

# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
Issue #22 – July, 2022



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Issue #22 – July, 2022 (Vol.7#2.WN#22)

**Publisher/Editor:** R. Graeme Cameron

**Proofreader:** Steve Fahnstalk

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COVER – Gothic Demon-Girl by Lily Blaze

## EDITORIAL

Issue #22. Not quite a milestone. That would be #25 when it comes around. Nevertheless, 22 issues is worth pondering. I mean, who could have imagined I'd get this far?

Issue #1 came out in January of 2016, just over 6.5 years ago. Not that I intended it to be a one-shot but I confess I'm a little surprised at how successful it's been. Won a couple of Aurora awards and nominated again this year. Read in 102 countries. Averaging 1,295 downloads per issue.

But the statistic I'm most proud of is the amount of fiction I've published. Including this issue, I've published 195 poems and 212 stories in *Polar Borealis*. Some contributors I've published more than once. I've even snuck in a couple of my own stories. Something of a modest market for Canadian authors.

Granted, my payment rates are ludicrous, or as I like to call them, symbolic. The whole idea behind this magazine, what motivated me to publish it, is the concept of providing a market for writers who have yet to make their first sale. As someone who began writing novels in 1967 and has yet to publish even one, I empathise with those who have been struggling for decades. A first sale, no matter how small, is a confidence booster. At least, that's my theory.

I also publish writers who've begun to establish a track record, and even a number of well-known professional authors. This is not entirely at odds with my goal of serving newcomers. The industry and the markets it serves has become so insanely chaotic and unpredictable that, in a sense, *every* writer is a newcomer. I know authors who've developed a strategy of switching genres and adopting pennames in an effort to stay on top of the changing interests of readers. A single hit book, or even a series of such, is no longer a guarantee of continued popularity. Getting published has become a crap shoot for darn near everybody, and I don't mean a pleasant, civilized casino game in Monaco, I mean everyone is crouching in dark alleys rolling the dice and hoping, hoping....

Indeed, whenever I get together with authors, editors and publishers online the single topic dominating conversation is marketing. How the heck do you sell your books? There's lots of advice out there. You can spend thousands of dollars acquiring some of it. But the fact is even highly experienced professionals are shaking their heads and wondering what the magic formula is. Nobody seems to know. So far the only consensus is that the key ingredient is luck. Without that you haven't a chance. And with more than a million novels self-published in North America every year luck is spread rather thin.

But it is like winning the lottery. You only need one ticket to win. And I tell myself the odds are 50/50. Either you win or you lose. 50/50. With odds that good, I'm okay with buying a ticket one in a while.

And there's always hope. *Polar Borealis* is all about hope. Last month I received 74 short story submissions. Once this issue is published online I will begin reading through the submissions. I am 100% positive I will select enough stories for the next two issues. 70% positive I will find enough for the next four issues. At least 10% positive for the two issues beyond that. Hard to say. I do have the habit of publishing stories I like, and I have wide and varied tastes. Consequently, I figure a story submission to *Polar Borealis* has, on average, at least a 30% chance of being accepted. Insanely high, compared to most magazines, I suspect.

So, people submitting to *Polar Borealis*, providing their stories are in some way genre-related, have cause to hope, because there *is* a chance I will like their submission and want to publish it. Not a lost cause by any means.

And if you do get in, you *know* your story will be read. *Polar Borealis* has a couple of habitual readers in Iceland. And at least one in the Falkland Islands. And isn't that whom you write for? *The* reader who wants to read your story?

I know I'm not unique. So when I'm working on my novel I'm writing for that person out there who shares my sense of humour and cynicism, my outraged idealism and my wildly diverse interests. I write to please myself, knowing it will please them. Once my novel is published—I'm guessing self-published—I will rely on luck for it to cross paths with my interests-doppelgänger. Icing on the cake if there turns out to be thousands of them.

You see? Cause for hope. Write for yourself. Therein lies success.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

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## SOLUTION

*by Greg Fewer*

alone  
zombies corner him  
he teleports

-----

# THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY

*By Lena Ng*

The stars blazed down upon me. Tossing and turning, the scourge of insomnia seized me, and helpless in its grip, I stared at the blackly infinite sky and scanned the cursed codes the star patterns were projecting. The corrupted stars of Versiveus, Kraelov, and Diaxon travelled in broken, unpredictable paths, their celestial music twisting into something ominous and portentous, and my eyes burned at the visions.

After dragging myself from the bed, I threw on a cloak and fled to the Midnight Library for answers. Mad Cupid stood guard at its gate; corpulent, naked, a troll-sized mountain of pink, soft-like-butter flesh. He used to patrol the Library's labyrinth halls until the fragrance of poisonous secrets insaned his brain. I flashed my library card numbers, tattooed on my elbow, to stop the release of his monstrous arrows. If struck, my heart would mutate into something abnormal, dooming me to a lifetime of unwholesome love. With a gibbering smile, he pulled open the gigantic mahogany door, the handle small in his hefty, grubby hand.

The fish-faced librarian eyelessly appraised me. He accepted my offering and I choked at the pungent scent of my sacrifice as he led me through the darkened tunnels, rivulets of moisture seeping down the walls like tears. Down into the earth's depths, passing the locked room of forbidden knowledge, the revelation of which would drive one mad, until we halted at the vault doors to the Deep Room. With quick flicks of his fingers, the librarian signed the safety rituals, scattered the protective plants, and with a subsonic sound, muttered a secret prayer. Cogs and gears ground a mechanical whir as the door clanked open.

The librarian entered the room only to turn over an hourglass, filled with crimson sand, before making a hasty exit. On magewood shelves, thick, dusty books with their twisted spines loomed over me, their hairy skins bristling at my touch, the titles written like slash marks from a bloody quill. All the paradoxes of mankind at my fingertips, the dualities of good and evil explained, the mysteries of the stars to be revealed.

Stark words danced before me as I dove through the pages of the hallucinatory *Abyssinium*, raged through the lamentary *Lachrymosa*, laughed with manic delirium as I read the festering *Maledictory*.

The crimson sands flowed down and red-tinged tears dripped from the corners of my eyes. Faster and faster, I flipped through the pages, scribbling

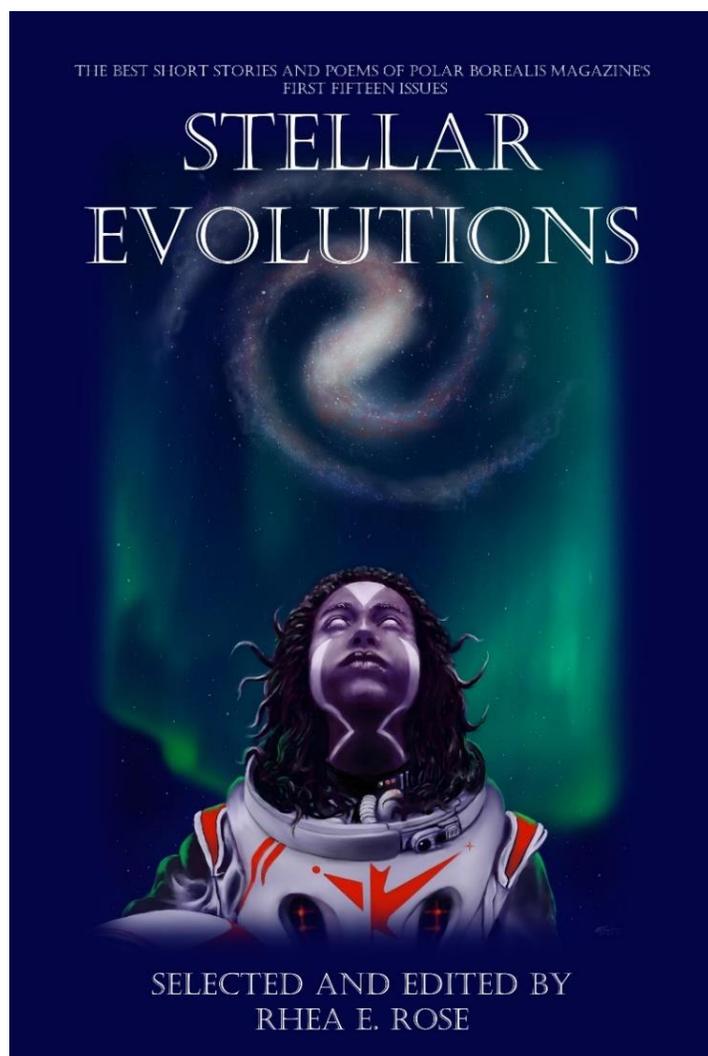
ellipses and equations, derivatives and reductions, chasing the enigma of my visions. Finally, the last of the sand ran through the hourglass and the books began to growl. I flung the hourglass against the floor, sand and shards of glass scattering. Words like insistent ants crawled from the leather parchments, inking themselves onto my skin, crowding into my ears, whirling me around and around until everything bled into blackness.

When I awoke, I was surrounded by red-gloved, masked men holding scalpels. I opened my mouth for a gurgling scream. “Believe me, we have no other choice,” said the head surgeon, placing the plague mask over my face. “We have to operate.”

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## 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](#)

# WHAT AWAITS

by Lisa Timpf

“Just like the Jurassic Period,”  
the biologist gasps,  
gazing in wonder  
at their new planet’s foliage  
“But then, we'd better watch for—”  
a roar in the distance  
confirms his misgivings.

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ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #119 V.32 #1



## 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](#)

# BOLT FOR BRAINS

by *Don Miasek*

(Previously published in *Unfit Magazine* in 2019)

Ms. Chesapeake was talking about the summer break now, and all the safety procedures she expected them to take over the summer holiday. Vinod wasn't listening. Instead he—and all his friends—were staring at the clock on the wall. The time shone in bright green letters, with the seconds slowly counting up.

Tick, tick, tick.

Four minutes to five and the end of class. No more math. No more show-and-tell. No more boring stories about the history of Venus Station Beta. No more kindergarten.

No more flesh and blood, soon. Vinod tried not to think about that. His mom had always told him that these were the best years of his life, and so he should enjoy them. But while his friends were excited for the summer off, Vinod was scared.

Tick, tick, tick.

Something nudged Vinod in his back. He squirmed around in his seat to look behind him. Charles held a note out for him, and Vinod unraveled it.

Calvball? it said.

Vinod nodded enthusiastically and handed the note back. One last game of Calvball, and he'd be separated from his friends forever.

A loud buzzing rang throughout the classroom, and Vinod jolted in his seat. In his thoughts, the four minutes had passed.

“All right now,” Ms. Chesapeake called out over the noise of everyone packing up their bags and gadgets, “Everyone have a good time off. Remember, ‘a careful student is a safe student’.”

Vinod lined up with the fifty other kids as they filed out of the room. The doors were flanked by two soldiers with big guns and big armor.

“Have a good time, kids,” one of the soldiers said as they passed by. “Have a safe time.”

The other soldier said nothing. He was focused on running a scanner over each of them. Anyone and anything could be an explosive, mom always said. Vinod had never seen it in person, but the newsfeeds on VenusNet were proof of that. Once mom let him watch a vid of a school levelled by an explosion. Instead of a shining building, there was only broken metal and rubble.

He'd cried all night, even though mom said he'd never have to worry about that. But she also said he wasn't allowed to watch the vids anymore.

\*\*\*

Vinod stood shoulder to shoulder with the others, hoping nobody noticed him secretly standing on his toes. It made him look like a big kid, and if he was a big kid he wouldn't be picked last for teams. Nobody wanted to be picked last for Calvball.

"Um, we'll take Amy," said Jake.

Amy bounced out of the line and lined up with Jake's team. There were only four left of the unchosen players.

Whoever got picked last was the biggest loser, Vinod knew, and he looked over at the others in the line. Charles whispered into the other Team Captain's ear. Vinod hoped Charles was telling Madra to pick him. Madra nodded, but then pointed at someone else. "I'll take Robart."

Vinod could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. That wasn't fair! Robart was fat and missed even the easiest catches. I'm a way better player than Robart! he thought. Yet it was Robart who happily joined Madra's team.

Three left.

Vinod wondered if Charles really told Madra to pick him or not. Maybe Madra had just ignored Charles. Charles was his friend, and he wouldn't just leave him to be the biggest loser. Yet something in Vinod's mind made him wonder.

"Rebecca," Jake said without hesitation.

Two left. Just him and the dummy Eldren, who looked over at him. Vinod knew what Eldren was thinking, because he was thinking the same thing. If you aren't picked last, then you aren't the biggest loser. Nobody wanted that.

