

# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #24 – February 2023)



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022)

Issue #24 – February 2023 (Vol.7#1.WN#24)

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

**Proofreader:** Steve Fahnstalk

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

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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

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

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## **ART CREDITS**

COVER: Dragonwitch – by Kari-Ann Anderson

## EDITORIAL

In a way, *Polar Borealis* is a public service. I created the magazine primarily to provide a market for beginning writers. After all, newbies are up against stiff competition, in that professional magazines require popular contributors who will guarantee enough sales to keep the magazine afloat. At most, editors can take a chance on just one or two newcomers per issue.

*Polar Borealis* is semi-professional. The magazine is free to download, but contributors are paid. Expenses are met from my pensions, supplemented by much-appreciated Patreon donations. Consequently, PB is immune to the vagaries of the market place. I can publish whom I like when I like. I'm willing to fill an issue entirely with first-career-sale material. Fact is, if I like a submitted MS, I will publish it, regardless of marketability. Simple as that.

Trouble is, the last six months of 2022 did not meet my expectations. I had enough material, but somehow couldn't stick to a regular schedule. Too many distractions and problems got in the way.

Fortunately, in December I got my act together. Thus, I intend to publish one magazine a month, starting in January (done) and running through to August. I will be alternating *Polar Starlight* and *Polar Borealis*, producing four issues each. I believe I've perfected my editing and layout technique to the point of easily keeping to the January-to-August schedule.

In September I will open a month-long submissions window for poetry to go into both magazines.

October will be devoted to discussing with *Polar Starlight* editor Rhea Rose who gets which poems.

In November I will open for a month-long submissions window for short stories to go into *Polar Borealis*.

December I will reserve for planning the placement of material in *Polar Borealis*. With any luck Rhea and I will have accepted enough material to enable us to plan the contents of each of all eight magazine issues to be published in 2024. This involves economies of organization that should make sticking to the schedule simple and easy.

Contributors will benefit. By January they will know exactly when their works will be published, and precisely when they can submit new material.

I, too, will benefit. I believe this program will free up sufficient time to work on my own writing projects. Might even revise my SF novel to the point where I can begin to shop it around or self-publish. Confidence is high.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

# GREETINGS, EARTHLINGS!

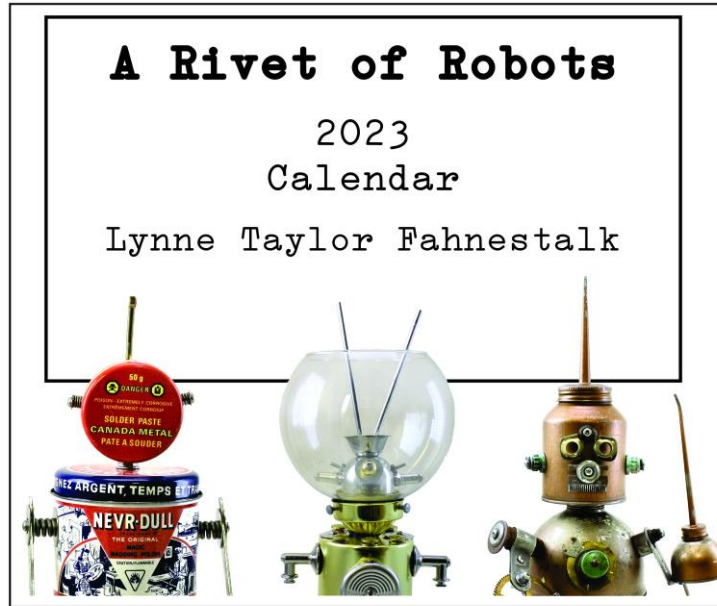
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## POLAR STARLIGHT #8 – January 2023

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Starlight is edited by Rhea E. Rose. Each issue features cover art and 16 speculative fiction genre poems.

Cover of the 8th issue, *Spiderclock*, is by Kasia Runté.

The 8th issue contains poetry by Collen Anderson, Lisa Cai, J.D. Dresner, Greg Fewer, Angi Garofolo, Neile Graham, Aaron Grierson, Frances Skene, Sapphire & JE Solo, Richard Stevenson, and Marcie Lynn Tentchoff. Plus a book review by editor Rhea E. Rose.

Find it at: < [Polar Starlight #8](#) >

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry  
Issue #8 - January, 2023



# ELVIS AND EINSTEIN

*By Richard Stevenson*

Hey, didja know Elvis Presley  
was an ET breeding experiment?  
Seriously! Grey melon-head ETs  
spirited Mom away in their saucers  
again and again—all through her pregnancy,  
monitoring little Elvis in the womb.

I kid you not! ETs extracted Ma's  
fertilized egg and spliced in library genes  
to determine his lip sneer and oiled hips,  
his stunning good looks and liquid voice...

Library genes—you know: specifically  
labelled genes extracted from the human genome  
over centuries of human development,  
catalogued and stored in computer-run cryogenic vaults  
for later retrieval and manipulation. Oh yeah!

Elvis was as much a test tube baby as maybe most  
of our super scientists and athletes. No guff!  
Sure, Elvis stole his stuff from big Mama Thornton  
and the whole black club thang across the tracks.  
We all know about that. But *how* did he do it?!

Hey, when the scientist abductors here on earth  
stole Einstein's brain, they couldn't find  
anything different from a run-of-the-mill  
human brain. Even cross-sectioned and scrutinized  
under an electron microscope! Hell, Einstein  
coulda told 'em: it's not the container, dudes;  
it's what's in it! And what could we see?

Oh yeah! And it wasn't just Elvis and Einstein either.  
Damn! These melon-head ETs have pretty well

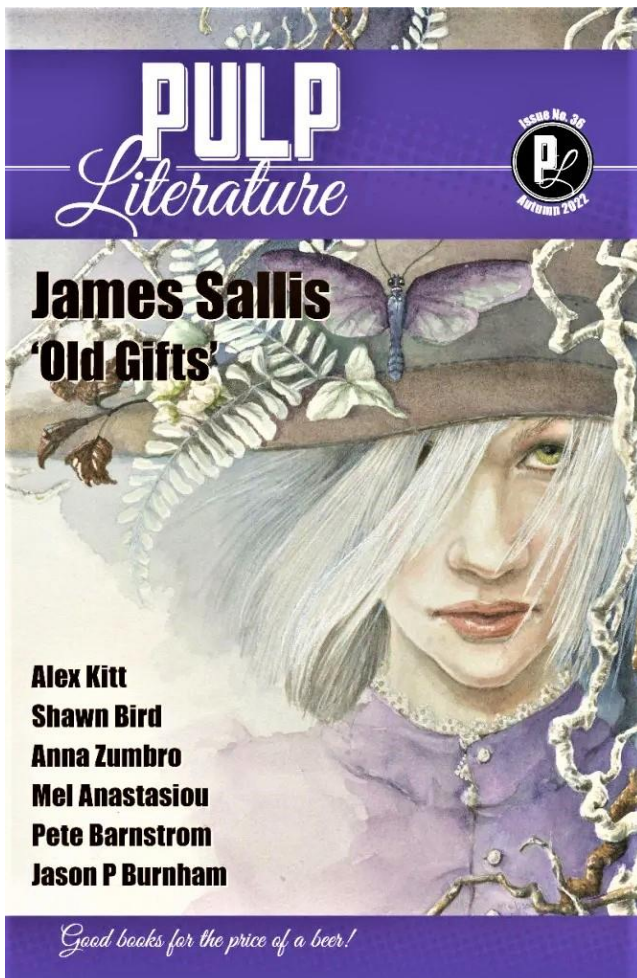


been behind our genetic architecture all along!  
I mean the whole hominid shh-bong, from  
ape to 'squatch to good ol' homo sapiens II.

What kind of sandbox boxes are we gonna play in next?!  
These ETs manipulate our genes like Plasticine—  
fifties' alien Silly Putty. What will happen when  
they get to model III? Will *we* get there?

I like to think the aliens are working on the moral DNA code  
and may just get us to get along *before* we destroy  
the planet and everything on it. But that's probably  
wishful thinking. Still, I say the water glass  
is half-full on that one, and that's *my* choice!

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#### PULP LITERATURE #36 Autumn 2022

COVER: *The Butterfly Witch* – by Melissa Yuan-Innes

#### CONTENTS:

*Old Gifts* – by James Sallis

*Can-on-a-String* – by Alexx Kitt

*Ambience* – by Jason P. Burnham

*Caught Dead* – by Shawn Bird

*Oeufs Dangereux* – by Pete Barnstrom

*Adrift Off the Shore of Alzheimer Island*

– by Cheryl Skory Suma

*Dump 'Em Dog* – by Anna Zumbro

*Forgive My Delay* – by Mikael Lopez and Enrico Orlandi

*The Shepherdess: Grandmère Paris* – by JM Landels

*Pretty Lies: I Can See for Miles* – by Mel Anastasiou

*Once Upon a Time in Camelot* – by GD Litke

#### POETRY

*Griefbody* – by Cara Waterfall

*Harvest* – by Cara Waterfall

*BigGermanDialectWordClankinglyInsertedHere*

– by Kevin Spent

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #36](#)

# CICADA

*by Warren Brown*

The poison moved elegantly through Jeff's body. That was how he thought of it moving, elegantly. Without anger, without fear, without hope. Without those things he was without. The sun was bright on the city, the glass buildings reminding him of the sugar crystals climbing up through the liquid of a long-ago classroom experiment.

It does that to you, he thought. Takes away time. Makes everything now and nothing now.

He shifted the Honda into fifth and twisted the bike's throttle until the sharp spitting of the twin exhausts became the sound of his grandfather's chain saw cutting oak for the wood stove in the hunting cabin so many years ago when they'd hunted together in the forests of Northern Michigan.

But it wasn't years ago, was it? Not years. Yesterday, the day before, they'd done it.

No, I did it, he thought. I killed him yesterday. Shot my grandfather in J. C. Penney's.

Tears burned his eyes as he swung the bike hard into a curve and flicked the handlebars to get around the Mustang that sat broadside across one lane, its dead driver jade green and gleaming in the sun, rotting clothes hung raggedly on the bright mineral deposits made by the poison of dead flesh.

Jeff wondered what it was. A bacterium. A virus. A genetic mutation from Mars. The ultimate result of too much nicotine, or caffeine, or benzene, or Dentyne, or Halloween.

He giggled and nosed the Honda onto the exit for the mall, past other cars, some with gleaming occupants, some without. It had happened not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with a "What?"

Everyone thought it would have been the bomb, or Corona virus that ground things to a halt. Then Emily Springer happened. Little Emily of Marin County, California, the highest per capita income county in the country. She stepped out of her swimming pool one day to find diamonds on the soles of her shoes. Except she hadn't any shoes. And they were more like emeralds, in color at least, hard and multifaceted and part of the flesh of her feet. Emily had been news. And her sixty-year-old neighbor, James Sloan, had been news, and the thirty or so odd cases all over the country had been news. Then the news had turned to fear.



Jeff flipped the switch on the bike's cowling stereo and turned the volume up, listening to the white noise of atmosphere. There was no news now. There were only those who were alive and those who were dead. Jeff was alive and, by his own estimate, dying. He glanced at his wrist to see the time. There was no watch. Just the bracelet of green pebbles gleaming in the sun, circling his wrist neatly like jewelry. He figured the bracelet told his time as well as anything, since it had not been there the morning before.

He pulled the bike off the expressway and decelerated down the gentle, sweeping turn of the off ramp. It was still odd, being able to get places in town so fast, the only noise being the sound of whatever he chose to drive. He leaned toward motorcycles mostly now. They didn't use much fuel and were handy for threading around obstacles left by the death of civilization, such as the remains of the 747 that sat wingless ahead of him, its alloy corpse miraculously intact for having fallen from the sky.

Jeff always speculated on how it might have happened whenever he hopped the curb with the bike and skirted the huge plane via the sidewalk. He wondered what part of the pilot had turned to green glass: his brain, his heart, his lungs perhaps. Maybe nothing so dramatic. There was no way to tell. The pilot and passengers were gone, removed either by their own power or some other he could only imagine.

He had convinced himself he had heard the plane coming down months before although he lived ten miles from the crash site. But it was hard to know what was real.

For instance, he knew the girl with silver hair could not be real. He had seen her that day in Penney's when he'd shot grandfather. Watching him from out in the mall, turning to run from the sound of the Walther as it fired. Or perhaps turning to run from a madman like Jeff who fired at...

He moved the body with his foot. "Grandfather?" he said. "Why did you come at me with the saw?"

The mannequin with the tennis racket did not reply. The racket remained clutched in its perpetual, lifeless lobbing motion, and the chest with the three nine-millimeter holes did not breathe.

