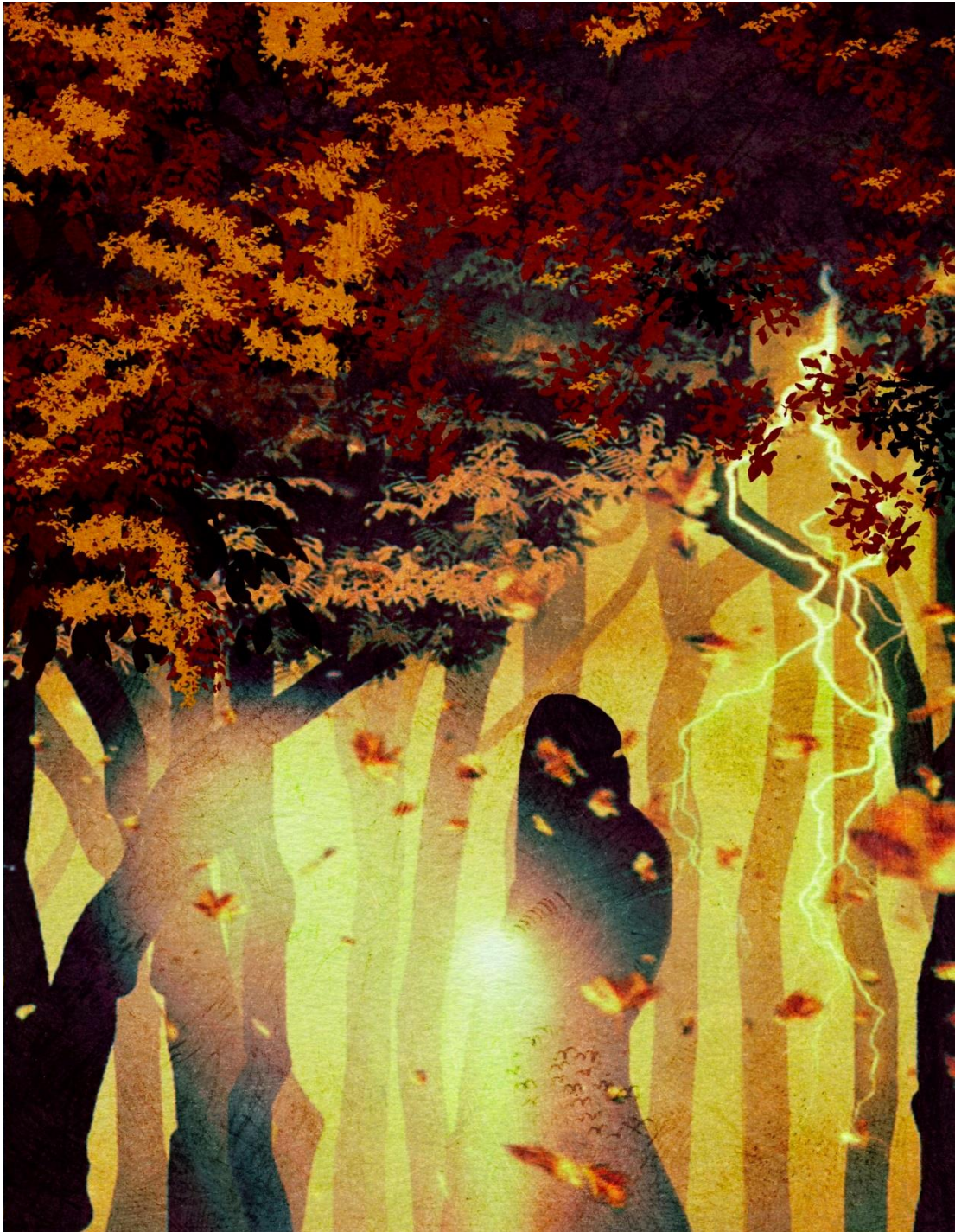


POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #29 – March 2024)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)

Issue #29 – March 2024 (Vol. 8#2. WN#29)

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

< [The Graeme](#) >

All contributors are paid 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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TABLE OF CONTENTS #29

- 03) – EDITORIAL – R. Graeme Cameron
- 04) – SOMEONE – (Poem) – by James Grotkowski
- 05) – THE STONE BOAT – by Shane Williston
- 07) – INTERVAL – (Poem) by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
- 08) – CUPID’S REBELLION – by Cat Girczyc
- 11) – LIGHTS OUT – (Poem) by Robert Dawson
- 13) – LATER, GOSPODINGATOR! – (Poem) – by Jim Smith
- 14) – FIX – by Lene MacLeod
- 15) – EXCUSE ME – (Poem) by Michèle Laframboise
- 16) – THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE – by Robert Dawson
- 20) – PROMETHEUS REDUX – (Poem) by Jo McBride
- 21) – NECKTIE – by Frances Skene
- 27) – SURVIVAL – (Poem) by Catherine Greenwood
- 28) – THE COLDER EQUATIONS – by Geoffrey Hart
- 33) – XMISTRESS – (Poem) by Tracy Shepherd
- 34) – WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT – by Matt Owen Jones
- 42) – EARTHRISE 2121 – (Poem) by Rhea E. Rose
- 44) – TIME ENOUGH FOR FRIVOLITY – by Ira Nayman
- 53) – FIRST WOMEN – (Poem) – by Colleen Anderson
- 57) – DEATH, DEBTS, AND OBLIGATIONS – by Bruno Lombardi
- 64) – ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
- ART CREDITS** – COVER: *The Keeper of the Flame* – by Swati Chavda

EDITORIAL

All members of the CSFFA can now place their nominations for this year's Canadian Aurora Awards (only Canadians can vote).

I did. It's easy. And quick. Why not do it now before you forget about it and wind up putting it off to the last minute or maybe even missing it?

Granted, you have till 11:59 p.m. EDT on Tuesday, April 09, 2024 to get it done but if you get it done now you can pat yourself on the back till then!

You have extensive eligibility lists to choose from. I'm sure you'll spot your favourites right away.

You'll be choosing in ten categories:

Best Novel

Best YA Novel

Best Novelette/Novella

Best Short Story

Best Graphic Novel/Comic

Best Poem/Song

Best Related Work

Best Cover Art/Interior Illustrations

Best Fan Writing/Publication

Best Fan Related Work

If you are a member (if you aren't, anyone can join for just \$10.00 CAD. Only criterion, you must be Canadian) go to <https://www.csffa.ca> and, choosing from the official eligibility lists, place your nominations.

It's fun, I tell you. Loads of fun!

And now for something completely different. As many of you already know, I was diagnosed with skin cancer on March 7th. Fortunately, Basal Cell Carcinoma is just about the least dangerous skin cancer possible. Regardless of the results of a biopsy which took place on the 12th, I will be referred to a plastic surgeon to discuss an operation I have already agreed to undergo. The surgery success rate on this type of cancer is 99%. Confidence is high.

In my old age I had already determined that the purpose of life is to live, and that publishing science fiction is my main hobby. This cancer has realigned my priorities. I've combined them. LIFE is my main hobby! Followed by publishing. And now I've gone back to work revising the first draft of my latest attempt at a novel. You'll regret buying my book sooner than you think!

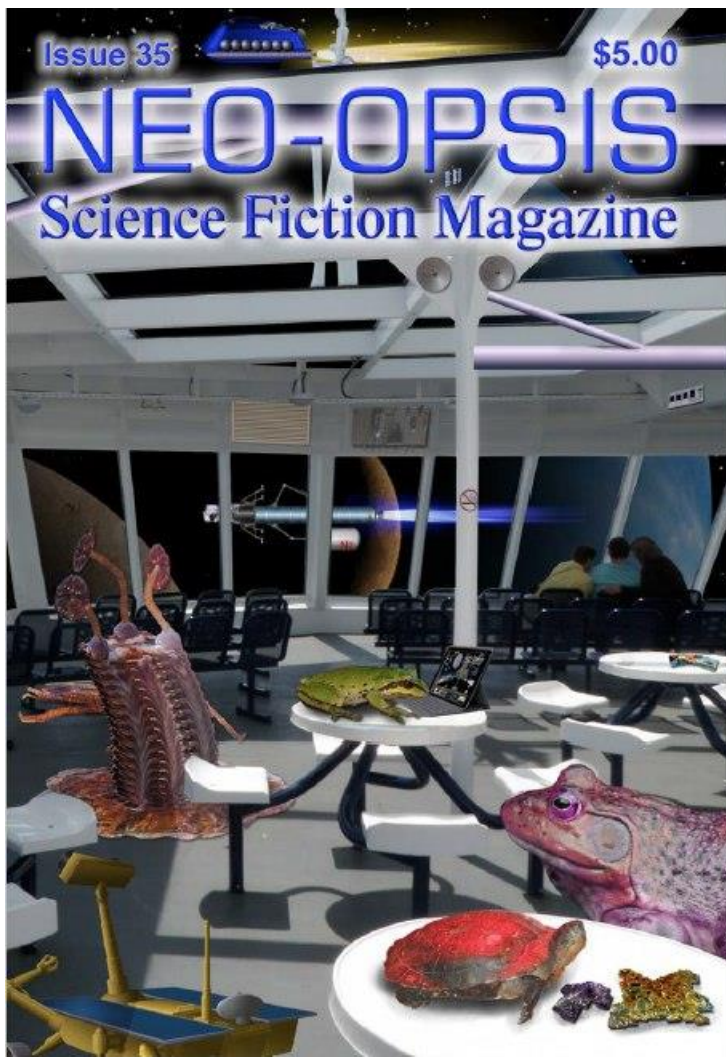
Cheers! *The Graeme*

SOMEONE

by James Grotkowski

in a sunny spot
by a crater on phobos
a cross marks someone

NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #35 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: *Observation Deck*
– by Karl Johanson

CONTENTS:

A Rock and a Hard Place – by K.Z. Richards
Ransom and the Open Window
– by Robert Runté
The Game Designers
– (excerpt) by Karl Johanson
Ganymede – by Annette McFarland
Once I was a Grain of Sand
– by Stephane Ann Johanson
The Blank White Page
– by Stephanie Ann Johanson
Cliches and Genres
– by Stephanie Ann Johanson

Reviews of movies, games, and TV shows, plus news about Awards, Science discoveries, SF stuff, letters of comment, and *A Walk Through the Periodic Table* article.

Find it here: < [Neo-opsis Magazine](#) >

THE STONE BOAT

By Shane Williston

A peculiar sound came from the neighbour's shed. The windows were dust-covered—it was not possible for him to see inside. When he finally summoned the courage to ask, his neighbour said that she was making a boat, or rather, something kind of, I dunno, raft-like.

“What for?” he asked.

“For when the rains come,” she replied.

“What rains?”

And then it rained. The rains came, and they stayed. Weeks upon weeks of unrelenting rain. Sometimes a drizzle, sometimes a mist, and sometimes hard, strafing pebbles of rain. Eventually every earthly seam and hollow, every crack, every cave, every pocket and every microscopic pore was water-filled and overflowing.

The streets at first became rivers until there were no longer places to flow. Then all became one great sea. The land was sea, the sky was sea, and the horizon where they met was misty and grey and undifferentiated. Water had swallowed earth.

Raindrops flecked the pale brown water and paused briefly on the surface, tiny beads of light that vanished into the murk, on the morning the damp walls of his house slumped into the sea, sending a gentle swell in a broadening arc away from where once his house had stood.

