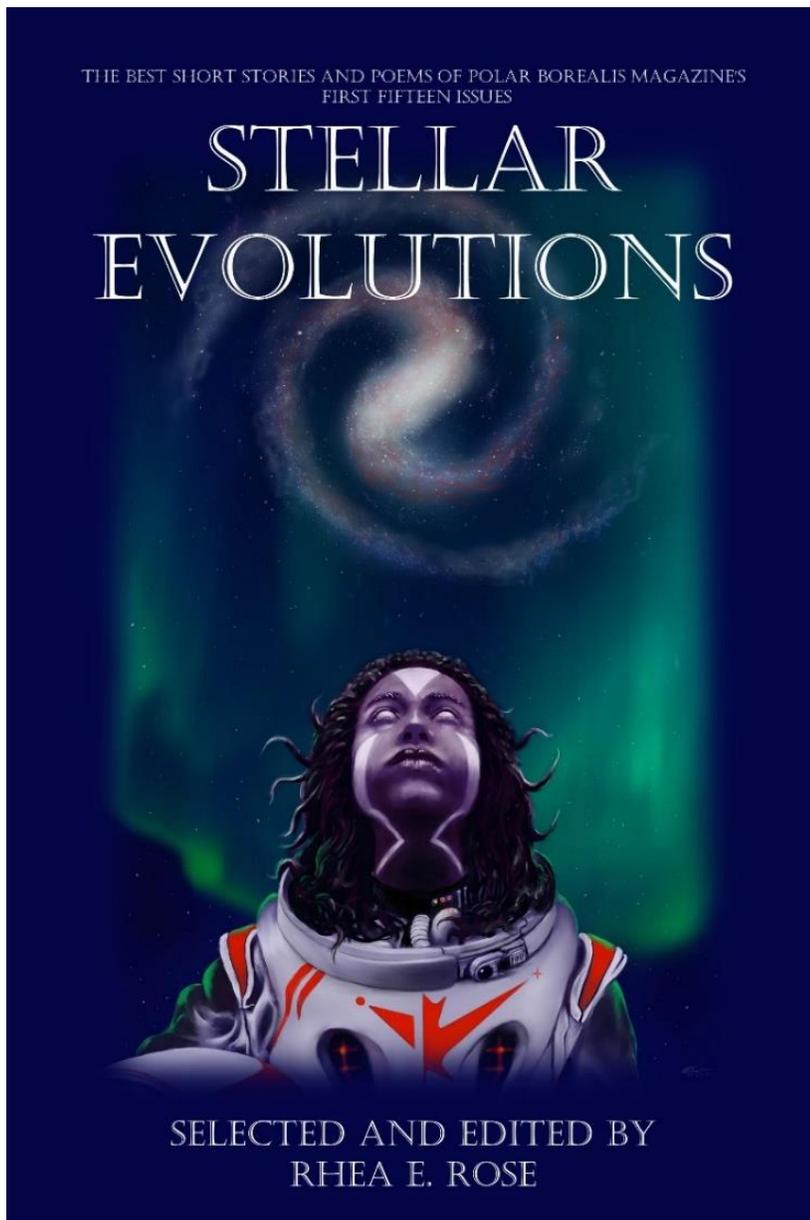
The hair on Johnathan’s head stands up as one of the nearly-invisible fae laces their fingers through it and picks it off the ground, carrying it through the air. It throws it high into the sky, then hits it hard, the clouds alighting

once more with colour as the game resumes, the wicked creatures playing with their new ball.

Julia looks down at the snow and picks up Johnathan's crushed cigarette before admiring the sky once more.

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](#)

ADRIFT

by Cait Gordon

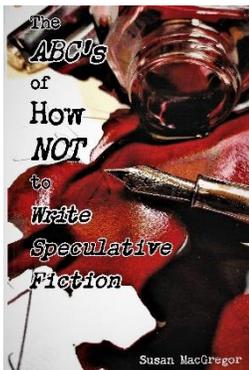
Lost from the convoy, in a holding pattern
Sending one more signal, receiving no reply
Remembering when the blackness
Used to be blue sky
When we once were *we*, but now it's only I

Life support sustains, mask is at the ready
Rationing my FoodPax, they are in low supply
Do they notice I am missing?
Am I just "some" guy?
Were we ever *we*? Am I just simply I?

Sensors still unchanged, no rescue's been engaged
Ship's got maybe one jump, assuming that I try
Their coordinates got scrambled
That console is just fried
To become *we* again... or remain only I...

Shoulders down and back, my torso tall and straight
My mind is quite made up, I lift my chin up high
"Risks with such odds? Taken by fools!"
Maybe I'm that guy
To Hades with their *we*, I'll live for only *I*

Yet...



The ABC'S of How NOT to Write Speculative Fiction by Susan MacGregor

The Graeme comments: This is a rare and wonderful thing, a writing manual which is a delight to read. Precise and to the point, Susan shares editorial expertise gained reading more than 20,000 short story submissions to the slush pile of *On Spec* Magazine. Many of the problems and mistakes she identifies will surprise you... and amuse you. Who knew that learning how to write engagingly would be so entertaining? Much to learn here. Much you *need* to learn.

Find it at: [TheABC's of How NOT to Write Speculative Fiction](#)

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine #33 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:

Cover: *Surf* – by Karl Johanson

Hands on the Wheel – by Robert Dawson

Breaking Camouflage – by Mark Silex

The Sea Child – by Russ Adams

Yellow is the Colour of the End of the World
– by KT Wagner

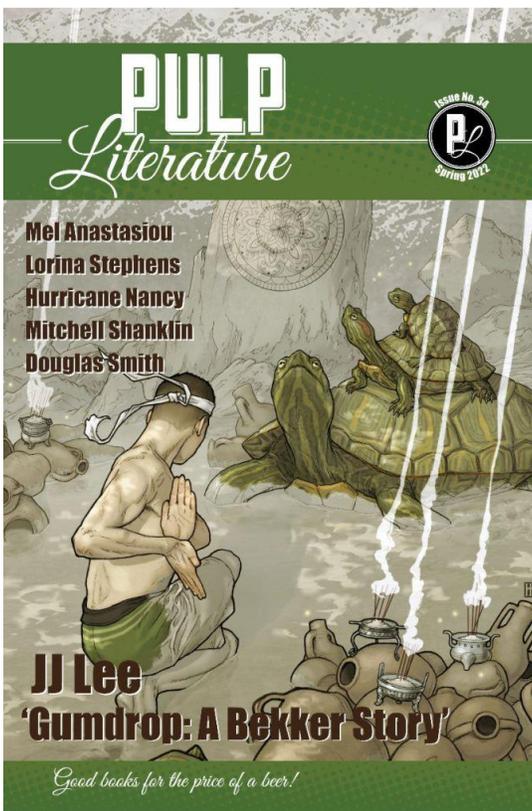
The New Tudors – by Cat Girczyc

The Test – by Karl Johanson

Essential Maintenance – by Michèle Laframboise

Find it here: [Neo-opsis #33](#)

PULP LITERATURE #34 Spring 2022



Cover: *Black Tortoise Kowtows* – by Herman Lau

Contents:

Gumdrop: A Bekker Story – by JJ Lee

The Realm of Shadows – by Megan W. Shaw

Pretty Lies: Fly Away – by Mel Anastasiou

Would We Had Time – by Lorina Stephens

Gerald Bantam Says Goodbye – by Hannah van Didden

The Balance – by Douglas Smith

A Jar of Marmalade – by Laura Kuhimann

Clothesline – by Kimberley Aslett

Respawn – by Michelle Barker

A Gentleman's Primer – by Mitchell Shankin

The Shepherdess: Artifice – by JM Landels

Poetry – by Mitchell Bodo, Alex Kitt, & Derek Webster

Cartoons – by Hurricane Nancy

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #34](#)

SECRETS ABOUT TIME-ENVELOPES

by Derek Nason

“You do everything you can to get ready...” I heard mom talking the last night I was home, before I got sent to the Academy. She thought I was asleep. “...but when they come it turns out they—”

They want kids. That’s what she was gonna say. I heard my aunt Deb reach across the table to hug her. Bottles clanged and fell to the floor.

I can’t remember our goodbye because that was the next day and I was up all night. Thinking. About Academy.

I didn’t think that was possible—being awake ‘til the sun came up. Every time I tried it on Christmas Eve it didn’t work. I guess bad thoughts are stronger than good ones.

I wake up every morning *before* the drill instructor turns the lights on. When everyone drones about it, I drone too, trying to fit in.

After two hours of exercise, we eat. Then it’s Classroom. I used to hate school. But Classroom is nice. You get to *sit*.

The first time we did Classroom someone asked “if the Frae are all about being warriors, why do they fight kids?” Teacher nodded. It’s a weird question because asking it is like you’re admitting you’re afraid to fight them, but it’s what everyone is thinking, so it’s also weird not to ask. Teacher said that, to the Frae, we’re stronger than grown-ups. We have something deep in our blood (I don’t remember the right word, I only know my version of it, which I got by combining two words) called tile-mirrors.

Tile-mirrors are stacked-up inside us. When we’re born we have a tall stack. Before we die, the stack is so small it’s almost gone. That’s how the Frae decide who’s worth fighting. Whoever’s got the biggest stack must be farthest away from death. And that means they’re the strongest.

On that first day, I had a good question. I didn’t ask though, so I still don’t know the answer. It’s this: why don’t they fight newborn babies? They got all the tile-mirrors. I know it sounds dumb because babies can’t fight.

After scientists saw the Frae through telescopes, heading our way, humanity spent all this time building bombs that get big as the sun, only to find that the aliens can make time-envelopes, and every time we shoot a bomb at them they disappear in a time-envelope and come back after the blast is over. And the dumbest thing of all, the only reason they’re here is to take a kid into a time-envelope and have a fight.

So, if all those smart people are gonna make a mistake that big, let's not act like my question is dumb.

I decided on day one of Academy: if a Frae ever envelopes me, I'm gonna ask why it doesn't fight babies.

The first kid that ever made it back is a teacher here. He's the reason we know why the Frae came all this way. He's obsessed with fighting. He was probably a bully before all this.

I was a month into Academy when the first kid from my class was enveloped. Mack. He was my only real friend. The only other one that looked different.

I look *and* sound different (with my high voice). I think kind of different too. I'm always the last one to *get* things in Classroom. So I'm thrice different (Mack taught me that word). Which meant that when my friend disappeared, I was really, really alone. Thrice alone.

I waited and waited. You'd think if someone got in a time-envelope, had a fight, and won, they'd instantly come back. But no. It's all messy with the Frae just like it's messy with people. Sometimes kids come back right away and sometimes it's a while later. Sometimes, because time and space are connected and all that, they show up somewhere else.

When Mack came back, he was sitting at the table of a Chinese family in a chair they'd kept empty because it's where their kid (who got killed by the Frae) sat.

And Mack loved Chinese stuff: movies, comic books. Grown-ups called it a coincidence.

Mack didn't have to train anymore. He wouldn't get enveloped again. But they like the winning kids to come back to Academy for a bit. It lifts our spirits. Shows us we're not all gonna die.

Mack could've gone anywhere, done anything. He was a space war hero. Just like from his comic books. But he stayed. Just to keep me company. Makes me feel all the worse for what I said to him.

We were eating. Our table was full of kids, now that Mack was a hero. I was popular because I was his best bud. I'll admit: I liked it.

There was this quiet moment, and something inside me made me want to fill it with something ugly. I don't know why.

"Why didn't you ask it anything?"

"I told you," he said. "I didn't talk."

We're trained not to talk to the Frae. "Don't talk, don't think—just fight," the teacher says.

"But it was an alien." I couldn't let it go. The other kids got annoyed.

“I didn’t talk. I ran up, took its harpoon, spun it, and broke its neck.” He made his voice deep. He was performing now. “It collapsed like a jellyfish.” Kids cheered. Teachers joined in. It was all so fake. Mack didn’t even know the word “collapsed”; a grown-up taught it to him so he wouldn’t say “fell-all-apart.”

The mess hall was still clapping. I leaned in close and asked: “don’t you ever get suspicious?” Suspicious was a word I just learned. I thought it made me smart, but right then it was making me a jerk.

“Whattaya mean?”

“I mean everything happened just like it should.”

“So?” He stopped whispering. The other kids were looking at me.

“Whattaya sayin’?”

“I’m sayin’ the Sim Room feels pretty real, right? What if this was a newer, even realer one? And the grown-ups, I don’t know, needed a hero?”

Book.

Close your eyes and say *book*. That’s what a punch sounds like from inside your head. Mack booked me. Then someone else booked me. Then someone else. The teachers had to pull them all off.

When I was healed up, Mack was gone. Which was good. I was holding him back from his dream life. Now he was free.

The rest of the year at Academy came and went. The snow came and went. I didn’t even notice it because they don’t let us outside. Half my class disappeared. None of them came back.