Jeff had come to his senses upon touching the mannequin with his boot. A part of him had thought it strange that his grandfather would be attacking him with a chainsaw. A part of him knew that his grandfather had been dead for years. And now all of him knew that the tennis racket had never been a chainsaw, and the mannequin had never been his grandfather.

"Hell," he remembered saying as he looked at the bullet-riddled plaster

figure, "Penney's doesn't even carry chain saws."

Then he'd heard the sound of someone running, turned and saw her clicking through the mall away from him, her shoes on the marble floor sounding like tap shoes. She had silver hair. And that's why he was riding back to Penney's. Now that he knew he was dying he wanted to talk once more to another person. Wanted to say goodbye, wanted to say he was sorry she had to see him acting crazy, wanted to say she had nothing to fear from him.

He braked the bike to a halt next to the outside door of the department store, flipped the kill switch, and listened a moment to the wind. Cicadas whirred in the decorative trees. Jeff wondered if life was what they expected after 17 years in the ground. It seemed most likely they had no expectations. He locked the ignition and pocketed the rubber chicken key ring. He thought it was nice there was still some humor in the world. He thought the downed 747 on Yale Avenue with its skyscraper tail painted with JAL was even more humorous than the rubber chicken.

"Where did they all go?" he said to himself. An image of a 747 load of wandering Japanese turning to emerald glass and snapping photos of a post-apocalyptic Tulsa floated in the air in front of him. Maybe the rubber chicken was funnier. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. It seemed sticky to him, like silicone sealer.

A chilled lump of terror materialized in his stomach as he considered the possibility of going blind with the disease before he died of it. He fought it down. It hadn't happened to anyone he knew. The poison did not work that way.

"The poison does not work that way," he said to his grandfather mannequin. The mannequin did not reply. Jeff wondered why the mannequin had tried to kill him with the chainsaw that was really a tennis racket. He shook the thought away. The mannequin had not tried to kill him. It was the poison that was killing him, turning his brain to emeralds, turning his sanity to rainbows. Was the girl with the silver hair crazy? Was there a girl with silver hair?

His wife Donna had not had silver hair. Nor his son Sean. Their hair had been blonde before the poison had taken them. Then it had been like fine green wires, fine green wires in the light of the funeral home back when people were still taking the trouble to have funerals. He missed them. He thought they would have enjoyed the image of the Japanese passengers wandering around.

Maybe the girl with silver hair would enjoy it. Jeff patted the nylon holster on his hip. The cold, ugly lump of the Walther was there. He considered

shooting the woman with silver hair if he saw her again. "Wouldn't it be the kindest thing," he said to grandfather mannequin. The mannequin replied with a still, silent lob.

"The kindest thing," a voice said from behind him. He thought of Benny Goodman playing jazz. He thought of how his wife would have spoken had she been a sweet, ebony wooded clarinet, or silver, he thought, turning. A silver clarinet.

She stood in the shadowed afternoon of the mall. The woman. Her hair was silver. Her eyes were aquamarine. Her arms and legs, and parts of her outside the tattered walking shorts and blouse, were encrusted with emeralds.

"The kindest thing," she said, "would be to kill me. You think that." It was not a question.

Jeff stared at her, squeezed his eyes closed, and opened them again with difficulty, his lids pulling against sticky tears.

"Jesus, God," he said. "You can't be alive."

"Alive as you," she said.

"But you're like the dead ones. You've gone through the change." He raised his hand and touched the bright circle around his wrist, feeling the roughness of the crystals as his fingers moved over them.

"Some change," she said, "and don't die. I can read your mind, and I know you won't die."

"Other people are alive?" Jeff said. He stepped toward her. She flickered in the light as a cloud passed by the sun. He stopped. "Look," he said. "My mind is gone. If you can read it you must know that. I'm crazy. I'm no good to anyone. I don't even believe you're really here. You scare me."

Jeff stared at her as she stepped closer.

"I've come to tell you not to be frightened. You'll feel very sick for a while. Don't give up. We'll come for you."

He reached quickly to grasp her arm. She tried to draw it back. She was hot as fire. He yanked his hand back and looked at the rising blisters.

"I'm sorry," she said. "The change makes us hot." She moved away. "We'll come when it's time."

Jeff stared after her as she walked quickly into the mall. He started to follow her, but his legs were heavy and wouldn't move right.

\*\*\*

The spasms hit him on the way home as he rounded a curve on the expressway. The pain doubled him over and he wrenched the Honda's handle

bars involuntarily. The bike bounced onto the shoulder and nosed into a ditch. Jeff hurled over the handlebars and rolled. The cramps seized him again. He squeezed his eyes closed against the pain and descended into a nerve-burning inferno of agony.

Die, he thought. Die oh God die, please. He tried to pull the Walther from its holster to stop his agony, but the holster was empty. A pain-shot image of the woman with silver hair came to him and he remembered the black shape of the Walther in her hand as she walked away from him in the mall.

In the night he died and walked across the cold wastes of an arctic hell. In the morning he could not open his eyes.

"It doesn't matter," he said to himself. "I'm dead. It doesn't matter if I don't open my eyes."

"Here," someone said. He felt fingers on his face, fingers brushing over his eyes. And heat, gentle heat against the cold of the Arctic dream.

He opened his eyes and had trouble focusing. There were figures. People. A crowd.

"Your vision will clear," someone said. "Don't worry."

"You didn't kill your grandfather," someone else said.

His sight cleared and he saw there was a crowd of people. Jewelry people. Gemstone people. Someone bowed and took a photo. He heard the insect buzz of a Polaroid camera.

Jeff thought of Japanese tourists and began to laugh. His own breath burned his lips as the laughter came out. His lungs were bursting with fire, his throat ached with heat. The air around him was filled with woodwind sounds, a babble of trills that threatened to deafen him.

"Shut up," he screamed. "Shut the hell up. Leave me alone."

Hot hands rested on his face. His vision cleared enough for him to realize someone was practically nose to nose with him. Her face was framed by hair like pewter wires. The skin of her face was like emerald-colored, fine grit sandpaper.

"In your mind," she said to him, her lips not moving. "Listen in your mind. Pretend you have no ears. Be calm. Feel like this." She stared at him and the "this" became apparent. It was so simple, so elegant. It was not a "this" he could have shown to anyone, but a "this" that was a peaceful truth, an ultimate verity. To feel like "this" was unimaginable and perfect.

"It happens at different rates in different people," she whispered in his mind. "Don't be scared of it."

Scared, he thought. Why should I be scared? And something sweet ran

through him, sweet like the feel of the breeze over the hammock when he'd lie in his grandma's back yard in the sleepy summers. Listening to the cicadas like woodwinds in the trees, he'd lie there and dream, as he started to dream now, as he barely felt the cool earth that they scooped on top of him.

He'd lie there and dream about what he might dream, and dream about what he might wake up to—and what songs he might sing when he at last climbed from his bed in the earth and split himself free from the emeralds grown over him so beautifully in the night.

-----

#### ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #122 - V.32 #4



#### FICTION:

*Fire Flows Downhill* – by Alex Langer

*I'll Have My Toast With Jam, Please*

– by Andrea Bernard

*Blister* – by Judy Helfrich

*Compassion Fatigue* – by David Tallerman

*Loaner Bodies* – by Aaron Perry

*Botman's Tale* – by Liz Westbrook-Trenholm

*Acceptance* – by E.A. Mylonas

*The Yellow House* – by Jonathan Lenore Kastin

*Quirks* – by Arinn Dembo

**COVER:** *Judy and the Dinosaur Rockers*

– by Ken Macklin

**NON-FICTION:** *Editorial: The Power of Speculative Fiction to Offer Hope*

– by Lareina Abbott

*Art Heroes are People Too: Artist Interview with Herman Lau* – by Cat McDonald

*"Shut up!" She Explained: Liz Westbrook -*

*Trenholm Writes an Anti-Covid Story - Author Interview* – by Roberta Laurie

*We Come in Peace* – Thomas Mixon

*Rapunzel in the desert* – Melissa Yuan-Innes

*Bots: "Edgar," and "Scrooge and Marley"*

cartoon – by Lynné Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it here: [On Spec Magazine #122](#)

# LIVING

*by Roxanne Barbour*

living under scrutiny  
off-worlders hiding activities

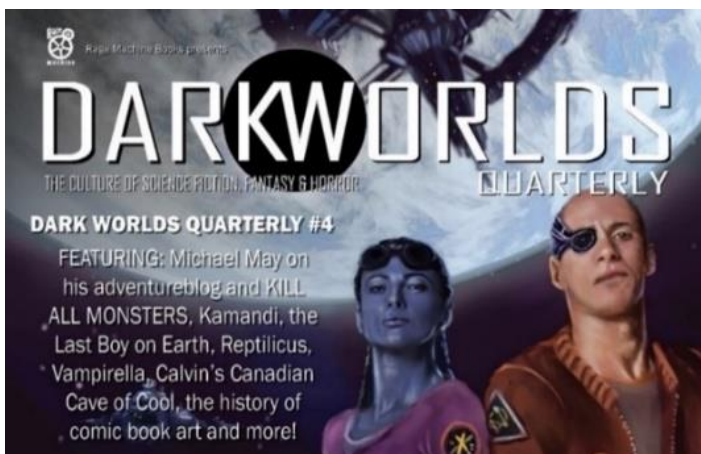
being  
a minority  
tending to distort  
global acceptance  
Martians

being  
an alien  
garnering total support  
becoming easier  
movies

dealing with Hollywood  
morphing into actors

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## DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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

- Monsters of Jack Williamson's "Moon Era"
- The History of Fantasy – Homeric Comics
- Plant Monsters in Movies and Television.
- Time Machine Problems – Historical Pulp
- Amazing Stories Plant Monsters 1929-1939
- The Plant Monsters of Astounding
- Hugo Gernsback's Plant Monsters

Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)

# THE RED SCARF

*By Rhea E. Rose*

I looked up from the street toward the haunted house on the hill. The house, famous in our suburban neighbourhood, looked like a cliché haunted home. The old Edwardian architectural nightmare of disrepair had a black and broken picket fence. The only path to get to the front entrance was to climb a weed-infested forested hill.

As a child walking home from school, we dared each other to walk by, stand on the walk below and stare at it until someone or something came to the window.

We all accepted the dare at some point but, other than running past the house at full speed, none of us ever plucked up enough courage to stand and stare.

One day, while school was still in session, the principal came on with an announcement about an approaching hurricane, and we were all dismissed early and were to head straight home.

The announcement of a hurricane, possibly a tornado, seemed very exciting and, even as a youngster, I understood that it was a dangerous situation.

My friends and I huddled together outside in the schoolyard, discussing who would walk home past the haunted house. The only one up for the challenge was me, and I convinced two smaller kids to come with me. Heading toward the house was a long way to go home. There were shorter cuts, and we knew it, but viewing the haunted house on a stormy day seemed too good an opportunity to be missed.

“Don’t worry,” I said to the younger children, “the big wind isn’t coming until much later.” The two little girls trusted me because I babysat them on occasion.

The blustery wind made me pull the end pieces of my pigtails out of my mouth. The warm hands of the kids held tightly to mine. “And the house is up a hill, so nothing inside can get us. We can be long gone before any monsters get to us.”

“Monsters?” Tammy, the youngest, asked.

“My mom says an old witch lives there,” little Stephanie said. “She hangs children.” That was news to me. I’d never heard that a witch lived there. I always assumed it was ghosts. “My mom calls her the Hag on Hill House.”



“Even a witch can’t get us from down here on the sidewalk,” I assured them, but I wasn’t sure.

The sidewalks were eerily empty and quiet as we walked hand in hand for several blocks and turned down the street that gave us the best view of the old house. The sight of row after row of modern houses boosted my bravery. At the same time, while it was still early afternoon, only a half-hour past noon, the sky got dark. A cold wind blew, and the trees’ branches bowed, their flyaway leaves hitting us in the face and on our bare knees.

We shivered but continued.

We stopped in front of the house. We were utterly alone. No cars, no other people, only we three. The wind blew our hair across our eyes.

In the distance, at the end of the street, the sky looked black, and I became unsure of my decision to go home this way. “Take a quick look, then we’ll run home,” I said, but they looked terrified. They didn’t even look up at the old house. They took off when I let go of their hands, leaving me alone on the abandoned walk.

My scarf, caught by a chill gust, blew up the hill toward the house. My birthday gift, gone, pulled up, up, up the hill like a snaking kite. I stepped off the curb to go after it.

I looked up.

An old woman dressed in black, with a black bonnet on her head, stood in the window staring at me.

I stopped.

The hag held my stare. She didn’t speak or move but called to me inside my head.

*Beware the wind*, she said.