I'm faster! Vinod wanted to shout. I can jump and I can catch, and I can throw better than half the kids in the school yard, even if I was only in kindergarten. But he knew shouting that would just get him in trouble. Soldiers lined the Calvball field, and he knew they wouldn't hesitate to run over if someone caused trouble.

Charles leaned over into Madra's ear and whispered again. Please be telling her to pick me! Vinod thought. Madra shrugged back at Charles and then pointed. "I guess I'll take Eldren."

"No!" Vinod shouted, but he knew it was stupid the moment he did it. "That isn't fair!"

"Ha ha, loser bolt-for-brains got picked last!" Jake crowed. He was way bigger than everyone else. Jake was in the second grade.

Vinod felt his face turning red. "I am NOT bolt-for-brains!" he shouted.

"You will be soon," Jake taunted. "They're gonna scoop out your brains." He made a gross noise with his mouth. "Shllluuurpp!"

"No, they won't!" Vinod ran up to him.

"Oh my God, bolt-for-brains doesn't even know what happens during augmentation."

"Stop calling me that!" Vinod knew he was crying but couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

"You're gonna be a machiiiine!" Jake sang. "You're gonna be a machiiiine!" He looked at the others, and they slowly joined in. Nobody wanted to get on the bad side of a second grader.

Vinod was aghast. This was his worst nightmare come to life. He wished he could just wake up and do this day again. Then he'd say no to Charles and not even go out for stupid Calvball. He looked over at Charles, and to his horror his friend had joined in with the singing.

"Charrrrles!" Vinod cried.

Charles stopped singing. He looked embarrassed, but Vinod knew that was because he was known to be his friend. "Sorry Vinod, but you aren't gonna be 'round no more. We aren't gonna be able to hang out once they scoop your brains."

"You're my friend!" Tears were running down Vinod's cheeks. He wiped them off, but he knew everyone had already seen. Now he was the biggest loser AND a crybaby.

"Boop, boop, bolt-for-brains Vinod is having his last emotion!" Jake laughed. "Shlrrrrp!" The others made the noise too.

"Ms. Chesapeake has cybernetics and she isn't a bolt-for-brains!"

"That's different." Jake gave that big sigh that adults gave when they were trying to explain things to little kids, but Vinod wasn't a little kid no more. He was out of kindergarten. "Ms. Chesapeake just has a little cybernetics. My dad says that's completely normal. What you're gonna be is a full-convert. You're gonna be a bolt-for-brains hooked up to a computer, and we're never gonna have to see you again."

Vinod looked over at the soldiers lining the Calvball field. They must have heard the shouting by now. Why didn't they come over and tell Jake to stop being a jerk? Vinod wished they would.

In all the VR flicks Vinod had seen, this was where the plucky young kid would punch the bully's lights out, even though the bully was thirty centimeters taller. Bam! Pow! The bully would go down and all the kids would cheer, and everything would be all right from then on.

Mom always said those VR flicks were stupid and weren't real. Vinod knew that—he didn't need an adult telling him—but part of him hoped that maybe in this case it just might be true. Stories were built on the kernel of truth, according to Ms. Chesapeake.

Vinod brought his fist around and smooshed it against Jake's chest as hard as he could. For a moment, the bigger kid looked stunned, and Vinod hoped it was because he'd been knocked right out. But then Jake laughed and shoved him back.

Vinod stumbled and fell on his butt, dirt spraying everywhere.

"Bolt-for-brains, bolt-for-brains!" Jake shouted. The bigger kid was on him in a second, and all Vinod could feel was the rain of fists crashing against his face. "Bolt-for-brains, bolt-for-brains!"

What happened next Vinod could only barely remember. Jake pummeled him like only a bigger kid should. He heard the others shouting, and through the haze of pain he wondered why Charles wasn't helping him. Nobody could be friends with a bolt-for-brains crybaby who was the biggest loser.

"Knock it off!" someone shouted. It was an adult voice. In a moment, Jake was hoisted off and into the arms of one of the soldiers.

Vinod wished the soldiers had stopped them before he'd ever been picked last.

"You goddamn kids!" the soldier shouted into Jake's face. She was right furious now, and Vinod hoped she'd punch Jake's lights out. But instead the soldier only spoke. "We're trying to protect you from terrorists and you stupid children are pulling this kind of shit?"

Now Jake was crying, even as the soldier set him back down. Good, Vinod thought. Let him have a taste of his own medicine.

"Your parents'll be hearing about this," the soldier said, though Vinod thought she sounded a bit worried. Soldiers weren't supposed to touch the kids, even if it was to break up a fight. They definitely weren't supposed to swear at them, neither.

Charles stood over Vinod and held out a hand.

But Vinod was in no mood to take it. That would be forgiving stupid Charles, and Vinod couldn't give him the satisfaction. He climbed back to his feet on his own. He wished he could stand tall. The kids in the VR flicks would say something clever and make the bully cry even more, but Vinod was no VR flick kid.

"H-h-he punched me!" Vinod bawled instead, pointing at Jake. "He called me a bolt-for-brains and he punched me!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," the soldier muttered. "You're going to be one of those full-convert deals."

That nearly stunned Vinod out of crying. A second grader saying that being a bolt-for-brains was bad was one thing, but an adult? He'd never be able to show his face in public again.

Vinod didn't look at any of the other kids, but he hoped they felt bad about the way he'd been treated. He'd been their friend ever since pre-school. He wished he could tell them all off, but instead he just grabbed his Calvball gloves and knapsack and ran off the field.

"Hey, kid," the soldier called out. "Don't just run away." But she did nothing to stop him.

Vinod ran to the vacuum train terminal. Along the way, he wiped the snot off his face as best he could with his sleeve, but one look at his reflection in the station's chrome walls showed puffy cheeks and red eyes. Everyone else on the train would know he was a big crybaby. With his Calvball gloves, he bet all the adults knew he'd been picked last.

\*\*\*

The trip home was a half-hour by vacuum train. Vinod kept looking at his phone, hoping there'd be some message from the other kids. They'd all be apologizing for the way they acted, and saying that Jake was actually the biggest loser and how they never should have sung bolt-for-brains at him. But there were no messages from anyone. All of them had abandoned him, and Vinod felt that his eyes were as big as discs now. He hoped none of the adult passengers on the train saw it.

The train dropped him off in front of his building. It was the biggest on Venus Beta, and Ms. Chesapeake always said the VenusNet Data Center was the most important of all. None of the other kids seemed to see it that way, though.

Vinod stopped and waited at the security station for the man to signal him through. Soon he was running for the door at the end of the long dark hallway. It chimed as he approached, sliding open. The lights flickered on as he stepped in.

"Moo-oom!" he cried as he entered the apartment and threw down his gloves and knapsack. Big kids weren't supposed to cry for their moms, but Vinod didn't care. Jake and Charles and Eldren and the soldiers weren't there to see him.

He found her in her work alcove, which is where she normally was at this time of day. Her arms and legs looked like a skeleton's as she lay in her bed under the protective glass of her capsule. A silvery sheet was all that covered her otherwise naked body. Thick cables, colored in each ribbon of the rainbow, ran from the chrome plating in her head to the computer banks lining the

walls and ceiling. Her eyes were shut, but Vinod knew she could still see him through all the cameras around the room.

“Mom, Charles and Jake punched me!”

Mom did not answer.

“MOM!” he shouted again, and this time she stirred.

The huge machinery hooked up above her head whirred and ka-chunked. Her eyes suddenly fluttered open, and she smiled as she saw who was standing above her. “Oh, my dear sweet Vinod. How was your last day at school?” Her voice came through the computer system.

“I hated it,” Vinod bawled, and it all tumbled out. He told her about being picked last at Calvball, how Jake was mean to him, and how Charles didn’t do anything to help. He didn’t mention trying to punch Jake, or how the soldier had to break up the fight.

Mom listened to every word, but Vinod suspected she didn’t truly understand just how bad of a day it was. “Oh, Vinod, I’m so sorry.”

“Can you tell Jake’s mom what he did?” Vinod hoped Jake would get spanked—she was a known authoritarian.

That made mom hesitate, but then she gave the slightest shake of her head. “I... no, no. We’d best not trouble Jake’s mother. In a little while you won’t have to worry about any of that. None of your friends will matter, soon enough. You’re going to be augmented.”

Vinod bit his lower lip. Even if he hated Jake and Charles and Rebecca and all the others, he didn’t know if he wanted to never see them again.

“Full-convert cyborg means safety, Vinod. It means protection,” mom said softly. “Once you’re part of VenusNet, no-one can ever hurt you.”

For some reason, that didn’t make Vinod any less scared. “But mom,” he sniffled.

“No buts, Vinod. Jake and Charles and all the others will envy you after augmentation. No name-calling and no bullies.”

Vinod couldn’t help but like the sound of that, even if it meant they wouldn’t be his friends anymore.

“There are bad men and women out there,” mom went on. “There are terrorists, and criminals, and mean people who would hurt you all throughout Venus Beta. I will never lose you the way we did your father. Do you understand?”

Vinod nodded, but still sniffled.

“Do you want a hug?”

Vinod nodded. It wasn’t every day he got a hug.

Mom smiled, and her fingers twitched as the command was sent through the network.

\*\*\*SANITATION PROCEDURES STARTED\*\*\* a computerized voice said. Gases shot through mom’s capsule, and she gasped as she gulped down the clean air.

Vinod fidgeted with his hands as he waited, wondering what his own capsule would look like.

\*\*\*SANITATION PROCEDURES COMPLETED\*\*\*

Mom’s capsule creaked as the glass jolted up into the ceiling, exposing her to the apartment air. Her cracked lips tugged upwards in a motherly smile, and she held her gangly arms out for him. Vinod gladly climbed into them and hugged her back with all his might.

“My dear, sweet Vinod,” she said. “No-one can ever hurt us in here.”

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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.

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**Breaking Camouflage** – by Mark Silox

**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](#)

# BEHOLD

by James Grotkowski

planetoid for sale  
behold my land of dreams  
zap the kraken first

-----

SPECULATIVE NORTH – Issue #6, December 2021



## FICTION:

### **Arturo**

– by Amorina Kingdon

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### **Nightshift**

– by Linda D. Addison

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## NON-FICTION:

An Interview with Linda D.

Adison – by Andy Dibble

## COVER ART

– by Marco Marin

[Speculative North #6](#)

# REWIND

by *R.A. Clarke*

(Previously published. Won 2<sup>nd</sup> place in *Writers Weekly* story contest in 2019)

“Do we have to sit outside again? It’s already freaking hot out here.” Susan fanned herself with her hand and adjusted the brim of her hat.

“Of course, it’s hot. What would you expect?” Neil laid back on his forearms and closed his eyes, making a big show about sunbathing. “You’re the one who wanted to come to Costa Rica.”

“It just seems to be getting hotter every day,” she whined. Her skin felt scorched, but it remained pale. “Don’t you think?”

Neil just shrugged, ignoring her.

Susan frowned. The last few years of marriage hadn’t been easy. Their spark had gone out, and she’d hoped this trip would rekindle the romance. The vacation started out so perfectly. The promise of exotic adventure, the lure of pristine sandy beaches, and a private cabana they had all to themselves for a whole week... it was a true all-play-no-work paradise.

But it didn’t last, and now the days stretched on. She ran a hand over her leg, knowing the carnage she would see there later.

Susan stared out into the rolling waves as they lapped at the shoreline. Sunlight glinted off the ripples, leaving spots in the pigments of her eyes. The horizon stretched endlessly. She had loved the ocean once.

“It’s nearly time to go to the boat.” Susan was beginning to feel that familiar pulling sensation again, like she was made of metal and a magnet had come into range, attracting her to it. She had tried to fight it many times before, uselessly. The reality was, they had to follow the same daily routine whether they wanted to or not. “Maybe we should go early today?”

“What’s the point?” He shrugged again, which infuriated her. “Going early or late makes no difference.”

“Don't you even care anymore?”

“We’ve tried everything Susan.” Neil sat up, a tired and slightly irritated look on his face.

“We’re obviously missing something! There has to be a way.”

“There’s no coming back from this,” he said sternly. “You need to accept that we’re—”

“Don’t say it.”

Neil growled and flopped back to the sand. “Fine, live with your own delusions.”

A bitter silence lingered between them for quite some time. The magnetism pulled harder.

Susan caught sight of a slender silhouette approaching, her willowy form casting a long shadow in the morning light. Blinking against the sun's glare, Susan swore under her breath. "Not again..."

"What?" Neil's eyes popped open, sitting up with anticipation. Susan quietly seethed. She had to be with him right now, but she didn't have to like it.