And then I got enveloped.

I don’t think anyone noticed at first when I disappeared from the mess hall. I was a for-real loner by then.

There was a circle of dim light. I was alone in it, with a Frae.

I wasn’t scared. I was glad. A year is a long time to be away from mom. I was ready.

It made a sort of sniffing sound. It was pink and purple. Shorter than me but thrice as wide. I hadn’t grown any taller yet, but the conditioning made me solid and fast. Just standing there: it felt like I could do anything, be anywhere, as soon as I wanted.

The harpoon dropped from its long jelly arm. “Oh,” it said, and picked it back up. I knew if it tried anything with it I could move out of the way. And if I couldn’t—fine. My mom would get a ton of money from the government.

“Why do you wanna fight?”

A head grew from a thin neck like a flower. It made its body skinnier.

“Why me? Why kids?”

“Oh.” A bunch of scales poked out on its head. Its eyes got big and looked down at me.

“Oh,” I said back, mocking-like. I hated this thing. Or maybe I hated how my life turned out waiting for it to show up. “You sound real smart. Let me ask you: if you’re all about tile-mirrors, why don’t you fight babies? Huh? Do you wish I was a baby right now? Do something with that stick and I bet you’ll wish I was a baby.”

“Oh.” It looked at the harpoon in its arm, like it was surprised to see it. That was all I needed. My training took over.

It saw me charging, screamed “oh!” and threw the harpoon. I was already in the air. I caught it, spun it, and stuck it into it. It went right through, like it was made of the stuff that comes off old dandelions. My eyes were closed because we’d been trained to be able to do it with our eyes closed, and I didn’t want to watch. It died quietly, not taking too long. “Oh... oh.”

When I opened my eyes I was back in the mess hall, about a foot from where I’d been sitting. Some time had passed. My class was done lunch. The Novices were eating theirs. All five or six years old.

Nobody clapped or anything. A girl covered her tray so I wouldn’t get purple blood on her food.

When I got home my aunt was gone. My mom is someone who needs someone. She needs people so hard it drives them away, she once told me.

Even though there was one less person there were thrice as many bottles. I could go find Mack but I know he doesn’t want me to.

I really liked Mack. More than you’re supposed to like friends. I think he knew that. He hoped I’d never say anything about it.

Sometimes TV people come over because I’m a hero. Mom always gets excited for it. She’s got this dress she wears every time.

None of the TV people know I think about Mack all day. Ever since everything became about fighting, people don’t want to hear about that kind of stuff. Especially if it’s about two boys.

I think that’s bad. I know it’s better now and everything because we used to fight each other and now we don’t because we’re fighting someone else, but I don’t care.

When I’m sitting with my mom and we’re having breakfast, I’m not thinking about winning fights in time-envelopes. I’m thinking about Mack. About being grown-ups with him. Maybe even raising babies with him. Babies that’ll never know what a punch sounds like from the inside.

And that’s my secret. That’s all I wanted to tell you.

THE END OF THE EARTH

by Carolyn Clink

*(
Everything has its time
and everything dies. – Dr. Who*

She thought you were here to save the world,
save her, save everything.

You showed her love and death
through time and space.

You showed her she could not save her father.
You showed her everything and the end of everything.

Even when you changed, she followed you everywhere
through time and space forever, it seemed.

Until you left her, as you'd left so many.
Never your fault. Never.

Never your fault. Never.
Until you left her, as you'd left so many

through time and space forever. It seemed
even when you changed, she followed you everywhere.

You showed her everything and the end of everything.
You showed her she could not save her father.

Through time and space
you showed her love and death.

Save her? Save everything?
She thought you were here to save the world.

THE BOGATYR AND THE CURSED INN

by Charles Moffat

The gypsy started plucking at his violin, a few plucks at a time before transitioning to playing a melody with his bow. As he did so another gypsy joined in with a hurdy-gurdy, seamlessly blending the music of both instruments with masterful talent. Gypsy girls began to dance slowly around the campfire, to the delight of the fat old merchants who made their trade on the roads south of the Holy City of Kost.

The trade route ran through of the safest region in the kingdom of Korovia, for knights from the Holy City patrolled the roads, keeping the peace and driving off bandits and wandering monsters. Further south were towns and cities populated by Halflings, too insular and set in their ways to stir up trouble beyond their borders.

The merchant caravan and the gypsies were camped at a fork in the road. Next to their campsite were old crumbling stone ruins that marked the site of an inn which had been burned to the ground long before living memory by dragon fire. Some claimed it was haunted by the ghosts of those the dragon had slain, which is why the inn was never rebuilt. No one wanted to stay in a haunted inn.

Off to the east side of the camp was a lone Bogatyr, a title-less knight who dabbled in magic and the supernatural. Tall and strong he was, a warrior without a doubt, huddling under his furs to conserve the warmth from his tiny fire. He could have added more firewood, but he was loath to do so.

He rested one hand on his sword hilt, his eyes on the ruins of the old inn. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of something in the ash-covered ruins. Something transparent that shone with a dim white light.

He stood and paced slowly towards the inn, the fingers of his right hand tapping his sword hilt impatiently. His horse nickered loudly when he walked out of the firelight and through the shadow of the dead elm tree to which it was tethered.

Most of the inn was gone, but the parts of it made of stone still stood. He passed through the charred remains of what must have once been a grand foyer and into a great hall beyond, its recesses shrouded in gloom.

He drew his sword and held it aloft like a torch. "Ilumina!" As he spoke the last syllable of magic the sword gave off a white light, akin to the moonlight of the silver moon Metrequia. The light penetrated the darkness and upon a

shattered throne at the far end of the hall a ghostly apparition of a young woman cloaked in fine clothes shifted her gaze and regarded him.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice sounding distant and yet pleasant. “Are you a ghost?”

The Bogatyr laughed. “No, I only see one ghost here, and that is you. Why do you still haunt this place, oh fair spirit?”

She, in turn, laughed. “Me? I am no ghost. I live here. This is my family’s inn, as it has been for centuries. But it is you who is the spirit, for why else would you be immaterial?”

The Bogatyr blinked. “You think I be the apparition? Is that truly what you see?”

She nodded.

“And what else do you see?” he asked, waving his sword at their ruined surroundings.

“My home,” she said proudly, defiantly. “The grandest inn on the southern highway, once the mead hall of a great king, my most distant ancestor.”

“I see a wretched wreck of an inn. This place died long ago, destroyed by a dragon, as the legends reveal,” the Bogatyr said.

“There are no dragons here, spirit, just you,” she replied. “A demented ghost who cannot see what is real with his dead eyes. What devil sent you hither?” She stood and went to the wall, a ghostly translucent torch appearing in her hand from where an iron sconce still clung to the stone wall.

She turned towards him, brandishing the torch as if it were a club. “Leave here, spirit, you are not wanted in my abode!” she declared.

The Bogatyr snorted. “I don’t take orders from ghosts,” he answered, holding his sword at the ready. “If I best you, will you finally see the light and move on to the afterlife?”

“I should ask the same of you, you confused spirit. What makes you so certain that you are not the ghost in this fight?”

The Bogatyr smiled gently. “As surely as I know there are gypsies and merchants camped outside who dare not enter this ruin, for they know it to be haunted. You say this inn is your family’s, and has been for centuries? Aye, a desolation for centuries, the grave of you and your kin. You are the spirit in this because I am your future and you are from ages past.”

“Nonsense!” she shouted, swinging her torch at him.

He dared not let any part of her incorporeal form, or her ghostly torch, touch his mortal flesh. He parried it easily and deflected it to the side.

She swung again, and again he struck the torch away, causing her to stumble. She bumped into something invisible, and an ancient cask popped

into view to roll across the floor, spilling an evil-smelling liquid where the stonework was cracked and charred.

“Begone, foul spirit!” she shouted. She backed off a few steps, then charged at him, seeking to strike him with her torch, using a vicious overhead swing of undoubted force. But before it could connect she slipped on the wet pavement and fell, the torch tumbling from her hand into the spew from the cask.

Bright white flames engulfed the young woman, twisting coldly about her writhing body. She screamed and tried to roll to smother the tongues of fire, but they consumed her with an icy grip.

To the Bogatyr’s eyes she resembled a spasming ice sculpture covered in burning frost. He backed away from her, uncertain. Whatever supernatural fire this was, he wanted no piece of it. It was a deathly thing, a distorting torment beyond the realm of the living.

The ghost-fire spread quickly, burning and illuminating parts of a building that was no longer there, and scorching the stonework of what little actual ruin remained. He had no desire to stay and fled the building, seeking refuge near the dead elm tree outside.

Gigantic, leaping flames of white ice spread through the non-existent structure, illuminating the night sky and the grey clouds above. The merchants and gypsies had ceased their music, some backing away in superstitious fear and others drawing near with an insatiable curiosity.

Now the Bogatyr understood. No dragon had destroyed this fine inn. ’Twas a common fire, and somehow, through some fluke of time and destiny, he had been the catalyst. He had been destined to kill the inn and its owner long before he was ever born.

He sheathed his sword as he walked back to his camp, turning his back on the flames that shone through the ages. He dared not go near it. Ghosts he could handle, but a fire from centuries past might pull him backward in time... Thinking about what then might occur, the very prospect, hurt him to contemplate and he didn't relish the headache.

He kicked dirt on to his puny campfire and untied his horse from the elm tree. He mounted the horse and turned it toward the south. If he made good time he could reach a certain Halfling village where he knew of a genuine inn that served genuine pints of creamy golden ale.

He needed a contemporary drink, a dose of reality. Perhaps then he could put the memory of this brush with the past behind him.

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

by Douglas Shimizu

“Another trip around the sun” they say.
Sounds like so much fun.
Wish it were on a starship soaring
Rather than boring old terra firma.

I miss the stars blurring past the portholes,
The Doppler rainbow as we hit warp speed,
Like the icicle Christmas lights
We used to hang around the tree.

While our song for this season is usually
“I’ll Be Home For Christmas,”
Now I long for it to be “Rocketman”
And no telling where you’d find me.

But for now,
Earthbound. Flight Status: “under review.”
Not the present I asked Santa for.
Ground assignment: Operations Centre,
But, hey, I’ve been here before.

How did I get on the naughty list?
Commit what crime to get the Admiral pissed?
Being an officer and a gentleman
We won’t discuss his daughter I kissed.
(allegedly).

So, the charge is “conduct unbecoming”
But it’s a claim that’s unlikely to stick.
They’ll soon need their smoothest pilot speeding
Like a sleigh handled by old Saint Nick.

A new class of starship preps in space dock
And I’m not letting it leave without me.
Come launch date, spring, come find me aboard,
Captain’s chair, bridge, that’s where I’ll be.



FICTION:

- Oikos Needs Cooks*
– by Geneviève Blouin
Sins Between Man and his Fellow
– by Alex Langer
What Bones Remain
– by Cynthia Zang
Three Knives – by Jared Millet
Infected – by Koji A. Dae
Sales Pitch
– by Michèle Laframboise
Dragon’s Fire
– by Katrina Nicholson
Wayfinder – by Marcelle Dubé

COVER:

- The World We Left Behind*
– by Swati Chavda

NON-FICTION:

- Editorial: What’s Old is New and What’s New is Old*
– by Susan MacGregor
Artist Interview with Swati Chavda
– by Cat McDonald
Author Interview with Michèle Laframboise
– by Cat McDonald
Bots: “Kawaii3” and “Zombies” cartoon
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Get it at: [On Spec #119](https://www.onspec.ca/)

The Graeme has a blog! Yes, indeed. I repurposed my OBIR website from a review magazine into a self-promotion blog. Only a few blogs so far. I write one whenever the mood strikes me. My latest is titled “The Inevitability of Procrastination.” I hope to write at least one blog a week. I also hope to provide links to my new personal SF fanzine “Great Galloping Ghu!” if I ever get around to publishing the first issue. Procrastination, you know. Check out the website at: <https://obirmagazine.ca/>

THE UNDINE'S VOICE

by Melanie Marttila

Terza had waited to get back to the water all of her adult life, bound by concrete and asphalt and the burden of survival. Terza had retired as soon as possible, bought this cottage, spent the winter do-it-herselfing the place into the semblance of a home. But it was time. It would be bone-numbingly cold. Perfect.

Terza ran to the end of the dock before she could talk herself out of it, plunged beneath the surface of the frigid, late-May water, returning home, sunk to the bottom, floated languidly up.

Isn't it time you admitted what you are, sister?

The bubbly, water-fogged voice propelled Terza to the surface but, as soon as she'd taken a breath, she dove back under. Expelling breath in small bursts, she sank, stayed until spots danced at the edges of her vision, then launched off the weedy bed, to the surface, gasping and treading water.

She dove again. And again.

When she emerged and ran shivering back to her retirement home, Terza stripped her bathing suit in the mud room and towelled briskly before dashing to her bedroom to dress. Her lips still showed blue in the mirror, like some recalcitrant child at the beach.