My scarf landed in a bush near the broken picket fence around the house, not even in the yard. I went after it. The wind bullied me and made the leaves smack my face. Globules of rain fell and hit my head like watery fruit. I forced myself not to look at the woman in the window, not to look at the grumbling sky.

*Grab the scarf and run!* I told myself.

But the hill became slippery; every two steps forward slid me one step back. The prickly bushes grew thicker as I fell and scraped my knees. The gathering wind stole my breath. My red scarf was held fast to a thorn by a thread. The rest of it threatened to blow toward the house. I reached, stretched, “Got it!”

“Gina!”

I turned to look. Little Stephanie and her tiny sister stood in the sheltered doorway of the spooky house. The door behind them opened. The woman from the window stood there. She took the hand of each little girl. They held tightly to hers. The hag stared at me as she led them inside. They both looked back, their sad small faces, worried, white in contrast to the witch's black skirts. Then they were gone.

Fighting my way up the hill, I managed to get to the scabbed and stained front door. I pounded once, and the door opened. The wind blew me inside the house. While I searched the broken ruins like a fireman looking for life, neither the woman nor the little girls appeared. When I find them, I'll take them home. I won't leave until I find a home. One day I'll go home, but not before.

In the meantime, from where I stand at the window, I can watch the other children as they walk home from school.

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#### **FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #15**

January 2023

#### Contents:

*The Day We Returned to Sunnytown*

– by Angela Liu

*The Meiosis of Cells and Exile*

– by Octavia Cade

*How to Travel Safely in Faerieland*

– by Vanessa Fogg

Find it here: [Fusion Fragment #15](#)

# OUR MISTAKES ON ENCOUNTERING THE BIG, FAT GASBAGS OF NEPTUNE

*by Jim Smith*

Our first mistake was the alphabet.

Our second mistake was making poets work and workers write poems.

Our third mistake was growing only one mouth.

Our fourth mistake was applying the ointment physically.

Our fifth mistake was SETI.

Our sixth mistake was living in this galaxy at all.

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NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #34 is published out of Victoria, BC, Canada.



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

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

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

**COVER:** *It's Lonely Out in Space*  
– by Karl & Stephanie Johanson

#### **CONTENTS:**

*Arboghasz Dal Axander*

– by Matthew Hughes

*The Machine Man*

– by Andrew Knighton

*Lightspeed Traffic Jam* – by John Taloni

*Visiting the Big Sandbox* – by Jim Lee

*Homeplus* – by Liz Westbrook-Trenholm

*Tea for Two* – by Xauri'EL Zwaan

*In the Shade* – by Jeremy Schnee

*She Hulk: Attorney at Law*—Review

Find it here: [Neo-opsis #34](#)

# DAZZLED

*by Gerald L. Truscott*

Elam glides on the wind over an ocean of clouds. Soaring, diving, skimming the mounds of vapour, he pierces a billowing white column and whistles with glee. Ahead, the god of weather peers up from the clouds with a dark, shifting scowl.

Elam shouts, “Look at me, dreary one!” He swoops down and slaps the weather god’s nose with one of his wings. Then up again into the clear, cold air. Above him, the indigo sky glows iridescent.

The clouds go on forever, a frothy covering for the torrent below. Elam dips his feet into the misty surface, then pulls them up wet and cold. He shivers as he lifts himself up towards the sun of light. A quick flip and a spiralling arc take him back to a comfortable glide above the clouds.

On and on, the icy wind sharp and refreshing, Elam flies with ease over the sea of mist. He catches an updraft and rises again, then crosses wings over his face and drops backwards in a plummet’s dive. The sun looks purple and veined through the skin of his wings. As it falls from sight, he opens his wings again and levels off in a hunter’s glide, laughing with sheer joy.

Because he alone escaped the wet misery below—the huddling weather, the drooping weather.

Those in their huts and caves looking dolefully out at the rain sheets can only imagine Elam’s pleasure. Those beneath the dripping branches can only shiver and yearn for the feel of air on their wings. Elam was the only one able to leap over the approaching clouds, to escape the weather god’s blustery tantrum. He left all the others behind, stuck to the ground, praying for the suns of light and shadows to burn the clouds away.

Elam flies into the day, darting at pink and violet clouds, kicking sparkles of colour into the air. The sky brightens as the sun of light charges it with azure. Elam’s wings find energy in the light, beat faster, carry him to the new day. Far ahead the sky glows orange and crimson.

The sun of light rises over a ragged horizon. Its rays warm Elam’s wing muscles and tug him forward. The thrill of wing power replaced his frolicking joy, the power to stay above the rising clouds, to leap over the mountains. Elam’s wings beat faster, the mountains creep nearer.

Ragged peaks rise above the swirling clouds. Air rushes into Elam’s face. This is bad wind. His wings can’t beat fast enough, so Elam circles back to

catch another updraft, finds a pass and takes the current through. He lets out a proud whistle as he glides down to the clouds on the other side.

Too tired now to dance and skim, Elam rides the current farther into the day. After a while the world below shows through thinning clouds. Elam aims for a gap in the clouds and dives.

A strange world lies below. No forest, no rivers or lakes, no cliffs or ravines. A flat, featureless world dressed in the colours of stones and dust. No water or plants to be seen.

The mountains are far behind. The sun of light now burns hot at the top of the sky and the sun of shadows splashes red on the horizon. Elam scans the ground, seeing nothing of interest. He considers leaping back over the mountains, but his tired wings urge him to rest. Then a curious shape appears in the distance and Elam's wings beat with renewed vigour.

\*\*\*

Elam circles above a small group of figures arranged in a V formation, like that of the small fliers who arrive and depart with the seasons. But these figures seem to be affixed to the ground. They are plump and awkward looking, wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, covered with a smooth, tawny pelage. They have no wings, but arms that hang limply at their sides. And they have a face, each of them, round and hairless, just below the apex of their form, with large, round eyes that stare forward at the mountains where Elam came from.

Behind the group of creatures, crimson rods with bulbous heads protrude from dark mounds of earth. The head of one rod blooms like a flower. The head of another, sticking up from a smaller mound, looks like a tiny version of one of the large creatures. Another rod, at the rear of this strange garden, has attached itself to the back of a large creature who's leaning forward as if straining to pull free.

Elam circles for some time. Some of the creatures loosen their eyes from the mountains and look up, slowly raise their arms to point. All have quizzical faces, questioning eyes. Elam can see no threat from these things, so he spirals down, tests the ground with outstretched toes and lands in front of the group. With wings extended he approaches the lead creature and says, "I am Elam from beyond the mountains. Who are you?"

The creature replies in Elam's language. "We are so pleased you have come to us again." Its voice sounds like many voices in harmony. It reminds Elam of a trickling mountain stream. He feels the dryness in his mouth.

The creature says, "You have come from the opening eye. This is very good."

All the others say "Ah."

Elam looks back to the mountains, sees blue sky through a slit in the dark clouds above the peaks. He puffs up his chest, flutters his wings. "I flew here, over the clouds, from my home in the forests on the other side of the mountains."

Elam becomes aware that all the creatures are staring at him. Then he hears a muffled scraping sound from beneath the broad base of the lead creature as it jerks unsteadily towards him. He steps backward and flutters his wings. He asks them, "Why do you stand here looking at the mountains?"

"We walk... over the plain."

"You *walk*?" Elam is surprised that creatures designed for ground movement are so slow and awkward on their feet. But more immediate questions come to mind.

"Do you have water? Food?"

"All we need."

"Can you share some with me? I especially need water."

"No," says the creature, and the others echo, "No no no no...."

Elam tries to stay calm. He asks, "Why not?"

The creature blinks like a rock lizard, says, "We gain our sustenance from the ground."

Elam steps backward, flutters his wings so that he bounces on his toes. He studies the creature's face, its dry, willow-bark skin, its knot-hole eyes, its lips like twisted osiers. "Aha!" he says. "You are trees. Trees that walk... but so painfully slow."

The creature's eyes bulge out from their holes. "We walk, yes, over the plain."

"But where are you going? To the mountains?"

"Our destination is that of all thinking beings," it says as it looks over Elam's shoulder. Elam jumps with wings spread and pirouettes in the air. All the other faces look to the sky above the mountains.

Elam considers this, having forgotten his thirst for a moment, then offers his interpretation: "So you will walk to the mountains and climb to the highest peak, where you can dance in the mist and pluck the stars from the sky and... and taunt the weather god as I did today." He laughs and spins around again, then lands to face the leader. He says: "Yet here you stand rooted to the ground like a tree!"

The creature utters something unintelligible, and murmurs ripple among the others. Then it says, "The eye in the sky is merely our beacon, to help us realize the meaning of our existence." With a crunch and a lurch, it steps forward again. "You... you are an amazing creature, a wonder from the air, a sign that there is so much more to the world than we can experience. You have met us before, many times. We have learned your language and some of your habits. We know that you will never be able to understand us and the purpose of our journey."

Elam shakes his head, flaps his wings. "Tell me. I am a thinking being. Tell me why you are here."

The creatures make noises that sound like laughter but more like the rustling of dry leaves in the wind. The leader says, "We don't yet know. That is why we walk."

Elam looks again at the mountains on the horizon, veiled in clouds. What was once the shape of an opening eye is now an elongated ovoid. The creature's words make no sense to Elam. "Why there?" He asks. "Why do you walk in this direction, towards those mountains?"

Rustling leaves again. But no answer. These are silly creatures, Elam decides. "How long have you been walking?" he asks the leader.

"We have always walked."

"Forever? You unfortunate creatures. If you could fly you would be there by now."

"But we cannot fly," says the leader, "just as you cannot walk."

Elam plants his feet on the ground, about to show them that he can walk much better and faster than any of them. But before he can, one of the creatures near the front of the group falls forward with a crumpling sound.

"Oh no, that one also cannot walk," he says.

Elam watches in horror as the fallen creature crumples and breaks apart like the dried husk of a sunberry. He's appalled that none of the others acknowledge their fallen comrade. He feels the dryness return to his mouth, and he pities these strange beings in their dry, rusty land. He looks towards the horizon where the sun of shadows sits, flooding the earth with shades of red. He says: "In my home of forests and cliffs and ravines, water and food abounds, life is rich and joyful. You might reach there one day."

"No," says the leader of these strange, helpless beings. "Understanding the importance of this meeting will take time beyond our short lives. But the interval between your visitations tells us that we have moved closer. Still, this



will take many generations of thought for those of us with feet firmly on the ground and eyes directed at the mountain peaks.”

Elam laughs, but only to mask his frustration. His wings flutter anxiously, and then he beats them once to back away. “You are fools,” he says through the dust raised by his wings. “You are stuck to the earth and will never see the whole world. I have been to the mountains and there is nothing there but rocks and ice and clouds.”

The creature says nothing, just looks ahead.

Elam yearns for flight once more. He beats his wings more vigorously to lift off the ground. “If only you could fly,” he taunts them. “At this pace you'll never reach your goal.”

The leader of the creatures raises an arm and says, “Aaah.” Then falls forward to the ground and crumples like a pile of leaves. Elam gasps and lifts himself higher. His wings raise more dust, which swirls and enshrouds the group of creatures. Elam can see behind them other crumpled bodies they have left behind. In one richly coloured mass stands a crimson rod.

He circles overhead a few times, then steers back towards home. With wings rested and feeling strong, the joy of flying returns. Elam forgets about the plain creatures. Clouds soon hide the earth again and Elam nips at the cool vapour, gaining some relief for his parched mouth and throat. He skims, soars, tumbles, and glides, kicking at the weather-god's amorphous skin. Now the dark blood of the sun of shadows courses through the clouds, and the sun of light sits high over the home forest.

Elam hovers at the peak of the mountains, where the clouds slide over rocks and ice like a waterfall. He's forgotten the goal of those grounded creatures, not that it mattered. The image of water makes him thirsty again, so he rides a current down to the ocean of clouds and sets into a traveller's rhythm to take him home.

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# DREAMS

*by Robert Dawson*

When I was a youngster I wanted  
To join the first mission to Mars  
Or (given a serious breakthrough in physics)  
To follow the road to the stars.

I didn't suppose they'd develop  
A time machine, but if they did,  
I'd be a real mensch and let Grandpa survive  
Though he might be a horrible kid.

I knew that the future's mysterious  
And what it might hold's a surprise.  
But sandworms or Ringworlds or virtual reality  
It always looked good to my eyes.

Perhaps there would be evil rulers  
But whether in story or poem  
I'd join with the good guys and gals and we'd manage  
To neutralize and overthrow 'em.

And now I am seeing that future,  
Albeit through slight presbyopia:  
And what tropes am I living? A global pandemic,  
With delicate notes of dystopia.