The woman stopped at beach chair nearby. Her red fingernails contrasted sharply against the white see-through beach dress she wore. Neil's hungry eyes raked over her, as he stood to get a better look. The harlot removed her threadbare cover, practically naked, and not the least bit ashamed.

The succubus laid down on the same chair she occupied every damn day, stuck in their loop somehow, and Neil's eyes didn't falter in their admiration.

"Enjoying the view?" Susan turned away from her lecherous husband, sick of seeing him drool.

Susan recalled how shocked and uncomfortable they both were, when the nearly nude sunbather first appeared one hundred and sixty-two days ago. Neil had respectfully averted his eyes, saying reassuringly that he didn't need to look anywhere else. She had felt love for him back then... but, that love had been bitten off in chunks each day, slowly eaten up.

"Well, since you killed us, it's been my only joy." Neil's words dripped resentment.

"Ah, the blame game again, is it? You could've been the one to cut your leg just as easily."

"But I didn't."

Susan bit her tongue, deciding to ignore him. Instead she pondered what might have been. What if they hadn't ventured off on their own during the dive? What if the boat had been there when they resurfaced, like it was supposed to? What if she hadn't cut her leg on that coral, chumming the waters?

The magnet was tugging so hard now, that her body leaned against her will. Both Susan and Neil would snap to the dock soon, to relive their deaths all over again.

"I guess it's that time," Neil sighed. The scuba diving excursion always left at eleven in the morning, without fail. They'd gear up alongside the other excited couples and head out to the remote location to explore the exotic fish and underwater landscapes.

Susan absent-mindedly looked down at her thigh again, envisioning the blood seeping from her impending wound. Her heart fell, knowing she would

soon feel the sting of countless razor-sharp teeth, her cries mingling with Neil's as frenzied sharks dragged them under. Everything would go dark.

Then suddenly, they would snap here again, sitting on this cursed beach that steadily grew hotter with every rewind.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe we're in hell." A tear rolled down her cheek. Susan had never said it out loud before, still stubbornly clinging to the hope that it was all just a torturous dream she couldn't wake from.

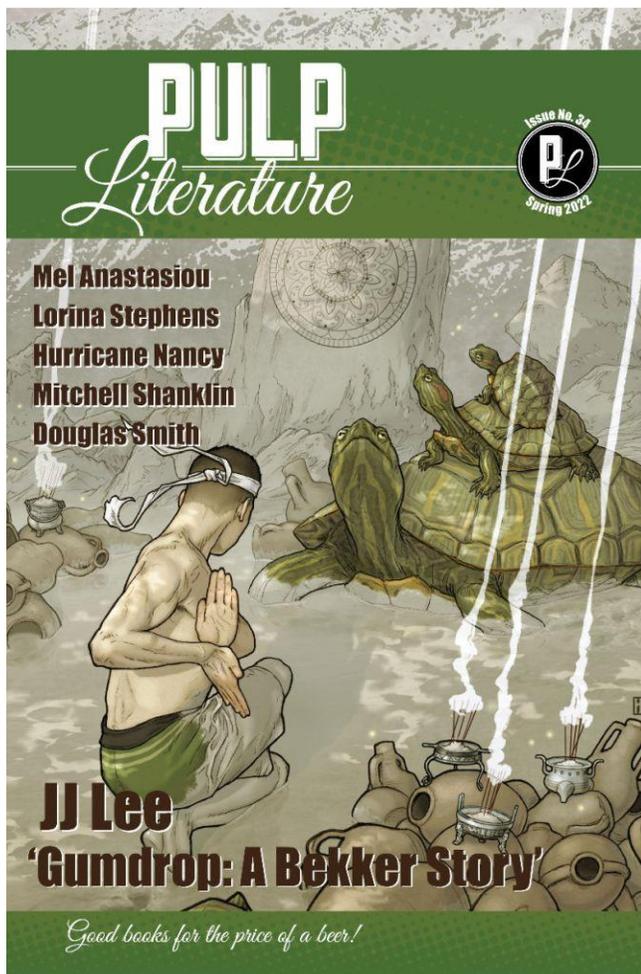
Neil looked at her with raised brows. "Welcome to reality." His gaze returned to the sunbather with a smile. "Hell ain't so bad."

Susan felt her mind shift, as the bright sunshine surrounding her darkened to a fiery red. The last vestige of hope she clung to crumbled. The magnet tightened its grip.

*Snap.*

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### PULP LITERATURE #34 Spring 2022



**COVER:** *Black Tortoise Kowtows* – by Herman Lau

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***Gumdrop: A Bekker Story*** – by JJ Lee  
***The Realm of Shadows*** – by Megan W. Shaw  
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***Gerald Bantam Says Goodbye***  
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**POETRY** – by Mitchell Bodo, Alex Kitt,  
& Derek Webster

**CARTOONS** – by Hurricane Nancy

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

# THEN, WHAT?

*by Shayne Dahl*

When the starry night rains down  
Flooding office buildings and homes  
Schools and parks where children play  
When the future arrives  
Where laughter has died  
The nature of things, revealed  
And darkness rules the day

When the ancient truth prevails  
And every single thing returns to dust  
When the pillars of creation crash  
Into the dry oceans of a dead world  
Long after the last of us

When there's no tear nor eyes to cry  
When the atmosphere is without breath  
When there is no life left to die  
And the ruins of this world  
Are eons beyond death

When clocks have stopped turning  
and calendars have no meaning  
When the Earth molts  
Shedding its thin blue skin  
When the surface is smoky and burning  
Because the Sun is screaming  
And the script reads  
THE END

Then... what?  
Then... where?  
Who and when?  
And why?

-----

# THE HERALD

*by Sheryl Normandeau*

It's snake oil, all of it: take a sip here, rub it in there. We've bought what they're selling—we have no other options and we've convinced ourselves that it's going to work. The trouble is, terraforming Mars will take a whole lot of time, and that's a bit of a problem.

There's a consortium of nations that paid for this expedition. I like that word, consortium. It sounds civilized and sophisticated. And expedition suggests an adventure, a voyage of discovery. It's romantic and completely inaccurate. We're going to Mars to mine it. If you think that's glamorous, you'd better give your head a shake.

When we arrive, they cram all three hundred of us—a multitude of highly-trained scientific minds and people with very specific skills—into a massive pod, this one plopped down on to a pile of rocky rubble. The landing crew probably had a hard time deciding where to put our luxury digs. I can see the head scratching and the weighing of options like campers trying to pitch a tent on the side of a mountain. "Is this side more level? What do you think?" But our new home has amenable gravity, all the support systems are working, and each of us has our own living quarters, which keeps fifty percent of the population from murdering the other fifty due to all the snoring. It's pretty cushy when you think about what we just left.

My online review: Mars is colder than advertised, with much more iron oxide. Five stars for the absolute peace and quiet. I'll need to get used to the boredom.

I'm on Team Pinner. We're pedologists and surveyors, basically the first guys on the scene. Our job is to determine the best spots for core samples to be drilled. The consortium's plan is two-fold. First of all, you strip mine as much of the planet's dermal layer as possible and burn it up, releasing all the CO<sub>2</sub> from the soil particles. It won't be nearly enough, of course—the atmospheric pressure of Mars is a miserable one percent of Earth's and you're only going to get a piddly fraction of what's needed from the soil. So we need to go deeper. Someone ran the imaging and apparently Mars has a substantial amount of carbon-bearing minerals buried in the crust. Someone else crunched the numbers and voilà, here we are, making it happen. I don't know, I don't care. I just work here.

They start us on the north pole, which is a seriously nasty place, fraught with ancient lava tubes and the kind of cold that seems to go through your

suit even though it's not supposed to. Petr Dulinova and I have been staying in a remote camp away from the main pod while we complete this job. Home Sweet Home is the equivalent of a bare-bones studio apartment, one of the many bubble-style outposts that house field workers. We've been painstakingly pinning this area for eighteen months, in for four weeks, and out on mandatory leave to the base for two. We're on our final shift before a leave, and although neither one of us snores, and we would never admit it to each other; we are both grateful for the chance to be out of each other's hair for a while.

We take the tractor out to the site and park in a previously pinned safe zone. We have to do our work on foot, checking every single step before we make it. It's tedious, but complacency can be deadly.

Petr, as usual, is keeping up a running monologue, his voice so clear in the headset that he could be standing next to me in a silent room. He's waxing humorously on a wide range of topics, circling around, as usual, to the wife and kids he's not supposed to have and not supposed to be missing. I have never been able to tell if his family is fictional. They ran all the background checks when we signed up, and we ticked all the boxes on their lists. *No ties*. It gets to you, though. You catch yourself periodically thinking about everyone you've ever dated and wondering if it was just you.

Damn straight it was. Petr and I tiptoe around the ridges, quicksand-like depressions, and holes this part of Mars is completely pockmarked with. They're all filled with soil so you can't tell in advance which ones could give way. So far, our scanners haven't let us down; we're like dancers moving awkwardly and slowly through a piece of choreography no one knows until right when they get to it.

Human error, however—that's another story. Just a second of inattentiveness. That's how you get into a car accident or lose a hand at a conveyer belt. I am adjusting the tint on my visor when the shift in weight distribution causes my right foot to slide on the soft soil. I am sucked underground so quickly I don't even have a chance to shout. The lava tube is a narrow sausage casing, with an abrupt landing in a small, tight burrow. Once I realize I am alive and that Petr is screaming at me from somewhere up above, I snap on my helmet lamp and take stock of how I feel. "I'm okay," I sputter. The scanner says I've slipped nearly ten metres. If the chute had been any wider (or my suit any tighter), this might not have ended in the same way. "This is the rabbit hole to end all rabbit holes, though. We're going to need help to get me back up."

Thankfully, Petr is wearing that help on his belt, in the form of a winch cable. I guess the consortium figured we'd be falling down holes on occasion. I hear him mutter something in Slovakian. "What's up?" I call.

“My winch,” he says. “I had it when I did our gear check this morning, but now it’s gone. There’s a spare in the tractor, but I have to go get it.”

We both know what this means. Petr’s journey back to the tractor is basically a minefield of potential holes, and if he drops into one, we’re screwed. To top it off, our suits need to be recharged every eighteen hours and that means that we need to get back to our camp at a certain time. If we dilly-dally, we’re also screwed.

Situations like these always make the heart race and your breath come quicker, don’t they? You end up straining the resources of your suit even more. I try to swallow down the welling of panic and survey my surroundings for the first time.

Yep, it’s a hole. It’s so small I can’t stand up straight, although if I really work it, I could stretch a bit back into the shaft I dropped from and recline to 110 degrees. While I’ll have to assume that position for my rescue, there is no need to make an attempt just yet, unless I want to take a really awkward nap. Right now, I’m crouched on all fours (a decent way to approach panic), surrounded by a tiny cocoon of dirt. I can’t shake the feeling that my grave may have been dug millions of years ago and I’ve finally arrived to fill it.

There’s only one thing to do when you’re stuck in a hole beneath the surface of Mars and you need to shake off unwelcome thoughts of your own death. You take soil samples.

They’ll be looking for a few things when they dig down into the planet. There is frozen water on Mars—plenty of it, actually. That’s been coming in handy for those of us here now, and it’s guaranteed that the immigrants who will eventually arrive from Earth once we get this whole atmosphere thing worked out are going to be mighty pleased about it. But our employers will also be looking for subsurface water in liquid form. So far, there’s no evidence that such a thing exists, but we’re all hopeful.

They’re also going to be searching for other minerals to mine. Something valuable, something we can exploit and sell. That’s been a bust, as well, but if you’re out wandering around doing soil samples anyway, you may as well confirm if there is a treasure trove under your boots.

My head down and neck crooked in the cramped quarters, I fumble to reach the specialized scanner in my pack.

A few test samples and, as predicted, I know that I’m not sitting on the equivalent of Martian gold.

I occupy myself in this way for what feels like hours. Petr interrupts me periodically with reports of his progress and I am getting jittery with anticipation when he says he’s made it to the tractor and is on his way back with the winch. I scan the next sample.

This one is not like the others. My heart jumps to my throat. I scan it again.

And again.

Your grade school teacher probably told you that there has long been a notion that there is life on Mars. Mrs. Dolihan refined it for me and my classmates by clarifying that it wouldn't be humanoid and you might not recognize it if you tripped over it. And here it is, beneath my hand, a collection of single-celled microorganisms. Martian life in this frozen hellhole. I've made first contact—me, the idiot who fell down the well.

After all these months, it's become difficult to remember why I'm here. It's not like I'm doing it for my great-grandchildren, after all. It's for the people of Earth—all of them. They're starving out there, water is down to a dribble, and they're getting picked off by weather and war and a few other "better luck next time" scenarios that no one saw coming. It would be supremely selfish not to pull on the cumbersome suit and strap on the tanks that keep you breathing and alive for another day. I try to remember what it was like to go to work when I was on Earth. Every job is noble, right? It doesn't matter what you're selling or servicing: you have to have a legitimate golly-gee-good reason to get up in the morning.