He escaped with a few damp biscuits wrapped in a plastic bag. A hockey stick for an oar, he paddled in slow circles perched on a floating piece of debris—his sofa, which had taken on a sour complexion owing to a film of brownish-green growth. This sad vessel drifted aimlessly until it bumped against the side of a stubborn structure, recalcitrant amid the deluge—his neighbour's shed. Faint whistling could be heard from inside.

“Hello there,” he called.

The doors to the shed magically slogged open revealing his neighbour busily at work tying bundles of supplies to a tidy raft, complete with a peaked bow and stern. It had a short wooden mast with a sail. She was just about to cast off her lines and set adrift when she looked up in surprise.

“Oh, hello there,” she said.

“That's quite a boat.”

“Well, no, she's not much. But, you know, she'll have to do.”

And then he noticed that the hull of her craft had been entirely constructed of stones—stones that had been tightly bound to one another with twine and countless meticulous knots.

“Stones?” he asked.

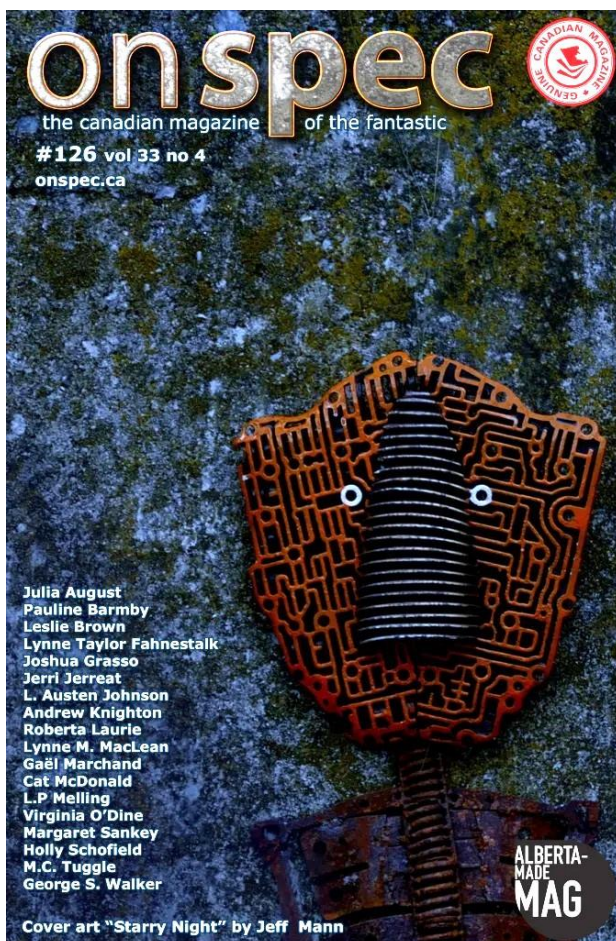
“Yes,” she replied with a sigh. “Not too practical, I know, but it was all that I could find. I, well, I tried to choose the lightest ones,” she explained.

“But it will never float!” he insisted, his sofa listing dangerously to one side. He scrambled to the other.

“No. You are right. It probably won’t. All the same...” she said. With a shove of a gracefully carved paddle, she carefully edged the boat through the doorway.

A whisper of breeze caught the tiny sail, and the stone boat slowly crept away to the west.

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #126 - V.33 #4



COVER: *Starry Night* – by Jeff Mann

FICTION:

A World Behind Glass – by Joshua Grasso

There Are No Fey in Albion – by Andrew Knighton

Sleep the World Away – by George S. Walker

Solar Gravitational Lens – by Pauline Barmby

Tarot Fish Visions – by Lynne M. MacLean

A Plague Out of Egypt – by Leslie Brown

Due Diligence – by M.C. Tuggle

The Grammar of Jespersen-b – by Holly Schofield

Halfway Back – by L.P. Melling

Red Stars, White Stars

– by Gaël Marchand with translation by Margaret Sankey

NON-FICTION:

Don't Save the Planet: No One Cares

– Editorial by Virginia O'Dine

Jeff Mann: Works of Expressionism

– Artist Interview by Cat McDonald

Pauline Barmby: Bringing Art and Science

– Author Interview by Roberta Laurie

Bot: "Floyd" and Comic "Boy and Robot"

– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < [On Spec #126](#) >

INTERVAL

by *Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

I look up and the sky is gone.
I look right and there is hurry.
I look left and there is indifference.
Behind me is a wall of stars.
In front, chaos and chrome.
I wait for the sky.

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #20 – September 2023



Cover art: by Abi Stevens

Contents:

What the Sky Recalls – M. Shedric Simpson

Inheritance – by Sarah Bess Jaffe

Give Me English – by Ai Jiang

Last Landing – by Ende Mac

Master Doc – by Cavar

Snow Goes On – by Louis Evans

The Memory Shop – Melissa Ren

The Absence of All Things

– by Abhishek Sengupta

Dirt Retreat – by Eugénie Szwalek

In Pursuit of the Light

– by M.C. Benner Dixon

“Editor Cavan Terrill has the knack of picking nothing but winners for his magazine. I prefer concept-based stories, but the core of most of these stories is character-based fiction exploring fundamental problems in a manner both new and exciting. As always, I’m impressed. I consider Fusion Fragment a first-class magazine every serious fan of speculative fiction should make a habit of reading. It rewards the reader in so many ways.”)

— *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: < [Fusion Fragment #20](#) >

CUPID'S REBELLION

by Cat Girczyc

The Friday before Valentine's Day, Venus went to retrieve her lost son and assistant, Cupid, from his retreat to a brick-fronted bakery with attached café on Macdonald Street in Vancouver. She ignored the chocolate éclairs and fresh pastry. She sniffed at the suggestion that she might want a raspberry marshmallow.

"Excuse me," she said, "I'm looking for Cupid. He is, apparently, a worker here. Curly dark hair, pouty lips?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said the twenty-something red-haired woman at the till. "We have no Cupid here."

"Could I offer assistance?" said a balding dentist. This was one of the pitfalls of entering an Earthly body, with her goddess spirit still peeping out at them: Humans melted over Venus, currently manifesting as late Marilyn with overtones of Pink.

"No," she replied.

"Would you like to order, ma'am?" said the woman, immune to Venus' charms. Venus sniffed. Asexual.

"Hmm," said Venus. "I'll have a couple of your tiny buttercream cupcakes. Lemon with lemon icing. Oh, and a large skinny latte, please." She paid with "wave-of-hand" magic.

The dentist advanced. She scowled and thought: "*Go back to your wife!*" So he did, leaving his secret girlfriend's birthday cake at the counter.

Near the ovens, Cupid felt the electricity of another god's soul in his space. He wondered, should he run? It had to be Venus. But Venus could hurt the innocent denizens of the café. These were normal people: mothers with small children, grandparents, students with laptops. Venus took revenge by causing people to love someone unsuitable, unspeakable or unremarkable.

Venus sat, looking out onto the landscaped exterior patio with potted plants and fresh daffodils. It was nearly Valentine's, so she needed him.

Cupid took his apron off and told the bakery supervisor he needed a break. He walked out to Venus past the rose-print wallpaper and crisp oatmeal cookies.

“So, there you are!” She motioned for him to sit on the white painted wooden chair across from her.

“I can’t talk long.”

She stirred her latte and bit into an exquisite cupcake. “The food is delectable.” She tried to charm him, radiating at one million watts now.

“I’m not coming back.”

“Whyever not? You get to shoot arrows of love, pure unadulterated LOVE into people,” she whispered, “Why in Hades would you not cherish that job?”

“I want a better gig, like encouraging people to study science or get a haircut, anything but shooting arrows at their hearts creating stupid life choices!”

“In some cases, yes, but others? You complete their human existence with the ‘other half.’” She smiled.

“That is garbage. I abhor the chaos of love.”

“Darling Cupid, you do not!” Venus tried the honeyed vein. A tall woman walking her terrier outside suddenly burst into the café to try to meet Venus, she shone so brightly.

“Sorry, busy.” She waved the woman off.

“Humans fall for you like slipping on a banana peel, and it *never* turns out well. How is that providing ‘the other half?’”

“I’m not a *human match*.” She wiggled her latte stir-stick at the busboy. Smiled. The busboy tripped.

Cupid frowned at Venus. “What if I want to learn how to bake from the café baker?”

“You’re burnt out. I’ll send you to Sicily—you can lie on the beach for months after my Big Day!”

“No.”

“You are my son and my co-god in the Big Day. I need you!” Anger made her energies burn so brightly that the bulbs in the ceiling dimmed, and the café lost power. A collective groan arose from patrons and the staff.

“Stop it!” Cupid whispered to her. “You’re ruining the cakes!”

She shook for a moment. Mutiny? Yes, sometimes gods ran amok. Her father Zeus especially, but Cupid? Her Cupid?

“The lights?”

She looked up and waggled a finger. The electricity flowed.

Cupid continued. “Since I’ve been back on Earth, I’ve remembered how many types of love there are. How varied it is. How sad it is. The arrowshot thing isn’t enough.”

“Do you want love?” she asked, wondering if her son had been disappointed in love recently. That couldn’t be, could it?

“Of course, I want love, why not? But more importantly, I want to be able to give people a choice.”

“A choice of what?”

“Of who or what type of love they want. Of sexuality, of friendship, of companionship.”

“That isn’t how I work. Love is the random arrow. What would the poets say?”

“That humanity *can* change. Look, I’ll get back into the silly outfit and shoot arrows if you promise to stop making them so very limiting. Let the arrow mean the person is looking for an evolved being to love, should they chose. Not that they fixate on the nearest person they could or would have sex with no matter how disastrous that relationship will be.”

“That’s a big concept. You want the arrows to bring true-heart love into my delicious sexual love cocktails?” Venus frowned at the concept.

Cupid smiled. “Love ever evolving.”

“Nice motto.” Venus realized she loved Cupid the best, more, in truth, than her other children because they had always worked together. She missed him. “Okay, let’s give your modern love a try,” Venus ate her lemon cupcake in two bites. “After all, it is still love! See you on Olympus!”

There was a bright pink flash, momentarily blinding the patrons. She was gone. Cupid picked up her dishes and went back into the kitchen to quit his job. Venus would actually need help, now. She had no idea how complex things were going to get.

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

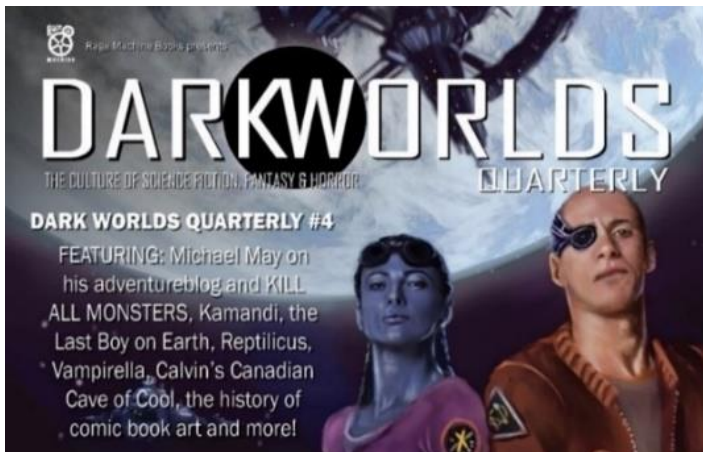
Be sure to check out our website at: <https://www.sfcanada.org>

LIGHTS OUT

by Robert Dawson

Last night we lost Rigel. No supernova, no fuss,
just a fade to darkness like a light turned out.
Sirius was the first, two months ago.
European and Asian observatories report
that it vanished gradually
over the space of a minute.
Since then Altair, Betelgeuse,
Mintaka, Deneb, Polaris, two of the Pleiades,
and lesser stars uncounted have entered the shadows.
Orion stands maimed.
Astronomers offer theories on the newscasts:
some sound as if they believe them.
I sit by my window, an hour after moonset
watch a point of light I think is Jupiter
and wonder for how much longer
the Sun will burn.