What am I, then, and why does some disembodied voice in the water care?

###

She'd bought the cottage because of the lake. The water had tugged on her insides when the real estate agent had taken her around. There were cheaper properties that didn't need half as much work, but Terza had insisted on this one.

She'd been found on the shore of this lake when she was a baby. Kismet. Serendipity. Whatever it was, she belonged here. Now, she might find out why.

###

The gills that appeared between her ribs—a painful evolution that nearly drowned her after a week of daily aquatic devotions—allowed Terza to remain submerged until she grew numb from the still-icy depths. No matter how long she swam, though, the voice didn't speak again, nor could she find its owner.

She gained weight, a sleek covering of warming fat between sagging skin and brittle bones. Her fingers and toes itched through the growth of webbing.

Her skin, fish-belly pale to begin with, jaundiced, turned green, and then blossomed into the loveliest shade of turquoise. She anticipated a lovely, jewel-toned sapphire. Her skin grew damp. Nothing to affect her clothes—when she wore them.

Terza stared at her transformation, a hysterical giggle swallowed, irrational fear firmly shoved to the back of her mind.

Whatever I am, it's weird.

###

The sound of a car rolling up on the packed gravel driveway brought Terza sneaking to the window to peek through lacy curtains.

Shae—shit. She'd agreed to host her friend for Canada Day long weekend. It's July? Already?

The pause was momentary, and Terza whirled into action, clothes, tidying, sweeping—what would Shae say when frog-woman opened the door? Hiding what she'd become—or hiding, period—hadn't occurred to Terza, wasn't an option.

There was a cheerful rappa-tap-tap.

Terza froze until the clang of the old brass bell mounted beside the door set her in motion again. She opened the door.

Shae screamed, turned, and stumble-ran back to her car.

"It's me. It's Terza. Shae—" She gripped the door frame, her knees jelly.

When Shae reached her car, she whirled and collapsed onto its hood, rocking the suspension as she fumbled with her phone.

"What are the police going to do with me? I'm not sick. I'm just... changing."

###

Twenty minutes of fear-stricken coaxing, two hours of awkward conversation, and most of a bottle of Merlot later, Shae was cry-laughing on the old, floral-patterned couch. "Jane said retirement would transform you. She wasn't half wrong."

"I don't think this—" Terza posed and indicated the whole of her alien glory with an elegant gesture— "was what Jane had in mind." She'd abstained and let Shae self-medicate. Even the smell when she'd opened the bottle nauseated her.

"What's happening to you, anyway?" Shae's voice shook. The whites of her eyes were prominent.

Terza thought they'd gotten past that, that she'd told Shae all there was to tell. Sighed. "I don't know, but I think whatever I'm becoming is what I always

was?” Her adoptive parents had kept her away from the water, told her the story of how her three-year-old self had fallen in once when they were on vacation. She’d been so sick, they said—or had she?

Shae watched her with round eyes.

“I was found not far from here, the only survivor of three, hence my name. They thought I was lucky. I don’t know who—or maybe what—my birth mother was.”

Shae looked at her like Terza was about to grow tentacles. She couldn’t deny the possibility. “Including you, I can count the friends I’ve had in my entire life on one hand. I’ve never fit in anywhere.” I want to fit in here. Let me go, please.

“You fit in at work.” Shae emptied the dregs of the bottle into her glass and waggled the empty at Terza, tentative, uncertain.

“I did my work well,” Terza corrected as she moved to the wine rack. “I didn’t have anything else to devote myself to after my parents died. I only have Pinot left.”

“Please.”

Terza opened the bottle and exchanged it for the empty. “You should let that breathe. I’ll hold your hair back, but I won’t thank you if I have to mop up your puke.”

Shae relaxed with the navigation into familiar waters, rolled her eyes but set the wine on the driftwood coffee table anyway. “You were the best of us. Place has fallen apart since you left.”

Terza didn’t care. She’d tried to implement some succession planning, teach someone else all she’d learned, but no one took her up on the offer. That life was prelude, though. This cottage, this lake, this evolving body of hers—this was something new. True. A beginning.

###

Terza dreamed of a tangle of flesh and woke, her body alive in a way she barely remembered. When had that part of her shrivelled up? Maybe it had never developed properly in the absence of her native element.

She resisted the call of the water, not wanting to leave Shea alone in the cottage without explanation. She hadn’t submerged since Shae arrived, certain it would frighten her when Terza didn’t come up for air, no matter how many assurances she offered beforehand. She couldn’t puddle around anymore. Terza had to go deep. The next time she dove, she might not come up.

###

Terza focused on Shae for the rest of her visit, closing a final door on her old life. They talked about their work friends, reminisced about past road trips and lost weekends, played board games, and read books together in silence. Shae drank every bottle of wine Terza had left, which was just as well.

Shae sunned on the dock but didn't swim or ask to use the canoe by unspoken agreement. She didn't bring up Terza's "condition" again. Terza felt the weight of Shae's gaze on her often, though. She repressed her instinct to lash out. Shae wasn't a threat.

They had a surprisingly good view of the fireworks at the Science Centre in town on Sunday night. The larger, higher bursts, anyway.

By Monday morning, Terza's skin had faded to a sickly green and she hid her irritation with an effort she hoped Shae didn't notice. After breakfast, Terza saw Shae to her car. "Don't take this the wrong way, but this is goodbye."

"Are you going to...?" Shae's gaze drifted toward the lake.

"Yes."

"Well. Good luck, then." Shae drew Terza in for an awkward hug. "I'll miss you."

Once, maybe. Now? "I'll miss you, too." Terza hoped the lie sounded sincere.

Terza didn't even wait for the car to roll out of sight before she was back in the house, shucking clothes and tidying up one last time. Then, surveying the cottage she'd thought would be her retirement home, Terza pulled the blinds, shut off the water and drained the lines, locked up, and hid the key under a stone in the back garden.

When she entered the water, it was like being able to breathe for the first time in days. She dove down and down, and at the deepest part of the lake, she looked up, watched the sunlight diffract in the water like crepuscular rays through clouds.

Something silken touched her shoulder.

There you are, sister. Welcome home.

Do you enjoy reading Polar Borealis? Most of the time I manage to put aside enough money out of my pensions such that I can publish four times a year, but sometimes unexpected expenses delay publication. If you could contribute \$1 a month, or \$2, or \$5 via my Patreon site, I'd be most grateful. Every bit helps me to keep to my schedule.

See < [Patreon Site for Polar Borealis Magazine](#) >

THE FRIGHTENING SPIRIT

by Heddy Johannesen

This desire is so passionately tender
in your ardent eyes, a prayer to my heart's
chambers. Your eyes are mirrored in the
Spirit's lusty dance under a
misty moonlight.
I turn away.

A pale vision I am, clad
in an ivory gown, a strong
ochre sphere holds me, you
kiss me, I know you love me.

The glowing sphere doesn't burn
nor harm me, safe from the
delirious ghost
on the windy moors.

Silence, steaming, rising.
Sea waves under the moat dizzy me.
Love uttered like heartbeats flapping
of rustling crow's wings.

Oh, guard me in the gold sphere,
the crow's
sharp eyes
pierce through the night,
resting atop a tombstone.

Alas... sunlight emerges to stir life on earth.
Be present, be near, we will breathe to a
twin chime, to sweet life deep in a love
richer than the frightening spirit's dance.

NIX DELICIOUS

by James Grotkowski

All life and so definitely including delicious life, requires energy input, energy storage, energy reorganisation, energy output and conditions to allow for the reasonably consistent access to that energy. Then life gathers, builds, destroys and saves information in such a way that those energy and information processes can recur indefinitely. That's a little too much for bacteria to understand. They just do; eat, drink and be merry. By merry I mean multiply. Bacteria multiply by division. It's a good thing that they don't do sex because otherwise the whole world would be shaking, continuously and merrily.

On Nix, however, there are no bacteria. Close, but not quite. Close insofar as outward appearance goes. The Strake, though tiny, know many things, including the processes of life, but not about bacteria. Any bacteria would be four billion miles away.

The Strake have had a semi-long standing scientific debate about the pale blue dot circling third from the Star. There are analyzed indications of a large amount of oxygen in Dot's atmosphere. Because oxygen is usually not a naturally occurring atmospheric component many believe it must have arisen from some kind of biological action; life. Life elsewhere in the universe! Let alone life in the local Star system! The "LIFE—We-Are-Not-Alone" advocates and the skeptics twist the facts to support their viewpoints but both sides agree that Dot's atmosphere is not normal. The debate is due for a shakeup.

Everything on Nix shakes. It's been doing that since before the Strake evolved, so the paleontologists and cosmologists say. Ehhe and Bea have been doing their close sky dance for more than a million Star orbits. They dance everywhere in the black as they hold each other so tight. The Star that shines and warms upon Nix traces a tangled path just inside of the heavens too. The distant crystal-sphere-affixed stars move just as chaotically as the transparent shells appear to spin and dive. Finally, just after the life of the discoverer of the laws of Brownian motion, scientific methodology gained a foothold in the Strake intellectual world. Thanks to observations of the motions of Hydra. The new breed of astronomers saw that heavenly object tumbling as it tumbled. Then they thought that perhaps Nix itself tumbles. Eureka! With that epiphany they deduced that Nix and her trio of sisters orbited Ehhe and Bea and that Ehhe and Bea orbited the Star as did the Dot and the other Wanderers. It was all so simple. As Nix orbits Ehhe and Bea it itself widely tumbles and shakes

instead of spinning smoothly on an axis. Ah, that's why it is so hard to decipher the machinery of orbital dynamics: all of the skies move as Nix sweeps randomly around, nothing has any consistency, all outward views are chaotic. It's a great thing that the Strake are tiny, else the jerking inertial forces from Nix's gyrations would not be masked by the molecular motion randomness in their tiny tiny world.

###

Guh-behhe had a telescope. The scope's mounting bracket was a marvel of Strake technology. It could swivel and twist with crazy accuracy. He only had to entwine a couple dozen of his more sensitive filaments to control the device. Through its steady viewpiece Guh-behhe spied a speck where there should not have been a speck. His preliminary scribbled calculations indicated that the pinpoint could be on a trajectory that traced unnervingly close to the known worlds of Nix, Ehhe and Bea.

"Guh-behhe, get your butt down here for dinner!" commed Ma-mehhe. Guh-behhe didn't have much of a butt. More of a vacuole bulge. He swam down and across the artificial plasm divider to engulf the nutrient bag that his progenitor had made for him. Over oxidized yet again. He inadvertently scrunched his whisker filaments and Ma-mehhe (the horrible cook) sensed it. Progens were all too aware of things like scrunching. But Guh-behhe signalled that he was just over-excited by the speck. He ingested the yuck of the bag without further expression. Ma-mehhe was on a diet and was only snacking on virus capsules these spins and as usual she was unaware of Guh-behhe's struggles.

When finally done he touched filament tips with Ma-mehhe, conveyed his love, and hurriedly swam back to his scope. At 140K mag, the speck had moved. New calculations confirmed and refined the forecast trajectory. In a couple dozen spins it would zip within possible slingshot range of Nix. What was it? He wrapped his mathematics and notes in a secure liposome packet and torpedoed his discovery to his clone friend/sibling at the Strake Orbital Dynamics and Slingshot Bubble.

Luh-bea loved haute cuisine. She retrieved Guh-behhe's calculations and then politely ate the phospholipid capsule. Though so very utilitarian for the Strake epiplasmic-torpedo comm network, the packets were also delicious. "Thank-you, Guh-behhe" she minded, for she was well aware of Ma-mehhe's awful concoctions and of the resolve Guh-behhe must have had to have his filaments on such a morsel but yet use it for comm. She studied the information. 2.9 baryspins and the new dot would buzz by.

Luh-bea had a bigger telescope than did Guh-behhe. She flicked her fourteenth filament with prideful glee. Not only a telescope but a quantumscope too. It had been tracking the mysterious dot for four cloneparts now. Her divisions had been dutifully pasted to the omnipresent pioneer thread that was drawing all the newbies to the deep crater with the old reliable heat source. “What would their life be like?” she often wondered. All the while the dot drew closer. It really wasn’t just a dot anymore. Even Guh-behhe’s instrument would see more than a speck. She saw golden reflectance, a couple of protruding rods and an oversized disk like the inner surface of a smooth crater. It was definitely artificial and coming her way. The “Life—we-are-not-alone” advocates would be riotously overjoyed. The “We-are-the-reason - everything is” N-Gazers would have some unwanted adjustments to make. Luh-bea and Guh-behhe would have to be careful with their news.

But that wasn’t all. The quantumscope revealed more. Strong echoes of the long-ago-vibrations of oxygen were discerned on the artificial. Echoes just like those from the pale blue dot. It had to have come from there. And the Qscope revealed that the artificial was or had recently been delicious. Traces of phospholipids and exotic proteins, both of exquisite culinary regard, were detected. The Strake would have loved to eat them. But digestive desires could not hold precedence.