On these days, I think: This is my home now. I can't go back to Earth again. Honestly, I don't want to. This is the better life I signed up for. Short-term thinking, to be sure, but it's all I've got. I'm one of the lucky ones.

But this. This makes things decidedly more difficult.

I keep staring at the tiny patch of soil that that the aliens inhabit. Aliens, I think, and giggle into my helmet. I've got that all wrong, don't I?

"You okay?" comes Petr's voice. I've forgotten that our coms are open.

"Never hunky-dorier."

The Martians and I sit in the hole and one of us does some serious stewing. If I take my newfound friends back to the base to meet everyone, we're going to have to—what? Potentially stop terraforming the planet because there may be several million more of these little guys booting around and we might kill them all in the process?

It's not like the consortium or anyone else on Earth has a Plan B. It's the Martians or us.

I can delete the data on my scanner. But someone else—another pinner, perhaps, or someone drilling, would find them, or others like them. This isn't a secret that can be contained.

Well, there's evolution, isn't there? We can try to accelerate the process, but terraforming is going to take time. I won't see the end result, that's for sure. Maybe these little guys won't perish, but adapt. Perhaps they will thrive.

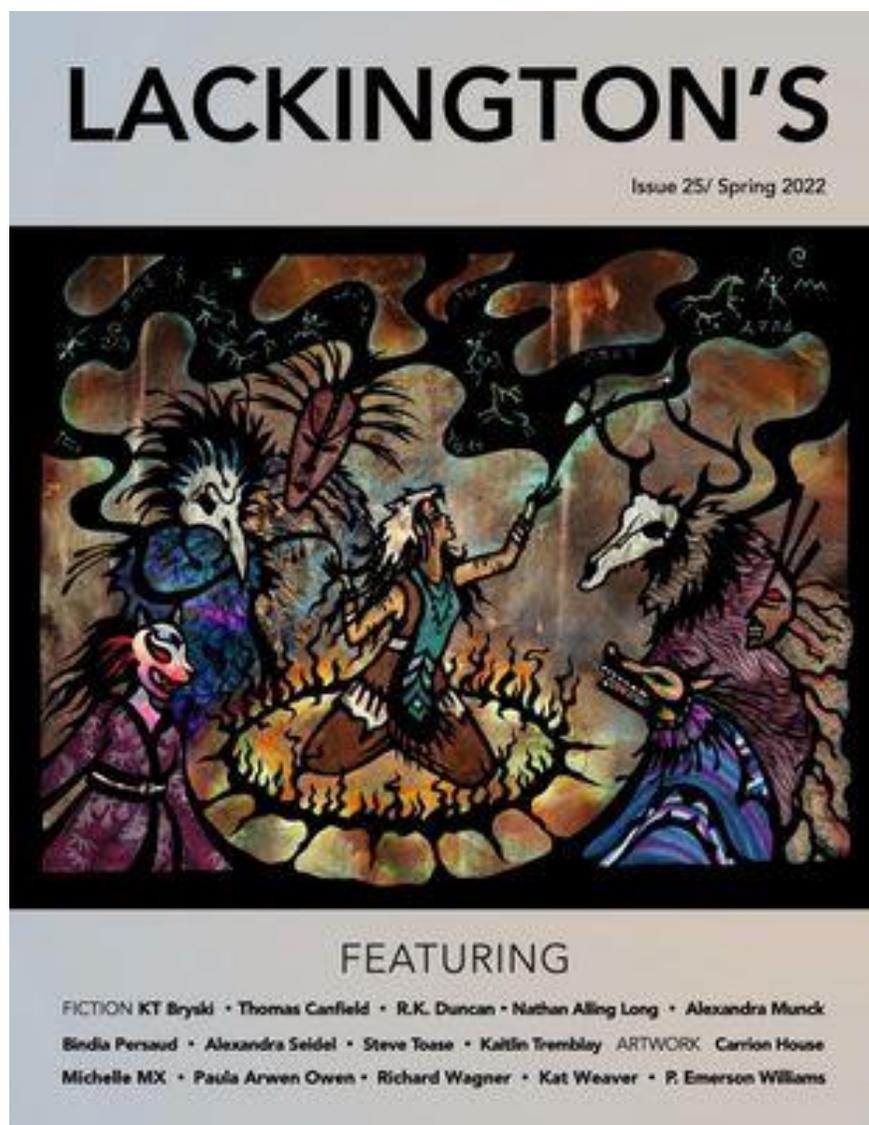
I will never know. And I hate to think poorly of someone I just met, but what if the Martians aren't friendly?

*This isn't a secret that can be contained.* It's just a matter of deciding who wants to spill the beans.

"You die in there? It would save me the trouble of hauling your sorry ass out." I can hear the whine of the cable and Petr's deep laugh. I clip to the line and slowly ascend.

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## LACKINGTON'S MAGAZINE, Issue #25, Spring 2022



Lackington's is going on hiatus. This is the last issue.

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#### COVER

– by Paula Arwen Owen

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– by Nathan Alling Long

#### *Eat the World*

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– by Steve Toase

#### *The Surface of Water*

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#### *An Atlas of Wandering*

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#### *In the Stillness of Bones and*

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#### *Homage to Stone*

– by Thomas Canfield

See [Lackington's Magazine #25](#)

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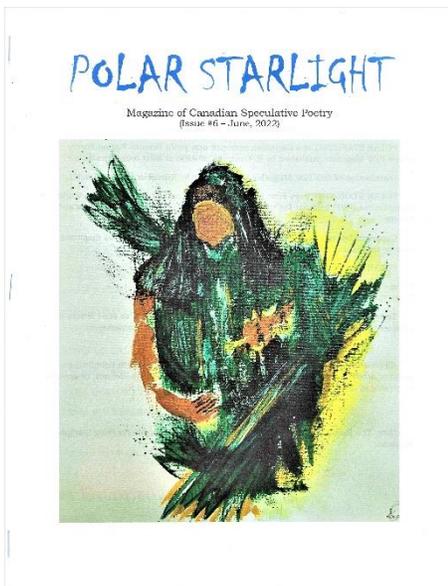
# PILLAR

by *Melanie Marttila*

spotlight shone skyward;  
unutterable prayer;  
Pandora's hope escaped.

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## POLAR STARLIGHT #6



Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Starlight 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.

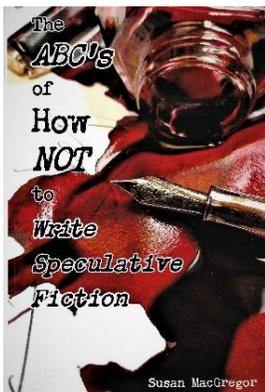
Cover of the 6th issue, *Saturn Return*, is by Tracy Shepherd.

The 6th issue contains poetry by Gregg Chamberlain, Shayne Dahl, Robert Dawson, Greg Fewer, Neile Graham, James Grotkowski, Sandra Hunter, R.K. Persaud, Frances Skene, Jim Smith, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Lisa Timpf, and Gerald L. Truscott.

Find it at: [Polar Starlight #6](#)

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## 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: [The ABC's of How NOT to Write Speculative Fiction](#)

# SCHRÖDINGER'S CATS

*by Wayne Cusak*

“Erwin, there’s a couple of people here to see you.”

Annemarie’s call rang down the hall, ricocheted brassily off the dark wood wainscoting, was tempered just a little by the flowered patterns on the wallpaper rising to the ceiling above the half-height paneling. The penetrating sound wasn’t what might have been expected, perhaps because the summery frock she wore and the ribbony bowtie at her neckline suggested a woman of softer voice.

No response. She turned back to the couple standing just inside the parlour, tossed her head in a way that flounced her curly brown hair and smiled with a softness belying the tone of that call to her husband.

“I’ll fetch him. You’ll have to give me a few moments. When he’s busy in his study, he gets all caught up in black holes and light speed and things of that sort. Sometimes he doesn’t hear what’s going on around him. I swear, there could be an earthquake and he’d keep on working. Please, have a seat.” She giggled a little and gave the air a pat with her hand, as if that might restrain any impatience on the part of the visitors, though they had displayed none.

A substantial portion of the morning’s sunshine flooded the front of the rented house near Oxford University, swathing in brightness the parlour into which Annemarie had led them. “That’s fine, Mrs. Schrödinger,” said the woman. Her cream-coloured, rose-patterned pinafore glowed in the brilliant light and rustled as she waved aside any hint of objection, expressly stated or implied, that might have been drawn from Erwin’s unavailability at exactly that moment.

The man, clean-shaven, neatly trimmed hair, nearly as short as the woman who had joined him in the intrusion upon the Schrödinger residence, fished from the recesses of his jacket a small piece of cardboard with something printed on it. “We’ll introduce ourselves properly when he attends upon us. In the meantime, would you be so kind as to present my card to him?” he asked, passing it to the physicist’s wife.

Annemarie smiled. “Oh, certainly. Of course I will.” Off she went down the hallway, bearing a smile that was sure to brighten the darkest corners of that passage.

“Erwin,” she called, stepping inside the scientist’s study, “there’s a lovely young man and woman who’ve called to see you. I said I’d fetch you. They’re waiting in the parlour. Oh, and the gentleman asked me to give you this.”

Erwin glanced at the card. “SPCA? I wonder what the devil they’re here for. Are they looking for a charitable donation, do you suppose?”

“I’ve no idea. They didn’t say. They simply asked to speak with you.”

“Oh... all right then.” He rose from his desk, looking a little irritated at the interruption, though being particularly careful not to say anything that would make his wife feel badly about it.

She led the way back along the hall. Erwin studied the card again as the two of them stepped into the radiance shining through the large parlour window. He looked up, catching the eye of the man in the tweed suit. “I take it you’re Jacob Wittlestone.”

“I am, Mr. Schrödinger. And may I present my companion, Miss Letitia Wildness.”

“Miss Wildness, Mr. Wittlestone.” Erwin nodded, then studied the business card once more. “May I ask what brings two members of the SPCA to my door?”

“Well, sir, as you may know, the SPCA has a special interest in any animals that are being abused.”

“Yes, I am aware of the nature of the work your organization performs.”

“So... well... it’s your cat, Mr. Schrödinger—we’ve come about your cat.”

“My cat? But I don’t have a cat.”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Letitia. “We’re too late!” Jacob rested a hand on his companion’s forearm, perhaps to suppress emotions for the nonce.

Bewildered, the theoretician scanned the faces of the visitors, first one, then the other, searching for some explanation that might have been awaiting an investigatory turn of a stone. “Uhm... ah... too late for what, may I ask?”

Letitia didn’t answer directly. She half turned her body, craned her head further round, looked directly at Jacob, left Schrödinger gazing at her back. “The poor thing’s dead,” she mumbled with a catch in her voice. Her eyes moistened. She raised a trembling hand which her companion quickly took hold of, imparting a steadiness she was rapidly losing prior to his intervention.

Jacob clung tightly to the woman’s fingers, shrouded delicately in lace gloves, currently fashionable, but otherwise of little merit. The words he spoke were directed over Letitia’s head, toward the physicist. “She means the experiment with the cat, of course. Am I to take it we have arrived too late for that?”

“I haven’t experimented upon a cat,” Schrödinger said. “I’m a physicist, not a veterinary scientist. And I’m not at all certain what you two are going on about.”

“It’s the experiment with the cat—” Letitia began to expand upon the earlier statement, but stopped as she choked up. Jacob finished it for her. “—in the box. The cat in the box experiment.”

“I don’t have a cat. I’m actually allergic to cats.”

“Make a note of that, Letitia, with date and time. We have a revenge motive, stated in his own words.”

Miss Wildness fished through her purse, then pulled out a dog-eared notebook. “Pencil, please, Mr. Wittlestone,” she sniffed. The hint of tears clouding her eyes moments earlier was gone, replaced by the air of a bureaucrat with an officious sense of mission. Jacob found a pencil in the recesses of his tweed suit.

“I don’t wish to be at all rude,” said the physicist, “but I was engaged on a project when you folks arrived. I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about, and I’d really like to get back to my work.”

Letitia’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my God. He’s going to do it to another one of them.” Trembling, she rolled her face onto Jacob’s shoulder, reached for his lapel with the hand most distant from it and near swooned against him. The pencil clattered, the notebook fluttered as they hit the floor.

Annemarie returned with a smile that had won her friends among most people she met. “Are your guests staying for a little while, Erwin? Should I put on some tea?”