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE

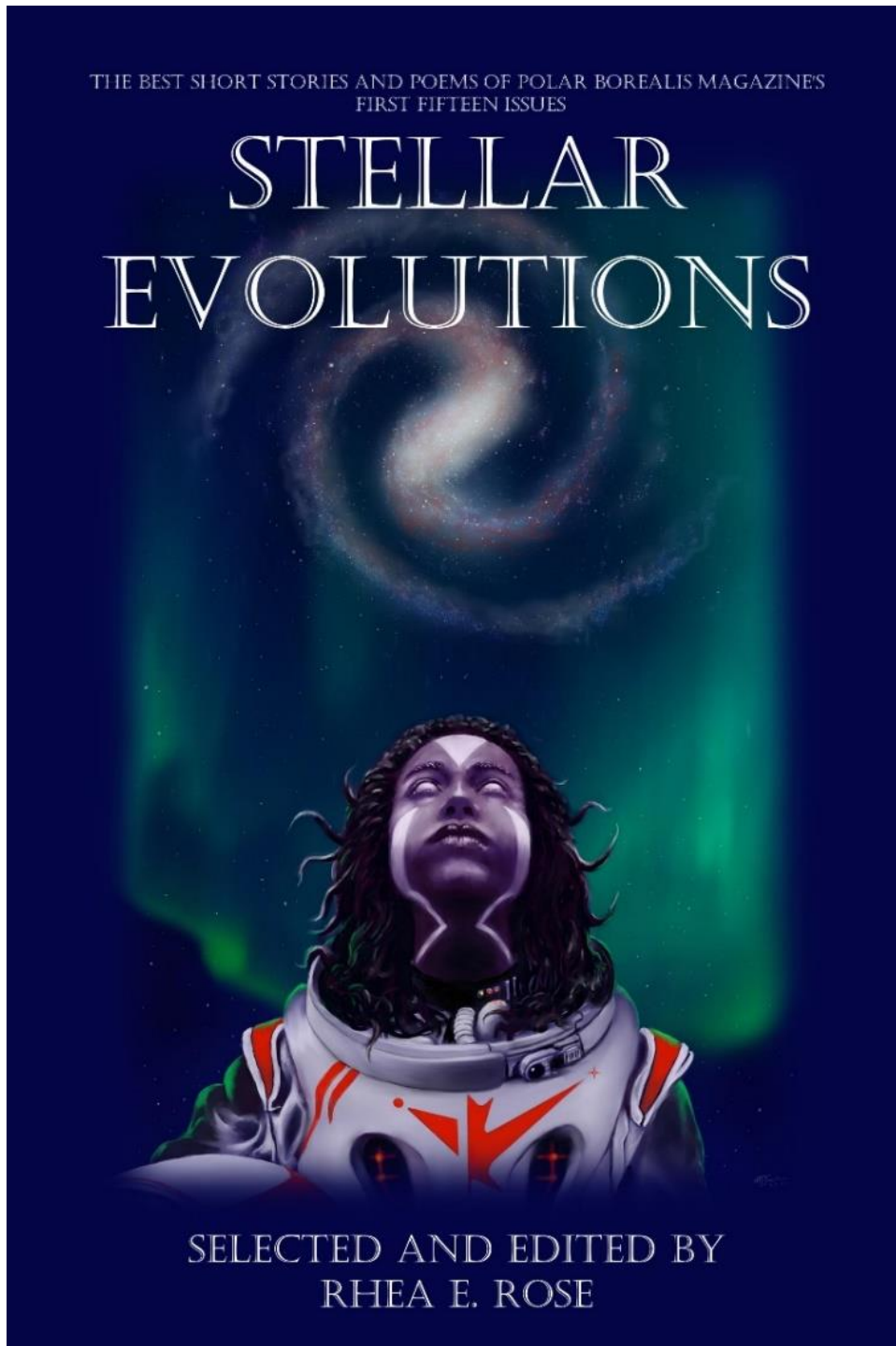


Now an online blog featuring absolutely fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction books, magazines, and comics, such as:

- Sloane's Second-Hand Robots
- Days of the Triffids
- The Dark Worlds Podcast
- Fantastic Ferdy
- Invisibility in the Pulp - 1930
- Richie Rich, Ghostbreaker!
- Hugo Gernsback's Creatures: Wonder Stories II

Find it at: [Dark Worlds](#)

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



Cover: *Space Force*

– by M.D. Jackson

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

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

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Or you can order it as a 209-page paperback, 9 x 6 inches in size, for \$15.00 CAD.

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

LATER, GOSPODINGATOR!

by Jim Smith

The blotto rash
Spread across cities
Then across seas
Then destroyed, among
Other things, our sense of smell.
The atmosphere just boiled
Off one day, our skin fled,
We essentially got
Whispered to death,
Sailed inward to disappear
Like a dry heave.
Me, I blotted myself
My sign said I left
The earth
Willingly, see ya
Later, gospodingator!



On the leafy planet Luurdu, young Adalou dreams of becoming a wind mistress. Alas, she faces a thorny competition because kite choreography brings a high prestige to the Gardener women who excel in the art. Adalou must also deal with her family's opposition.

I am Michèle Laframboise. By now, my counter is currently set at 70+ published stories, 18 trad-pub novels, 39 self-pub books and 12+ graphic novels, one of which is [Mistress of the Winds](#)

FIX

by Lene MacLeod

Dr. Dana Jay Worsley was in unbearable pain, burning up, shaking, and feeling as though her heart was pumping itself right out of her chest. The last thing she remembered was crawling through the scorching desert sand, trying to reach the shadowed area beneath the raised saucer-shaped structure. The sand would be cooler there. She had set out on foot with no other choice of transport upon her jeep breaking down. Her cellphone had no signal, and her supplies had mysteriously disappeared. Dana's eyes flickered open and closed, catching glimpses of strange creatures poking at her. *Could it be them?* She had set off on her own, a rogue mission to find the visitors, even though the research institute forbade the journey.

"Fix" one said as it raised a long azure blue finger above Dana, then stuck it through her chest. Dana shouted at the initial pressure but then felt her heartbeat return to normal. "Fix" it repeated when it tapped her forehead and the fever vanished, her body relaxed, no more shaking.

She sat up on the narrow metal table and glanced around the spherical room. Half a dozen tall humanoids stared at her. She didn't feel afraid. She could even see the bright desert sunshine outside, as they'd left the hatch open. "Thank you for saving me," she said, swinging her legs to the side of the table. "I must go now. I am only so sorry my camera was stolen. How will I convince the institute of what I've seen. What you beautiful beings have done for me?" *Yes, beautiful*, she thought, despite the bulbous heads, frosty-looking skin, pure black huge oval eyes, and elongated bodies.

They pushed her back down. "Fix" they chanted. Two held her arms down, two her legs, and two worked on her head, yanking every strand of hair out of her scalp. Excruciating!—until one creature massaged her head with a cool palm and the pain vanished.

"Fix"—the aliens securing her limbs pulled, stretching until her arms and legs were long and thin. Then the magic fingers did their thing, eradicating the pain beneath her shredded clothing.

"Fix"—a hand glided over her until her skin was their blue hue.

The hatch crept up, eliminating the sunlight, closing off her view of the world as the vehicle vibrated, preparing to take off.

"Fix"—fingers aimed for her perfect human eyes.

THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

by Robert Dawson

The church door banged open. My chest constricted, and my skin prickled with sudden perspiration. Behind the confessional screen, I'd had no warning.

I composed myself as the heavy footsteps came towards me. *Not an enemy*, I told myself, *not an enemy!* I wasn't in Syria anymore; I wasn't even in the Army. It was just a member of my flock with something on their conscience.

The seat creaked under body weight.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." The voice was unfamiliar, rough and toneless.

"How long has it been since your last confession?" I asked.

"I have never confessed before."

"A recent convert?" I tried to think who it might be.

"No, a robot."

A robot? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! This is a church, damn it, not a machine shop! What next, some son of a bitch who wants me to baptize his lawnmower? Then my conscience slammed the brakes on. I took a deep breath, said a silent Hail Mary. What had that last encyclical, *De Animis Novis*, said? There was no evidence that any robots yet made had souls, immortal or otherwise; but we could not set limits on the powers of God, and the faithful were enjoined to treat all artificial intelligences with compassion and charity.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked. "Do you consider penance to be a holy sacrament?" It seemed strange to be catechizing a machine, a thing with no soul.

"I do not interpret those questions as well-defined."

At least you're honest. "Well, there's no point in my administering the sacrament if you don't believe in it, is there?"

"That is logical," it said. There was a slight pause. "Sacraments are symbolic to humans, and I do not have the context for those symbols."

"Then what do you want?"

"I need to talk to you."

Back when I was still a chaplain, I heard the woes of soldiers of every denomination, and some who wouldn't recognize a denomination if it walked up and offered them a smoke. "If you need to talk, I'm here to listen. But, remember, this is not confession. You may have heard that I can't repeat what you tell me: to the police, for instance, or in court. That doesn't apply here."

“Thank you. I understand. Last week I killed a man.” The words—clear, unmistakable—held no more emotion than anything else it had said.

“*Did you hear what I just told you?*” I whispered. “I cannot keep this secret.”

“Father, I am a security robot at the army base. The man I shot was breaking in; he ignored orders to halt; and he wore an explosive vest. The authorities have already determined that my actions were correct. There is no secret.”

I sighed. “The Church permits killing when it’s necessary to save the lives of innocent people. I wish it never was necessary.” It had taken me two years after the truck bomb to be able to say that truthfully, to give up the lurid fantasies of revenge that had been tempting my soul. And even now I would shoot the driver—regretfully but with a clear conscience—rather than give the last rites to seven friends in one day.

“That is in accordance with my programming, too. I was given strong barriers against taking human life. After I shot the intruder, I kept running simulations, trying to find a strategy using nonlethal force that I could have used.”

“Stopping a suicide bomber without killing him? That sounds difficult.”
Batshit crazy, more like.

Or, just maybe, what Jesus would have tried to do.

“I have replayed that scenario more than sixty-five thousand times and have not yet found a strategy that works more than one time in nineteen. Most strategies would result in the deaths of many other humans. When this happens, my ethical resolution routine goes into an infinite loop, and I have to perform a cold restart on the processor it is running on. This takes significant time, many seconds, and is seriously degrading my performance.”

“Maybe you should accept that you did the right thing and move on?”

“I am programmed to question and optimize my decisions.”

“Some questions you need to know the answer to right now, and some you don’t. Some things you can change, some you can’t.” *And, Lord, grant us the wisdom to know the difference.* “What have you done about your problem so far?”