Luh-bea and Guh-behhe decided to broadcast notice of their discovery on the epiplasmic-grid. They needed assistance with any plans for the trajectory and they couldn’t keep their news private because the artificial would soon enough be visible to all. Besides, having the biggest news in the history of the world was something hard to keep bottled up.

Fortunately the N-Gazers were mostly unschooled and it was going to take them some time to assimilate and to confront the information from the news conference. The working personnel from the Strake Orbital Dynamics and Slingshot Bubble were able to hear the news in an excited yet organized and peaceful way. After the announcement of the impending fly-by, the crowd elected a “what’s next” team. Guh-behhe and Luh-bea were necessarily part of that group. They all knew that time was short. Before that first meeting ended it was decided that Guh-behhe would be slingshot off-world to intercept the artificial. He would likely die out there but it would be a spectacular way to go. Even the N-Gazers would envy that kind of martyrdom. Guh-behhe at first wasn’t all that enthralled with the team’s decision. Soon, though, and with more details resolved, he developed more enthusiasm for his fate.

He would be fattened up with loads of message capsules. That was fantastic. Then he’d be partition accelerated and his several clone-parts

thereby produced would be glued to the pioneer thread and zipped off to the hearth crater for a life of privilege. That was royal treatment.

Then he'd been given the honour of working on the slingshot development for a few days. The slingshot was a new thing for the Strake. It was ultra-hi-tech and news of its concept, design and existence had only recently been released. Flying or streaking through space was not something easy for the Strake to conceive; after all they were tiny; they couldn't jump or walk or fly. All they could do was swim in thin liquid films. Flying was out of bounds for their mindset until the slingshot was imagined. Along with the device came the concepts of the Strake themselves being able to do the flying and hurtling. That sparked wild conjecture and creativity within their intellectual community. The feat of free flying was obvious only after the fact of its conceptualization. Now Guh-behhe could dream of flying as he worked on increasing the power of the slingshot.

So far he could fly across the room. He needed several more orders of magnitude of slingshot power to be able to surpass Nix's feeble escape velocity and several more magnitudes of power increase to match speed with the zooming artificial to allow intercept.

Lub-bea was best recognized within the Strake scientific community for her contributions to telescopy. It was understandable that she was having a difficult time transitioning her attention and skills to the discipline of slingshot. But the best scientists often draw from multi-disciplinary work and that ended up being the case as Lub-bea solved the slingshot power deficiency problem. It turned out that the quark strings that she used to focus her Q-scope happened to be on her mind. The thought flashed to her that if she could entwine the strings in a twisted braid and if the paired quark nodules that were spaced along the strings could be induced to weakly bond, one string's nodules to the other strings nodules, then she'd have her solution. The braid could be powerfully contracted in a coiling and shortening chain reaction effect induced by using a fifth quark to annihilate the unstable nodules. Soon thereafter she envisioned Guh-behhe slingshot-hurtling through space and crashing into the artificial in a triumphant kind of way.

A Strake can live in the vacuum, radiation and vagaries of space. That's where they evolved. Well, in the liquid films on the surface of Nix where there was no atmosphere to shelter from space. Space was a filament's length away most of the time. A consequence of this was that Guh-behhe needed nothing other than his plump self for his slingshot voyage. Luh-bea's braid was now tested and verified as an inter-planetary enabling device. Because of her slingshot certification program there were several capsules containing Ma-mehhe cuisine discards now in orbit around Ehhe and Bea.

###

The flying dot was currently visible to unaided sight as a twinkle twisting through Nix's tumbling skies. The slingshot was ready and armed. The astronaut was in pocket position.

Guh-behhe's only accessory was a nanoburster. The burster was a recorder and transmitter of data. The plan was for the operator to enter everything possible about the artificial during the first few hours post-intercept. Then a single burst would be activated and the data would transmit in a quantum-entangled manner back to Nix. A lone expensive and complicated device capable of producing that one blast of data was all that the Strake could prepare in time for the launch. That was all they needed. That burst, they thought, would corroborate, annotate, and substantiate the greatest discovery in the history of the world.

Luh-bea had calculated the trajectory and the timing of the flight of Guh-behhe with ultra-fine precision. They would wait for the artificial to speed past their moon and then they'd aim Guh-behhe in an acute-angled side collision approach to the object as the trajector and the trajectee receded. The time came to be. The Strake's slingshot force of acceleration was huge, but as Guh-behhe was microscopic, his tiny form could withstand the moment of the surge.

###

Now he was coursing through space. The first Strake to fly. Guh-behhe was rotating end over end. Rotating not dizzyingly fast, but quick enough to force his filaments along the spin equator to extend outwards. Guh-behhe was a flying hairball.

After flying for what felt like an eternity the hairball hit its target hard. But Guh-behhe stuck. His spin and flinging filaments had absorbed some of the impact energy. He'd smacked into the artificial and he did not bounce, but instead slid along a golden foil surface only to come to rest on that film when he slid up against the ragged upturned edges of what looked to be a random hole. Guh-behhe recognized the hole. The newly space-faring species of the Strake knew well the effects of micro-meteorite hits because their home, Nix, itself continuously suffered that circumstance. It was hard to move without a liquid support environment but the astronaut was able to tortuously pull himself over and around the splayed foil of the piercing and into the interior of the artificial.

The food was good... no, great! Guh-behhe loved his phospholipids and here there were all the packets he could ever wish for. Some were almost his size and some appeared to harbor elements of life. He didn't know what they were but bacteria were good eating dead or alive. There wasn't much else for

him to do. He crawled around in a most inelegant spasmodic filament-flopping manner for many hours. Always there was food, (he'd have to partition soon), but he found nothing else of interest to report.

He noticed though, that in the pure vacuum of space he was beginning to crystallize and that was certainly going to bring his awkward mobility to a stop. He'd better report back to Nix. At last Guh-behhe unstrapped his nanoburster and set to writing an account of his flight and his circumstance. He also wrote that the artificial appeared to indeed have been produced by some intelligence that was good at laying out foil and that was good at providing food packets for wayward hairballs. He wrote that he could feel heat sources and a tingling of electronic codes but so far he'd found nothing but foil and rivets.

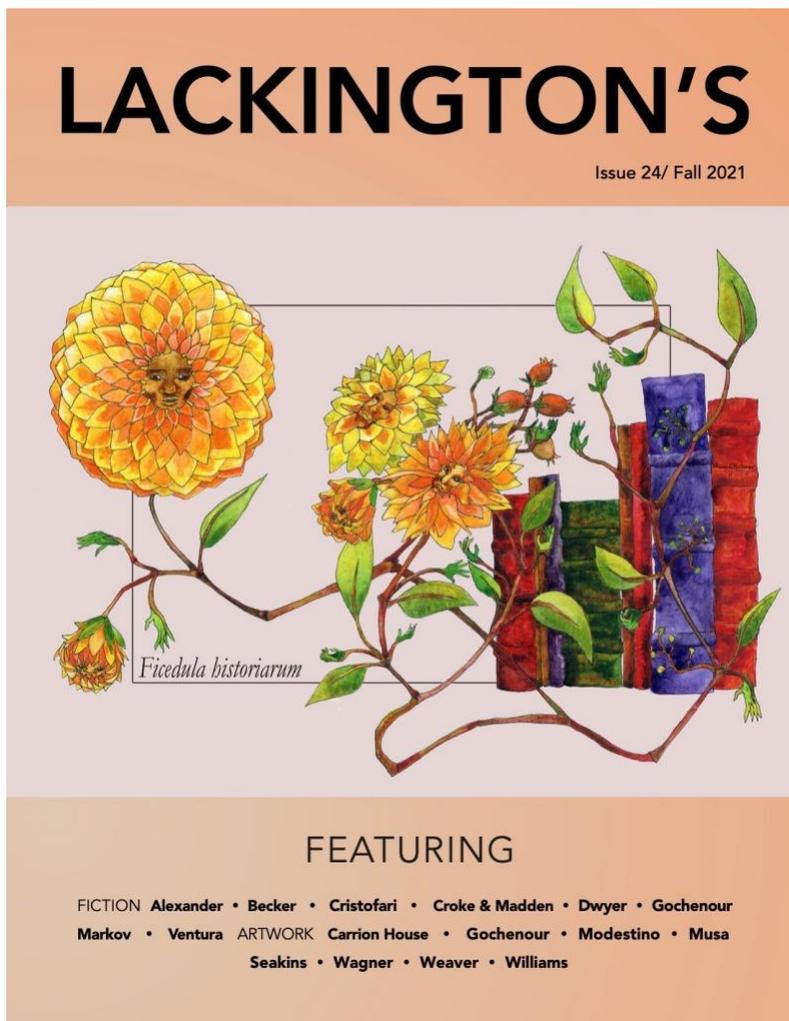
Luh-behhe got the instantaneous burst from Guh-behhe and the artificial and she reviewed its contents with glee. Yes they were not alone; but not alone with what? She was glad to hear that the food was good and she was sad to hear that Guh-behhe was crystallizing. But the word had to go out and the people of Nix were going to have to try to find a way to know more about the pale blue dot from whence the artificial had come. The last bit from Guh-behhe said that he only had eighty-two filaments left under his control and that that last bacteria was absolutely scrumptious.

Guh-behhe was stuffed. Before his impending immobilization he decided to wander as far he could. Out of the black he found another pierce and he was able to crawl into that hole too. Now here was something to report, something more than foil, but alas he'd consumed his one and only round of comm with his nanoburster. He saw before him a field laid out in an array of red, green and blue knobs. He squirmed onto the array and his filaments flopped down into microcircuitry. It was like he was controlling his telescope again. Guh-behhe had just tapped into a CCD imager on the artificial. His brain was able to swiftly accommodate to the new circuitry and to make sense of the coding that zipped around. Guh-behhe could see. He could see what the artificial could see. At the moment he was peering precisely at the heart of Ehhe. Now too, he was beginning to sense a comm other than photographic intelligence in the coding that he was tied into. Before he was ever to be feeling hungry again Guh-behhe had figured out how to comm images and senses and data of any kind back to the artificial's origin, to what the artificial called Earth. He prepared a message.

Hello pale blue dot, I am Guh-behhe of Nix, one of the world-moons in the vicinity of Ehhe and Bea. I have found your artificial to be interesting and I've been able to assimilate with your circuitry. I'd like to tell you that you and we are not alone. I know that the people of Nix will welcome contact with the

people of Earth. Please say hi to Luh-bea for me. I think I'm dying but it's well worth the experience. Your food is delicious.

Lackington's Magazine, Issue #24, Fall 2021

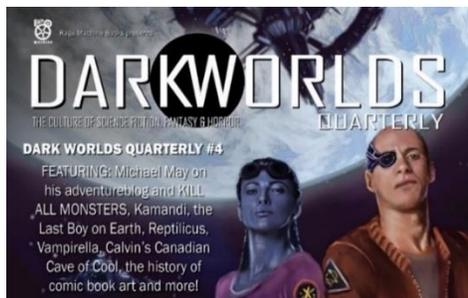


Lackington's is an online speculative fiction magazine. We want to help widen the space for prose poetry. We're looking for stylized prose. Not inept purple prose, of course, but controlled and well-crafted wordsmithery that reflects the story, setting, theme, atmosphere, or philosophy it seeks to describe.

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 - 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](#)



DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE

Now an online blog featuring absolutely fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction books, magazines, and comics, such as:

- Plant Monsters of the Golden Age: Trees & Flowers.
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SOUL?

By Robert Stevenson

Devil, it said, though doubt I had,
Your soul I want, it threatened.
Soul? I said, term not defined.
It laughed in shock and horror.

Think ye not? Then stand awhile,
I'll touch you so, and he pulled,
And I drooled and gibbered
And screamed inside until he put it back.

Soul? he said. Yes, said I,
Please don't do that again.
How may I keep it tucked within?
How may I stay alive?

You can't, said he, you well deserve
All that will come to you.
And pray you not, for that's the myth.
'Tis only I that's real.

Only I that judges you,
Only I that cares.
Only you that stands before me.
Only you who'll die.

I breathed out my last breath
My heart beat its last beat
My eyes saw no more of this world

I looked out through new eyes
I felt power unimagined
His last words to me: Your turn now.

RENTER'S REPORT

by Michèle Laframboise

Dear Guest,

We hope your stay in our Paradise-IV Resort has been up to your convenience. For our ongoing quality improvement program, we would like you to fill in those interactive cards, answering the questions as truthfully as possible. Rest assured that all your personal information will be kept private.
Vacations-R-Us Inc.