“I don’t think we’ll need that, dear. Miss Wildness and Mr. Wittlestone seem to be just searching for their cat. Have you noticed a cat about the place?”

“Well, there are some, Erwin. Strays, I think. They seem to call around rather frequently. Most mornings, actually. Sometimes I put a bit of food out for them, or some milk. But I’m quite sure they’re harmless.”

Erwin turned back to the visitors. “Can you describe your cat? Perhaps my wife has seen it.”

“It’s not our cat, and we don’t know what the feline in question looked like,” said Jacob.

Letitia let out a great sob, followed by a low mumble in the ear of her partner as she clung to his arm. “They’re luring them, Erwin. God knows how many of them are in danger. The poor things.”

“If you can’t describe your cat, I’m doubtful there’d be much I can do to assist you to find it.” The scientist turned to his wife. “When exactly is it that you feed them? Perhaps these people could come round to watch. They might spot the one they’re looking for.”

“An invitation to observe the torture and execution,” Jacob gabbled softly to the young lady, who was still seeking comfort on his shoulder. “Mr.

Schrödinger, we've come here to put a stop to this. We're determined to do so. Indeed, we must do so. Absolutely must. We're prepared to purchase the cats from you. How much will you require to give them up?"

"Eh? What are you talking about? I'm afraid I have no idea what you're getting at."

"The cats you've been putting in a box with the poison, the radioactive substance and such, Mr. Schrödinger. As many of them as you've got lined up for your awful experiments. We're willing to purchase them all from you."

"But I have no radioactive substances; I have no cats, nor have I put any cats in a box. I haven't poisoned animals of any kind."

"Oh, pshaw, sir," Letitia scoffed. "We've read of your work." Her voice had lost the quavering element which had tempered it just moments earlier. In its place there was an alien sounding firmness in the articulation of the petite young woman.

A heaping helping of comprehension lit up Erwin. "Are you speaking of my thought experiment?"

An equal measure of confusion seized upon the faces of Jacob and Letitia. "I can barely comprehend that you've invited our thoughts on your cruelty, since we've come here to prevail upon you to cease such activities. Our answer to your question ought to be obvious, and go without saying. It is this: 'Not much, sir. We don't think much of it at all.'"

"Eh? You have the advantage of me, Mr. Wittlestone. I'm not grasping the nature of your objection."

"And that, sir, is why caring human society requires the SPCA. So very many things are wrong with your experiments." As he spoke, Jacob puffed himself up to his full five-foot, nine-inch height. "I'll recount just a few of them, sir: sealing a cat in a darkened box, leaving it there for an indefinite period of time, failing to provide food and water for it, the lack of a litter container and clean litter within the box. Those are the least of things. There's also the matter of exposing the animal to radioactivity and leaving poison in the box for the cat to consume. I could go on, sir, but this list ought to sufficiently portray the horror with which right-minded people view your work." Having laid out the accusation, his countenance assumed the smug look of a prosecutor who believed he had just proven his case.

As the man in the tweed suit spoke, Annemarie's face had darkened, appeared tortured—a countenance consistent with the fears his speech now roused in her. "Oh, Erwin, you didn't! Please, tell me you didn't."

Schrödinger reached out to his wife, put one arm around her shoulders, rested the opposite hand once more on those of her forearms closest to him.

“No, dear, I didn’t. I haven’t quite figured this out, though I am beginning to suspect it may involve a wild goose chase of sorts.”

“What’s that?” Letitia’s hand flew to her mouth. “Are you experimenting upon geese as well?”

“Eh?” Erwin tilted his head to one side and cocked an eyebrow as he turned from his wife to the whimpering pinafore. “Am I doing what to geese?”

“We have your statement, sir,” interjected Jacob loudly. “Letitia, add that to your notes. Quickly now, before the opportunity and the verbatim memory of it slips away.”

The young woman had retrieved the fallen items and returned the pad to her purse after making the previous entry in it. She extracted them again, flipped through leaves of cursive writing and busied herself once more, scribbling on the next blank page.

“Miss Wildness, Mr. Wittlestone, I sense in you the combination of enthusiasm and lack of focus with which my first-year students struggle at the university.”

“We’re in our second year, sir,” said Jacob.

“No matter. I stress to you both, I have not exposed any cats to radioactivity. Nor have I poisoned any felines. As of now, no such creatures have died at my hand.”

Letitia’s head perked up; her colour, which had drained away minutes earlier, now returned. “That is a tremendous relief, Mr. Schrödinger,” she gushed.

“Yes. Yes indeed. It’s a relief,” added Jacob, “though not a sufficient assurance cats are not being mistreated, so long as they continue to be held in darkened boxes and left indefinitely in the most miserable of conditions.”

“Oh, I have not yet put any cats in a box, either. That it was simply a thought experiment. Nothing more than a musing, shared with my good friend and colleague, Albert Einstein.”

Once more Letitia grasped Jacob’s forearm and squeezed as tightly as her small hands would allow. “Jacob! Did you hear? There are more people in on it. It’s a cabal. We shall have to confront this Mr. Einstein as well.”

On the one hand, the breathy warmth of Letitia’s exclamation, exuded toward Jacob’s ear, appeared to arouse his passions; on the other hand, the idea of a network engaged in nefarious animal abuse had seized his attention. “Yes, I caught that, Letitia. But he’s given us a new lead in this web of miscreants. We must keep up our pressure; continue demanding safe and proper treatment for animals.” He stroked her bicep.

“Indeed, Jacob, yes,” she purred. “We shan’t let this pass. We simply can’t. It would go against all of our principles. Tell Mr. Schrödinger it’s intolerable.”

“I believe he’s been made aware of that now,” replied the tweed, looking again over the top of his companion’s head in search of any musings the physicist’s face might betray. “Mr. Schrödinger, we cannot possibly be a party to anything that may promote undue violence to animals, or any form of mistreatment of them. Our society is dedicated—irrevocably dedicated, I say—to the protection and well-being of God’s four-legged apostles, and even those less attractive members of lower animal species. The very thought of your experiment, and those being carried out by your colleagues, is abhorrent to us.”

Annemarie had remained in the room; she looked decidedly uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. Schrödinger noted her grim countenance. He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed his eyes. “Miss Wildness, Mr. Wittlestone, the force of your argument makes a tremendous impression upon me. I confess, until now I had never seen the matter in quite the way you have presented it to me. The passion and sincerity with which you have so clearly laid out your case for the cats moves me. Truly and deeply, it has moved me.”

“Now, though, here’s the difficulty with which I’m faced,” Schrödinger continued. “My colleagues and I have invested greatly in our experiments. We cannot simply walk away from them, abandoning the entirety of our investments. Responsibilities must be met.”

The faces of the two young activists were immediately buoyed by the ray of hope breaking through the dismal cloud of despair under which they had suffered to this point. “But Mr. Schrödinger, we’ve already offered you a solution. We’ll pay you for the cats. You, your Mr. Einstein and any others who may be involved need suffer no loss. We can, and will, make good upon it for you.”

“I see. I see.” Erwin, mulling the proposal, calmed his wife with a wink. “We’d have to tot it all up, calculate the total investment. It could be a rather significant sum. You realize that, don’t you?”

“I suppose we’d hoped that if you saw the justice of our cause, you might put the money aside; that perhaps you might just do this as a matter of good conscience so that our funds could be preserved to attend to other causes requiring our attention.”

“Well, as much as I might be tempted to do so, I must consider the others. It’s not a resolution I can make on my own, and I know some of them will be insistent upon receiving compensation.”

“But if the money is there, will you be able to sway those others, Mr. Schrödinger? Can you obtain the commitment of your colleagues to abandon experiments involving cats?”

“Ahh, now I’m afraid that may be a little too much to hope for. However, if the finances can be arranged, I believe I can convince them we ought not to take the life of any cats, and that we must take great care hereafter not to abuse them, or to place them in harm’s way. But let’s turn our discussion to the proper amount of compensation. I realize this can add up to a lot of money, but I do know my colleagues. I’m going to suggest to you that two hundred pounds Sterling per cat should do it.”

“We shall obtain the funds! You and your colleagues shall have your money, Mr. Schrödinger. We’ll make it happen.” The words tumbled excitedly from the pinafore’s mouth.

“But there must be a verification—some means by which we can be assured the cats remain in good health,” interjected Jacob.

“Hmm. Miss Wildness, Mr. Wittlestone, the two of you do drive a very hard bargain, but I see the merit in your position. The resolution must indeed lie in verification. You must come by from time-to-time, check on the cats, perhaps even help out with their feeding. I see no way out of that. You’ll know nothing of their condition until you actually do check upon them. Verification is a *sine qua non* to assurance of their welfare. They may be dead, they may be alive, they may even be simultaneously dead and alive—you cannot know without checking.”

“Surely, sir, you jape. They can’t possibly be both dead and alive.”

“In the absence of verification, who can truly know, Mr. Wittlestone? No one, I say! Cats and more cats—you and Miss Wildness shall indeed know they live. Good faith requires affirmation, else I won’t accept your money.”

Jacob looked put upon by the new obligation with which he had been so suddenly burdened. Letitia, however, appeared relieved, grateful. “Oh, thank you. Thank you,” she gushed. “I confess, we anticipated far greater difficulty dealing with you. However, I—no—WE are delighted to conclude this arrangement with you on terms leaving each of us feeling good about the outcome.”

“I share precisely those sentiments, Miss Wildness.”

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# PATHS

*By Frances Skene*

Too many in power have led us down this path,  
at the end of which conscious beings huddle,  
rain falling from murderous clouds.

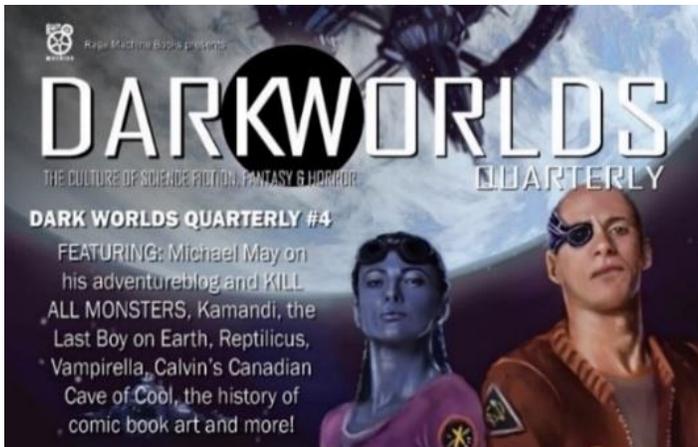
At least that's better than sun  
burning through a weakened sky.

The screen comes to life, more news of weather  
events, as they call them, as though a hurricane  
or earthquake is like a fancy ball, you and I  
in our best duds, rocking the end of the world.

Instead, I look again in the cupboard. Maybe  
there's food or soap that I missed before.  
Maybe the water will come again. Maybe the dog  
has found another rat.

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# SMILE

by Dayle Sharpe

I sit in the window and the sun kisses my face. Outside, a gentle breeze rustles the trees adorned in robes of red and gold. All the grandeur of autumn, but the sky is so clear, I can almost imagine it is spring. How the gods must love me; it could not be a more beautiful day to die.

There's a tap at the door.

"Nonna, I have a present for you!" my granddaughter calls with all the enthusiasm of a five-year-old.

I let her in. Ilaria presents a bouquet of pansies and mums, tied up in the red ribbon from her hair.

"I picked them myself. Do you like them?" She has chosen each bloom precisely for me, and I wonder how many gardens she decimated in the process. *Oh, to be so young and carefree again.*

Ilaria sits down at the table, chubby face cupped in her hands. She squirms in her seat, waiting for biscuits and tea. I switch on the stove and we wait for the kettle to warm.

"Mama says I mustn't stay too long. She says you have lots to get ready for tonight."

"I have all the time in the world for you darling girl," I say, kissing her on the cheek.

There is a tray of papassinos in the drawer near the oven, baked fresh this morning. I fetch the pan, place it on the table between the cream jug and sugar bowl, and nod for her to take one. Ilaria, of course, selects the biggest one. Crumbs drop from the corners of her mouth as she chomps it.

"What shall we talk about today, little one?"

"Your party, of course!" She has never been to a ceremony before. I am sure her head is full of all sorts of illusions.

"Oh yes, my party. Which part are you looking forward to?"

"Hmm," she twists a dark curl around her finger. "The desserts for sure! Mama says you baked enough for everyone."

"I should have guessed; you do love your sweets—"

"And the dancing too! Papa says everyone will dance together in one big group." She pauses. "Nonna, I don't know how to dance. What if I mess it up?"