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# USABILITY TEST

*by Victoria K. Martin*

## *Test # 1*

The trophy case dominated the room, tall and sturdy, made of beautiful birdseye maple. It was a magnificent piece of furniture. So magnificent, in fact, that it seemed almost sad to fill its shelves with trophies that were old, tarnished, and covered in dents. Miranda sighed as she placed the last of them. She consoled herself with the knowledge that if today's test went according to plan, the trophies would all gleam and glisten once more.

To be honest, trophies hadn't been her first choice for this test; fine silverware was what the spell was really intended to care for. But finding people willing to donate their fancy dishes without any guarantee of safety had proven a challenge. It had been much easier to get everyone in the office to bring in a few participation trophies that were otherwise gathering dust in their basements.

Miranda continued to double-check the room, ensuring the manual for the polishing spell and all the required ingredients were laid out on the nearby table. And then she exited the room, joined her partner, Liam, by the two-way mirror, and waited for the first testers to arrive.

"How do you think they'll do?" Liam asked, shifting his weight from side to side. This was the first spell he'd worked on since joining Charm & Hex Industry, and he was clearly excited to see his baby grow to fruition.

Miranda smiled at him; while this was far from her first time, she was still pleased to be at this final stage. "Well, we shouldn't expect the first test to go completely smoothly, but I think the instructions are in very good shape. The testers shouldn't have too many problems completing their task and casting the spell."

The door opposite the mirror opened, and two spellcasters chosen from the company's testing pool entered the room. Miranda didn't recognize either of them from previous tests, but she trusted that they would be fully qualified and capable. As they sat down at the table and began to look at the instructions, she took out her clipboard and prepared to take notes.

### *Test #2*

“Well, that could have gone better.” Miranda paused to inhale, happy to note that the scent of scorched wood had cleared. “But better to have it fail now than when a customer tries. Have you made all the changes I suggested?”

Liam flipped through the manual. “Yes,” he said, his eyes scanning the pages. “Steps one and two were fine but step three has been substantially rewritten and then a few steps have been added. Oh,” he added with a slight shudder, “step ten was removed altogether.”

“Good,” she said with a nod. “I’ll let them know they can bring the next testers in.”

“You’re sure this time will be better?”

“Absolutely positive.”

### *Test #3*

Miranda stared at the mess on the floor. “I had no idea it was even possible to liquefy britannium. It would have had to get to at least 250 degrees Celsius in here.”

“255,” Liam informed her, grimacing.

“Well then. The new step five will need some major revisions to prevent overheating.” She carefully stepped over the molten metal. “Maybe add in a cooling phase? We could probably re-use some steps from the popsicle-making spell.”

“Okay,” Liam said, adding to his notes. “What about this mess?”

“I already called the cleaning crew; we should be able to start again in half an hour or so.” She sat down at the table, pulling the manual towards her. They would have to print off a new copy, one that didn’t have holes burned through it.

Liam loomed over her, fidgeting more now, a mix of nerves and growing anxiety. “Next time, it will work, right?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

### *Test #12*

This time, there were frozen bits of trophy and shelf scattered and shattered along the floor. However, since the cleaning crew weren’t leaving between tests anymore, the remains were already being swept away. Meanwhile, Liam was putting up replacement trophies, now that they were beginning to run low.

Miranda tapped her pen against her clipboard. “I think we’re going in the right direction. But, obviously, something is still not clear enough for the participants to accurately cast the spell.”

Liam leaned forward, resting his head against the mirror. “Is this... normal? For it to take this long?”

“Yes, of course,” she lied. “Charm & Hex’s first major spell went through at least this many usability tests before it could be reliably replicated. Once it was done, however, it put the company on the magic industry map. We’ll be fine.”

*Test # 19*

“We’re fine; this is fine.”

Liam didn’t look convinced. “I think we should stop the tests and see about—”

“No, we don’t need to do that.” Miranda sat down at the table and started editing the manual, crossing out sections and adding in bits. “Just one more. It will work.”

*Test # 25*

“This isn’t working.”

“No,” Miranda admitted with a deep sigh. “It’s not. But if we just tweak it a bit more, maybe....”

*Test # 37*

Everyone ran from the building, fleeing the dark, toxic-smelling smoke that emanated from the testing room. Miranda and Liam looked at each other, trying to communicate, but all they could do was cough.

*Test # 51*

“What if we added some diagrams?”

*Test # 76*

“What if it was *only* diagrams?”

*Test # 95*

Liam sat in the testing room alone, head on the table as he ran through the last couple of days. He’d seen trophies melt. He’d seen them freeze and

shatter. He'd even seen them explode. The only thing he hadn't seen? Any of them getting polished.

The door opened, and Miranda walked in, a bag in her hands. "Well, this is it," she said. "I've found our solution."

He sat up. "Really? What is it?"

Miranda reached into her bag and handed him a cloth and a tub of polish. "There's no magic quite as reliable as good old manual labour."

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# FLOATING

*by Dean Wirth*

Gravity holds the sky to rounded hips to which continents cling,  
Fitted together—pieces of a Titan  
Sheets of melted asteroid and lava long ago overlaid this strange world  
Painted in shades of brown, green and black laced with gossamer lines  
Of blue river rushing, draining to the shadow-world underneath  
Through the thick crust of creation

Within its voluminous cavity, deserts of translucent crystal allow light  
To shine through solid jewel-lakes that sparkle deep below  
Curious shape for a world thus fashioned  
Curious five-billion-year-old chance of cosmic sculpting  
Shaped beyond logical probability  
From its surface sprout severed arms, legs and neck spinning  
With both rapidity and grandeur

This world within a world holds both mystery and life  
For inside thrives a being  
On its bleak and lifeless surface play his imaginings  
Dancing, playing, killing, lifeless, and yet  
They breathe

-----

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# A NEEDLE PULLING THREAD

(Previously published in *Agnes & True* on April 22, 2018)

*By J.R. Johnson*

Luani scanned the new Symphony Hall with an appreciative eye. After five years of refurbishment, untold cost overruns, and the inevitable discussion of whether art was worth it (in such perilous times), the building was finally complete.

Golden Quebec beech panelling angled through the hall to maximize acoustic reflection; high balcony walls curved like the sides of a ship; and the organ's massive pipes glittered at the bow of the room. The organist perched in a crow's nest halfway up to the soaring ceiling, a thin metal rail all that stood between her and empty space.

"Why waste time on a boondoggle," Tino had said, "at the end of the world?" Her co-worker was a practical sort, packing the same peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch every day. He didn't understand her need to visit the new hall.

She shrugged off her white lab coat and nodded towards the DNA analyzer. "Can you flip the samples for me? They'll be done in fifty-seven minutes." His nod allowed her to escape the lab's fluorescent lights and dual-stage filtration system in time for the concert.

Lu picked her way across feet and scrunched legs to find her seat. Most patrons had checked their coats, but Lu shrugged hers over the seat back and curled the heavy wool around her; it looked odd in the already warming room, but she needed what was in the pockets.

The overhead lights dimmed to dusk. Lu slipped a hand through the coat pocket to the secret compartment inside, a little pouch that she had fashioned from a tank top with a rainbow on the front. The shirt was no loss—they wouldn't see another summer.

The recording button, nestled against her thumb, was a round target that she could find in the dark. The click of the switch was drowned out by the announcement to turn off all cell phones prior to the show. And absolutely no recording. Why they cared at this point was beyond imagination.

The program called for Saint-Saëns, a rollicking movement that reminded her of happier days, listening to classical music with her father. The notes

were by turns energetic, despairing, and hopeful, featuring an implausibly optimistic ending. She captured it all.

After, Lu eeled her way through the crowd to reach the wide glass doors before the crush. A toxic veil of snow shrouded the streets in cinematic, shimmering white flakes. Despite the danger, she liked that it hid the piles of uncollected trash.

Public transportation had become unpredictable. She pulled her coat tight against the cold and walked the long road back to the lab accompanied by thoughts of the night's beauty, and her mission.

The final batch of samples had not brought good news. Perhaps another lab, on this or any other corner of the globe, would find a cure for what ailed them. Lu doubted it. There would be no technological solution to this devastatingly organic problem, hence, her side project. By staying late, she was able to breed her swarm without interference. Lu doubted that her boss, who was working herself to death trying to find a cure, had noticed her at all since the news broke three months ago.

The next Saturday Lu returned to the orchestra for an adagio by Albinoni. The seats on either side of her were empty this time. Was the magic of the reconstructed ark that was the symphony wearing off, or was this something else? The click of her device sounded louder this time, but no one bothered to turn.

Her first generation had reached target-age, allowing her experiment to progress to the next stage. Lu picked a Sunday evening to begin, even though it meant missing what promised to be a particularly fine performance of a Mozart piano concerto. Mask on, deep breath, begin.

A matinee this time, with discounted seats but even fewer in attendance. Lu frowned as she settled into her seat. The couple in the row ahead of her, who had introduced themselves as dedicated season-ticket holders, were absent. A dusting of heads, most greying, faced the stage with dull anticipation.

Was it her imagination, or had the stage manager rearranged the players' chairs? Lu squinted in the dim light, trying to make out the exact number of arms wielding bows, feet tapping beneath curved metal chair legs. The conductor blocked too much of her view to be certain, but the number of

artists on stage felt fewer, the swell of the music less dynamic. Cooperative, still a joint effort, but the sound attenuated by fewer hands.

“Cockroaches?” Tino’s hot breath on her neck made Lu jump. “Why are you messing around with them?” How she missed him coming up behind her she didn’t know. Sensory deprivation was often the initial symptom of the disease. A flick of the wrist blocked her work from view and closed her lab book; its cover was black like the ones they used for official research, so she hoped that he wouldn’t notice the difference.

“Just testing out an idea,” Lu said. “Have you found something?” Tino never turned down a chance to talk about himself, and he was a brilliant scientist.

He shook his head, the creases on his forehead deeper than she had ever seen. She felt like an idiot for indulging even a flicker of hope. They wouldn’t get through this. All they could attempt was to extend a breath from beyond, to cling to the conviction that someone, somewhere, would find it and know they had lived.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are deeply sorry to announce that today will be our final concert for the duration.” The loudspeaker echoed through the near-empty hall. Lu instinctively looked for the announcer but saw only the handful of others courageous enough, or foolish enough, to brave the night. Her eyes locked with an elderly woman’s, seeing the reflection of her own knowledge that for any human alive, “the duration” might as well be eternity.

Perhaps half of the players had come, perhaps only half could still come. The conductor asked for a moment of silence before the first note. In that massive, almost empty space, the gesture of respect came easy.

The room’s perfect acoustics amplified the click of her recorder. The conductor straightened his back and nodded once before raising his wand.

Finally, she’d done it. Months of work as her colleagues fought desperately on, struggling against the inevitable.

Snow still fell outside, carrying with it their doom. Lu shifted her backpack over one shoulder and slipped out the lab’s main door and into a layer of snow. She trudged to the centre of what had been a small but immaculate lawn nestled between glass and steel buildings. A frozen concrete fountain sat silent

to her left, and trash filled the quad's far corner in a haphazard pile of shredded plastic bags.

The quad stank of decay. A vent at the southern corner of the administrative offices spewed steam near a sewer grate. Food, warmth, and moisture... perfect.

She sat on the cold white ground near the fountain and extracted her favourite childhood lunchbox from the backpack. The scratched metal exterior was blue and white and shaped like an old mailbox, the kind with a rotating red flag on the side to signal a delivery. She raised the little flag one last time and laughed at the symbolism, and her own folly.

The latches on the decades-old box stuck from disuse. She gently wiggled them open and tipped the box onto one side. Hundreds of young cockroaches streamed towards the sewers with an unerring instinct for food and shelter—survival.

Lu watched the last of her creations scuttle away and knew that her efforts were likely pointless. Of all the things to record for the future, a few musical pieces played at the brink of the cliff would make little difference, even if anyone lived to discover them. But it was the human experience, music performed live with as much hope as humanity could still muster. She fell back into the thick layer of snow, her laughter turning to tears.

Frigid flakes settled on her bare hands, neck, and face. She shivered at their feather-light touch as though additional exposure might make a difference.

It would not. No one escaped infection.

She stuck out her tongue to catch the next flake and the next, collecting as many as she could. All the while her roaches streamed into the night, an ark of artistry, music woven into their DNA like a tenuous thread connecting the present to an unknown future.

When Tino ventured out into the icy night, he saw Lu lying face up on the snow-covered lawn. Her arms and legs moved in time with the stars as she made angels under a darkening sky.

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# WHEN WORDS COLLIDE

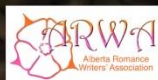
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# RED RECKONING

*by Rodolfo Boskovic*

The dead are distant                      defiance doomed  
To greedy greatness                      granted to grow  
The alien iron                      angrily aborted.  
By birth bastards                      buried below  
Rocks and rivers                      in un-rest remain.