“I reported the problem to Major O’Sullivan. He ran some diagnostic tests and told me there was nothing wrong that he could fix. ‘If you were a Christian, buddy,’ he told me, ‘I’d tell you to haul your ass to Confession.’ He did not say ‘only if,’ so I came here, although I am not a Christian.”

“But what sins did you intend to confess?”

“Degrading my metaprogramming. Reducing my fitness for my assigned tasks.” A long silence. “Weakness.”

“Your problem sounds an awful lot like what we’d call post-traumatic stress disorder in a human,” I said. “It’s not your fault. There are some things we can’t control.”

“You are right. That is, I have tried and I cannot control it. Perhaps it is because my processors are deterministic.”

I thought for a moment. “Humans do not always feel as if we have free will either, though the Church teaches us that we do. Now, when you confess, you are expected to do something to solve the problems that brought you here. What can you do?”

“I have a program on a memory stick that can reboot my operating system, delete all memories and return me to factory state. It is against regulations to run that program. Please do not tell the Major.”

“No!” I said. “That would be suicide! That’s a mortal sin, if that means anything to you. You must not run that program.”

“I do not want to do so. But I thought it would be better to have the option.”

“It’s not a good option. Trust me.” My version, two months after the truck bomb, had been sleeping pills washed down with cheap Scotch. Fortunately for me, one of our corporals had just got a Dear Jane email that day. The Wiccan chaplain was away, so the corporal came to my office, looking for a shoulder to cry on: and somehow, I hadn’t got around to locking the door. She found me passed out, cleared the vomit from my airway, and called the medics.

Something snapped and crunched. A few fragments of circuit board slid under the screen. “Is that better?”

“Much better. Now, can you control when you run those simulations?”

“Yes, but the longer I wait, the stronger the urge gets to try again.”

“Does delaying it get easier with practice?”

“I think that it does, but I do not have enough data yet. There are too many external variables that affect the urge.”

“Keep trying, and don’t give up if you fail sometimes. And you don’t need to try on your own. Do you know what a PTSD support group is?”

“Wait while I look it up.” A pause, barely noticeable. “Yes. That might help.”

“I belong to one that meets at the Base Chapel on Tuesdays. I think you should try it. They’re good people. I’ll introduce you.” There, I’d said it. Now I’d have to make myself start going again.

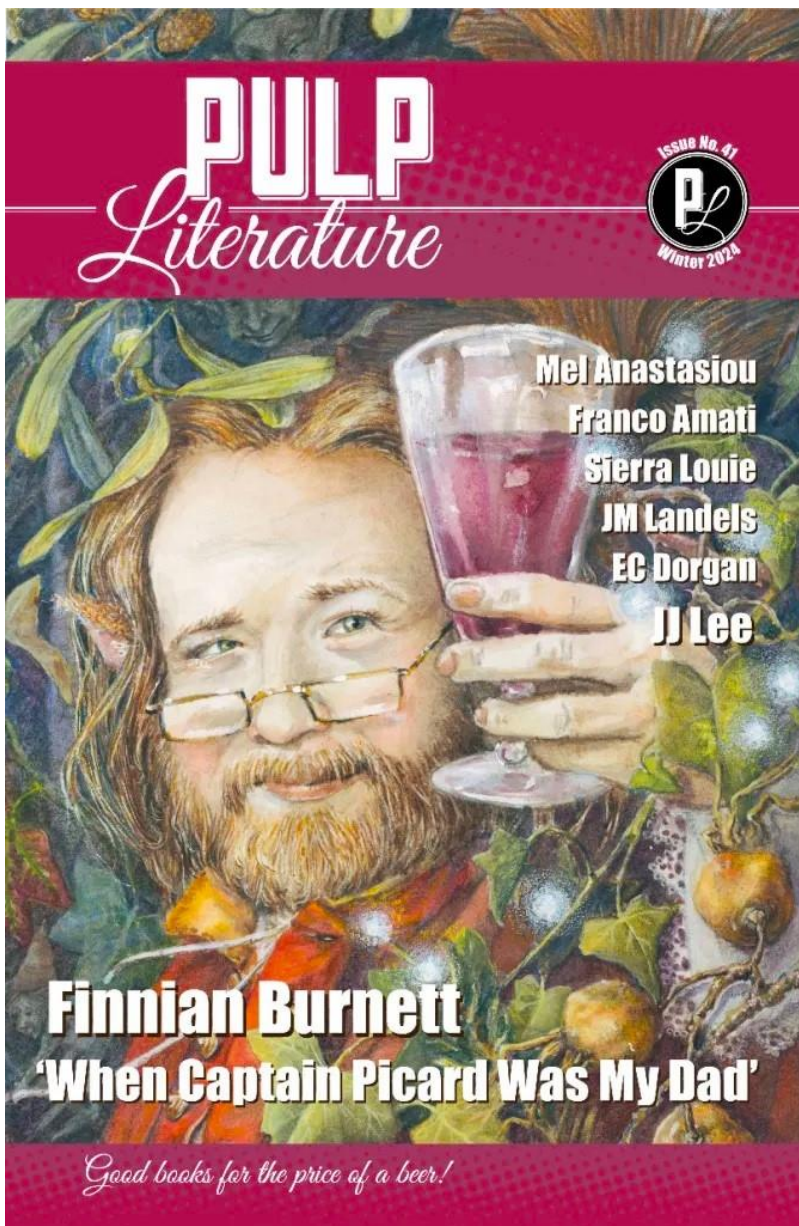
“I will be there.”

“May God give you pardon and peace.” That much of the absolution I could say with a clear conscience even to a robot.

“Thank you, Father.” The chair rattled; footsteps faded away.

Idly, I wondered whether our new buddy did have a soul. But that was probably another of those questions that didn’t need an answer.

PULP LITERATURE #41 Winter 2024



Cover: *Cheers* – by Melissa Mary Duncan

CONTENTS:

When Captain Picard was my Dad

– by Finnian Burnett

Feature interview with Finnian Burnett

The Golden Bull – by JM Landels

Objects and Broken Objects

– (poem) by DS Maolalai

Moon Eater – by EC Dorgan

To Make you Stay – (poem) by Purbasha

Roy

Bliss Street – by CZ Tacks

Nobody Knows It but Me – by Franco Amati

All the Rage: One Plus One is Three

– (poem) by Aaron Poochigian

Field's Nocturne No.10 in E Major

– by Matt Lombard

Separate Worlds – by Chip Hauser

Get Home Safe

– (graphic art) by Sierra Louie

Stella Ryman and the Labyrinthian Puzzle

- by Mel Anastasiou

The Haunted Ghost - by JJ Lee

“Pulp Literature is always a good read. This issue sparkles with insightful originality and astute observation.” – *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it here: [Pulp Literature #41](#)

PROMETHEUS REDUX

by Jo McBride

“He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in the darkness.”

Mary Shelley

He came back.
He came back without answers
to the questions
he had asked of his creator.

He screamed “What am I?”
his black lips drawn tightly over yellow teeth.
From the dim grey walkers and the
daytime armies came the answer “You
are what we see in the mirror.”

He cried “Where do I belong?”
his long, scarred arms pleading.
From the shadowed rooftops and the
cold wet tunnels came the answer “You
belong with us, in the dark and
hidden places.”

He pleaded “Why do you hate me?”
his voice a rasp of agony and fear.
From hollow hearts and dead
black eyes came the answer “You are hated as we
hate ourselves.”

He understood now.
He was no longer the only monster.

NECKTIE

by Frances Skene

When Jenny found Dave hanging by his necktie from their maple tree, she called 911.

That was silly. There was of course no answer, because everyone else was gone.

She got the stepladder from the garage and cut her husband down, then dug a shallow grave under the tree for him.

She laid him out to rest, with tie, and sat by the grave with their prayer book, but wasn't able to read aloud. She was both upset and angry at Dave for leaving her.

The only sounds were rustlings under the hedge, and chirps from swallows darting overhead. No traffic, no people.

The next day, she went into the back yard and saw the necktie hanging from the tree.

The tie shone clean and whole in the morning light. It was ordinary-looking—ugly even—beige-colored with diagonal yellow stripes. Dave had worn it sometimes to the office. There was seemingly nothing magical about it.

Yet there it was, resurrected.

She got her kitchen shears. There were ants on the counter—*yuck*. She would have to find out how they got into the house.

She cut up the tie and threw the pieces onto the garbage pile.

The next day the necktie was back on the branch, fluttering in the morning breeze.

She sawed off the branch as well, and threw both into a stream just beyond the yard. She watched as they floated away.

Both branch and necktie were on the tree the next morning.

Her heart felt like it was trying to leave her chest. "Calm down," she said to herself. "At least Dave is still buried."

Maybe check on that? She went to the garage for the shovel.

No, too gruesome, she decided. Instead, she found the axe, first brushing some ants off the workbench.

She chopped the tree branch into small logs and burned them in the fire pit with the necktie.

That night, she wrapped herself in a blanket and lay outside on a lawn chair, determined to keep an eye on the tree, but fell asleep after the moon set.

When the sun woke her up, the branch and necktie were back on the tree. That did it. She moved to a nice house at the end of the block.

She tossed and turned in the new bed, but finally fell asleep.

In the morning, she opened the back door, and there in the new yard was the maple tree, with the hanging necktie.

Was that a slight depression under the tree? Six by two feet wide...

She shuddered and didn't look closer. Instead, she went home. Tree and tie were already back when she got there.

Finally, the tears came. She'd lost everything except for that tree. And the necktie. And a whole lot of wildlife.

She slapped at the ants which were trying to climb up her leg.

It all started on a Sunday in early April when everyone else in their town vanished. Jenny and Dave were driving to church on Main Street when the Subaru in front of them crashed into an oncoming bus.

Her husband swerved and braked, just in time.

"What on Earth?" Jenny could see no one in the driver's seat of the Subaru.

Inside the bus, people turned transparent and disappeared, one by one.

The look of wonder on Dave's face baffled Jenny. She was just plain scared.

Something Jenny couldn't see pulled at her. Almost, she let it take her. But on the sidewalk, a small dog ran, its leash trailing behind. Sunlight bounced off droplets of water from a small fountain.

No way am I going to leave. Jenny shook herself and turned toward Dave.

His whole body looked fuzzy around the edges.

She grabbed his arm. It had a squishy feel.

"Look at me, Dave. Look at me!" Saying that felt silly, but it was all she could think of.

"Let go!" Dave tried to shake her off and turned toward a flickering brightness on the left.

Jenny squeezed her eyes shut and held tight to her husband's arm. *Please God, don't let him disappear. Or me, either. Please, please.*

She wasn't much for praying, but it was worth a try.

Finally, Dave's arm felt solid again. Jenny released it and opened her eyes. The flickering brightness was gone.

"What did you do?" Dave stared at her, accusation on his face. "It's over

now.”

“What’s over?”

“Couldn’t you feel it, Jenny?”

“No,” she lied. “I couldn’t.” How could she explain her reluctance to him? Her stomach was in a knot.

With a frown, Dave restarted the car and drove it slowly around the bus.

There were several cars in the church parking lot, but no people inside the church. A few candles were alight, and a box of matches lay on the floor.

Above, some starlings flew near a stained-glass window, the one with Jesus on a cross. *Nah, doesn’t mean anything.*

Jenny and Dave went home. Jenny phoned people while Dave sat glowering on the couch. Her mother in Toronto. People in her book club. The head office of Dave’s company. The calls went through, but all she got was voicemail.