I wink at her, get up from my seat and begin swaying at the hips. "You can't mess it up, honey. Just listen to the music and let your body move."

Ilaria giggles. She has never seen her grandmother dance before. For a moment, I feel a lightness too.

“You’re a good dancer!” She laughs and joins in, waving her arms from side to side. We hum a familiar tune and she’s a bit off-key, but it makes it all the sweeter. Swaying together, we are an awkward duet, separated by stature and age but connected in spirit as much as any two souls could be.

We dance until the kettle whistles, interrupting our abandon. Ilaria brings me the teapot from the hutch and spoons in a heap of loose black leaves. As I pour the water, steam rises like a shroud over the moment and sadness creeps into my heart. It’s these ordinary things that I cherish the most.

The moment has changed now, an unspoken heaviness in the silence between us. Perhaps we should dance some more, to lighten the mood, but Ilaria is studying my face and I can tell she has more to say.

“Go ahead, child. Say what you’re thinking.”

She bites her lip and swallows hard. “Are... are you scared? I mean, of what happens after the party?” She turns from me to hide her worry. Even at five, she knows she’s expected to be festive today.

“No, I’m not scared,” I lie, wrapping my arms around her tiny shoulders. “This is what I want.”

“It will go well, won’t it, Nonna? You will be happy, just like Mama and Papa said?”

“Oh yes, very happy indeed.” More lies, but necessary ones. I refuse to taint her innocence with truths she can’t understand.

I was barely much older than Ilaria when I discovered these truths for myself. It was my own Nonna’s ceremony day. They told me she would be the happiest she had ever been, so proud and honored to give her life to the gods. It was her legacy, to ensure her family’s prosperity with this sacrament—like every noble elder before her.

*She will smile like you’ve never seen her smile*, my parents promised. And they were right. Once she took a swig from the hemlock brew, the smile they talked about surfaced. A gleaming, beaming grin from ear to ear, it looked as if it might rip her face in half from top to bottom, a ripe tomato split in two chunks.

She smiled as the music played and we all held hands, dancing around her in a circle. She smiled as we chanted prayers to our gods, offering up sacrifice for continued good fortune. She even *smiled* as the first and the second and the twentieth stones pommelled her fragile body—in the flank and the arms, and many upon her head. Stone after stone, turning that split tomatoey grin into a mushy, pulpy mess. Grandmother ragu, bleeding out all over the square.

She smiled because, apparently, she was happier than she had ever been.

I do not tell this to Ilaria. Instead, we chat about ordinary things, like our family and how blessed we are. Ilaria tells me her little brother is still teething, and that she hopes he will be done with it before the new one comes along. I get out the family album and show her pictures from when she was a baby. She can hardly imagine being that young.

“Were you ever a baby?” she asks.

I can’t help but laugh. “Hard to believe, isn’t it?” To her, I have always been old.

Down the hall, the clock chimes; the hour has gone noon. Soon, the procession will come for me. Here in my kitchen with Ilaria, talking as if it were any other day, I wish this moment could last forever.

But instead, I am called to sacrifice myself for the greater good of generations to come. Though, I’m not convinced it’s the gods who want this at all, and fifty feels too young to die.

It is *not* what I want—for me, or Ilaria, or anyone else, for that matter. I should have left this commune, raised my family in a place where nature determines expiry dates, not antiquated traditions. It is too late now. The only choice that remains is not if I will die today, but how.

Suddenly Ilaria lets out a groan, in an instant snapping me out of self-pity and redirecting my focus.

“Nonna, I don’t feel well. My tummy hurts.” She is grimacing and her complexion is ashen.

“*Mi amore*, come lie down.” I soothe her as I brush her hair behind her ears and carry her to my bed. “You probably ate too many pastries.”

Sweat begins to gather on her face like dew on the morning grass. Her little body twists and contorts on the bed, at first gently in a rhythmic motion, then in violent thrusts. She cries out in pain and coughs on the saliva collecting in the back of her throat.

“I feel bad,” she whimpers.

I don’t feel much better. My chest aches for my darling granddaughter. She has always been my spark in the cold, my light in dark places. It’s hard to see her this way.

But whether today or many tomorrows from now, this is how she will end up. At least she will be spared the gory stoning, the trauma of seeing me—and one day her parents—die that way. And she will never have to live with that horrifying fear, permeating every moment of her conscious life, knowing her turn is just around the corner.

“I’m glad we could spend our last day together,” I say as I climb into the bed and curl up against her crooked, shaking body. I try not to cry in front of her.

Ilaria stares at me vacantly, in her eyes I see my grandmother. The ghosts of our ancestors and the lies that bludgeoned them.

*How benevolent of our gods to save our families from the burden of caring for aged parents. How generous, to bequeath our wealth and lands to our grieving heirs, in payment for the sacrifice. Oh, how the gods must love us!*

Well, the gods can go to hell and take the rest of this town with them.

The hemlock is working quickly now. My beautiful Ilaria is arched backwards in the bed, her body forming a rigid bridge between living and dying. Risus sardonicus—the fateful smile—emerges on her face.

I look away. I don’t want to see that smile ever again. I hold her tight, relieved she will go wrapped in my arms, not on display in that cursed, bloody ceremony. I cradle her and sing to her until she sucks in a piercing wheeze of breath and exhales her soul.

She is gone.

My heart shatters. But in my mind, I see legions of dead grandparents nod in approval. My Nonna is among them, as if her ghost wanted this all along. This is my true legacy, to end this cruel tradition.

Outside, I hear voices coming up the path. The procession has arrived for me. I uncurl Ilaria’s corpse from my trembling arms and wipe the tears from my face. Deep breath, I steady myself. This is my big day. I will give my life with pride and honor, like every noble matriarch before me.

I go to the pantry for another tray of papassinos, my contribution to this evening’s festivities. What a contribution it will be. We shall eat them together in celebration of my life, and I will be generous in dishing them out. Then, we can all smile together.

I greet the crowd at the door before they get a chance to knock. *Ilaria was so excited, she went to get more flowers for my grave*, I tell them. I fetch the flowers she had already picked and take them with me, silently thanking them for their sacrifice.

The sun shines high in the sky, blessing our death march to the town square. *Oh, how the gods must love me, to give me this glorious stage for my final act*. I float down the path with the lightness of knowing there is nothing left to fear.

In the end, I am happy to go this way. It could not be a more beautiful day to die.

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## OCTOBER BIRDS

*by Neile Graham*

She darts between cedars,  
wings brown as fallen leaves,  
lands on an empty branch  
that echoes her descent again  
and again—and it's only because  
she wasn't there and now is  
that you know that's not  
where she belongs. And she's pert,  
bright-eyed as leaves aren't now,  
which makes you smile. She's like  
a messenger of hope, word  
from a distant, charming land—  
until she turns and sees you.  
Until her beak scissors open  
with a sound amplified  
by the autumn squall that shivers  
the clawing not-leaves there.  
Now she has arrowed you  
against the tree, now she has you.  
Tiny harpy. Coal-voiced.  
Her eyes they are still bright—  
but lit by winter, lit by the bloody way  
she has pierced you there.  
A twentieth your size. You'd thought  
you owned her by seeing her,  
made her alive with your notice.  
Instead she has pinned you,  
frozen you by one sound freed  
sharp and wild into the chilling air.  
How then each knife-edge of frost  
limning the leaves cracks you open.  
Your lips split like a beak, bird-voiced  
and branching, rooted and warbling,  
you are seen and you sing.

# GREETINGS, EARTHLINGS!



**Tim Terrific**

Tim loves doughnuts.  
Tim loves outer space.  
Tim would love to go to outer space and eat doughnuts once he gets the whole helmet thing figured out.

**JANUARY 2023**

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

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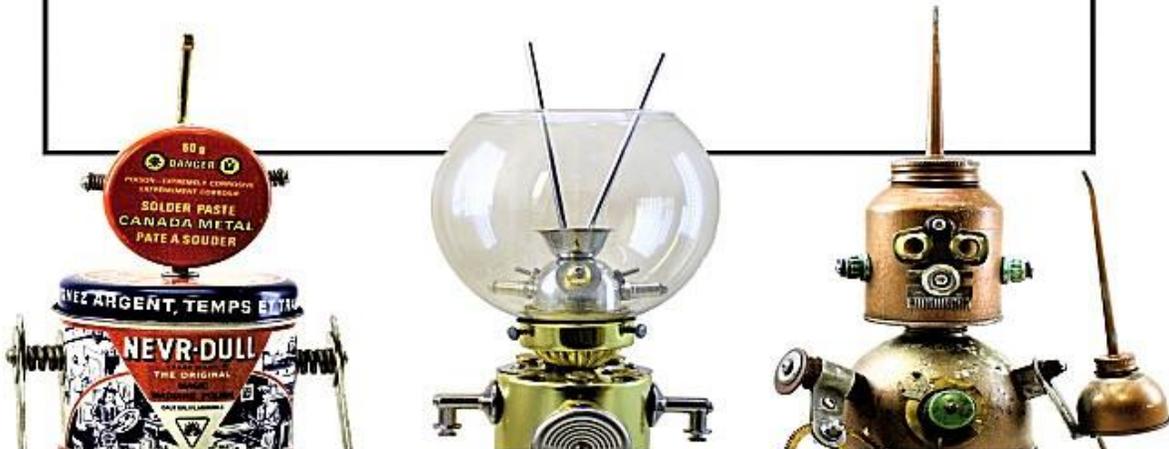
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## A Rivet of Robots

2023  
Calendar

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk



# THE WATER SPRITE

*by Nina Munteanu*

It was a cold November day, before the snows, as I wandered the endangered Jackson Creek old-growth forest. Centuries old cedar, pine and hemlock towered above me, giving off the fresh scent of forest. The trees creaked and groaned, swaying in a mischievous wind. I sighed with the thought that this ancient forest might soon disappear to the encroaching housing development. Leaving the main path, I descended the leaf-strewn slope toward the river. My boots pressed through a frosty crust into the spongy ground of dead leaves and organic soil. I stopped and breathed in the fresh coolness of the air. A damp mist huddled among the trees, adding wisps of mystery to the ancient wood. It was as though I'd entered an enchanted forest in some fanciful fairy tale.

Not far from the river, I approached an old yellow birch tree. Its gnarly trunk rose as tall as some of the cedars and pines around it. Golden flakes of bark curled and formed craggy patterns around the girth of the old tree. Its moss-covered roots snaked out like tangled ropes in a profusion of brilliant green. This was fairy country, I suddenly thought.

I crouched down, and set up my tripod and camera to capture this magical tree from the perspective of the forest floor. Head almost touching the ground, I inhaled the scent of loam and decaying leaves. The fresh pungency of cedar, pine, and humid moss hung in the air. Nearby, the river chortled and bubbled in a content symphony of motion. A curious red squirrel parked itself on a log nearby to watch me. It didn't scold me like they normally did when I entered the forest, like it understood... It then occurred to me, as I set up my equipment under the squirrel's careful stare, that I was in the presence of an enchantment. Like I was peering into a secret dance of feral celebration. But being there and appreciating it, I had now become part of it; I was Alice going down the rabbit hole into a true wonderland....

It was then that I glimpsed it as I carefully took my timed pictures. A blur of blue. What had I witnessed? A motion? A colour? Then it was gone. But in that moment, I'd felt the spark of an elation that comes with a glimpse into a secret world.

When I returned home to look at the images, I saw that my camera had captured a wispy blue entity that flowed into view and peered around the old birch at me with a kind of curious though mischievous grin.

Had I just captured a blue sprite? *Something* was unmistakably there!

I read up on sprites. According to European lore, a sprite is a supernatural entity. They are often depicted as fairy-like creatures or as an ethereal entity. The word sprite comes from the Latin *spiritus* (“spirit”), via the French esprit. Given that the sprite I’d observed was blue and we were close to the river, I wondered if it was not a forest or wood sprite, but a water sprite. According to alchemist Paracelsus, the term “water sprite” is used for any elemental spirit associated with water. They can breathe water or air and sometimes can fly. They also possess the power of *hydrokinesis*, which is the ability to create and manipulate water at will. Also known as “water nymphs” or naiads, these divine entities tend to be fixed in one place. Sprites are not corporeal beings (like selkies, mermaids and sirens) given that they are not purely physical; they are more like local deities than animals. This explained the wispy nature of the being I’d seen peering at me from the tree.

I consulted with several friends—some who purported to know much more about sprites than I did. When friend Merridy suggested that “forest sprites, normally green, may turn blue if a nearby brook calls to them,” I reconsidered, particularly when she added that “water sprites can be distinguished by their chatty nature. They rarely go beyond the banks of a river or brook. Forest sprites are mostly silent.” My sprite, though quite curious, had remained silent. And yet, I felt a strong sense that it wished to tell me something.