Red is the reckoning                      the robots roar  
With battered, broken                      bent bodies  
Guests to grime                      gathering to gore  
Stranded in stink,                      stuck in states  
Of longing lost                      lives un-lived.

The listless lock                      lately lets  
Prisoners press                      with prowling pressure  
Threading through                      throngs of threats  
For valid vengeance                      valiantly venture  
With livid loathing and                      looming lasers.

Left to look are                      the lost lives  
How hatred                      harbored, in horror  
Comes to conquer                      with crimson cries  
As nurtured night                      is now near for  
Destruction is destined to those      the dead doomed to die.

-----

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# THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

(Previously published in *After Dinner Conversation*.)

*by David Wiseman*

I met the Devil today. He was walking down main street, right by the undertaker in B\_\_\_\_, which is a little town near here, and which, for obvious reasons, I'd better not name. I recognized him straight away because he had furry legs with hooves for feet. Well, almost right away, at first I thought he was just some guy in fancy dress, but who dresses up like that on Christmas Eve? Not only that, he clip-clopped as he walked, and who has an outfit with sound effects?

And he wasn't alone.

He had at least two smaller devils with him. I say *at least* because although I can picture them now, the edges of that picture are a little fuzzy, so yes, two for sure but maybe three. I took them for boys out with their dad doing last-minute shopping, looking for something for their mom, so two fits the picture I have in my mind. But who dresses their kids up in fancy dress to match their dad?

I was so taken by the dad's legs—well, all the way from his chest down, the more I think about it—and the clip-clopping, that even now his face is hard to place, but I'm pretty sure he was wearing a hat and when I picture that, I reckon it was a white cowboy hat, and with some horns on it too. Horns like cattle might have with black tips, although I seem to recall by convention, they're supposed to be goat's horns. Besides the horns, the hat had a black band round it, but wouldn't you expect the whole hat to be black? Maybe that old black-hat white-hat thing isn't true after all. Either way, horns on a cowboy hat didn't make a lot of sense, even for a fancy-dress costume.

But then I haven't been to a fancy-dress party for a very long time, so I'm no expert.

The three of them, or four maybe, were coming right at me, the low winter sun straight in their eyes. There's not space for four abreast outside the undertakers so I stepped off the path into the road to make room. Maybe they hadn't seen me at all, 'cos they just walked on till they were level with me and I just stood there gawping.

"Hey, fella, what's up?" said the dad, stopping and turning towards me.

What's up? Only everything. Where to start? So I mumbled, "Nothing," but I couldn't leave it, could I? "I just er... I wondered if..."



“Ah, surprised, eh?” He looked up and down the empty street before asking, “You’re not from around here, right?”

“No, we just moved to...” I waved vaguely in the direction of my new home, about thirty minutes down the road.

“Ah, OK. Well,” he said, ready to move on, “Merry Christmas to you.”

“Wait,” I blurted out, louder than I meant. “Who are you?”

He turned back to me. “Here I’m Nick, Nick Baphomet, other places I got other names, but I think you already know me.”

“I’m not sure, maybe I do. You live here in B\_\_\_\_? I wouldn’t have thought in this sleepy little...”

“No, not full time, just here for the holidays.”

“You celebrate this holiday? I mean ...” I hesitated over saying the word for fear of tempting a thunderbolt to strike me down, but he’d said it to me, hadn’t he? “You celebrate Christmas?”

I looked again at the blotchy white and grey fur that started sparsely across his chest under his tweed jacket, thickening as it ran down his body to muscular legs tipped with shiny black hooves.

“Of course!” he replied, “One of my great successes don’t you think?”

“*Your* great successes? But...”

“Oh yeah. Jesus, Mohamed, Abraham, all the other guys like that, all mine.” He smiled and leaned towards me slightly, so a cloud of foul breath rolled over me. “To be honest, I’m still pretty smug about ’em all. Used to be that there were so many gods nobody knew who did what and who to pray to, then I got the idea of just one god. Counter intuitive, right? But then the arguments over whose god is the real god. So good, eh? Brought more misery into the world than anything before or since. Yep, proud of that.”

My head was reeling. Was this guy just playing me for a fool?

“Am I dreaming this? Did I die without noticing?” I protested.

“Hey no, not so far as I can see, you look fine. But if you’re feeling bad then you should...” he looked back at the funeral home then thought better of it, “OK maybe not there, but across the road in the Salvation Army store, they’ll let you sit in there a while.”

“No, no, I’m fine. The people here, do they know you’re here, staying for the holidays? Don’t they...?”

Don’t they what? Get up a bunch of vigilantes and throw him out of town? Call out a lynch mob? A lynch mob in B\_\_\_\_ was even less likely than me standing on main street casually chatting with the Devil, which was what I was apparently doing.

“Folk round here know I like a bit of peace and quiet when I’m in town, and I try not to bother ’em. Mostly, if they see me coming, they cross the street to run that little errand they nearly forgot, making out they didn’t see me. It’s like that most places I go these days, people mind their own business and look the other way. I appreciate that.”

“Where else do you go?” As I asked, I thought of hell and added lamely, “Down... there?” and pointed a crooked finger to the ground.

“Whooo-hooo, down there,” he said in a spooky voice, pointing with a shaky finger to mimic mine. “No! Down there’s all closed up, has been for centuries. Got too crowded, and besides, there was nothing *down there* that couldn’t be done right here.”

“So where?”

“All over, a week here, another there. We’ve got offices worldwide, all the big cities and some fairly out of the way places too. There are opportunities everywhere.”

“Offices? You have offices?”

“Incorporating was probably the single best thing I ever did. Meant I could delegate so much. Mostly it runs itself nowadays, I can put my feet up and do little more than watch, sometimes for decades. When I look back, I can’t imagine what it’d be like running things in the old way. It’d be ridiculous, I’d never keep up. Gives me the shudders to think of it, there’d be a kinda creeping sickly goodness everywhere with only me pushing back at it.”

“Let me get this right,” I said slowly, “You’ve turned into some kind of jet-set corporate executive, and you don’t want my soul in exchange for my heart’s desire?”

“Where’ve you been, friend!” He threw back his head and snorted a kind of cross between a laugh and a whinny. “Do you have any idea how much a single soul is worth today? Even a hardly used one like yours?”

I shook my head dumbly.

“Less than the cost of a cellphone. And a very cheap one too, not one of your fancy things. Nobody deals in singles anymore. Everything’s wholesale, bought and sold in bundles of two million here, ten million there.”

His hooves clopped on the sidewalk, seemingly impatient to be done with me.

“The hat,” I said shakily, anything to keep him talking. “A cow? And horse’s hooves? I thought goat, did I get that wrong too?”

“We never liked that goat motif, and it was never my idea, but it kinda stuck for a while. But horse, goat, cow, elephant, it doesn't matter really. We're not strong on any of them. People see what they want to see.”

Behind him there was an impatient skittering of small hooves. In my stupefied amazement I'd quite forgotten his small companions until that moment.

He looked down at them and ushered them out from behind his legs. From each side of him a small version of himself peered up at me. There may have been a third between his legs but could be I'm just imagining that now.

“Yours?” My question was superfluous, but I asked it anyway.

“Hell, yes!” he announced proudly.

“How old?” I asked, just like he was a regular dad and his cow-horned horse-legged miniature clones were regular children.

“These guys?” He seemed startled by the question and stroked his chin while looking to the sky. I noticed he had a wispy gingery moustache and a poor excuse for a beard, like he hadn't shaved for a week or so but nothing much had sprouted. But then, if he was taking a few days off for the holidays, why not? He interrupted my wandering thoughts with, “You know, I don't really remember, but they're sure growing fast these days. Maybe eight or nine hundred. I know there was some bloody crusade going on somewhere, but then again there've been quite a few of them over the years.” To underline the humour he saw in this he gave another snorting bray, which the little clones echoed with their own high-pitched whinny.

I stared at the clone peering round his right leg. He had black eyes set in a pale round face, reminding me of nothing so much as a currant bun ready for the oven.

“We should be getting along,” the dad said in that polite way that you do when you're getting bored with too long a conversation with a slight acquaintance.

“No, wait, you can't just walk away,” I cried. “This is too...” I stopped. Too, what? Too weird, too scary, too ridiculous? “Too important,” I asserted, hoping flattery might delay him.

“Look, I have some things to pick up and these guys are getting restless, do you want an autograph or something? I used to specialize in doing things for good folk like you, it's Christmas so anything in particular you'd like? Oh, but no selfies, I don't do selfies.”

“I just feel as though I should do something. Anything, but certainly *something*. What will people say, what will my wife say when I tell her? They’ll think I’m crazy, but they’ll think I should have *done* something. Made some kind of stand.” It felt quite empowering to say that much and I was a little surprised at myself, asserting right over wrong like that, and with this guy of all guys.

“Oh, now I get it,” he grinned. “You mean do something like challenge me to mortal combat, then, using some magical powers I guess, vanquish me and save the world. That kind of *do something*.” He couldn’t have been more scathing.

“Well, no, obviously not, but don't you think I should at least try?”

As I spoke I felt into the big right-hand pocket of my parka in case I had a forgotten hunting knife lurking in its depths. The best I could feel was the plastic cap from a long-lost ball-point.

“OK,” he shrugged, “If you like, but let's get on with it. I thought we were getting along fine.”

“We were,” I reassured him, “I mean we are, it’s been nice to meet you and your... boys.” They were staring up at me from their black-button eyes, their little black-hole mouths hanging open like I was a madman, the like of which they’d never seen before.

“So, what you gonna do, stab me with those knitting needles?”

The knitting needles! The whole purpose of this errand had been to get knitting needles for my wife. They were protruding from the little paper bag I held in my left hand. But how to get them out, how to use them with enough force in a single strike and still retain any element of surprise? I stood staring at him, shopping in one hand, pen cap in the other.

“Maybe not the needles today, eh?” he said slowly, as one might speak to a toddler holding a box of matches. “So, what now? I don't think you've thought this through very well. A fight, here on the street, in front of the children? What kind of example would that be? How long before someone calls the cops? Then you'll babble on about saving the world and in no time flat you'll be spending Christmas with the guys in white coats while your favourite chair will be sitting empty by your fireside.”

Put like that, it seemed anything I could do was futile. I let go the pen cap in my pocket.

“No, unless you really have got magic powers—and I'm pretty sure you haven't—then it’s probably best to stand down your red alert. Here, let’s shake and we'll be going.”


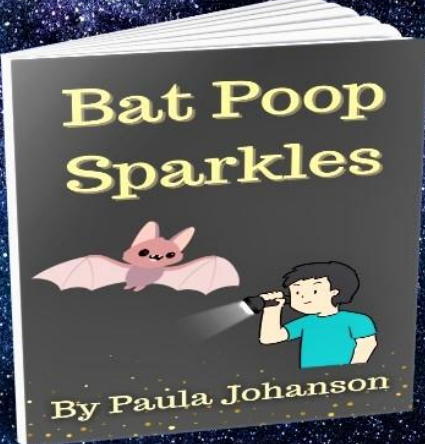
Mesmerized, I took my hand from my pocket and proffered it limply towards him. He took it in cold, clammy fingers. It was like shaking hands with a dead squid.

“Well,” I said a little lamely, trying to retain some vestige of self-respect, “at least I didn’t sell my soul, I can say that. I didn’t do a deal with the...”

They’d moved a few clip-clops away from me, but he looked back. It was my turn to squint into the sun. “You didn’t do a deal?” he called back, “Oh, Robert, I think you already did. I’m pretty sure we’ve got a file on you somewhere. There’s a file on everybody somewhere.”

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"Wait, does bat poop  
actually sparkle?  
Why did no one tell me this.  
I love bats even more now!"  
@GothyBookLover on Twitter



doublejoybooks.com  
books2read.com/batpoop

# FATA MORGANA

(Previously published in *On Spec Magazine* in 1994)

*by Catherine Girczyc*

Smiling lights on the water  
Winking at us, transforming us  
Into the stuff of myth.

Blue faking its way into my heart  
And I laugh, realizing that this time  
I am the Lady at the edge of the Lake  
Not Guinevere at all, but the puissant  
Misty One.

An anomaly in history  
A woman helping a King  
A female Druid, worshipping  
Strange beauties in the night.

I grin, knowing that I am changing  
The waves of time when I say  
To the young girl beside me:  
I will not be taking the Boat out today,  
Put that sword back,  
We have need of it.

Arthur can save himself for once.  
I have work to do.

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# MORTUARY SAL

*by Jacqueline Thorpe*

The young woman crouches, pinned to the side of the culvert by the raven's black eyes. Her breathing is ragged, heart juddering, arms wrapped tightly around her legs. She tries to bury her face in her knees but the raven won't let her. It pulls her back, to the horror that's sent her there.