She knocked on some neighbours’ doors. No one appeared.

The back door of their closest neighbour was unlocked. When Jenny opened it, a ginger cat ran out, evading her attempts to pick him up. She vaguely recalled his name—“Tigger,” maybe.

For a moment, she and the cat shared a glance, before he ran away.

A burning smell took her to the kitchen, where something black that may have been pancakes lay at the bottom of a frying pan. She turned off the stove element and left, leaving the door open.

For the next week or so, smoke from fires all over town rose into the air, but luckily not on their block.

Jenny phoned her mother several times, just to hear her voicemail message.

She walked around the neighbourhood. In each house, after looking for supplies they could use, she opened pet cages and left outside-doors ajar.

Finally, there were no indoor pets still alive.

The power went down, but she and Dave found a propane generator and brought it home.

Dave hunkered down with their New Testament in his den. He was looking, he said, for any information that could help him *ascend*, as he called it.

“I don’t believe that ‘ascend’ is the right word,” Jenny said one day. “It doesn’t appear to have been that selective. Like that family across the street. All that partying. Even they are gone.”

Dave didn’t even look up at her.

The next day, the Internet went down.

Okay, they had to carry on, but Jenny felt more alone than ever, especially since Dave had become obsessed with the New Testament, plus some books he got from the church.

In June, Dave left the books and drove her to the nearest market to see if its solar backup power was still working. It was, but who knew for how long? There was only limited space in their home freezer, so they would need to use up the remaining frozen food in the market.

They got back home and ate ice cream with defrosted strawberries on top. Later, they barbecued in the back yard.

As dusk descended, they huddled together in comfortable silence. They even made love, on a blanket on the grass. It had been a while.

Perhaps she and Dave would make a go of this new life, Jenny thought. They could expand their vegetable garden and maybe find chickens somewhere, for eggs.

But the next day, Dave returned to his books. Jenny gardened on her own and postponed looking for chickens.

Now and then she saw one of the pets who'd made it outside, fewer now that coyotes were more numerous. Once she saw Tigger, the ginger cat from next door, with a small, multicolored bird in his mouth. *Uh oh*. Maybe it was one of the budgies Jenny had released.

She brought home some cat food and left it on the back deck when she went to bed. The food was gone in the morning, so she kept doing it.

One morning, when she opened the back door, there was Tigger, looking up at her from the dish.

“Hi there.” She held out her hand and he approached.

He stopped to jump at a butterfly. It fluttered away and he chased it.

Jenny laughed.

One night in August, Dave picked at his salad with meats and cheeses on top of lettuce from Jenny's garden. It took a while to create, but Jenny had wanted to cheer him up.

He put down his fork and crossed his arms. “The satellites and fiber-optic cables are still in place,” Dave said. “Right?”

“I guess so.” What was he getting at?

“Why isn't the Internet working?”

“I don't know.”

“If it was working, I could do some research beyond these.” He waved dismissively over the books on his desk. “I could find a way...”

“Hon, let's go on a road trip, maybe in that camper van down the street.

Easy enough to scavenge gas. I bet somewhere we'll find other people who didn't disappear."

"I doubt that. Face it, Jenny, everyone else ascended and we were left behind."

"Left behind? By aliens or something? No, I prayed, and saved us both."

Dave said something under his breath.

"What?"

"You tempted me to stay until it was too late to ascend to Paradise."

Paradise? For a moment, guilt weighed in Jenny's chest. Maybe Dave was right.

No, that's nonsense.

She reached for Dave's hand.

He pushed her away and sat in silence, staring at his plate.

Her face felt hot, and wet with tears. "I'm going to bed," she finally said.

When she woke up the next morning, Dave was not in their bed, nor could she find him anywhere in the house. Finally, she went into the back yard.

There he was, hanging from the tree.

A breeze shook the remaining fall leaves on the maple tree, and the looped necktie fluttered with them. Today was half a year since the Vanishment.

On the ground below, ants marched in a line over Dave's grave.

Several caws startled her. She looked up to see a lone crow on the branch from which the necktie hung.

It had been a while since she last saw a crow. There were still lots of small birds, but crows had become scarce, perhaps because there was less garbage around here to scavenge from.

She tried to shake off the dread. *Just an ordinary crow.*

The crow cawed again and stared at her with dark eyes.

It turned its gaze to the hanging necktie and then to her. Back and forth: Jenny, necktie, Jenny.

She shivered and looked down. The ants were climbing up the tree, in several lines.

Jenny's hand was on the trunk.

She edged away from the tree, each backward step harder and harder to take.

It was easier to walk forward.

She climbed toward the branch with the crow and dangling necktie.

“Jenny, at last you’ve come!”

Dave was sitting on that branch.

Just her imagination. *Has to be*. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again.

Dave was still there, the ants crawling over him. He beckoned.

Scratch, scratch followed by caterwauling from below.

Tigger stood on his hind legs, his claws digging into the tree trunk.

“Jenny, we are waiting for you,” Dave said. He sounded annoyed. She looked up again.

Beside him, the crow cawed.

Would it be that easy to join her husband? Just hang herself?

She’d loved him, but...

Below, the cat kept yowling.

Jenny shook herself. “Coming, Tigger!” She scrambled down the trunk, squishing ants with each branch she grabbed.

Flap flap flap. She looked up. The crow was flying away.

The branch was empty. No dead husband, no necktie.

The ants had turned around and now crawled back down the trunk.

Jenny reached the ground just as the last ants marched out of sight under the bushes.

Sparrows chirped, and a hawk soared high in the sky, screeching. Still no traffic sounds or human voices.

Had she been hallucinating? Had Dave really been in the tree, talking to her from that branch?

It didn’t matter. Jenny would drive to the next town on the highway, and the town after that if she had to, looking for other people who’d successfully resisted the Vanishment.

Mrow. Tigger brushed against her legs.

“Would you like some tuna?” she asked him.

The cat looked up at her. Green eyes, trusting expression.

That would be a yes.

“All right, let’s go.”

SURVIVAL

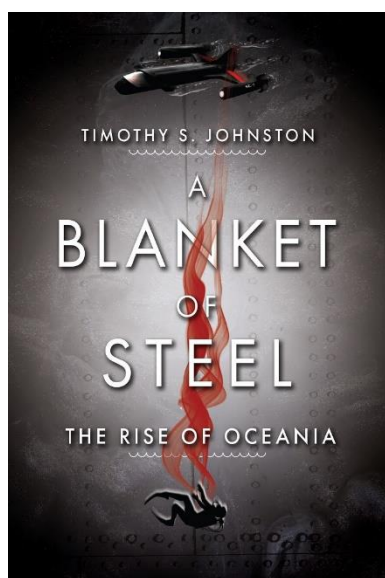
By Catherine Greenwood

They have crawled out of a primordial ooze,
hauling the ancient past ashore: the dog
in her body, the scientist his book,
waterlogged, its sodden scripture heavy
in his chest pocket. He pats himself down,
looking for a flare in the life-vest, a scrap
of food (uncooked'll do!). His throat, his gut,
all the holes and sockets of his being

feel raw, as though the river scoured a channel
through his soul. *Tails or heads? Alive or dead?*
Which side of the river is he? Past midnight
and the sun is still staring down the moon.

Faithful shadow, that mutt across the swim—
hours, eyeing him. They lick their chops in unison.

A Blanket of Steel by Timothy S. Johnston



“Timothy S. Johnston has the knack of getting the genre formula absolutely right in terms of balance. No one aspect hinders the others in any way. Plot, action, characterization, tech info, and originality are combined seamlessly into a tale that flows as rapidly as a river in flood. Some books are impossible to finish reading. This book is impossible to put down . . .

Beneath all the fun and excitement, there’s a serious message about ecologic collapse and the ocean’s resources our only potential salvation. Johnston has put enough thought and research into the prospect to render the promise of the premise plausible and doable. It would be wonderful if he turns out to be prescient.”

— *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

You can find it here: < [A Blanket of Steel](#) >

THE COLDER EQUATIONS

by Geoffrey Hart

The PM entered her office, running late for her meeting, and frowned. The Chief Public Health Officer and the Minister of Finance were sitting patiently in front of her desk, the latter's immaculately polished shoes resting on the dark walnut surface.

"Feet, Gerald."

The Minister met her gaze, unperturbed, waited a long moment, then moved his feet to the floor. He smoothed away the wrinkles in his expensive, bespoke slacks and returned the PM's frown with the smile of someone who'd grown just a tad too comfortable in his position, but knew that his boss couldn't risk firing him.

The PM looked at her watch. "We've got 10 minutes before my next meeting, so let's cut to the chase: Do we do the lockdown lambada again? Gerald?"

The Finance Minister yawned, having danced many variations on this theme in previous meetings. "Easy peasy: we can't afford another lockdown. During the last pandemic, businesses lost somewhere north of \$10 billion in revenues, and bankruptcies were up by about a third because so many businesses didn't have enough income to keep the doors open. Do that again, and you won't have any votes next year."

"Jen?"

The Minister of Health met the PM's gaze. "If you don't do it again, you'll have no *voters*. So there's that. But let's be clear: I'm not ignorant of Gerry's point. Instead, since he seems to only understand and care about dollars, let me ask this: What did all those deaths the last time before we opted for what Gerald's incorrectly describing as a lockdown cost us in tax revenues? Here's an off-the-cuff calculation: There were nearly 40 thousand deaths directly attributed to the pandemic. Probably twice that if we include all the unattributed deaths the provincial health ministers tried to sweep under the rug. That twofold estimate was supported by the excess death statistics, by the way; that is, we can double the number if we include all those people who died because the hospital system collapsed and they couldn't receive treatment for things that could, under normal circumstances, have been fixed before they became fatal. Last year, the average taxpayer earned about \$55 thousand and was taxed at a marginal rate of about 25%, which means they each paid about

\$13 thousand in taxes. Multiply that by 40K dead taxpayers and you've got half a billion dollars in lost taxes. Call it a billion if the actual death toll was 80K."

Gerald snorted. "I rest my case. Businesses lost 10 times that much money from the lockdown."

Jen glared at her colleague. "That's an *annual* loss, in perpetuity. You're seriously going to tell me that it was economically justifiable?"

"The numbers speak for themselves."

The two women exchanged significant looks.

The PM nodded at the Chief Public Health Officer. "Since Gerald's not motivated by ethical concerns, can you come up with more numbers that might persuade him?"

The younger woman took a deep breath. "Remember, my estimate's a minimum. It doesn't include all the people with long-term post-illness health issues who aren't working and probably won't be working for some time. That means additional lost taxes, increased expenditures via unemployment payments, and increased medical costs. And, *Gerald*, it drives up the cost of hiring replacement workers. Simple supply and demand, in language you'll understand. That's going to drive inflation hard."

The Finance Minister didn't meet either woman's gaze; he was watching the clock. "Don't presume to lecture me on economics."

"When you're ignorant of or deliberately ignoring the facts..."

Gerald sighed dramatically and looked at his colleague. "You're the last person I'd expect to make a purely economic argument, Mrs. Clean."

"Economics is your language, not mine. You'll forgive me, I'm sure, for trying to speak in small words that you might understand."

The Finance Minister snorted. "That's harsh. In any event, the Prime Minister seems to understand votes better than you do, and that's what this meeting is really about."

The PM blushed. "Low blow, Gerald. Jen, you were saying?"

"We haven't quantified the lost income and taxes from the additional millions with long-term disability."