CARD 1

NAME	Sir Edward Scrutany
AGE	93 (rejuv once)
ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN, ONE BEING LOWEST AND TEN PERFECT, HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR STAY?	6 (and not counting the last day!)
WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE ACCOMMODATIONS?	<p>The Paradise-IV resort golf course was not finished, only nine poor holes! But I understand that, given the current political situation, works could not be completed in time.</p> <p>Well, there were plenty of other good things to compensate for this small deficiency.</p>
REGARDING THE STAFF	<p>The scrubbing lads and table waiters were honest, guaranteed by the loyalty chip.</p> <p>The Personal Service ladies were perfect and discrete. Their bipedal anatomy was exempt of harmful microbes and close enough to my own. And clean. You wouldn't believe what they can do with those tubular mouths!</p>
WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?	Peace! Oh, the peace!

	<p>The whole planet was off the grid (well, until the last morning). I really needed this welcome respite from the daily grind at the Finance Squad Institute.</p> <p>Eddy kept to his sulky self most of the week.</p> <p>Of course, he missed his friends from the Polymath Institute, but this was a good change. Some of those friends were the lazy artsy types, incapable of hard work. They wouldn't be able to recognize a business opportunity if it bit them in the behind.</p> <p>However, Eddy appreciated the beach and the surfing, but we rarely saw him in the evenings. Well, it is this restless young age... but there were no girls of his age among our fellow vacationers.</p>
<p>WHAT DID YOU DISLIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?</p>	<p>The inner continent was off-limit. The forest went on and on, but the resort's grounds (and the unfinished gold course) stopped long before the first parasol trees. The manager told me about some fanged beasts roaming the forest and groups of insurgents protesting the mining operations. The shooting-field noise kept the most troublesome beasts away.</p> <p>Then there's the "nightly entertainment." Such naïve <i>good vs evil</i> gobbledygook!</p> <p>You would believe that, with all that we did to develop their backwater world, those trumpet-faced indigenes would be able to offer a passable acting performance.</p>

	<p>The last evening's show was a perfect example of <i>poor-pity-me</i> kitsch about space invaders. The sheer rendition chased my wife away.</p> <p>I didn't care much for the ensuing hullabaloo.</p>
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CARD 2

NAME	Jessica Arabella Scrutany
AGE	<u>(Field left empty)</u>
ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN, ONE BEING LOWEST AND TEN PERFECT, HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR STAY?	8 (except the last day)
WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THE ACCOMMODATIONS	<p>Our room offered a splendid view of the endless ocean. And at night, the waves carried some algae with bio-light, a deep blue, hiding the slimy things under. How romantic!</p> <p>The domestic equipment was subpar.</p> <p>For example, the kitchen's Garburator burbled loudly in the middle of the night and the auto laundry had that weird rattling noise when ignited.</p>
REGARDING THE STAFF	<p>All fine.</p> <p>They lived in their village surrounded by trees that you can see from the resort's roof, rows of red brick houses. The indigenes kept to themselves.</p> <p>Really, the staff was really nice, full of attentions.</p> <p><i>(pause)</i></p>
CAN YOU ELABORATE?	You got accustomed to their physiognomy, their trumpet-like

	<p>mouth and the jewel on their brow. They used it only for speaking, blowing soft notes. I don't know how they ate.</p> <p>Their natural body odour smelled like rotten wood and damp earth. But it couldn't be their fault, since they had no nose. (Well, not a visible one like ours.) The hotel manager made them scrub themselves twice daily.</p>
<p>WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?</p>	<p>The resort was stunning, with that pristine beach in front. The sandy expanse went on and on, around the whole planet. And those clouds changing their shape according to my wishes, what a fine idea!</p> <p>The turbo Sea Dazzler I took to the open sea was top of the line. I didn't expect such mechanical skills from the short indigene girl attending the boats.</p> <p>My son, Eddy, preferred the surfing boards but I loved the speed, cutting through the waves and the occasional slimy creature lurking under.</p> <p>And the garden was a riot of ever-blooming flowers! Their balmy fragrances masked the earthy odours of the forest and the flotsam brought by the sea.</p>
<p>WHAT DID YOU DISLIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?</p>	<p>Edward had a fit when he found out about the golf course. It was supposed to be finished before our arrival. Those family vacations are a very special occasion for men such as he, and he was looking forward to it.</p>

	<p>The shooting range was too noisy at night.</p> <p>My son retreated to his room as soon as we came here. Well, at his age, I guess I would not want to be seen at a social gathering with my parents.</p> <p>At night, the wind direction shifted, bringing odours of rotting meat inside the resort.</p> <p>Also, I did not care much about the “evening entertainment.” Even if they had used special effects, those sacrifices stories were utter bad taste.</p> <p>And, of course, there was the last night.</p>
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CARD 3

NAME	Edward Scrutany II (Mom calls me Eddy)
AGE	16 standard (and no stupid rejuv!)
ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN, ONE BEING LOWEST AND TEN PERFECT, HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR STAY	0.0001 And I’m nice.
WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE ACCOMMODATIONS?	At first, it sucked. Then... It <i>really</i> sucked.
CAN YOU ELABORATE?	<p>I didn’t want to come here, but being the son of Sir Edward “Strut my Stuff” Scrutany did entail some family loyalty (or so Dad liked to say).</p> <p>Well. The place was OK, I guess, a large inner court with a pool and café, with the rooms around over two floors.</p>

	<p>And a garden. My mom gushed over the flame flowers!</p> <p>But outside the resort, the endless beach around the equatorial band, the domesticated sea, the shapeshifter clouds: <i>bo-oring!</i></p> <p>In the low water, those green, disgusting algae clung to your legs!</p>
REGARDING THE STAFF	<p>Oh. My. Window!</p> <p>Those servants were so weird, all violet-skinned with a loyalty chip bulging on the forehead, like a walking board saying, “I never lie.”</p> <p>Wonderful conversation-starter... Of course, they didn’t lie, but Mom found them creepy anyway. You wouldn’t know it, because she kept smiling and smiling at them.</p>
CAN YOU ELABORATE?	<p>Why should I?</p> <p>Am I supposed to be a spy here?</p> <p>The trumpet-nosed servants lived in their own village, which was off-limits to visitors.</p> <p>So, what can I say, huh?</p>
WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?	<p>The surfing was OK, I guess.</p> <p>The third day, I even talked to a local girl who cared for the quay and the boats (while Mom was careening away on her stupid Dazzler). I used my wrist translo-pad to understand her tooting.</p> <p>I learned a lot.</p> <p>For instance, despite their absence of nostrils, Paradisians <i>could</i> smell our bodies.</p> <p>Of course, she had a “neverlie” chip on her forehead, but something in the seawater, either an electrolyte or the slimy algae, counteracted it.</p>

	<p>We could communicate freely as long as she swam alongside my surfing board.</p> <p>Oh, what I loved the most? Her tubular mouth. It must have been created for singing. Man, those soft, harmonious horn notes!</p> <p>If she and her friends decided to start a band, I would be the first in line to be their manager!</p>
WHAT WAS HER NAME?	<p>Screw this interactive mode! I'm no snitch.</p>
DID YOU—	<p><i>No!</i></p> <p>I'm not my father!</p> <p>And, just before you ask, I never even kissed Lola (not her true name, by the way, and she doesn't work there anymore).</p> <p>What an amazing singer! I kept a record of her vocalizations.</p>
WHAT DID YOU DISLIKE ABOUT YOUR STAY?	<p>The firing range, used only at night by some guests. Really, I know hunting was in our blood, but they could dispense with all the noisy clatter!</p> <p>Another thing (and for once, I agree with Dad, which is weird): was that tedious evening show.</p> <p>I mean, sacrificial offerings? Who does that anymore? And this alien invasion tale was too transparent an allegory to bring home their message.</p>
PLEASE FEEL FREE TO COMMENT	<p>Lola told me the invasion sketches were inspired by real things that happened here, but too distorted for the manager to see through it.</p> <p>On the fifth day, she agreed to take me to their village behind the cute row</p>

	<p>of trees. She hid me in a wheelbarrow under a tarp.</p> <p>Lola had to pass a kind of screen to enter, but her chip let her in inside, <i>no problema</i>, and the earth packed around me masked my DNA signature.</p> <p>She couldn't talk plainly out of the water, but I guessed no villager could get out.</p>
<p>PLEASE FEEL FREE TO COMMENT</p>	<p>Poverty was just a meaningless word until I pushed the tarp off my eyes. From outside, I had expected more brick houses and cute gardens. It was insane. And humans called this place Paradise.</p> <p>All around the village, idyllic images of houses and gardens were projected on fine mesh screens.</p> <p>Inside the enclosure, muddy holes gaped, with naked children digging up loads of dun-coloured rocks. The house were mud huts with a spattering of refuse.</p> <p>The Paradisians employed at the resort counted themselves happy, even if their pay barely covered basic needs.</p>
<p>YOU KNOW YOU WERE FORBIDDEN TO GO OUTSIDE THE LIMITS</p>	<p>Yeah, sue me!</p> <p>Just wait until my lawyers pounce on yours...</p> <p>The same night, out of the village, Lola took me on top of a scale leading to an annex's roof. From this position, I could see inside the walls of the firing range. Loops of ropes encircled upright wood beams, near a mound. On the torture post, I glimpsed spatters of blackened blood.</p>

	<p>Paradisians too weak or ill to carry on the workload were selected for “special” treatment.</p> <p>Lola’s eyes didn’t possess any lacrymal system, but a low rumbling came from her mouth. My arms rose slowly to encircle her. She was cold: because her body temperature was lower than mine, or because of her overwhelming dread.</p> <p>No wonder the resort’s garden was so lush! I did not find in me the courage to tell Mom why.</p>
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CARD 1—ADDENDUM

<p>WHAT HAPPENED ON YOUR LAST NIGHT?</p>	<p>About time you asked! Everything was topnotch, and I was even enjoying myself... It was in the middle of the sorry evening presentation. A gaggle of villagers invited themselves, shouting like the devil. People fled, or tried to. The show ended in total mayhem. I got injured, then I fell in the pool. Only the blood clouding the water hid me from the shovel-holding berserkers. One of those fools set fire to the resort. A good thing I was in the pool: those soft exotic woods burned fast. I had a fleeting thought for my wallet in our room.</p>
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<p>AND THEN?</p>	<p>After a long and ugly night, marinating in soiled water, I dragged myself out of the pool, in search of my wife and son.</p> <p>Those vacations had been a disaster. The sooner we got out of this mess, the better.</p> <p>I don't blame all on Vacations-R-Us, of course. You never know what to expect when you hire locals.</p>
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CARD 2—ADDENDUM

<p>WHAT HAPPENED ON YOUR LAST NIGHT?</p>	<p>All evening there was some ruckus going on in the indigene village. However, the manager told us it was nothing to worry about.</p> <p>I got tired of the presentation and decided to retire for the night. Eddy had left before the representation, too. I knocked on his door, but he wasn't there. It didn't faze me as his interest leaned towards the young indigene tending the boats. (He thought I didn't notice his gallivanting!)</p> <p>As I was unlocking our door, I heard what seemed like a drunk wind orchestra, all bugle calls and loud tooting of horns. I bent over the railing of the second story around the pool.</p> <p>A large group of villagers stormed the premises, armed with various pointy gardening tools.</p> <p>The manager assured the still-seated spectators that this intrusion was part of the show.</p>
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PLEASE FEEL FREE TO ADD
YOUR COMMENTS

He was still clutching his remote box when a big grimy indigene smashed his cranium with a wooden club. The rising panic cries covered the crack of bone. Steps echoed in the stair cage leading to my floor. I ran through the room; there was no other exit. I parted the curtains, opened the window and jumped, landing on the soft earth of the lush garden.

I remember running, hiding, keeping my head down in the bushes. I wished I could close my ears to those loud bugle notes interspersed with the pitiful screams of our fellow group members.

The beach was mercifully empty, so I waded in the stinky, slimy water between two Sea Dazzler speedboats. It took forever before the horn toots and the shrieks abated. I shivered in the cold water. I would have taken a Sea Dazzler if they hadn't been chained to the quay. For safety, I gathered...

The resort burned for a long time, angry red flames reflecting on the passing clouds.

<p>AND THE MORNING?</p>	<p>In the morning, I looked around, keeping my head low. The beach had combed itself in the night. As if nothing had happened.</p> <p>Was I the sole survivor? Where was my husband? My mind kept picturing Edwards and Eddy’s bodies mangled by the furious indigenes. What had we done to provoke such anger?</p> <p>Then, I heard steps on the sand, coming near the Sea Dazzlers. <i>They were back!</i> I thought, paralysed with fear.</p>
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CARD 3—ADDENDUM

<p>WHAT HAPPENED THE LAST NIGHT?</p>	<p>That last evening, I slipped out of the resort, taking with me the field screen configs.</p> <p>And Dad’s special wallet.</p> <p>Despite Dad’s low opinion of their financial savviness, my hacker friends had taught me a thing or two.</p> <p>When the screen imprisoning the village failed, all occupants escaped outside. Lola had warned them this afternoon.</p>
<p>ARE YOU AWARE OF THE DAMAGE THEY INFLICTED UPON THE RESORT?</p>	<p>I may get a ton of problems with my report, but so do you, suckers! According to my plan, the villagers were supposed to flee to another place, better hidden, somewhere on the planet. Of course, “even the best-laid plans...” like my father said. Well. I guess the adults who lost family</p>

members in the shooting range held a real grudge against the resort.