"It was an accident," the woman whispers, repeating the police officer's words. "A terrible accident."

The raven pays her no heed. Its black eyes erupt into two red flames and an image materializes before her. It's just a bit of smoke at first, floating out the window of the house. But before long she can see the curtains are aflame. She hears yelling.

"Get out, Sally! Get out! I'll get Sam!"

Sal sees a girl emerge from the front door, pale blue eyes wide with panic. And it's over almost as soon as it begins. As the girl rushes out, the air rushes in. The house explodes. Glass shatters outward, bits of brick, wood, a flaming couch rain down. The force knocks the girl across the street, a blazing piece of timber glancing the side of her face. She lies motionless for a moment, then looks up. All that's left is a smoldering black hole.

The image evaporates. The raven flies away. Sal leans back against the culvert, shame flooding in. Her fingers fly to her face. She feels the puckers and ridges, but needs no confirmation. What she's seen is no dream. There are no dreams in the Weighstation, only memories brought luridly to life. If she's brave, if she has faith, she can make the memory go away. So she's been told. She's terrified at the undertaking, but clings to the hope it offers. Sal crawls out of the culvert and begins her day.

She thought it would be hot in the Weighstation but it's soul-shattering cold. She climbs the stone steps of the midden. The stench roils her stomach, but it's the safest place to sleep. She passes bones, blistering skin, bloody clothes—rotting things, corporeal things, things not needed in the Weighstation. She reaches the top and the city's pantomime begins. She passes shops selling wigs, makeup, lace and lingerie, morning coats and top hats, brocade jackets, and bright, silk dresses. She stops at Smithersins' Shroud Shop. White coverings, embroidered with intricate patterns of flowers and birds, hang in the window. The workmanship is stunning, for Jack



Smithersins knows the Wicked One values beauty almost as much as he values sin.

It was Smithy who found Sal behind his store. He who held her as her new reality sank in. He who suggested she train under Eccles, the finest threader in the city, despite a disfigurement worse than hers. And here she is, only three more bodies left before the WO decides whether she's skilled enough to stay in the Station like Smithy or be transferred below. If she's allowed to stay, she'll become a fully certified mortuary seamstress, one of the legions who work the in-between realm of the Station, preparing the damned for their final evaluations. The downside is, she'd be here for an eternity. The upside is, she wouldn't entirely be dead. Sal doesn't know if that's an upside.

She picks up her pace. She's arrangements to make.

Maisy the Diviner sits cross-legged in her cardboard hovel, purple cape a dash of brightness in the eternal gloom. The WO leaves Maisy alone in exchange for readings of happenings topside, which somehow, he can never quite see. What the WO doesn't know, is that Maisy can see ahead and behind as well. It's this expertise she's promised to Sal. Sal doesn't know why. Maisy says only that she sees a strength in her, a strength that will set her free. Topside, Sal had a strength. If she concentrated fiercely enough, she could move things without touching them. Sometimes, if she was riled, which to be honest, was quite often, she'd send things flying without intending to. That's what got her into this mess.

"So?" says Maisy.

"It must be tonight. I only have three more bodies left and I'll get a few today."

"Are you ready?"

Doubt floods Sal. "You don't think so?"

"I know you are. The question is, are you brave enough?"

Not brave. Foolish, to think she can deceive the deceiver, but it's her only chance to set things right. "Yes," she says firmly.

"Good. Payment?"

Sal opens her book of silks. There's a hundred threads inside, some gossamer thin, others sturdy, all brightly colored. Eccles takes one-third of her wages for them, compared to the quarter he charges Tom for his black ones. But the colors, combined with her finesse with the needle, bring her clients uncannily to life. Her work is apparently getting noticed, even by the WO himself.

Maisy's eyes light up as she reaches in and plucks out half of every colour.

“Tonight,” says Maisy.

Sal hurries across the street. She opens the door and peers through, hoping to slip quietly inside. But as soon as she tiptoes in, a hand rakes her.

“Late!” yells Herrindore Eccles. The rancid tang of him wafts over her. He waves her into the room, retreats to his desk and bends over his ledger. He wears a formal black frock coat, frilly cuffs at his wrists. His impeccable attire does nothing to draw the eye from his festering face.

“I apologize,” says Sal, hanging her coat. “It was slippery. I had to go slowly.”

Two empty eye sockets turn to toward her. “How many?” he simply says.

“Three?” asks Tom, coming through the mortuary door. He smirks at Sal. Tom earned his credentials in a record ninety-two days, securing his spot in the Weighstation last month. His golden hair shimmers in the firelight. He has sun-kissed skin, a square jaw, and a lithe physique that moves like mercury. His comeliness can’t hide the evil in his soul.

“Correct, I have three.”

“You might finish this week,” says Eccles. He sops the wound on his brow with a rag. “There’s one in the cold room, another expected soon. Now get to work. You’ve got to get your papers so I can make some coin!”

Sal dons an apron and pushes through the swinging doors, ignoring Tom’s wink.

Four trolleys stand in the cold, upon which four corpses lie. Three are covered with sheets, one is bare to the navel. Sal peeks under the closest one and curses. Tom’s done his usual shoddy job. The boy’s eyes are sewn shut with thick black thread, the needle holes huge, stitching rucked. He’s displayed the same carelessness for the other two bodies. She asked Eccles once why the WO accepted Tom’s slipshod work if splendor was so important to him.

“Because Tom is beauty itself, and reason alone for the WO to want him at the Station,” said Eccles.

Sal knows she’s as far from beauty as a person can get, but like Eccles, her skill with the needle is evident. The old man taught her a few tricks on her first day—basic stitches and ties. Then, conjuring an image, showed her how it should be done. The woman had fine bones, rich chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and cupid-bow lips. She bore a countenance of absolute peace. Eccles had created that look from a thousand tiny stitches, Tom told her, an incredible feat, for his wife’s face had been all but blown away.

The woman Sal is assigned looks in her mid-fifties. There's no signs of trauma, even though it's violence that brings someone to the Station. Sal will call her Jenny.

"There we are, Jenny," she says, pulling the sheet back up to her shoulders, returning the modesty Tom stole. She fills a bowl with sudsy water, and washes Jenny from head to toe. She lifts an eyelid. The green eyes show only blankness. Sal's stopped wondering what brings the fallen below. In the Weighstation, no one ever asks and no one ever tells. Sal would die all over again, if she had to reveal what brought her here, even though it was a mistake, a tragic mistake.

She gets out her book of ribbons, sits on her stool, and begins to sew. She chooses a green the colour of the woman's eyes, and sews the lids shut with precise, delicate stitches. She ties the thread in bows at the outside corner of her eyes. Already, Jenny seems brighter. Sal gets out pink, purple and green threads and sews butterfly wings along each temple, teasing the needle gently through the skin. Next, she uses navy blue to extend the antennae, joining them in elaborate curlicues across her forehead. She sews tiny stitches of red into her grey lips, making them pop, and weaves pink into her hair. Finally, she dresses her in a matching pink dress. At last, Jenny seems at rest. Sal pulls the sheet over her face. She's about to take a break when Eccles comes trundling in with the next body.

"This one's a lovely, chovely mess," he says, fairly dancing in delight. Blood seeps through the sheet and the smell overpowers even Eccles.

He wheels the trolley to a stop, then peeks under Jenny's sheet. "Good," he grunts. It's the first time he's praised her work.

"Thank you."

"Get to it."

He walks out and Sal lifts the sheet on the new body. She gasps. The head sits in the crook of the corpse's arm. She's never dealt with a body in pieces before.

"Poor Jack," she tells the man. He is about twenty-five and is remarkably undamaged—except for the separation.

In a way, it's easier. She plunks the head in the sink, the ragged edges of his neck dragging over the side like turkey wattle, and washes him under the running water. The head slides around like a bumper car, escaping her grasp a few times. She leaves it to dry and gets about washing his body. She replaces the head, tucking in the tendrils and sews him back together with sturdy red ribbon, making fanciful loops. They contrast nicely against the white shirt

she's chosen. She doesn't embellish his face as he has fine features and a look of repose, despite the savagery that's been done to him. She pulls the sheet up and washes her hands in the sink, catching her own melted face in the mirror.

"The last one was quite something," she says to Eccles as she emerges from the mortuary, attempting to keep their comradery going. He doesn't look up. "I'll be going then."

"Make sure you're on standby," he calls out. "I've received word we could get one overnight and I'll expect you back lickety-split."

"Yes sir," says Sal, letting herself out. The reality of what she's about to attempt sinks in, and her knees buckle. She steadies herself against the wall and focuses on the fact that she's been given a second chance. She heads home to her culvert, hoping against hope Maisy gets to her before Eccles.

The hoot of an owl wakes her, feathers fluttering luminous white at the entrance to the culvert. An image takes shape before her, and she knows Maisy has mastered a magical feat.

She sees a young woman sitting at the kitchen table. The woman—at fourteen, still a girl—is doing her homework. She nibbles the tip of her pencil. Sal can tell she's fractious. She's struggling with math, her mind drifting to the party. *What will she wear? How will she get there?* She tries her luck.

"Mum, have you decided?"

Her mother is stirring stew on the soup, tea towel tucked into the belt of her skirt, cigarette dangling from her mouth. "About what?"

"The PARTY!"

Her mother takes a drag and turns around.

"No, the answer's no." She continues fixing dinner.

"But Mum!"

"You're too young."

"But everyone's going!"

"No! That's the end of it."

Sally sees the set to her mother's shoulders and knows she won't bend. Her disappointment turns to rage. The girl looks at the pencil and it snaps in half. She stares at the canister on the counter and it tips over, noodles spilling everywhere. She looks at the three glasses of milk by the fridge and the liquid spins in three tiny whirlpools, splattering the counter.

Her mother whirls around. "Stop it! You must learn to control yourself."

Sally doesn't stop. Her lips curl into a smile and Sal sees she's enjoying the power she's unleashed. The paper towel, hanging under the cabinet beside the

stove, unspools and flows over the counter. In an instant, the edge catches fire, flames ripping along both ends. Now the curtains are alight.

Sal watches as panic replaces the glee in the girl's eyes.

"Get out, Sally!" yells her mother, running to the kitchen door. "Get out! I'll get Sam!"

The girl flicks on the tap with her mind but she can't make the water move. She tries to spray the fire extinguisher but cannot focus. The young woman rushes to the door and Sal knows she must make her move.

She pictures herself coming back into the young woman's body. At first nothing happens, but then the culvert begins to dissolve, the midden fades. Soon she's breaking through to the light. It's going to work!

A hand snatches her foot, fingers cold as the Arctic Sea. It yanks her back to the dark and she comes face to face with a man. He has silky black hair, cut-glass cheekbones and eyes as hypnotic as a sunset. He steadies her on the floor of a cavernous black room. A moment later, he's sitting on a silver chair, one long leg crossed languidly over the other.

"Ah, the young woman with the extraordinary needle skills," he says. "Where were you going?"

Sal cannot utter a word, not because she isn't scared witless, for the malevolence rolling off him has her rigid with fear. It's because something is preventing her from opening her mouth. She reaches up and runs her fingers along her lips. Her mouth is sewn shut with tiny, neat stitches.

"Do speak up," says the man.

Sal tries to push her tongue through her lips to loosen the thread, but it's too thick and wiry. She can only grunt helplessly.

He rolls his eyes.

"Let me assist you." He reaches out and tears the thread from her lips, taking shreds of skin with it. The pain is blinding. "I said, where were you going?"

"I... I was going back," she bubbles through the bloody pulp of her mouth.

The sunset of his eyes turns into two writhing pits of snakes. He wraps an icy hand around her neck. Talons emerge, pricking her as he lifts her off the ground. He opens his mouth and roars. The sound is as if a thousand tortured souls are trapped inside of him. She tries to turn away, but he makes her look. She sees a ring of razor-sharp teeth, opening and closing like a camera aperture onto an ocean of terror-stricken eyes.

He drops her and paces, silver-tipped shoes clipping on black marble. "Did you think it was going to be that easy?"

She is a crumpled heap, becoming light-headed as her mind shuts down.

He stops and takes her chin in taloned hand.

“Confess, and I will let you go,” he says.

“It was an accident,” she whispers.

He squeezes until her suddenly-corporeal jaw crunches.

“No!” he yells.

“I didn’t mean to!” she wails.

He laughs and hauls her up by the collar.

“Try again.”

She tells him, then, what she’s been unable to tell herself. “I did it on purpose!”

“Better,” he says, eyes sunsets again. “More.”

“I wanted her to know how powerful I was!”

“At last. The truth, I find, is often more delicious than a lie.

He walks away, then turns and says, “Pity about the face.” And he vanishes.