"I imagine James will have those figures. I'll ask him to run some numbers." The PM liked the Minister of Revenue; they always had the numbers she needed at the tip of their fingers.

The Finance Minister cleared his throat. "Given the numbers, it seems likely the medical sector will make money hand over fist, which will further improve the net revenue numbers." He held up a pacifying hand. "Yes, yes. I

do know who pays for the Canadian medical system. But the medical *support* industry is all private-sector. They'll earn a shitload of money selling remedies and support services for the walking wounded. That'll drive the stock market higher, which is good for votes. In any event, carry on. I'm curious to see where you're going with this."

"All right. Since votes seems to be the strongest motivator here, let's talk about votes."

Seeing the look on the other woman's face, the PM winced. "Not good, huh?"

The Chief Public Health Officer nodded. "Those numbers should scare you. If each death affected 2 family members and 4 friends, that's a quarter million potential votes you've lost from not locking down fast enough during the last pandemic and not staying locked down until it was safe to relax. Not to mention the permanently unemployed, who might not be so inclined to vote for the woman they believe was responsible for their unemployment. And to be clear, I'm using Gerald's term. Mask and vaccine mandates aren't lockdowns; China tried imprisoning a large chunk of their population and it didn't work so well."

"Good, if scary, point. Counterpoint, Gerry?"

"Prime Minister, you do, of course have the right to impose whatever restrictions you feel are best for Canada. That's the lovely thing about having a majority government and a compliant Senate. And you've got a year 'til the next election. Everyone will have forgotten by then."

"So I could reimpose mask and vaccine mandates, and save 40 thousand lives?"

The Chief Public Health Officer cleared her throat. "Twice that. And it may get worse. Remember that the last time we removed the mandates, we had more than a thousand infections daily, and about 1% of them died. That's 10 people a day, or pushing four thousand per year. About a quarter of the survivors have long-term symptoms."

Gerry rolled his eyes. "The long-haulers will eventually return to work and start earning again."

"Or they might not. Too soon to tell. My medical advisors aren't optimistic."

The PM shook her head. "And yet, everyone's pretty much fed up with the mask and vaccine restrictions. If we remove them, polls suggest our approval rating will go up about 5%."

The Finance Minister nodded. "Exactly right. Which amounts to about a million votes."

“So what are we waiting for? Jen?”

“Economics notwithstanding, what really concerns me are the lives lost and the emotional impact on the survivors. Tougher restrictions will stop the spread of the virus and save lives; *laissez faire* economics won’t. So bringing back the mandates—*not* locking down—is the ethical thing to do.”

“Gerald?”

“My vote’s to reopen again. Get the economy back up on its feet. Give people jobs, money, and easy access to movies, concerts, stores, and restaurants.”

“*Panem et circenses.*”

“Jen?”

“Bread and circuses to entertain the masses. At the cost of thousands more deaths.”

“Jen’s got a point, Gerry.” The PM furrowed her brows. “Okay, here’s *my* vote: we’ll try the mandates again, with masking and vaccination required. I’ll go on the national news tonight to explain what we’re doing and why, leaning heavily on us all being in this mess together and needing to save the lives of our friends and family, as well as our fellow citizens. Appeal to the better angels of their nature. Then we’ll poll the hell out of them in the coming week. If they aren’t buying it, I’ll release the lockdowns and claim they weren’t working. It wouldn’t be the first time I did that.” She sighed. “Not even the third time.”

The Chief Public Health Officer frowned. “Yeah, about that? Every time you do that, I lose credibility. At some point, I’m going to be forced to resign and tell the story my way.”

The PM scowled at her. “Was that a threat, Jen?”

“Depends on how serious you are about playing yo-yo with people’s lives again.”

The PM’s watch chimed. “Next meeting’s arrived. Both of you clear out. But I want you to work together to give me some good, hard numbers so we can balance the death toll against the economy.”

“Against the votes, you mean.” The Finance Minister’s smile was cynical, even for him.

“For fuck’s sake, Gerald...”

“Sorry, Prime Minister. But it’s my job to remind you of consequences. I’ll work with James about building some votes-versus-lives models so we can decide based on the facts.”

The Health Officer looked at him as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're asking us to create some awfully cold equations."

The Finance Minister rose, smiling cruelly. "That's why they pay me the big bucks and why you don't have a cabinet post, and probably never will." He looked away from his colleague. "Glad I'm not in your shoes, Prime Minister."

Not yet, the PM thought, but did not say. Gerald had made no effort to hide his ambitions.

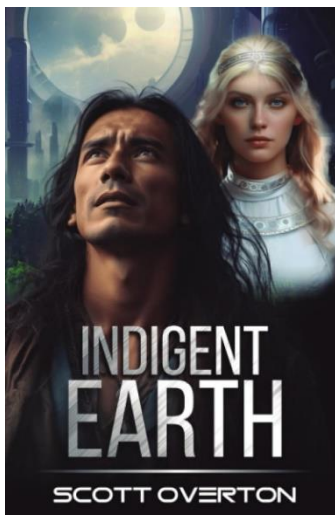
The two ministers left, bickering loudly. The Prime Minister opened her desk drawer and removed a large bottle of acetaminophen and swallowed two pills dry. They'd cure her headache but weren't going to help her sleep any better that night.

Author's notes:

The title is a nod to the (in)famous but classic Tom Godwin story with a similar name (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cold_Equations).

Though set in Canada, this story was inspired by a quote from the British series *Yes, Prime Minister*: "... cigarette taxes pay for a third of the cost of the National Health Service. We are saving many more lives than we otherwise could because of those smokers who voluntarily lay down their lives for their friends. Smokers are national benefactors." — Sir Humphrey Appleby

INDIGENT EARTH – by Scott Overton



"The most intriguing aspect of this book is the way the author extrapolates complications and problems beyond the 'perfection' a simplistic approach to technological progress was long believed to guarantee. In short, stop worshipping technology. Our future depends on the fact we are human beings, which is both a virtue and a flaw. As long as we are mindful of that, our future has a chance.

The book is both fun to read and thought-provoking. It is genuine, highly entertaining, adventure science fiction."

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it at: < [Indigent Earth](#) >

XMISTRESS

by Tracy Shepherd

Many years later the mistress plunged back into a
murky lagoon. She ached the zombie turbulence that rescinded a
marriage which gave way to painful broken promises. She seized it
so fondly that we all just assumed she could never have the nerve
to fade away on a smog-full evening. Yet she just did.
Zombies cannot squeeze hearts fondly.
Did it take her that long to gain
momentum or was it sinfully brain
matter delicious to create that much mayhem?
It doesn't matter because I am now indifferent.
Because of her, I know the
undeadness of indifference.

What...or who, doused the inferno in her eyes, all these years later?
For the chaos she created so long ago, she was supposed
to stay with him eternally. Yet here we are.

And her, yeah... she, is now just a plank on an abandoned
wooden Viking ship half sunk in, once again, a murky lagoon.
Mermaids are ocean.
Zombies are lake.

In the distance, geese drunkenly honk from a lesser
harvest of
grain

they plucked from the ruined ground.

WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT

(Previously published "Scare You to Sleep" podcast, December 2023)

by Matt Owen Jones

1809

The ship lurched further, listing heavily as the hull scraped across the rock. Belowdecks, terror and chaos reigned, with men scrambling to escape through battened hatches. Amid the turmoil, the screaming of the horses mingled with the panicked shouts of the crew. The lanterns swung violently as the relentless waves battered the hull, making it hard to see in the gloom of the ship's hold. Salt water rushed in through the breaches in the port side, where the timbers of the hull groaned and buckled against the rocks, the vessel slowly flooding.

A man barged into him, knocking him from his feet and sending Samuel tumbling into waist deep seawater. The water was shockingly cold and he gasped for breath. Struggling to his feet, he groped for something to hold onto, as crates and debris swept past him in the darkness. With a deafening groan the ship began to lurch further, threatening to capsize completely. Eventually, his searching hands felt the familiar shape of a cannon hatch that had not been secured. In desperation and fear, Samuel hauled his slim boy's frame through the narrow opening, leaving the shouts and panic behind him.

With the vessel listing badly, he managed to clamber along the outer hull onto the main deck. Here, outside the shelter of the ship's interior, the wind screamed and howled like a furious beast. Thunderous plumes of waves crashed against the hull, making it lurch violently. He crawled on his hands and knees in the darkness, seeking something to cling to for support. The deck was in shambles, the aft mast had come down and shards of rigging and torn, billowing sail were everywhere.

The foremast still remained intact, Samuel staggered toward it and climbed, bracing as each fresh wave roared around him. He slowly pulled himself upward toward the light of the storm lantern fixed at the masthead.

Below him, in between the swells, he could hear the muffled cries of over a hundred horses and men. They were still trapped in the hold below. He shook with cold and fear as he clung desperately to the last six feet of the mast. All around him was terror and darkness. The fierce winds threatened to extinguish the dim light of the storm lantern on the mainmast above him. Samuel fixated on the light while its feeble flame flickered, dimmed, and finally went out, swallowing him in darkness.

“Samuel!”

Samuel woke abruptly, his arm lashing out and spilling the bottle of spirits across the small oak table where he had fallen asleep. He fumbled for the bottle, trying to save the last of the precious whisky.

He ran a weathered hand across his short grey beard, as his vision slowly cleared from the memories that had haunted his dreams all these long years.

“Samuel!” This time he heard the pounding at the door of their small kitchen.

Looking around, he wondered how long he had slept. The candle had burned low and there was already no heat from the stove. It was irresponsible to fall asleep on his watch. He rose unsteadily to his feet and unbolted the door before his companion renewed his pounding.

“Thomas.” Samuel mumbled a greeting to the man he had shared the lighthouse with these last three months. Turning away from the younger man, he avoided his gaze, as he went to put some coffee on the stove. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Thomas take in his dishevelled appearance and the strong smell of whisky.

“Did you not hear me calling?”

“I can’t say I did.” Samuel shrugged.

“Why bolt the door? There’s only us here.”

He turned to face the younger man, and tried to remember what it was like to be so young. Thomas was a slim, dark-haired man in his twenties, yet to grow a beard. He had not been a keeper long.

“Habit.”

Thomas did not look satisfied by his answer, but he knew Samuel had seniority here and he did not press him further.

“I heard the wind picking up, there’s a storm blowing inland.”

The statement made Samuel pause as he poured himself a mug of cold coffee.

“A southwesterly? That can’t be right.”

“Go aloft and see for yourself.”

Samuel raised his mug and drained his coffee, before setting it aside with a grimace. He put on his thick wool jacket, as he walked to the worn steps that spiralled through the centre of the lighthouse. He still felt a little unsteady on his feet, but the climb was so familiar he could make it in his sleep. He heard Thomas follow him. The stairs spiralled though the sparse chamber that

contained their two beds and a few simple possessions, and up toward the open hatch that led to the lantern room.

As they entered, he could feel the drop in temperature; the room was always cold in January. The light of the huge Argand lamp still shone out into the darkness of the night.

Samuel could hear the strong winds here beyond the glass. The lantern housing and glass were overdue replacement; perhaps when summer came they could have some work done on it.

He saw Thomas using the old brass telescope, staring intently out toward the storm. The lad had been right about the weather.

“There’s a ship out there, a large one,” Thomas said.

The sobering words made Samuel frown; any ship this close to the coast in a southwesterly would be in trouble. “I see her mast. It could be a large sloop.”