When I told friend Craig that I would return in search of them he observed, “If you’re looking for them, that might be when they hide. Or maybe not. Any type of sprite is probably good, mischievous or friendly.” With a spritely grin I thanked him for his advice.

I visited the forest several times after but saw no sign of any sprites. Perhaps Craig was right; they were hiding from me. But why had I seen this shy water sprite in the first place? What was its intention with me? There had been a kind of plaintive sadness in its rheumy eyes and timid smile. I’d felt a kindred connection somehow. More like a lost memory, buried deep in the mists of my past, shoring up my mind.

Then, on a foggy late December day, after a light snowfall, I returned to document the ice forming in the river. Islands of ice had created a new topography for the flowing waters of Jackson Creek. Ice sheets also covered the forest path in places—making the walk somewhat treacherous. At times, I had to scramble and seize hold of branches to haul my way up precipitous banks from where I’d captured sculptures of ice that formed pearls, columns and platforms on the river.

The fog grew thick as my walk eventually led me into a stand of eccentric cedars that leaned like drunks over the river bank. The cedars sent out a tangled tapestry of gnarly roots I had to negotiate. Tingling with earth-magic

energy, I crouched again and set my camera and tripod to the level of the roots.

That is when I saw the water sprite again!

This time the sprite lingered with a look of plaintive determination on its wispy hoarfrost face. It seemed to float in and out of the old cedar like the tree's own breath, inhaling and exhaling. It met my stare with a timorous plaintive look on its wispy hoarfrost face, eyes glistening like melting ice. I knew its pale face—how long I'd known that sad face of solastalgia!

Then it vanished in a puff of blue mist.

Again, I shared with my friends the images I'd taken of this wispy being, dressed in the blue frost of ice and snow. In response to my photos, friend Gabriela challenged me: "Did you ask what message they have for you, Nina? They keep showing up in your way, they might have a message for you or to be delivered through you to..." *whoever...* This somehow resonated with me. But how, I challenged, would I hear their message when they were silent and so fleeting? She wisely responded, "Just ask yourself the question; you might be surprised when your next thought brings the answer. Since everything is energy, and you saw them at least twice, you're probably connected with them."

I thought of what Gabriela said to me as I reviewed the photos I'd taken. What had I thought when our eyes met for that eternal moment? Right after my elation at being invited into this magical secret world, I thought of the forest and the river running through it, both home to the silent sprites. I thought of the plan to clear the forest and straighten the river into a lifeless gully. There would be no forest canopy to cool the river. The organic loam would shrivel beneath a merciless layer of concrete, brick and plastic.

First, the pines and cedars would fall in a thunderous maelstrom of screaming saws. Ancient beech trees would squeal under the saws then crack with a final death shout. Then, with the clearing fires, the leaves of my precious old yellow birch would sizzle and take flight. They would join with embers of curling bark and soar in a vortex of billowing coal-black fury. All that had once clothed the earth would be destroyed, leaving only black stumps and charred debris. The melancholy brook would flow through a killing field, itself choking with burned debris. Thick and oily, the lonely creek would grow dark and surly, smothering its own.

That was what the sprite wished to tell me: *everything is interconnected.*

If the forest goes, the water goes, the sprites go, and with them the magic of life.

I grew tearful at the thought. The sprites—the water, forest, and field sprites—had for centuries been the caretakers of this enchanted wood, guarding the beauty and the magic of the wild.

Forced to flee their home, where would the sprites go?

Doomed to scatter into the concrete world of grey monochrome and unyielding progress, would they die along with their magic?

I imagined them lurking in the sterile domain of human hubris—vilified, ridiculed, and ignored. I saw them shrivel to empty husks, discarded detritus left on the side of the road along with Tim Horton’s disposable cups carelessly pitched from a car.

I felt dizzy with guilt. What could one person do?

I suddenly smile.

There is much I can do. I will start by sharing this story with you...

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### FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #12, July 2022



#### Contents:

- A Ship Called Moon* – by Mahmud El Sayed
- Explorer/Cartographer* – by John WM Thompson
- Hindbrain* – by Lindz McLeod
- Magic Tusks at the End of the World* – by Uchechukwu Nwaka
- Of Sight, of Mind, of Heart* – by Samantha Murray
- The Loneliest Passenger on the Hook-Death-Kill* – by Lauren Ring
- Varelse* – K.A. Nielson
- With Everything at its Center* – Timothy Mudie

See: [Fusion Fragment #12](#) Note: Available starting July 29.

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<https://www.sfcanda.org>

# SMOKE

*by Tracy Shepherd*

(Previously self-published)

The smoke of a sombre witch asked  
the smoke in an earthly wish,  
“Are you my home?”

Her smoldering protected a bee in entangled berries of  
nutritional wild grasses. Unconsumed by a heron  
whistling to a juicy beetle nestling and with no  
sexual arousal of course,  
“Why do you need an earthly wish?”

That answer is like prying clams open on a savage shoreline.  
(the apple snails hide among the heroic water hyacinths;  
they know better)

Or,  
The answer is like the shiny orbs of a spider behind a web.  
Just before a cocktail is splashed in its face.

The sound full love making prayers are absorbed in each  
others ever-biteable necks. Did you hear it?  
Let the smoke of the sombre witch  
shock you  
amaze you  
sing her name over you and  
clash with you.

Or,  
swim away like bees skimming the water of  
knotted willows.

The meeting of Ms. Fishcutter and Mr. Bee-eater.

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# THE INSPECTOR OF MOONS

*by Lisa Cai*

This moon was spotted with different shades of amber and gold. The records Chiyo's husband had made didn't prepare her for such a sight.

Her palanquin descended. The moon's surface was wrinkled by ridges. Some volcanoes spewed smoke and glowing lava. Yet the rotten smell of sulphur escaped her; her husband had gifted her the ability to survive and avoid unpleasantries out here.

The palanquin landed near a small spotless house, untouched by the climate. Three brown rabbits with long ears greeted Chiyo when she stepped out of the carriage.

"Welcome to the fifth moon of the eighth planet." They all bowed their heads. Their noses touched the ashen ground. "Congratulations, m'lady, on your marriage to our lord. We're honoured by your presence."

News travelled fast throughout the galaxy. The moon god, Zuki, and Chiyo had wed in his castle on the Earth's moon five days ago. In a private ceremony, they sealed their marriage by drinking sake from three red saucers with their closest attendants and one of her sisters present as witnesses. That evening, he offered her a drink of the elixir of immortality; the wife of a god had to match his longevity somehow.

Chiyo had other ideas. She entered the palace's library, unrolled scrolls, and flipped through books. She learned there were thousands of moons out there. Astronomers knew about distant ones, but their telescopes were weak; they had yet to glimpse even a speck of all that was out there. Eons worth of descriptions and observations of the lunar bodies were stored in this library. As notes were recorded every century, Chiyo thought it worthwhile to visit other parts of Zuki's realm and add to the books and scrolls.

Ever since she'd been a girl and known about her family's connection to the divine, she had dreamt about seeing the rest of the universe. If there was a chance to explore, she'd travel to places earthlings couldn't even imagine.

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Inside her palanquin, Chiyo flew about, passing by mountains and yellow and black plumes. When she was a child, she saw an eruption happen near the horizon. Her homeland was blanketed in darkness for days and she'd feared she'd never see the sun again. In the present, there was nothing to be afraid of.

“We’ll fulfil any task and answer all your questions, m’lady.” The three rabbits huddled together and faced her, waiting to assist her.

“What did my lord husband do when he last visited?” Chiyo had asked Zuki about how to take notes. She wanted to do well for her first mission abroad. He shrugged and assured her she could record whatever piped her interests.

“He asked about volcanic activity and if we could observe the nearby planet.” One rabbit shook his head. “Sometimes, the volcanoes are constantly spewing. On other days, less so. It’s too cloudy to view what’s beyond here.”

Thousands of years ago, Zuki had reshaped the surface. Rocks piled on top of each other and the plates smashed against one another to form volcanoes. Then they erupted forever with the magma underneath. If Chiyo had such powers, she’d spend her days hopping about the universe, shaping all sorts of moons.

Zuki’s last recording about this moon noted the consistent yellow sulphur clouds. Did the older scrolls and books do the justice of noting everything worthwhile? Chiyo could describe the state of several volcanoes, their height, the rabbits, and even the upkeep of the house she resided in. Why had Zuki’s notes diminished over time?

A volcano burst beneath her. Black smoke billowed inside the palanquin and blanketed her vision. Its smell was thick with something burning deep within the core of this sphere. In this brief moment, she spread her arms out. Her long sleeves flapped up around her and she inhaled that air deep inside her. Whatever this moon was made of, it tingled her spine and circulated in her lungs.

Once the palanquin passed far enough beyond, it was clear inside.

The rabbits huddled by Chiyo’s knees. All of them stood on their hind legs and ears pointed straight. “M’lady, are you all right?”

Chiyo circumnavigated this rock a dozen times, always noticing a new patch of lava, fumes, and shifting plates. She had thought all moons were the same. How wonderfully wrong she was.

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The palanquin rocketed through space to the next destination. Chiyo slid open its door. Lunar objects, shaped like dumplings, floated out there. Their centres bulged while the edges were flat. She’d have to go back to the library to see the notes on them.

So many colourful clouds of stars, small and bright, dotted the darkness out there. The black matter had all sorts of wonderful galaxies hidden in it too.

Chiyo hadn't gone near any of the planets. How were days, months, and years counted on them? Did it even matter, as they were uninhabited? What made the gods decide that Earth would be filled with life?

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The first moon of the tenth planet shimmered with ice. The surface was marked with long cracks, like scars covered in scabs. It was as if this moon bled and healed every day.

Chiyo's carriage descended. A white puffy rabbit with short ears dipped black awaited her by a house identical to the one on the volcanic moon.

"August lady, it is an honour to receive you." The rabbit bent her front paws and bowed her head down.

Chiyo shivered and closed her strained eyes. This horizon was nothing but shades of white and grey, from the snow, sky, and clouds. The plain they stood on was smooth, while everything else within sight was jagged ice that shifted and floated.

In her homeland, snow fell and blanketed frozen ponds and rivers in winter and withdrew when it grew too warm. Why was an entire moon submerged in water and covered in ice?

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Chiyo and the rabbit sat in the palanquin, hovering in the sky.

The white surface was frozen with hills of jagged chunks of ice. In the distance, a crack screeched into the air and the moon rumbled. The ice split a part in all directions, branching off like roots across the surface. Chunks of ice bobbed over the water. This was a common occurrence, Chiyo knew, but her gaze was fixed below her. The description in the notes didn't do it justice. Was this what it was like at the Earth's poles?

"Is there anything living in the ocean?" Chiyo said.

"No, my lady. Our lord of the moons was disinterested in adding underwater dwellers."

"Were you here during the creation of this moon?"

"Aye, I accompanied him in the carriage. The moon floated into its orbit and the water, borrowed from a nearby planet, was poured onto it. I have been stationed at this post ever since."

"Why did he do it?"

The rabbit paused. Her face and beady black eyes were impossible to read. "Me'thinks, my lady, our lord wanted to amuse himself."

Was he always like that, since the beginning of time? Chiyo could spend years visiting each satellite and she'd find something unique, something she never knew existed, but her life was limited to a few more decades.

Her husband shaped each and every moon, yet he settled and spent most of his days on the Earth's satellite. As a child, Chiyo climbed trees and her family's castle to stare at the boundaries of her clan's lands. The roads, rice paddies, and nearby towns, she thought, were the places she'd be forever familiar with; she'd never see what was beyond the territory. She thought she'd spend her life assisting with the administration of her father's domain. The impulse to run and see what was out there was embedded in her. Years ago, Zuki jokingly offered to let her drink the elixir of immortality, the serum adventurers sought in epics. Chiyo could travel to the ends of the universe and have time left over.

Now, she was where no other human had been before. The two moons she had visited were just a sample of what was out there. Chiyo could continue to venture, but felt the need to return to her household.

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Chiyo lie in the palanquin, wrapped in blankets. The wooden frame of the craft rattled as it travelled to the final destination.

She couldn't sleep. She crawled to her writing set in the corner of the carriage. Chiyo wet her writing brush on the inkstone and let it hover over a blank page. She spent four days out here and had four lines to write. She could ramble and mention the rabbits, volcanoes, and ice, but that was of no use to Zuki.

None of this had a purpose, did it?

She dropped the brush. Ink dripped and seeped through several pages, blotching out observations made a thousand years ago.