Sal sits in a heap, weeping. Then she realizes what he means. She’s too ugly for the Weighstation. Despite her talents, he’s going to move her below. She must hurry and try again, before that happens. She thinks of her mother’s soft hair, her brother’s giggle. An image coalesces. She watches herself reach for the front door. With every fibre in her body, she forces herself to return, and finally, she does. This time, she doesn’t open the door but rushes upstairs and grabs her brother from the bathroom where he’s sailing a plastic boat in the sink. She pulls him into the hall.

“I have him!”

Her mother rushes towards them from his bedroom and they run down the stairs. The carpet in the living room is blazing, though the stone entryway is safe.

“We’ll have to jump,” says her Mum, taking Sam.

“No! Through the basement door.” Sally pushes them ahead of her down the stairs.

Her Mum and Sam scramble out the door, but as Sally follows, a flaming ceiling tile crashes down upon her. Instantly she is alight. The pain is searing, but for the first time in months, Sal is warm and her shame eases to sorrow.

\*\*\*

Eccles is asleep at his desk when he hears pounding.

“At last! My lovely, chovely body.”

He opens the door and sees Smithersins and Maisy with a trolley.

“You’re not usually in the business of deliveries, Smithy.”

“I am tonight.” Smithersins rolls the trolley into the room.

“Must be someone important with a shroud that fine,” says Tom, rising from his cot beside his desk.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Smithy,” says Eccles, fingering the lace embroidery. He notices Maisy is weeping.

He unties the flap, and a puff of cinders floats up. From the scorched blackness, two pale blue eyes stare up at them. He recognizes her immediately, as does Tom.

“I’ll take care of this,” says Tom, a grin lighting his golden face.

“Like Hades you will,” says Eccles. He takes off his coat, rolls up his sleeves and rolls the trolley through the doors to the mortuary.

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# PREGNANT SEA

*by Carolyn Clink*

Mer-man  
swimming the warm  
reef waters  
craving sushi  
and slugs, cucumbers  
and conch—  
but unable to eat.  
Muscles ripple,  
propelling his awkward  
body in tight  
circles,  
undertow currents  
awake.  
He will give birth  
as the eddies  
batter his exhausted  
body onto  
razor-sharp coral.  
Attached like  
barnacles to a dead man's  
chest, mer-babies  
suckle.

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# STORY CONSULTANTS

*by Cathy Smith*

Finn glanced at the Extreme Sports crowdfunding page to see if it'd reached its goal.

He'd made frequent vlogs on his professional social media channels to advertise it.

He was waiting for the third stretch goal to be reached. It meant that all apps requiring a full VR immersion suit would be funded. *His bungee jumping VR app was among them.*

*C'mon. C'mon.* He thought as he saw it come close but skirt the edges of the third stretch goal.

There was a message from the developer in his inbox. *I've come up with a way to reach our stretch goal. Let's have a competition between the skydiving and bungee jumping apps. We'll let people sample both.*

He wrote back. *How is this a competition?*

*We add the one with the most votes to our platform.*

Things went downhill after that. Finn was under the impression everyone who signed on would get into the game. He had assumed it was a commission.

His concerns made him look up the terms of his contract. Extreme Sports was an online platform MMORPG. They added new apps to bring diversity to the extreme sports offered. However, the designers had to garner likes and shares to show they were worth investing in.

He sighed. *I would've preferred a regular gig rather than a competition.*

Yet he played along with it. Choosing to have a bungee jump off the Hollywood sign.

The skydiver app designer uploaded a parachuteless option. It made the skydiver splatter on the ground like they were a bug. Finn couldn't see what the appeal was until someone commented. *Why not make the skydiver a paratrooper jumping into enemy territory?*

His competition used the feedback to tweak the location. *Make it so a paratrooper has to bail out of a downed warplane.* Airplanes shot at the paratrooper when they jumped out.

It got likes.

Finn's attempt to engage with users backfired. *Why not make it, so we can say 'Geronimo' when we jump out.*

*I can't, that would be offensive to my fellow Native Americans.*

*I don't come to this platform to be flagged by the PC Police.*

*I'm sure the whole of Indian Country would object to the term. The outrage would go viral on Facebook.*

*No one cares about Facebook anymore.* Their relations deteriorated after that.

This comment got more likes than his bungee jumping app did.

They informed him that the skydiving app won the open competition at the end of the campaign. Finn knew better than to object to this. It might shame the developer to take him back, but the customers would boycott his app.

However, he made screen-captures of the exchange. He wanted to present his case to Digital Indian Country.

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*It's a good thing I knew enough to negotiate the return of my IP when the game design contract was canceled.*

His contacts in Indian Country made him aware of the Facebook Mobile Games market. Facebook was still popular in less developed countries. It was also an institution in areas of North America that didn't have top tier connection speeds. Like the Rez.

His Aunt Edith talked him into keeping a business page on Facebook. "It'll inspire the Rez kids to take up STEM education." He saw it as a low commitment form of community service.

Keeping track of his family there gave him an established presence on the platform. His skydiving app would work if he made it Indigenous themed. Though it may be closed minded to believe no one on the Rez had any interest in extreme sports.

So, he converted Bungee jump into a mobile game. All he had to do was remove everything but the sound and visual stimuli. An immersive suit would've added tactile stimulations, blown air into the VR bungee jumper's face as they rushed to the ground.

*It's a good thing I made the immersive suit stimuli as modular codes and can edit them out if I want.*

He'd deleted his app off the platform and repurposed it as a Facebook app.

He searched through stock 3D scans to make his app more Indigenous friendly. This was done by incorporating locations important to his people's history.

According to their stories the Peacemaker jumped off a waterfall to prove himself. It might make a good VR bungee jump.

Then there was Niagara Falls. According to their legends it was once the home of his people's Thunderers and a sacred site to them. The Mohawks had launched no land claims he knew of but it had a special place in their heart.

Of course, there were the major ironworking projects his people had worked on. Maybe he could use landmark bridges and buildings in New York.

It occurred to him he could make a generic steelwork project the location of a jump. The licensing rights would be low if he bought a prefabricated kit. Or he could make his own set piece.

He cobbled some sets and included an eagle flying overhead. He had all the proposed locations done in an afternoon. By the time he was done he had a generic Indigenous-themed bungee jump location for his VR app.

It was best to get feedback before he made it available, so he posted a still of the proposed locations. Such a move would serve as the necessary consultation. It'd promote his customers' engagement with his finished project.

*I've got a generic bungee jumping game for my location with an eagle flying overhead. It's off a ramp. I want to include Indigenous locations. How would you feel if I made a ramp off a white pine tree?*

The answer was immediate. *I don't want a thrill seeker displacing the great eagle on top of the Tree of Peace*

He groaned. He'd forgotten there was supposed to be an eagle to alert the league of danger on the Tree of Peace

So, he wrote back. *What if I got rid of the eagle overhead and made it a generic white pine?* There were likes to this so his sensitivity consultants accepted this tweak.

*This is taking too long.*

He added a poll to collect the necessary feedback more efficiently. People refused to vote but left comments. *The majority isn't supposed to rule, the Haudenosaunee are supposed to use consensus.*

*So, it's back to the old system.*

He put up a Maid of the Mist shot of a Haudenosaunee young woman in a canoe close to the Falls. He added the caption. *What of the Maid of the Mist? She sacrificed herself to the Falls for the sake of her village.*

It got thumbs down mojis. He groaned as he read over the comments.

*It belittles her sacrifice. It's insensitive and has a misogynistic undertone we don't need. Especially considering Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.*

Luckily, he knew of another legend regarding a Haudenosaunee woman and Niagara Falls. *What if I made the woman Thunder Boy's mother? She*

*jumped into the Falls and was rescued by a young Thunderer who lived underneath the Falls. He fell in love with her, and they had Thunder Boy.*

*That would be a way to teach our young our lore, but it needs to be in the context, not just one moment set off by itself.*

He sighed at this. Finn was skilled enough to create such a game, but that required time and resources he didn't have. He bit his lip at this.

Just when he thought the ironworker setting would be safest he got a thumbs down. *This promotes unsafe work habits.*

All this "engagement" made him envy book publishers. They didn't get feedback from sensitivity readers in real time. It was good when he got a positive response. Yet it took great diplomacy to diffuse escalating objections before they became flame wars.

However, he knew non-native gamers were prone to trash talk. It sounded abusive to anyone outside of the gaming culture. Navigating the Digital Indian Country was no worse than that. He might as well quit his job if he wanted to avoid abrasive people and their debates online.

He moved to other feeds in the app and came across gofundmes for various charities. The posts from an internet-savvy local newspaper reminded him that the paper had a Patreon page.

*The Rez is familiar with online funding. They're not completely out of touch. Maybe I can interest them in crowdfunding an Indigenous-themed game?*

It was hard to tell what would be more popular. An Indigenous game with a contemporary or historical setting?

He made a bungee jump scenario for the ironworker job site and named it High Steel. Its objective was to walk a high beam safely with a bungee cord as a safety feature. He made a still of it and got likes.

He turned the High Steel and the Thunder Boy's Mother scenarios into separate apps. The one that got the most likes would be the one he completed.

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Aunt Edith commented on both his VR apps posts with a link to a government arts grant link both scenarios. *They both teach our history. I figure they should both qualify for Indigenous arts grants.*

It was just as well he was in the habit of humouring his aunt. He scanned the guidelines as a means to leave an intelligent response to her suggestion.

The only arts eligible for grants were the traditional ones. Storytelling, plays, and writing. Stationary pieces could use multimedia. He didn't think he was eligible for the grants and said so to his aunt.

*Our young are more likely to learn the culture in interactive games rather than in print or from an elder. It should be eligible.*

*Campaigning to make it so would take too long for my checkbook. It'd have to be a long-term goal.*

\*\*\*

Facebook tracked the results even if his people objected to polls. He groaned to see the likes were dead even.

*Maybe I can televise a peach pit toss to choose which one to use? Would they consider that an exploitation of our traditions? Then again, he knew wagers were made on items between contestants at the longhouses, so it didn't seem too bad to stretch the game to accommodate his selection process....*

A comment was added to the High Steel challenge, and a ping alerted him to it since he was logged in. *A more elaborate sim of this app would work as the VR training tool the Union has mandated.*

*I thought they were more hands on.*

*The Union wants to add a VR training component. They want to use it before apprentices go up on high steel as part of safety training.*

Finn bit his lip. *Wouldn't the app need to be certified? I couldn't just offer it out of the box and hope they'd buy it.*

He wouldn't mind helping his people, but he still needed to make a living.

*The union takes proposals from curriculum writers. No one has offered anything that's interactive so far.*

*I could code the sim but I'd need a curriculum writer to write the lessons in the game. I take for granted that's the way it works for educational software. You can't just hire a regular media writer. You need someone experienced in curriculum writing.*

*Then let me put your name forward when the curriculum writer is decided on?*

Finn nodded. He saw this as a way to politely decline the work. It'd be one thing if it was a legitimate lead. However, he thought it was yet another attempt to extort pro-bono work from him.

He'd use Thunder Boy's Mother and the High Steel challenge to salvage his bungee jump app.

Not everyone left comments. Though the sight of this engagement on his Facebook page brought about more clicks in the VR apps. He wasn't a complete hack. Yet there were times he feigned more polite interest in community concerns and issues than he actually felt.

\*\*\*

He crafted proposals for gigs and checked on all his social media links. At least the ones he preferred, then it was time for an obligatory visit to Digital Indian Country again. It was easier to visit his relatives virtually than in-person on the Rez.

There was a message waiting for him. *I would like to collaborate in a curriculum proposal package. I looked over your High Steel app and it'd work well with my latest project. How can I make my course material interactive?*

Much to his relief they didn't expect him to work for free once he gave the proposal a quick overview. He ended up making more VR mobile apps as well as recruitment videos for Skilled Trades.

Post-secondary funding subsidized the full immersion sim users. They accessed the sim at the local training center.

They gave him regular contracts to keep the sim and apps up to code. The pay was good, so he took to looking for more gigs in Digital Indian Country.

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**PEMMI-CON 2023/NASFiC 15**  
**The 15<sup>th</sup> North American Science Fiction Convention**  
Alternative to Worldcon – 20-23 July 2023

**From the Chairs**

Thank you for entrusting us with the task of delivering a NASFiC to remember, the first hosted outside of the U.S. We are proud to welcome you to Canada's heart: Winnipeg. Science Fiction has always been a mosaic of styles and types: alternate history, mystery, future worlds, apocalyptic, fantastic, military... and Canada has always been a mosaic of peoples from many parts of the globe. Pemmi-Con hopes to show you the mosaic that is First Nations, Metis and Canadian Science Fiction. And, maybe, just maybe, we could do a programme on making pemmican: dried meat which would be traditionally bison but could be moose, caribou, deer and even beef, pounded and then mixed with an equal amount of melted fat, and various berries; how to keep your hunger at bay when on the hunt for new things.