A bunch of Paradisians picked up shovels and tools, and turned to the illuminated resort, bugling loud, angry notes.

I wanted to run after them. Lola grabbed my shoulder (she was strong for her small frame). Her expression, and the sad, low hornlike note from her mouth told me the berserkers would kill me if I tried to stop them.

So, I went with Lola and the rest of the population out of the resort's grounds. I steeled myself when the screams rose behind me. I felt rotten inside. I hated Dad and mildly despised Mom's antics, but never did I wish for their demise!

We followed trails in the forests, guided by the soft tooting of an older adult.

When the Paradisians decided they were safe enough, we parted company. Lola showed me a path leading back to the shore.

Our farewells lasted a good minute. I slipped into Lola's palm some useful cards from Dad's wallet.

I hope I have given her a better impression of humans.

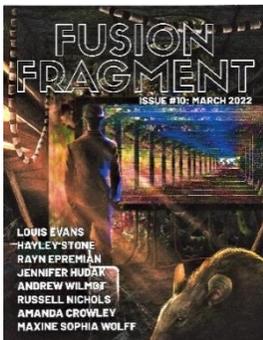
<p>WHAT HAPPENED AFTER?</p>	<p>It took me the rest of the night to walk back to the resort.</p> <p>The good thing about Paradise IV's equatorial band is that you can't get lost. Really! Just follow the beach.</p> <p>In the morning, over the parasol trees tousled heads, I spotted a faint thread of smoke.</p> <p>The sand under my feet was oddly clean, a vivid contrast to the blackened mass of rubble that had replaced the resort. The attackers had split, along with the servants.</p> <p>A low burbling noise rose behind me. I turned. Like in the horror stories, a turdsh-brown monster rose from the sea. First the rounded head, then the shoulders, the torso...</p> <p>The algae-laden creature waved its algae-dripping arms at me.</p> <p>Mom!</p> <p>I felt such a relief at her being alive that I ran into her stinking arms.</p>
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Card 2 ADDENDA

<p>(ARTIFICIAL INTERLOCUTOR DISCONNECTED)</p>	<p>Eddie hugged me so fiercely, despite the grime covering me, that tears rose to my eyes. My son even helped me clean up, with a kindness and patience unusual from him.</p> <p>All the opposite of his father. Edward looked neither stunned nor happy to find us alive.</p> <p>I guess my husband's lack of reaction can be explained by the terrible ordeal he had gone through.</p>
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Card 3 ADDENDA

<p>(ARTIFICIAL INTERLOCUTOR DISCONNECTED)</p>	<p>A powerful rumble of reactors announced that help had finally reached us.</p> <p>A plump shuttle landed on the beach, casting sand grains all around it. It opened its maw to release a small army of red-clad armoured rescuers, rushing toward the remains of the resort. I was quite certain they wouldn't find any survivor.</p> <p>I was wrong.</p> <p>The rescuers came back with a grime-covered and soaked-through individual, his muddy hair plastered on his head.</p> <p>Dad had spent a night in the tepid water of the soiled pool. The soot on his ruined suit told me he had tried to retrieve his wallet from the room that had burned down with the resort.</p> <p>He didn't show any emotion at seeing us. I guess he was still furious at his precious wallet's disappearance.</p> <p>So.</p> <p>Small change for him.</p> <p>But big, big change for a brand-new band of Paradisian horn singers who will soon get the best manager in the Galaxy!</p>
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FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #10, November 2021

Cover – by KiTT Jones.

See: [Fusion Fragment #10](#)

The Topography of Memory – by Jennifer Hudak

Love in the Time of Disconnect – by Haley Stone

A Star on the Tongue – by Rayn Epremian

Born Again – by Andrew Wilmot

Death of the Private Eye – by Russell Nichols

House – by Maxine Sophie Wolf

SWEET MORNING FOG

by Catherine Girczyc

Rolling in on my mind, hiding me
I don't remember yesterday, holding you
Today is forever touching you.
The wild madness of it all
Has me fast, entwined, entangled
In love.
Though my escape beckons
I feel the winds about me
Open air calling for me
“In the fog, creep away with the fog...”

And yet, could I stay?
Follow my heart in its falseness?

No, the frost would separate us anyway
A filigree cold destiny
Lace patterns frozen as the day breaks
Light melting it into oblivion

You and I will lose each other anyway
Watching ice crystals etch winter's fate on trees.

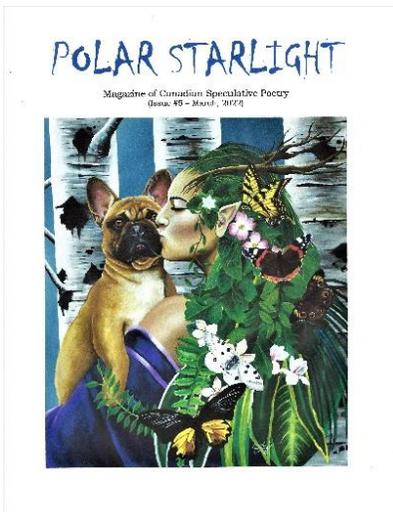
POLAR STARLIGHT #5

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 5th issue, *Dryad's Kiss*, is by Kari-Ann Anderson.

The 5th issue contains poetry by Geoffrey W. Cole, Janine Cross, LeRoy Gorman, Neile Graham, Shannon Green, Geof Hart, J.Y.T. Kennedy, Jo McBride, Frances Skene, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Gerald L. Truscott, and J. Wolf.

Find it at: [Polar Starlight #5](#)



THE DRAUGHT OF DREAMS

by Geoff Gander

(Previously published in “Subliminal Reality” anthology, Lycan Valley Press, 2019)

I met Simon on my first day at a telemarketing firm. He lounged in his cubicle with a thick, battered hardcover, his headset perched above his ears, while the other drones delivered their pitches with plastered-on smiles or thumbed through glossy magazines while customers complained. I asked what he was reading. He blinked, and flipped over the cover. Herodotus’ “The Histories,” stared back. I smiled. An essay on that book got me my first “A” in college. We plunged into an animated discussion about it, which quickly shifted to shared memories of college life—we had both studied history at the same institution, although Simon had been a few years ahead of me. It was the first intelligent conversation I’d had since graduating, and it was worth the dressing-down I received from management afterwards.

We hung out on breaks after that. To a bookish guy like me who got beaten up as a kid because I preferred reading to football, Simon was a breath of fresh air. We reminisced about happy hours spent wandering the stacks of the library, immersing ourselves in the mustiest tomes we could find. It was as far as I could get from my rural upbringing. One night, after one such conversation over drinks, Simon gave me a long look and asked, “Did you ever get into the Rare Books Room?” I shook my head; none of my essay topics had been esoteric enough to give me access.

“That’s a pity,” said Simon. “What’s in there makes the stacks look like a magazine stand. I got in twice. The first time the librarian watched me like a hawk to make sure I only looked at what I was allowed to read. I made my discovery on my second visit.” He grinned widely.

I pressed Simon for details. I had heard that genuine medieval grimoires, and even stranger things, were part of that collection. Unauthorized entry was grounds for expulsion.

“The second time the librarian left me to deal with another student. I poked around, and found an old folio wedged between some books. The typed manuscript inside was so old that I was afraid it would fall apart when I put it in my bag. It was about how our greatest inspiration—art in its truest form—comes from a source on another plane of existence that touches sensitive minds. Some called it a realm of gods; more modern thinkers saw it as our collective unconscious. Whatever it is, people have tried to reach it for centuries. One account,” Simon paused, smiling, “described a potion called the

Draught of Dreams that helps you get there.”

He paused. I sensed a “but.”

“But I’ve hit a snag,” Simon said. “One of the quoted texts is in a kind of Latin or something that I can’t figure out.”

I’d discovered during my studies that I had a knack for languages, and offered to look at it. Later that evening I was at Simon’s dusty bachelor pad, where piles of books and old National Geographics had colonised every flat surface. He produced the cracked leather folio and pulled out the yellowed, brittle papers. “This is it,” he said. “The good part starts on page 23.” He handed me a beer and sank into his couch as I set to work.

The text, laid out like a diary, related the attempts by a man in 14th-century Italy to brew the purported Draught of Dreams. Each time, he listed his ingredients, their proportions, and described the result. As I read on, the accounts grew more disjointed and the narrative digressed several times to describe dreams of being lost amid “endless shifting grey sands whipped by blood-scented winds.” I pushed myself away from the table. The author was a madman, and the unknown typist doubly so for trying to make sense of it. Soft snoring from Simon’s couch reached my ears. I grabbed my coat, grumbling over the wasted evening.

Something in the corner of my eye made me glance at the papers once more as I prepared to leave. The last sentence of the final entry stood out: “I have seen Her, and go to pay that which is due, to see what waking men may not, and visit realms undreamed.” My coat fell to the floor as I scanned the text just above the last line. *Had he really done it?* And there it was, the recipe for the mixture that, according to the writer, brought him within view of paradise. I scribbled a quick English translation. Some of the ingredients could be bought anywhere, but others looked like pure nonsense—where could anyone get “breath of virgin”? I rubbed my dry, burning eyes and checked my watch. 3:30 a.m. Enough silliness for one day.

I shook Simon’s shoulder and told him I had finished. He jerked upright and snatched my translation. “This is amazing,” he said as his eyes darted down the page. He read through it more slowly a second time. A grin crept across his face.

I nodded, wobbling with fatigue. I asked Simon why he was so seized by this.

“The greatest artists and thinkers stand out because they were inspired by the sublime,” he said. “Most of us are too busy trying to survive to touch that wondrous source, except in our deepest dreams where our consciousness can roam free. I want to experience that at will. You could, too.”

I remembered the giddiness I felt when I dreamed of visiting the fantastic places I had read about as a child. I had felt alive then; the daily monotony of life was now a slow death.

I told him I was in.

###

I won't describe how we got the ingredients, once Simon figured them out. There's enough on my conscience already. The preparations over the following weeks produced pungent odors that hung in Simon's apartment for hours, which led to many complaints from his neighbours. Neither of us spoke about what we were doing; the fear of discovery overshadowed our frenzied work.

I began to wonder whether someone had been tipped off. Stories appeared in the local paper about the police investigating of a string of strange and disturbing robberies. I saw suspicion in the eyes of passers-by, and before long I grew nauseated during the hours leading up to our collection runs, as Simon liked to call them. He buoyed me with pep talks the first few times I shared my concerns, but soon his tone grew snide and he began to question my commitment. He dangled the prospect of a lifetime of mediocrity before me and I, seething inside, knuckled under. *Just one more time*, I would tell myself. And then it was the last time.

We performed the ritual in my apartment during the early hours of July 20th. Some astrologers attributed powers over intelligence and divination to the planet Mercury, and so we waited until it was ascendant, hoping it would help us. I bolted the door and drew the curtains to shut out the outside world. We even disconnected my telephone, although only telemarketers ever called me. Once everything was in order we cleared away the second-hand furniture from the middle of my tiny living room, and I sprinkled a crimson powder we had prepared, into a protective circle, which hissed as it hit the weathered floorboards. Simon circled the room, murmuring prayers at the four cardinal points before joining me inside the circle. He lit a pair of candles that we had peppered with crushed basil for added protection, and set them on the floor. Once we had poured the syrupy black elixir into our wine glasses, we sat facing each other. My spine tingled and my stomach churned.

I recited the incantation, written in a language that was long dead when Ancient Greek was coming into its own, that begged whatever spirits were listening to let us pass unmolested into the world of dreams. Even though I had spent days rendering it phonetically so I wouldn't trip up, I struggled through each verse, as though my tongue tried to prevent the words from being uttered. As I spoke, the air warmed and thickened. Simon tugged at his shirt collar and began breathing heavily. Sweat trickled down my forehead. A

strong urge to throw open the windows and flee my apartment welled up. My numbed legs refused to listen to the voice in the back of my mind commanding me to rise. I bit my lip, but an unseen force had seized my tongue and throat and forced me to continue.

The ancient rhythms of those words overpowered our mundane, modern surroundings. A hazy, black smoke coalesced in the corners of the room, and thickened as I spoke. The flickering candles dimmed against the encroaching darkness that pulsed like a living thing outside our island of light. I spat out the final word. A deafening silence now filled the room. We huddled within our circle like rodents in their burrow.