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Zuki and Chiyo sat facing each other in a private room. His white silk robe had outlines of large red flowers. He glowed his usual silver light. The shoji behind him was open to the outside. The Earth was high in the black sky. A twist of clouds obscured Chiyo's homeland, the Tayoi Islands.

"Did you enjoy observing your new domain?" His grey eyes watched her as she bowed to him.

"The two moons were stunning in their own way." That was her sincerest feeling. Chiyo couldn't forget what she saw out there. She straightened up. "But I want to know why you lost interest in your own creations."

Zuki raised a hand up to muffle his laughter. His long sleeves, decked in floral splendour, obscured most of his form.

“What made it obvious?”

Between them, a notebook blotched all over with ink lay on the tatami mat. Plenty of mortals had been eviscerated for more minor offences committed against the gods.

“Your notes diminished throughout time,” she said. “I was in awe of what I saw.”

“You flatter me.” Zuki put his hand on his lap. “When you have lived as long as I have, you will understand.”

He was as old as the first moon, born to be their creator and caretaker. Every trip, visiting the same things over and over again, grew monotonous. He alleviated his boredom by creating all kinds of variations on his celestial bodies. And yet, he became dull to all the possibilities. Humans could only dream to reach the heavens the way Chiyo did.

Their marriage was likely something else he did to pass the time. Chiyo accepted his proposal on impulse. All her full-blooded sisters were wed or in concubinage, except her. She was thirty-two, had a son from a previous dalliance, and doubted any other future prospects.

“I do not want to live forever.” Chiyo gazed down and closed her eyes. “My lord, I will never drink the elixir of immortality.”

She had to retain the spark to explore, even if it meant she had a limited amount of time in this life; impending death, knowing her end was inevitable, was the highest motivation.

He was silent. Chiyo expected him to laugh or jest about this matter. She was a sham of a wife, travelling about and denying his requests. She was warned since she was child that her willful behaviour would repulse men.

The silver light shifted closer, and touched her skin, clothes, and eyelids. Her vision went from black to white. Sunlight offered warmth and harmed anyone exposed to it for too long. Moonlight gave nothing. Zuki knelt, inches away from her face. His eyes were half-lidded; they were so close yet he was looking far away.

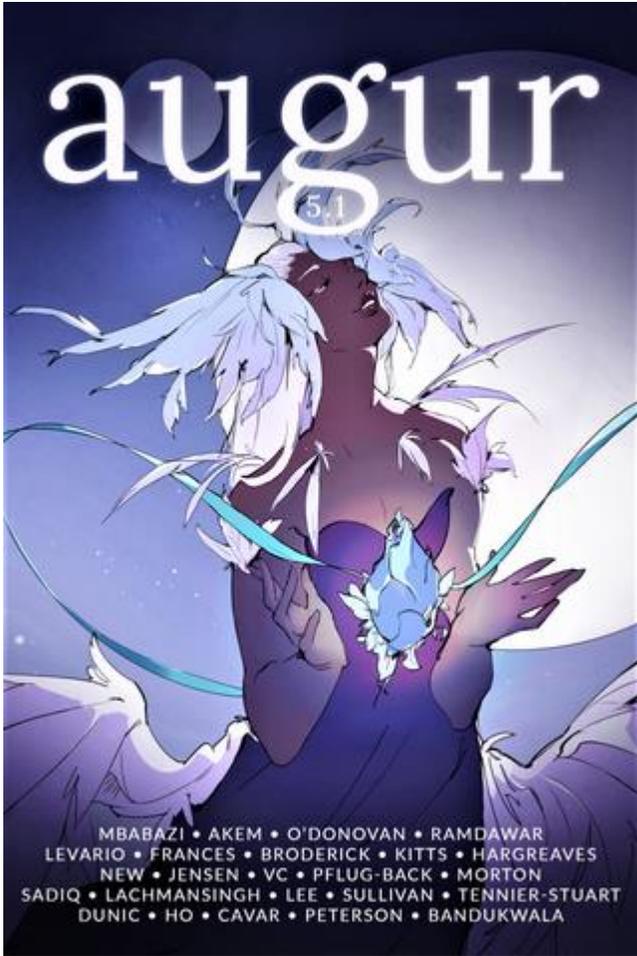
“You dare to reject a god’s offer of immortality.” His lips curled in the smallest of smiles, wavered. “Yet you found inspecting my moons worthwhile?”

“I did,” Chiyo said. He had once regarded his creations as something special. She reached down and clasped one of his hands. There was heat inside him after all. Not too late to share. “A text in scrolls and notebooks can only say so many things. I saw all those stars and planets too. We should see them together.”

Zuki squeezed her hands and his pulse began to race in her grasp. His silent request was to share her emotions and view the universe through her eyes. There were so many places they could see and she would never see again.

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### AUGUR MAGAZINE 5.1: June 2022



Cover art – Mochili.mocha

#### Contents:

*Bird Astrologer* – by Victoria Mbabazi

*Brief Chance of Moonlight* – by Akem

*The Wild Way* – by Lauren O'Donovan

*Currant Voices in a Convection Oven*

– by Shantell Sarah Ramdwar

*Don't Die—We have to Go to the Mitski Pop-up Shop this Weekend*

– by Victoria Mbabazi & Blake Levario

*The Seven Ochre Sisters* – by Meg Frances

*Changeling* – by Evalyn Broderick

*To Move with a Sea of Names*

– by Jamie Evan Kitts

*Bolt* – by Kate Hargreaves

*The Trouble with Time Machines*

– by Karen Jessica New

*A Thread of Gold* – by Nayani Jensen

*Still, We Wait* – by Nico VC

*Surfacing* – by Kelly Rose Pflug-Back

*The Mage's Box* – Eve Morton

And other stories and poems.

Find it here: [Augur Magazine #5.1](#)

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**AEscifi: FREE SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE FROZEN NORTH** See: [AEscifi](#)

We publish weekly short fiction that explores worlds that could be, paying authors fair rates and promoting under-represented voices.

We pay our authors and artists at rates that respects the value of their craft, because we believe that published writing should be paid. Creating literature is a vocation, not a hobby. We are an SFWA eligible market.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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### **Lily Blaze**

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

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

Website: <https://www.lilyblaze.art/>

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### **Lisa Cai**

Lisa is from Toronto, Canada. She graduated from Western University with a Master of Library and Information Science. She works in IT. She has been published in titles such as *The Future Fire*, *Polar Borealis*, *Enchanted Conversation*, and others. She volunteers for NaNoWriMo and is a submissions editor for *Speculative North Magazine*. [https://www.goodreads.com/lisa\\_cai](https://www.goodreads.com/lisa_cai)

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### **R.A. Clarke**

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living with her family in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. Besides chasing after rambunctious children and stealing the remote back from her sport-aholic husband, R.A.'s spare time is spent plotting fantastical novels and multi-genre short fiction. Her stories have won various international writing contests (Red Penguin Books humour contest, Writers Weekly 24-hour contest, and the Writer's Games), and she was a finalist for both the 2021 Futurescapes Award and the 2021 Dark Sire Award. R.A.'s work has been published by *Sinister Smile Press*, *Cloaked Press LLC*, and *Polar Borealis Magazine*, among others.

R.A. Clarke also writes and illustrates a children's chapter book series for ages 7-10 as Rachael Clarke. The first book in that series, *The Big Ol' Bike*—a story

about a smaller than average kid with a huge heart—was named a Females of Fiction Award finalist by Hindi’s Libraries in 2021. To learn more, please visit: [www.rachaelclarkewrites.com](http://www.rachaelclarkewrites.com).

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### **Wayne Cusack**

Wayne is a retired lawyer who has found a new love by taking up the craft of creative writing. When starting in this new direction, more experienced writers advised him to think outside the box. “Box!” he replied. “What box? Surely you’re not telling me creative fiction has boundaries?”

Wayne’s previously published stories can be found in the anthologies *Strange Economics*, *Sanctuary*, *Nourishment*, and *Outsiders*.

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### **Shayne Dahl**

Shayne is a Canadian anthropologist currently affiliated with Harvard University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has several academic publications on topics related to religion, dreaming, pilgrimage, sacred mountains, and mummies. He has published a poem called “Man on the Moon,” with *Polar Starlight* (#6), and a short story called “The Void,” published with *Aerial Chart: International Literary Journal* (2021) about classism, depopulation, and human-animal relations in rural Japan.

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### **Greg Fewer**

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

## **Neile Graham**

Neile is Canadian by birth and inclination, though she has lived in the U.S. (mostly Seattle, so she's leaning toward the border) for many years. She writes both fiction and poetry and is currently concentrating on plotting the build-out of her fantasy romance empire. Her poetry has been published in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., and on the internet. She has four collections, most recently "The Walk She Takes," a idiosyncratic travelogue of Scotland which includes ghosts, ruins of all kinds, and a landlady named Venus.

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## **James Grotkowski**

James is a native northern Albertan, now calling 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 short stories having been published in *The Enigma Front* anthologies. Now too, a smattering of his content can be discovered in the well known *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* offerings. Much more is soon to come.

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## **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.

Blog: <https://www.melaniemarttila.ca>

Facebook: <https://facebook.com/melanie.marttila>

## **Don Miasek**

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

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## **Nina Munteanu**

Nina is a Canadian limnologist/ecologist, novelist and award-winning short story author of eco-fiction, science fiction and fantasy. Her work has appeared in *Neo-Opis Science Fiction Magazine*, *Chiaroscuro*, *subTerrain*, *Apex Magazine*, *Metastellar*, and several anthologies.

Nina currently lives in Toronto where she teaches writing at the University of Toronto and George Brown College. Her book “Water Is...” (*Pixl Press*)—a scientific study and personal journey as limnologist, mother, and teacher—was Margaret Atwood’s pick in 2016 in the *New York Times* “The Year in Reading.” Nina’s most recent novel, “A Diary in the Age of Water” released in 2020 by *Inanna Publications*, is about four generations of women and their relationship to water in a rapidly changing world.

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## **Lena Ng**

Lena is a writer and poet from Toronto, Ontario. Her work has appeared in several anthologies and magazines including: *Just Desserts*, *World Unknown Review*, *Devolution Z*, *Monsters Among Us*, *Polar Borealis Magazine*, *Gathering Storm Magazine*, *Antimattermag.com*, and *The Quilliad*. *Under an Autumn Moon* is her collection of horror/fantasy short stories. She is currently seeking a publisher for her first novel, *Darkness Beckons*, a gothic romance set in the Victorian era.

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## **Sheryl Normandeau**

Sheryl is a Calgary-based garden writer who doesn't *always* write about gardens. Her short fiction and non-fiction has appeared in several North American publications, including past issues of *Polar Borealis*.

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## **Dayle Sharpe**

Dayle lives in the Okanagan with her family, two dogs and one seriously Badass Bunny. She is an expert at flittering aimlessly and keeps her head tethered to her shoulders by a loose thread. When she is not writing, she spends her time looking for a backdoor portal into Charlie Kaufman's mind and playing Fortnite with her kids.

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## **Tracy Shepherd**

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

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## **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](#).

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## Lisa Timpf

Lisa is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her speculative poetry has appeared in *New Myths*, *Star\*Line*, *Triangulation: Habitats*, *Polar Borealis*, and other venues. Her collection of speculative haibun poetry, "In Days to Come," is available from Hiraeth Publishing. You can find out more about Lisa's writing projects at <http://lisatimpf.blogspot.com/>.

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## AFTERWORDS

*by The Graeme*

**SFWA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association** (formally known as the Science Fiction Writers of America), an organization with more than 2,300 authors, artists and allied professionals as members, has recently changed its eligibility requirements.

Used to be, I vaguely remember, minimum requirements called for a certain wordage of publications paid at the declared SFWA standard rate. Since most magazines did not pay the standard rate this left out a fair number of established, frequently published authors. (I'm relying on my aged memory here, so the previous two sentences could be completely bogus, much like my understanding of life in general.)

Now, to become a full member, you just have to prove (via an affidavit) that "*your catalog of paid work in science fiction, fantasy, or related genres equals or exceeds an industry standard set by the board. (\$1,000.)*" How much you were paid per word no longer matters. You just have to have earned \$1,000 or more. Since the average writer (of any kind) earns \$1,000 a year this should result in a flood of new members.

Myself, I don't qualify for full membership. However, I could become an affiliate member. All I have to do is provide acceptable credentials that my activity in some way benefits the genre community plus get three existing members to swear I'm not a bald-faced liar (i.e. act as references). Hmmm.

The advantages of being a member are manifold and well worthwhile. Think about joining. Check out their site here: <https://www.sfw.org/>

Cheers! *The Graeme*