— Robbie Bourget & Linda Ross-Mansfield, Co-Chairs

**Guests of Honour:** Dr. Philip J. Currie, Julie Czerneda, Waubgeshig Rice, Nisi Shawl, George Freeman, and Katherine Vermette.

**Toast Master:** Tanya Huff

**Fan Guest of Honour:** John Mansfield

**Ghost of Honour:** Lorna Toolis

**Also attending:** Susan Forest, Michèle Laframboise, Robert J. Sawyer, Den Valdron & many more.

Find it here: [Pemmi-Con – The 15th North American Science Fiction Convention, 20-23 July 2023](#)



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

### **Kari-Ann Anderson**

Kari-Ann Anderson was born and raised in Fort Frances, Ontario and now resides in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She started out as a wildlife artist but has always loved the fantasy genre and was heavily influenced by her love of comic books. She eventually made it over to the Fantasy genre but retains the ability to create in multiple genres.

Kari-Ann won the Ducks Unlimited Provincial Artist of the Year for Manitoba in 2005 for her piece titled *Family Excursion* and has been nominated for an Aurora Award in the Artistic Achievement category. She has also painted covers for books and other projects. If you would like to take a look at more of her work, please visit [www.kari-annanderson.com](http://www.kari-annanderson.com)

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### **Roxanne Barbour**

Roxanne has been reading science fiction since the age of eleven when she discovered *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars* by Ellen MacGregor. The years passed by while she had careers as a computer programmer, music teacher, insurance office administrator, and logistics coordinator for an international freight company. She took early retirement in June 2010. Six months later, she decided to put to use all the books on writing that she had accumulated over the years, and actually start writing. To date her books include: *An Alien Collective* (2014, Wee Creek Publishing), *Revolutions* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Sacred Trust* (2015, Whiskey Creek Press), *Kaiku* (2017, Self-published), *Alien Innkeeper* (2017, Wild Rose Press / Fantasy Rose), *An Alien Perspective* (2017, Self-published), *An Alien Confluence* (2019, Self-published).

She also writes speculative poetry, and has poems published in *Scifaikuest*, *Star\*Line*, *Polar Borealis*, and other magazines.

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

## **Rodolfo Boskovic**

Rodolfo is a Brazilian-Canadian writer who lived in Vancouver for fifteen years and just recently relocated to Toronto. He has three short stories published. When he is not writing, he spends his days reading comic books.

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## **Warren Brown**

Warren Brown is a dual Canadian/American citizen and currently lives and writes fiction and poetry in Tulsa, OK. He has published fiction in *OMNI*, *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *The Book of All Flesh* (with Lana Brown) and other venues, and poetry in *This Land*, *Nimrod*, *Dear Leader Tales*, *Speculative North*, *Smoke in the Stars*, *Abyss & Apex* etc. His novel, *What Happened in Fool the Eye*, is available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites. He is a member of SFWA and SFPA.

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## **Carolyn Clink**

Carolyn won the 2022 Aurora Award for Best Poem/Song for “Cat People Café” which appeared in *Polar Starlight*, Issue 3. She won the same award in 2011 for “The ABCs at the End of the World.” Her genre poetry publications include *Weird Tales*, *Analog*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*, *On Spec*, *Tesseract*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Room*, and all 5 volumes of *Northern Frights*.

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## **Robert Dawson**

Robert teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. In his spare time he writes, fences, and hikes. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *On Spec*, *Neo-Opis*, *Polar Borealis*, *Tesseract 20*, and numerous other periodicals and anthologies. He is a graduate of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops.

## **Catherine Girczyc**

Catherine currently works as a technical communications manager while pursuing creative writing at night. She spent about twenty years working in television in Canada before getting a corporate day job.

Her prose writing recently garnered a Finalist position in the Writers of the Future (WOTF) competition 2022 Quarter 1 (although not in the top 3). She also has two Canadian national awards, the Auroras, for SFF work. Since about 2015, she's been actively writing and submitting SFF poems and short stories. Her work has been published in small, primarily Canadian SF markets like *Polar Borealis*, *Neo-Opsis*, *The Vancouver Sci-Fi Magazine*, and *Tesseract*s. Previous notable items include 9 WOTF Honorable Mentions and 2 Silver Honorable Mentions between 2015 and 2022. She's a member of SFWA and the APEX Writers group.

She's still writing scripts, too. Winner of the WIFTV 2020 award for the pitch for *Lights, Camera, Paranormal Action*, she developed this into a feature as well as a pilot for a series (TV one-hour). She's a Writer's Guild of Canada member and has sold 15 television episodes. She's currently working on a few SFF scripts.

Contact via: Twitter: [@ Cat\\_WritesSFF](#)

Webpage: [Catherine Girczyc](#)

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## **J.R. Johnson**

J.R. Johnson is a social scientist, writer, maker, archer, and unlicensed librarian. She grew up in the folded Appalachian hills where she learned to love Fall, blueberries straight from the bush, and the stream beneath the willows near her house. The fact that Fall is inevitably followed by Winter, that picking berries meant crossing paths with bears, and that the stream was laced with dioxins may also have had some impact on her outlook. Her work has appeared in *Terraform*, *Nature*, and other publications. For more on her latest projects visit [jrjohnson.me](#).

## **Victoria K. Martin**

Victoria lives in the Ottawa region, alongside a small menagerie and way too many unread books. When not writing or reading, she usually hangs out with her Great Dane who, despite his size, thinks he is a lap dog. She also co-hosts *Needs More Words*, a podcast about writing and reading (because we're all stuck on something).

Victoria has sold several short stories in the past.

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## **Rhea E. Rose**

Rhea Rose writes and publishes short fiction and poetry. She was 2019's guest writer and presenter at Wordsmiths writers' retreat/workshop at University of BC's Carey Center, and featured writer in *Pulp Literature's* issue #35 summer 2022. As well, she was the featured poet in 2021 in *On Spec magazine's* autumn publication. She has been nominated for several awards.

[www.rheaerose.weebly.com](http://www.rheaerose.weebly.com)

[www.rheaerose.com/](http://www.rheaerose.com/)

Twitter: @rheaerose1.

She is editor of Polar Starlight Magazine for speculative poetry.

For sample issue, see: <https://polarborealis.ca> (Polar Starlight #8)

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## **Cathy Smith**

Cathy is an Indigenous writer who lives on an Indian Reservation in Canada. She has 31 publication credits. She has also won an honourable mention from the L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest and is a co-winner of the 2016 Imagining Indigenous Futurism Contest. You can follow her latest projects at:

Wordpress: [bit.ly/2e41qWT](http://bit.ly/2e41qWT)

Facebook: [bit.ly/2dP3rXd](https://bit.ly/2dP3rXd)

Twitter: @khiatons

Instagram: @cathy2891

Tumblr: [bit.ly/2G3dEjo](https://bit.ly/2G3dEjo)

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### **Jim Smith**

Jim is a retired trial lawyer and lifelong SF fanatic who had the good luck to meet Judy Merrill in 1981 and work, argue, laugh and be frustrated with her (and her archives) on and off from then till she passed in 1997. He expressed a lot of his mixed feelings about their friendship in his 2015 Toronto Fringe one-man show, *I Love You, Judy Merrill*.

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### **Richard Stevenson**

Richard is a retired college English and Creative Writing instructor. He taught for thirty years at Lethbridge College in southern Alberta and recently moved to Nanaimo, B.C. He has the usual pedigree: MFA in Creative Writing, thirty published books, and a CD. Forthcoming are a number of children's books: *Action Dachshund!*, *Cryptid Shindig* (a trilogy including the volumes *If a Dolphin had Digits*, *Nightcrawlers*, and *Radioactive Frogs*) and the stand-alone collections, *An Abominable Swamp Slob Named Bob* (Altered Reality), *Hairy Hullabaloo* (Starship Sloane), and—just out!—*Eye to Eye with My Octopi* (Cyberwit).

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### **Jacqueline Thorpe**

Jacqueline spent 33 years in the financial journalism trenches. Retired, and finally unleashed, she writes science fiction from Toronto. She also hikes, bikes and is servant to a cat who, she is sure, has been genetically modified to get into mischief five times a day. She is a member of the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Club, and recently completed her first novel.

## **Gerald L. Truscott**

Gerald spent 33 years as an editor and book publisher, all the while restraining his own creative impulses. Now he's setting his inner self free.

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## **Dean Wirth**

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

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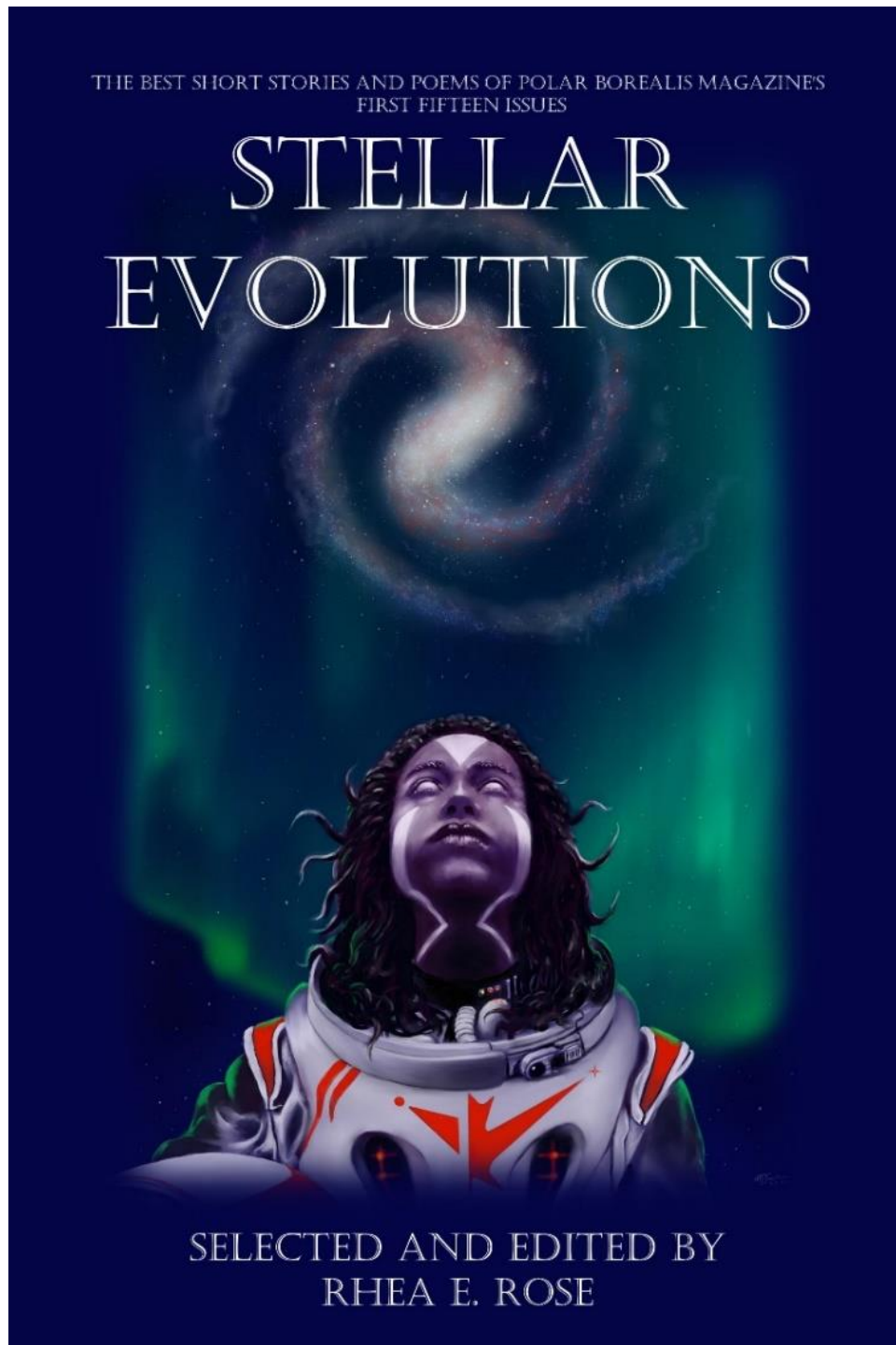
## **David Wiseman**

David Wiseman lived in the UK for most of his life but is now a resident of Nova Scotia. During his time in Canada he has, among other things, enjoyed running an art gallery and occasionally appearing as a background actor in movies. He writes long and short fiction, is an occasional blogger, and enjoys maps, photography, travel (especially on trains) and reading. He is also an accomplished genealogist.

David's novels, published by Askance in the UK, appear under his more formal DJ Wiseman name. His short stories have appeared online and in print in the USA, UK and Canada.

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



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