Simon straightened with visible effort. He looked me in the eyes. “Let’s drink up. We’ve come too far to turn back now,” he said. Although he was sitting next to me his voice sounded as though carried over a great distance by the wind.

He picked up his glass. His eyes flitted down to my glass, untouched on the floor. I slowly picked it up with a trembling hand, careful not to spill any of the precious liquid, and downed it in one gulp. It smelled of smoke and tasted of aniseed, with an aftertaste of ash that seared my throat like cheap whisky. The fiery sensation spread into my stomach and extremities, followed by a numbness that made my head swim. My vision blurred, and everything went dim around the edges. My heart pounded and I wondered whether we had poisoned ourselves. Flashes of vivid colour exploded before my eyes, and faint strains of a musical whistling reached my ears. A jolt racked my body, and everything went black.

###

I awoke face down in cold, pale grey sand, which undulated in great dunes in all directions. Leaden clouds—the sort that normally mean a thunderstorm—dotted the white sky, but there was no earthy smell in the cool air that normally warns of rain. I wondered if this was a particularly bleak afterlife, when a gentle breeze carried the faint scent of copper. *Endless shifting grey sands whipped by blood-scented winds.* My breath caught. Had I made it, then?

The faint musical whistling I had heard before blacking out reached my ears, growing louder with distinct variations in pitch and tone. I turned to Simon eagerly, realising only then that I was alone. My heart pounded as I scrambled up the nearest dune and scanned the motionless sea of sand stretching away into a distant grey haze. I shouted for him until my throat grew hoarse, but saw no one and heard no voice but my own frantic echo. I forced myself to breathe slowly. *This is just a dream. He’s probably having his*

own. That thought comforted me—regular dreams are personal, and there was no reason why this should be any different.

Dream or not, the music was the only sign of life in that dead place, and was hopefully where I would find what I sought. I let the music guide me as I trudged over the dunes, my spirits lifting as it slowly grew louder. The terrain rose into an incline over time—I have no idea how long I walked; the light was constant—until it became one solid ridge of sand. Beyond, the land sloped down to a low, sandy plain, at the far end of which rose a white, walled enclosure. A path of crushed, white stone began at my feet, leading to the structure. I was grateful for solid ground, and as I walked other paths came down from other parts of the ridge, all leading to my destination. These other paths meandered like rivers, sometimes coming close to mine but never joining. In the corner of my eye, tiny figures marched on the more distant paths, one of them having a gait that resembled Simon's. When I turned to look at them directly, they vanished.

The white-gowned presence that emerged from the gateway of the enclosure to meet me can only be described as Goddess, personified. She was full-figured and motherly, then curvaceous and alluring. She was blonde and tall, then short, red-headed, and Rubenesque, then raven-haired with a dark complexion. *I have seen Her, and go to pay that which is due, to see what waking men may not, and visit realms undreamed.* Adoration, lust, and fear welled up and warred within me, while the last shreds of doubt about my success fell away. I longed to touch her, worship her. She looked down at me and smiled.

I can't remember what she told me; only her voice—the sweetest music I'd ever heard—and the basic meaning of what she said. I was safe, I was wanted. She took my hand in hers—soft, smooth, warm. My whole body tingled as a wave of relaxation and pleasure coursed through me. She drew me past the gateway. I looked back, still hoping that Simon wasn't in his own dream but just delayed, and saw nothing but endless grey sand.

I entered a walled garden carpeted by lush, green grass and dotted with manicured bushes with flowers of all shapes, sizes, and colors, whose sweet perfume made my head swim. Stone benches with red silk cushions lay in the shade of luscious palm trees. My legs wobbled and a wave of fatigue washed over me; the journey along the desert path had taken more out of me than I had thought. *I don't need to rest. This is all in my head,* I reminded myself. A murmured word and a gentle caress of my jaw drew my attention to a gleaming white marble fountain that rose in the midst of a clearing in the middle of the garden. My guide strolled towards it, glancing back to see if I was following. My skin tingled warmly where she had touched me and I had already taken

several steps towards her. *This is a dream. Nothing bad can happen here.*

The patter of gentle rainfall greeted me as I approached the fountain, which was built in the Greek style, with a fluted column rising from the middle of a hexagonal, broad basin. The sculpted face of a young, sleeping man, framed by a pair of feathered wings, protruded from the column's capital. I recognised the likeness as that of Morpheus, the Greek God of Dreams. Water streamed from the image's softly-parted lips. My host stood by the fountain, holding a faintly shimmering clear crystal goblet. Her mouth formed musical notes, and although no words were spoken I understood that the Draught of Dreams had only brought me here. Drinking from the fountain, and consciously opening my mind, would take me the rest of the way.

Pins and needles ran up my arm when my fingers brushed hers, as I took the goblet. It pulsed warmly in my grasp as I turned it in my hand, watching its facets sparkle in the diffused light from the white sky above. I filled it in the fountain's stream and brought it close. The water seemed to have an inner, golden glow. My companion smiled and gave me a slight nod. I glanced back to grey desert beyond the gateway, hoping that Simon was having a similar experience. I looked again into the goblet. Tiny black specks wriggled in the water.

I blinked. The goblet's stem had grown clammy in my hand. *If this is a dream, why is this happening?* A rotting smell rose from the fountain that overpowered the perfume of the flowers. I glanced at the still-smiling woman. She flickered, and in her place loomed a misty, globular being, whose writhing appendages flexed inches from my body. I leapt back and raised my hands to shield myself, then stopped, amazed. She stood as before, smiling and beckoning me to return.

This couldn't be real. Whether my subconscious or some other power showed me that vision, the spell was broken. I tossed the goblet aside. The woman let out a guttural bellow of rage as she grew and twisted, sprouting lesions and tendrils while losing any semblance of human form. Her curses grew deeper and louder as she grew more inhuman, and I looked away and covered my ears. She struck me with a blow that sent me flying into blackness.

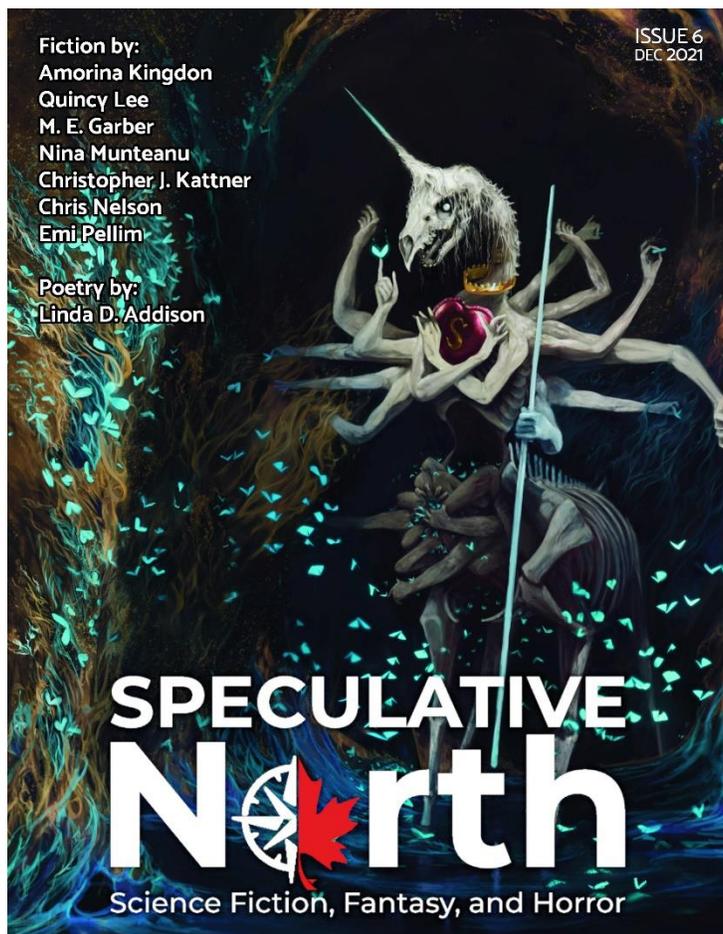
###

I came to my senses in my apartment, my face throbbing hotly where I had been struck. I was sprawled on the floor, halfway out of the protective circle Simon and I had made. Judging by the smashed glasses and knocked over, extinguished candles we had not been resting calmly. *I must have hit my head when I fell over*, I thought. I shuddered at the memory of that woman—that thing—in the garden. *Just a dream.*

The luminous hands of the wall clock indicated that only a few minutes had passed. Simon lay next to me in a crumpled heap, outside the circle. I shook him. His shoulder was slack in my grip and he rolled onto his back. His chest was still and his dead eyes stared emptily. I bolted to my feet. The floor crunched softly underfoot. Fighting to keep my breathing steady I flipped on the light switch. A dusting of grey sand covered the floor. That last phrase in the manuscript came back to me: *I have seen Her, and go to pay that which is due.*

I threw my most precious belongings into my suitcase, thankful—for once—how little I had. The last thing I remember from that day is closing the door behind me, catching one last glimpse of Simon's prone form. I don't remember whether he was facing the door when I woke up, but he was facing me then, accusation in his dead eyes.

SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #6, December 2021



Fiction by:
Amorina Kingdon
Quincy Lee
M. E. Garber
Nina Munteanu
Christopher J. Kattner
Chris Nelson
Emi Pellim

Poetry by:
Linda D. Addison

FICTION:

Arturo – by Amorina Kingdon
The Time traveler's Cat: A Looping Tail
– by Quincy Lee
*Never Underestimate a Good Defensive Spell,
or Your Sister* – by M.E. Garber
Virtually Yours – by Nina Munteanu
Lodestar – by Christopher J. Kattner
The Braider and the Braid – by Chris Nelson
Florne's Ghost – by Emi Pellim

POETRY:

Nightshift – by Linda D. Addison
River Share – by Linda D. Addison
Whale Riding – by Linda D. Addison

NON-FICTION:

An Interview with Linda D. Addison
– by Andy Dibble

Cover art – by Marco Marin

Check it out at: [Speculative North #6](https://www.speculativenorth.com/issue-6)

PHOENIX IN RED OCHRE

by Katie Sweet

Too many peeps these days wanna be stamped like sardine cans off an assembly line. Ten minutes under a press and the latest mod's embedded in your skin. That's not what I do here. I'm an artist. Toss your ees into the mod bank on Sky Ring if you want a hack job. Inside my shop, you're getting hand-applied imperfection.

Yeah, that's the shit I'm selling. Imperfection. Take automation too far, and it's the only art left to us.

I've got my feet up on the counter, doodling on my smartpad. The shop speakers pump a folksy melody woven with ancient arcade noises. That usually keeps out the drunks tripping home from last call. But just my luck, some young company slicksuit bent under his gravity-defying hair funnel walks in with two women in tow.

He slobbers in the ear of one who looks right out of a wholesome interplanetary travel guide, prim nano-wire blouse and a full-length skirt with gold squiggles that shift as she moves. "Go on, babe, get whatever you want, it's on me."

She giggles and side-eyes me like she's never seen someone with face mods before.

"I want animation, but nothing too garish. Pam in Accounting got that skull dripping blood she thinks is so amazing. Gross."

I point my stylus toward the base prices illuminated on the wall. Slicksuit's jaw clamps up. "Right... uh, how much for a little one?"

He probably transferred his first real paycheck and spent weeks talking himself up, promising Squiggle-skirt an inner planet vacay and a box of Earth-grown fruit.

"Glo animation starts at a thousand, thumb-size."

His skin mottles red across his too-perfect features. Definitely a gene-tweaked baby. The girl looks even more so, a marble-carved doll with sleek black hair in a high ponytail.

He fixates on the two mechanical fingers on my left hand, the relic of an old injury that nearly killed my career. "Babe, let's try another place. This one's sketchy."

My digs are spotless, thank you very much. Slicksuit barely holds my interest at this point. Bottom rung salarymen aren't worth the wasted ink. But the other girl, the one Slicksuit isn't draped over, what's her deal?

She avoids my blatant stare and wanders the shop, flipping through the holo carousels. Outwardly, she's groomed like Squiggles, but less polished, frumpy in the sloped set of her shoulders. They could be sisters; same dark hair but hers tucked in a modest braid. There's more thickness to her waist, eyes too narrow for her round cheeks. She pushes up the cuffs of her white blouse. There, on her inner left wrist, I spot the embedded outline of a hexagonal chip.

She's not the sister, she's the backup.

Slicksuit steers his girl outside, but the backup lingers, dragging her fingers across a mock of my favourite canvas—a phoenix backpiece with animated fire licking up the spine.

I stretch and sidle over to the door. When she goes to slip out, I'm waiting. I press a business chip into her hand with the shop contact info.

"In case you ever want something of your own."

I'll never forget the look she gives me, as if she's surprised I can see her. Doesn't say a word, but I know she'll be back.

###

A month later, she creaks open my door. It's early; the slicks are at work and the jennies won't wake up for hours. I'm sure she chose a time the shop would be empty. Or maybe it was her window to escape.