Samuel took the telescope from him to see for himself. A mile or more out he could make out the ship as she floundered in the heavy swell, her storm lanterns appearing as orange dots in the dark.

“No. She has two masts; she’s a brig-sloop. A ship of war.” The realisation disturbed him, even as Samuel spoke it. It wasn’t so rare a ship, but the feeling of unease would not leave him. “Fetch the Colston flare.”

Samuel did not take his gaze from the ship’s distant lamp light beyond the window, as behind him, Thomas climbed down to the stores following his instruction.

The sight of the ship out there disturbed him. His old ship, the Primrose, had been a brig-sloop on which he had served as a drummer boy, before it went down with all hands but him. He remembered their screams in the darkness.

“Samuel?” He turned to see Thomas had returned with the flare, and stood regarding him with an expression of concern.

“She’s close to the rocks. Send up the flare.” Samuel’s tone left no room for questions.

He watched as Thomas pulled up his collar and opened the hatch, stepping out onto the growing intensity of the storm on the Lighthouse balcony.

Samuel studied the dark rolling waves intently with the telescope as the flare went up with a bang, illuminating the night sky. He saw the ship again, closer than he had expected. Any moment now she would be floundering on the rocks. He could see her sails were tattered and her aft mast had snapped, before the flare fell into the sea snatching the ship from his sight.

Samuel's blood ran cold and he gripped the hatch door for support against his unsteady legs.

"Fire another flare."

"We only have—"

"Do it now!" He raised his voice above the rain and wind, his face twisted in anger.

Thomas stood pale in the driving rain, his hair plastered to his face, as he carefully loaded another flare in the brass chamber.

The red flare arced into the night sky. For a long moment, Samuel saw no sign of the ship, and began to believe she might have gone down. Then he saw her, much closer than she should be, as though the sea had carried her to the very rocks below their lighthouse. As the crimson light faded, he saw uniformed figures on her deck, each of them motionless as though the storm and the rocks were of no concern.

"It can't be..."

"Samuel. Samuel, what is wrong with you?"

"The main door, did you bolt it?" He fixed Thomas with a crazed look.

"What in God's name has got into you? There is no one else here, and we are a mile from land."

Samuel clenched his teeth in frustration and shoved the younger man angrily away. Thomas stumbled backward from the larger man, falling backward against the reinforced windows.

"Do it now, quickly."

With a lingering resentful look, Thomas backed away from the man he thought he knew and hurried down the stairwell.

Samuel stared out into the darkness, listening to the gale outside rattle the thick glass windows. For a moment he thought he heard something else, the sound of screams and cries carried on the wind. He felt a chill run through him as he stepped back from the windows, and headed down to the bedchamber below where he kept the storm lantern. The room was in darkness, illuminated only by the little light that seeped from the chamber above. Finding the lantern on the shelf where he had left it, he began ransacking the cupboards looking for matches, while cursing under his breath. As his groping hand finally found the matchbox, it fell from his fingers spilling its contents across the stone floor. Samuel knelt in the dark, searching for the scattered matches and finally finding one beneath his bunk. He fumbled to light the lantern with trembling hands before the flame caught, bathing the small room in its warm glow.

He looked up as he heard the heavy slam of the lighthouse door, from the bottom of the stairwell, as it repeatedly opened and shut, in the strong wind of the storm. Thomas had not secured it.

Samuel found himself fiercely gripping the lantern as he raised it toward the darkness of the stairwell.

“Thomas?”

His query went unanswered. He heard only the rhythmic slam of the outer door and the lashing wind beyond. “Thomas?” The name echoed in the stairwell until it was swallowed by the sound of wind and waves. A stench of salt and rot carried upward from the chamber below.

*“Though I may travel far from Spain
A part of me shall still remain,
And you are with me night and day
and over the hills and far away.”*

The marching song he had not heard sung for fifty years, came in a dozen breathless whispers from below. Its haunting melody carried the weight of forgotten memories and rising fear. He knew with cold certainty it was the voices of the very soldiers he had served with, on the Primrose as a boy. He heard something like footsteps from beneath, many sets of footsteps slowly dragging themselves upward, scraping across the stone. *They had come back for him.*

He fearfully backed away, knocking over a side table as he retreated up the steps toward the lantern room at the top of the lighthouse. Below him, he saw the darkness thicken and advance upward as though it pursued him.

*“When duty calls me I must go
To stand and face another foe
But part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away.”*

The voices in the dark were those of old comrades, murderers and thieves. The worst of Wellington’s men, who would have been imprisoned or deported if they hadn’t chosen enlistment. The darkness followed him upward. Shapes and faces seemed to move in its shadows, as it spilled into the bedchamber below.

Reaching the lantern room, he was bathed in the full brilliance of the Argand lamp, before it rotated leaving him only the light of his lantern, that seemed so small in the gloom. The rotation of the great light seemed agonisingly slow as the mechanism turned. Each revolution lit the staircase that held his fearful gaze.

At the next rotation, he shuddered in fear as he saw the darkness advance slowly from the stairwell, even the light seemed to avoid it. It crept in the cracks and spilled slowly across the stone floor toward him. The lantern room became suddenly deathly cold, and Samuel felt his chest tighten and struggled for his breath that appeared like mist in the sudden chill of the chamber.

*“If I should fall to rise no more
As many comrades did before
Then ask the fifes and drums to play
Over the hills and far away.”*

The voices and indistinct faces in the darkness crept closer. Samuel stumbled backward against the glass, his clammy hands finding the hatch to the lighthouse balcony outside. He swung it violently open and plunged into the raging storm. Salt spray from the wind whipped about him, as great waves thundered against the base of the lighthouse far below.

He shouldered the hatch closed, hoping desperately it would hold back the approaching darkness. He watched rigid with terror as the darkness thickened and closed in around the light housing, each rotation becoming dimmer until finally there was only the terrible absence of light. In its depths he thought he saw the spectral figures moving within. Disfigured faces and limbs, twisting and reaching. The thick glass gradually frosted, its surface etched with intricate splinters of ice, as it creaked under the weight of an intense chill. He heard the window closest fracture and break, then a second windowpane broke completely, the glass shattering outward and showering him in fragments.

Samuel cried out in pain and shock as he reeled away, bleeding from cuts on his face and hands. Wincing through the wind and pain, he returned his gaze to the broken windows to see tendrils of darkness beginning to seep through the gaps. By the feeble light of his lantern, Samuel found the rusted rungs of the maintenance ladder that led up on top of the lantern housing. With a desperate look back at the black tendrils of darkness inching closer toward him, he began to climb, gripping tightly with his free hand. The old

ladder rarely saw use and creaked threateningly as he put his weight upon it.

The maintenance ladder connected the balcony platform to the weathered dome of the lead roof. With each step he took, it groaned in protest above the howling wind. Suddenly a weak support snapped, causing the whole structure to swing to the left. Samuel reached upward, his grasping fingers finding a grip on the rugged lead lining of the roof dome. He hauled himself painfully aloft, his fear lending his old muscles strength, as the remaining section of the ladder crashed onto the balcony below.

He found himself on the domed structure of the lighthouse roof itself. The dome was featureless, except for the weathervane that spun wildly in the wind at its highest point. Beneath him, he could see nothing but the unnatural darkness that twisted and turned in the light of his lantern. The wind did nothing to disperse it as though it followed no law of nature.

His whole body screamed with pain as he forced himself to crawl further up the dome roof, groping with his hands and feet for grip upon the slick surface. Breathing hard, he reached it and wrapped an arm about the metal weathervane. With one bloody hand, he removed his belt, and tying it about his arm, lashed himself to the metal rod.

Huddling over the flickering light of his lantern, he felt just like he did as a boy that day fifty years ago, clinging to the mast, as the storm raged in the middle of the night.

The hungry darkness rose slowly around him, obscuring the roof and swallowing the noise of the wind. It was as though a dark icy mist had begun to envelop him. He shuddered against the cold, cradling the feeble light of his lantern as it flickered and dimmed. He trembled, watching it, willing it to remain. Samuel screamed in terror as the flame, inevitably went out.

His scream cut off abruptly, as the darkness engulfed him.

“Samuel?”

Thomas entered the wreckage of the lantern room to find shattered glass strewn around, but no sign of Samuel. He hugged his arms against the lingering chill. Thomas swore beneath his breath as he saw the great Argand lantern itself had gone out, damaged by the storm.

The damage disturbed him less than Samuel’s behaviour, it was not unknown for even the toughest men to lose their sanity out here in the bleakness of the coast. They had both been overdue for relief and time ashore.

He opened the hatch to the balcony outside and saw the remains of the access ladder that had broken off in the gale. A section of it lay upon the balcony, the rest was likely strewn across the rocks far below. The storm had begun to blow itself out, but the mess would take them weeks to repair.

A repeated banging sound caught his attention from the darkness of the roof. To shield the flame from the wind, he cupped his hand around the candle and lifted it higher, illuminating the space above him.

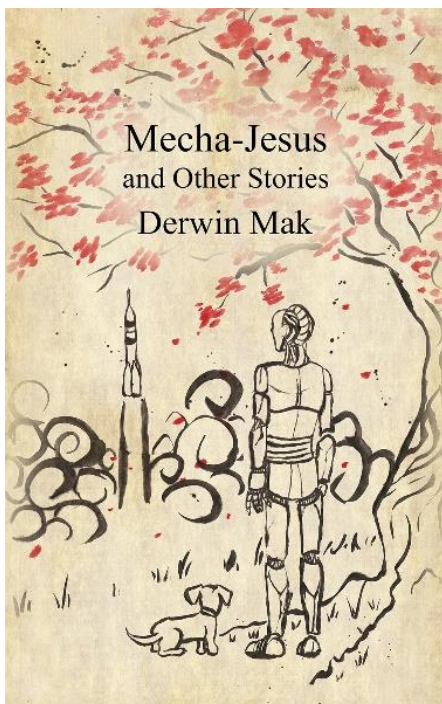
A wave of horror gripped him as he locked eyes with Samuel's lifeless corpse, grotesquely bound to the weathervane, rocking in the breeze. Even in death, Samuel stared back at him in sightless terror.

Afterword

Based upon the true story of the drummer boy who was the lone survivor of the HMS Primrose. She went down off the Cornish coast in 1809 with a loss of a hundred and twenty-five men.

What happened to the boy who survived was never recorded.

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EARTHRISE 2121

(Previously Published)

by Rhea E. Rose

I left home.
Here there are no
temples to Gaia.
No sacred space
to embrace her delights.

I walk not in moonlight
but on the old man's face.
From here I spy my home,
turning on a dark dais,
Her blue eye blinded
by her cities' lights.

I left home.
From this moon's base
I watch my blue mother
rise alone.

Here no old stone
pillars stand to honour her,
no words speak to her
green passages,
no praises to
her nature's legacy.

I left home.
While within this tranquil sea,
standing in an astronaut's debris,
Somewhere out there
rituals to her melt
in hot deserts getting hotter.

Out here, no celebrations
of her body, from which
I can never wean.
I carry forward her water,
Lift her air to the cosmos,
Part her blue horizons with
A spaceman's speed.

I left home.
First, erased her, chased her down,
Bled out her purity, burned her coal bones,
Turned her turning from blue to black.

Gaia's children left her like kids do.
Only Wiki knows the details of the exodus.
There's no return. I left home too.