She's dressed casual and discreet; a pulled up hoodie and jeans. She tugs a crumpled napkin from her pocket and slides it across the desk.

I unfold it to find a doodle of a flower. A near-symmetrical daisy, with one broken petal. Something throbs in my chest, an ache I can't place.

"This enough?" She holds her wrist above the chip scanner. A transfer amount pops on the screen.

I don't ask where she got the ees. Backups can't even legally own a bank account. They're a rare sight here on Lime, but up on Sky Ring I hear there are parks full of them, where their owners take them for exercise. Give them cutesy names like pets. That chip on her wrist is basically a leash.

"What do I call you?"

"Betty," she says.

"You've come to the right place, Betts."

I take my time with the flower, layering it on her ankle with the smoothest application I can manage. The holo's on, broadcasting afternoon trash. A travel piece rolls and Betts tightens up so much I nearly jig a line.

"Titan, huh? You got someone Saturn-side?"

She shakes her head, but remains focused on the projection. "They say the sunsets on Titan are the most beautiful."

I shrug. "I'm just happy I got air. Sun's overrated." Not that I've seen much of it through the radiation shielding. We don't even have a viewing deck on Lime.

The little flower takes under an hour, and Betts admires the result in the mirror with a hollow smile.

"How much for a bigger animated one?" she whispers.

"Tell you what. I'll give you a discount if you let me try out some new techniques." What the hell am I doing? But I can't resist the curling gratefulness in the way she looks at me, like I'm offering the most precious thing in the galaxy.

"Next week," she promises.

Like clockwork, she returns. She can never stay for long so I work in short sessions, a few inches of skin at a time. Nothing that would show with clothes on.

Gonna be a masterpiece. I can feel it, a charge of energy every time I lay new lines. Silver fish on her lower back dart away when my hand draws near. A crane breaks the water, spread wings curled over her shoulder blade.

I've been freestyling most of it, struggling to balance the upper half of the composition. It comes to me one day as I finish the animation on a feather. The crane should be eating her skin, dissolving the flesh into shards of light that pulse down the long, curved throat.

A little gruesome, but Betts has been down with all my ideas so far. I describe it to her as she sips tea and waits for the Glo layer to set under the dryer.

She doesn't say anything at first, and I worry she's trying to let me down easy.

But her nails drag across her shoulder. "Not eating. Peeling. Revealing the underneath."

"And what's that?"

Her mouth lifts into a secretive smile. "Just me."

That night, I draw dozens of possibilities. None seem right. What does the real Betty look like, under all those cloned genes?

I pull out that first doodle she gave me, the little daisy. Bursts of flowers emerging from her shoulder. Maybe that will work.

I'm vibrating the day of our next session. My fingers tremble with eagerness. My gaze flicks to the clock on my tablet every minute.

The hour bleeds away. Betts is a no-show. Maybe she got held up. She's had to reschedule a couple times, but never without letting me know.

Stood up by the only client that gets my muse going, figures. I have to mod two smarmy drunks that night, as if the universe knows my weakness.

###

Months slip by. I'm finishing up with a customer when the door jangles and she walks in. Dark hair in a high ponytail. I'd know that face anywhere.

"Betts!" I leave the customer drooling in their anesthetic haze and leap off the stool.

But when she turns to look at me, I realize my mistake. This isn't the woman whose skin I miss like an itch under my nails. This is the other one. Her owner.

She shakes my hand with a fake smile stretching her too-perfect lips. She's wearing more jewelry than last time, a high gold collar engraved with waveforms that accentuate her neck.

"Sorry to drop in, but I was hoping I could get your help with something."

Her voice sounds so much like Betts, it throws me for a loop.

"Sure," I mumble, "show me?"

With a wink, she turns and sloughs off her kimono-style top. It dangles from her elbows, leaving her sleek back bare. Bare, but not empty. Fish swirl, and a crane raises its long neck up her spine. Iridescent colours leech through water surface, everywhere but the left shoulder. The part I hadn't finished. A sick lurch twists my stomach.

Not-Betts peers at me through her lashes. "You're the artist, aren't you? I figure a piece of work like this deserves completion."

Any response clogs in my throat. Not-Betts doesn't seem to notice. "It's pretty, I'll give you that. Not really my style, but a few touch ups should help. Would a lotus flower be too cliché?"

"No flowers," I growl, then bite my tongue. "You still got that boyfriend? Guy with the hair?"

"Oh, god no. Trust me, best thing about a refresh is the dating pool. I snagged a VP of marketing, and I'm only on my second. Prez won't even have lunch with a girl unless she's on her fourth." She catches sight of herself in the wall mirror and frowns, then pinches the flesh at her hip. "Can't believe I let the backup get this fat though. Gonna be the grav gym and meal supps this month."

She refastens her shirt and spins with a flourish. Her credit chip beeps across the scanner. "This enough? I mean, I already paid for most of it. Learned my lesson there. Next backup's getting a day allowance only."

The scanner brims with more ees than I've seen in months. "I have an opening next Wednesday."

"Great. I'll do the lotus, I think."

As she strolls out, her shimmery leggings ride up just enough to glimpse the tiny flower on her ankle. A beep from my timer reminds me of the customer still in the chair.

I don't wait around for Wednesday.

###

The downloaded brochure shows dusk on Titan tinted in red ochre, the oldest pigment on Earth. I've never been to the homeland, but another sky will suffice, as long as there's a view.

I don't need much. I can sell my tools, pick up new ones. Even have time for one last canvas. You're not a mod artist until you've tagged yourself. A daisy on the back of my hand, for whenever I need the reminder. Petals that dissolve like hourglass sand and renew in sunlight. Again and again, but never whole.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Carolyn Clink

Carolyn won the 2011 Aurora Award for Best Poem/Song for “The ABCs at the End of the World.” Her genre poetry publications include *Weird Tales*, *Analog*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*, *On-Spec*, *Tesseract*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Room*, and all 5 volumes of *Northern Frights*.

Josh Connors

Josh is just your average playwright, director, home baker, '80s slasher nerd, drag queen, theatre professional living in Corner Brook, NL. Graduate from The Randolph College for The Performing Arts Toronto Class of Summer 2012. They self-published their first play *Small Town Queer (STQ)*. Shortly after self-publication in December of 2019 *Small Town Queer* was chosen as a mandatory reading in three courses at the local university, Grenfell Campus. Two selections of English 1001: Critical Reading and Writing (Poetry & Drama) and one selection of Queer Literature taught by Professor Stephanie McKenzie.

Geoff Gander

Geoff's work has appeared in markets such as *AE Science Fiction*, *Tesseract*, *Exile Editions* anthologies, and others. He hasn't shaken the tabletop roleplaying game habit, and when not writing fiction he writes dark fantasy adventures for Fat Goblin Games, and *Call of Cthulhu* goodness for Sentinel Hill Press. Geoff likes to read and explore abandoned buildings, and lives outside Ottawa with a lovely stone-carving, bagpipe-playing witch, and her many cats.

Catherine Girczyc

Catherine works as a technical writer by day and pursues creative writing by night. Previously, she was a TV writer with fifteen television writing credits. Recently, her work has appeared in several SFF magazines. In 2016, *Polar Borealis Magazine* published *The Cup*. In 2017, two poems appeared in *Tesseract 20: Compostela*. In 2017, the story *Night Market* appeared in the *Vancouver Sci-Fi Anthology*. In 2018, *Polar Borealis Magazine* published two poems *Forgiveness* and *Dangerous Gods*. Also, *Neo-Opis* has accepted the story *Wrasse* for 2019-20 publication.

Contact via: Twitter: [@Cat_WritesSFF](https://twitter.com/Cat_WritesSFF)

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Cait Gordon

Cait is an autistic, disabled, and queer Canadian writer of humorous speculative fiction that celebrates diversity. She is the author of *Life in the 'Cosm*, *The Stealth Lovers*, and *Iris and the Crew Tear Through Space (2023)*. Her short stories appear in *Alice Unbound Beyond Wonderland*, *We Shall Be Monsters*, *Space Opera Libretti*, and *Stargazers: Microtales from the Cosmos*. Cait also founded The Spoonie Authors Network and joined Talia C. Johnson to co-edit the multi-genre fiction anthologies *Nothing Without Us* (a 2020 Prix Aurora Award finalist) and *Nothing Without Us Too (2022)*.

James Grotkowski

James is a native northern Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology but presently works in IT systems development for the aviation industry. He is a long-time member of the World Haiku Club with dozens of his works included in its published reviews. James has just begun his non-haiku writing endeavours, with two short stories having been published in *The Enigma Front* anthologies. Much more is soon to come. So far, few of his readers have been lulled to sleep. ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

M.D. Jackson

M.D. has been an artist, designer and an illustrator for many years. His work has appeared in *Art Scene International Magazine*, *ImagineFX Magazine*, *A Fly in Amber*, *Abandoned Towers*, *Flashing Swords*, *Outer Reaches Magazine*, *Realms Magazine* and on the covers of various anthologies from Pulpwork Press and Rage Machine Books among others.

He works in a digital medium, mostly with Corel Painter but also with Photoshop. Happily, he is also handy with an ink pen and, of course, that old tested and true technology of the HB pencil and a scrap of paper.

Check out his art at: <https://mdjackson.artstation.com>

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, and 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.

Michèle Laframboise

Michèle Laframboise feeds coffee grounds to her garden plants, runs long distances and writes full-time in Mississauga, Ontario.

Fascinated by sciences and nature since she could walk, she studied in geography and engineering, but two recessions and her own social

awkwardness kept the plush desk jobs away. Instead, she did a string of odd jobs to sustain her budding family: some quite dangerous, others quite tedious, all of them sources of inspiration.

Michèle now has about 20 novels out and over 60 short stories in French and English, earning various distinctions in Canada and Europe. Her most recent SF book, *Le Secret de Paloma* (David, 2021) deals with teen angst and grief on a remote, hostile world. It is currently in translation and waiting to start its quest for a good home.

You can stop by at her website michele-laframboise.com to say hello, or visit her indie publishing house echofictions.com/ to get a taste of her fiction!

Caitlin Marceau

Caitlin Marceau is an author and lecturer living and working in Montreal. She holds a B.A. in Creative Writing, is a member of both the Horror Writers Association and the Quebec Writers' Federation, and spends most of her time writing horror and experimental fiction. She's been published for journalism, poetry, as well as creative non-fiction, and has spoken about horror literature at several Canadian conventions. Her debut collection, *Palimpsest*, is available from Ghost Orchid Press and her novella, *This Is Where We Talk Things Out*, is slated for publication by DarkLit Press later this year. If she's not covered in ink or wading through stacks of paper, you can find her ranting about issues in pop culture or nerding out over a good book. For more, check out caitlinmarceau.ca/

Melanie Marttila

Melanie has been writing since 1977 and her poetry and short fiction have been published in small press anthologies and in magazines such as *Bastion Science Fiction* and *On Spec* since 1994. She received her Master of English Literature and Creative Writing in 1999 and is a professional member of the Canadian Authors Association and SF Canada.

Eyes on the skies, head in the clouds, #actuallyautistic author Melanie Marttila writes poetry and speculative tales of hope in the face of adversity. She lives and writes in Sudbury, Ontario, in the house where three generations of her family have lived, on the street that bears her surname, with her spouse and their dog.

Charles Moffat

Charles Moffat is an archery instructor and fantasy author who lives in Toronto, Canada, with his wife and two sons . He is fond of learning languages, speaks/reads/signs 11 languages, makes his own longbows and crossbows, writes about archery for *Archery Focus Magazine*, and publishes his short stories/novels on Amazon & Wattpad.

Derek Nason

Derek lives and writes in Saint John, New Brunswick, where he owns and operates a special care home for men with mental illness. His short stories can be found in *Fusion Fragment* (July 2021), *Abyss & Apex Magazine*, and on the forthcoming season of *The No Sleep Podcast*.

Douglas Shimizu

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

Frances Skene

Frances 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](#).

Robert Stevenson

Robert, a lyricist, has written 105 songs in the past 15 years. In the same period he took up writing poetry. He states he depends “on random inspiration, as opposed to regular perspiration, most of the time.”

And also “I don’t write to a subject. I just start with words that seem to be willing to form lines that have a beat and maybe rhyme. It’s all just wordplay until I get a critical mass of lines that I can start to shape into a narrative by rearranging them or editing them. Sometimes I’m totally surprised by what I’ve written, sometimes amused; and sometimes I even impress myself.”

Whereupon his wife Joyce likes to remind him of something said by former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson’s wife Maryon, “Behind every successful man, there stands a surprised woman.”

Katie Sweet

A digital arts teacher living in Barrie, Ontario, Katie spends her days wrangling teenagers and watching language evolve through the strange simulacra of memes. In non-pandemic years, Katie often toured the convention circuit, selling her prints and comics.