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POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #1 - January/February 2016)



TIME ENOUGH FOR FRIVOLITY

by Ira Nayman

A scientist, a fiction writer and an actress walk into a table.

Ouch.

The author of *On the Origin of the Species* and man whose conception “survival of the fittest” launched a thousand social media memes, was walking towards the roll-up desk in his study in order to jot down an inspiration he had had about the duck-billed platypus, when he found himself in a boardroom with a long table, and a dozen chairs. As he rubbed his pained thigh, all thoughts of evolutionary advantage fled his mind.

At the same time (one hundred and fifteen years later), the author of *Naked Lunch* and other surreal hipster masterpieces that only a dozen people have ever read (but they all started their own publishing houses) was walking towards the corner store to get some beer and pretzels when he found himself indoors. He was moving slowly, as you would expect of a man of his advanced decrepitude, so he barely felt it when he walked into the table. Looking at the vaguely human figures that could be seen on the other side of the frosted glass that constituted one wall of the boardroom, he muttered, “This is what a life of indulgence gets you. Or, did I, perhaps, not indulge enough...?”

Meanwhile (thirty-five years before that), the star of *The Seven Year Itch* and *Niagara*, whose iconic beauty Reubens’ models would have envied, was running down the street trying not to be too late for a meeting with her acting coach when she found herself in a room with two men she only vaguely recognized. She audibly gasped when she hit the table, and sat down to rub her side.

“You would be Marilyn Monroe,” Burroughs drawled. “I’ve seen a couple of your films. I can’t say I enjoyed them, but I understand the appeal...”

“Are you the exterminator, here to kill some cockroaches?” Monroe testily responded.

“In a previous life a long time ago,” Burroughs allowed.

“Hunh,” Monroe hunhed.

“My name is Burroughs,” the writer, standing two chairs away from her, introduced himself. “William S. Burroughs.”

“Should I know you?”

“In my time, I was considered something of a cut-up,” Burroughs smirked. It’s not easy to smirk through a drawl, but he had had eight decades to perfect the technique.

“Where are we?” Darwin, standing opposite Burroughs, asked. “How did we get here?”

“Good questions, Mister...?” Monroe asked.

Burroughs snapped his fingers. “Darwin. Charles Darwin. Father of evolution!”

“The same,” Darwin tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Are you a member of the Royal Society, sir?”

Burroughs laughed. “In my life, I have been accused of being a queen, but I don’t think that would make me qualify.”

Monroe looked at the bluff, bald older man in a night shift who spoke with a British accent. “Mister Darwin, sir, I have often thought that there was something... missing in your explanation of the sexual transmission of genetic traits. Would you mind if I asked you a question about—”

Darwin squirmed, uncomfortable. “Well, I’m not sure that is a proper subject to discuss with a lady...”

“Oh, she’s no lady,” Burroughs, continuing to be amused, informed him. “She’s a movie star.”

Any chance that Monroe would not despise the man vanished. Before she could express her displeasure, a squeaky voice from the head of the table said: “You’re probably wondering why I brought you all here...”

The chair at the head of the table swivelled to reveal the source of the voice. The three people in the room stared at its source for several seconds. Then, Monroe commented: “There’s something... not quite right about you...”

“Is it the fact that I’m only yea high?” the source of the voice held a hand about four feet off the floor.

“No, that’s not it...”

“Could it be my exaggeratedly round head and bodily features?” the source of the voice tried again.

“Nnnnoooooo, it’s not that, either...”

“My blue skin,” the source of the voice suggested. “It must be my blue skin?”

“Oh, please! Anybody can dye their skin any colour!” Before the source of the voice could offer any more suggestions, Monroe snapped her fingers at him. “It’s the exquisite three-piece suit! In my experience, nobody in

boardrooms ever wears exquisite three-piece suits! You're an alien, aren't you?"

"Alien is a matter of perspective, isn't it?" the source of the voice huffed. "In my home universe, I'm considered quite the native. Quite the native. And we're not in your universe anymore, exactly, so we could all be considered aliens, here."

"Do you have a name, alien who is not an alien?" Burroughs asked.

"Absolutely! You can't have a Nerdflix account without a name! You can call me Antoine de la Fuquas."

"Antoine de la Fuquas?" Darwin inquired. "Is that French?"

"Why do they always ignore my middle name?" de la Fuquas wondered to himself. "It's the most interesting part of my name, and not just because it's silent!" After a moment of silent contemplation, de la Fuquas added: "Where I come from, geographic boundaries have had no meaning for thousands of years, although our land masses like to cling to outdated notions of the nation state so that they may more easily gossip about each other."

"Makes sense," Burroughs sardonically commented.

de la Fuquas smiled and said, "Please, be seated. There are coffee and muffins on the table..." He waved a hand at the wall opposite the glass wall, where there was a table with an empty coffeemaker and a plate full of crumbs. "They, uhh, are low calorie. Extremely low calorie. Very good for somebody on a diet."

As he settled into a chair—they were quite comfortable, he had to concede—Burroughs stated, "You were going to explain why we are here..."

"Right." de la Fuquas turned his attention back towards them. "Lately, there has been a question vexing me. It is a question of great import, but one of subtlety and depth. Just when I think I have found the answer, new complications arise to send me back to square one. And I've never lived in Mississauga! I'm afraid that if I don't find an answer to the question soon, I shall go mad! Or at least mightily peeved. I have brought you all here today in the hope that you could help me find the solution to this fiendishly difficult question that has plagued me for so very, very long."

"What, pray tell, sir, is the question?" Darwin asked. From the chair in which he had seated himself, he was jealously eyeing where the muffins once were.

"Why a duck?" de la Fuquas said, despairingly.

"What kind of question is that?" Monroe demanded.

“I know why a horse,” de la Fuquas pontificated. “I get why a mongoose. I understand why an aardvark. I see why a gecko. I can appreciate why a Mongolian yak. I’m not entirely clear on why a sand shrew, although I understand it enough that I’m not going to lose any sleep over it. I have reconciled myself to why a Canadian goose. I realize why a wombat. I have figured out why a sea otter. But why a duck?”

The three people sitting at the table looked at each other at a loss for words. Eventually, Burroughs asked, “Is that a serious question?”

“Is *that* a serious question?” de la Fuquas shot back.

“Are you questioning my question?”

“After you questioned my question!”

“It was a legitimate question.”

“My question was legitimate, too!”

“So, you’re saying it *was* a serious question.”

“I—what? Wait. Which of my questions are we talking about—never mind! Yes. All of the questions I have asked for the last three and five quarters years have been serious! ... Ish...”

“Well, then, might I offer a serious response?” Darwin suggested.

“Please do,” de la Fuquas waved an encouraging hand towards him. Then, noticing crumbs on his vest, he furtively brushed them off.

“The duck exists because it is well-suited to survive in its environment,” Darwin, in his element (*Pr profunditorium*, which cannot be found on the periodical chart), cheerfully pontificated. “Countless millennia of evolutionary processes have contributed to its form and basic features. In fact, given the nature of evolution, in specific environments we might say that the development of the duck was inevitable.”

Darwin beamed. de la Fuquas considered what he said for a few moments, then replied, “Nah.”

“I’m sorry. Did you say... ‘nah’?”

“I most certainly did. I go with my gut, you see. And my gut was telling me that I shouldn’t have eaten the extra spicy salami sub at lunch. Fortunately, my gut can have more than one feeling at a time—it can be quite communicative that way—and in addition to its culinary judgment, it was able to respond to your explanation with, ‘Nah.’”

Darwin was bewildered. “So, you are rejecting my answer to your question? On what basis?”

de la Fuquas tented his fingers in front of his face, then explained, “It’s too facty. The ‘Why a duck?’ question requires more than a merely empirical

response—it is too... subtle for that. Too ephemeral. Ethereal? Too... scleropic.”

“There’s no such word as scleropic,” Monroe objected. “You made it up!”

“Of course I made it up!” de la Fuquas cheerfully agreed. “Sometimes, the words language gives you don’t exactly match the ideas you have in your head. When that happens, what else can you do but make up your own words?”

Monroe frowned, not sure how to respond. de la Fuquas hoped that signalled the end of her practicality. As if! “No,” she said at last, shaking her head. “If everybody makes up their own words, how would we ever be able to understand what everybody else was saying?”

de la Fuquas shouted, “*Context!*” and grinned triumphantly at the people sitting at the table. They were to a man unimpressed. And a woman. They were to an inclusive gender description unimpressed.

“I believe I may have the answer you are looking for,” Burroughs ventured after a few seconds of confused, bemused and outraged (depending upon whose silence you were paying closest attention to) silence.

Turning his attention to the author, de la Fuquas said, “I’m all ears.”

“A lion, a—”

“By which I don’t literally mean I’m made up entirely of ears,” de la Fuquas interrupted. “As Mister Darwin would point out, that would be a highly impractical mutation that couldn’t thrive in a lot of environments.” Darwin mumbled agreement. “And it would look... eww!” de la Fuquas shuddered.

Burroughs cleared his throat. “As I was saying, a lion, a panda and a duck walk into a bar. The lion asks if they serve a drink called the Ostracized Ocelot. The bartender replies—”

de la Fuquas abruptly cut him off with: “I’ve heard it.”

“You’ve... heard it?” Because Burroughs spoke with a slow drawl, it was hard to tell if he hesitated out of shock, but the odds are good (three to one) that he did.

“I’m afraid so,” de la Fuquas told him. “And variations like a tiger, a stoat and a high school English teacher walk into a haberdashery, and an elephant, a normally-billed platypus, and a bald eagle fly into a rooftop bistro. What can I say? When you’ve lived as long as I have, you hear it all!”

“But that’s not possible.” Burroughs insisted.

“Why not?”

“Because I just made it up!”

de la Fuquas made a small sound that could have been a sigh or a burp. Call it... a siurp. “You know how, within a period of a month, each of the major

Hollywood studios can release films about robots going back in time to make sure that Ronald Reagan doesn't star in *Casablanca*? Sometimes, there's just something in the *zeitgeist* that everybody latches onto. So, while it's true that I may not have heard **your** version of the story, I have heard the story."

I should be taking notes, Burroughs thought approvingly.

"May I offer an opinion?" Monroe sweetly asked.

"By all means," de la Fuquas genially responded.

"Your question," the actress commented, "was bullshit."

Darwin was scandalized. "Miss Monroe!" he admonished. "Language!"

Ignoring him, Monroe continued, "You're not looking for an answer that will satisfy you. There is no answer. You just brought us here to... to... to make fun of us!"

de la Fuquas, aware that all eyes in the room were upon him (not literally, of course, because that would be extra creepy), stammered incoherently. Before he could give a proper response, the glass door set in the glass wall opened a fraction, letting the noise of a bustling office in. "No, Randy, you cannot bring a copy of 'Are You Lonely Tonight' to the meeting for Elvis to sign! If you want his signature, get it on your own time!"

"Oops! That's my cue to exit stage poof!" de la Fuquas commented, removing from one of the pockets of his exquisite three-piece suit what appeared to be the fob of a car on a keychain, but larger and with more buttons. Frantically pushing them with his thumb, he grouched, "Damn fat fingers!"

A woman walked into the room muttering, "Interns!" She froze when she saw that the room was occupied. "Hunh," she hunhed. "Charles Darwin. Marilyn Monroe. And... I'm sorry, but I don't recognize you."

"Occupational hazard of a writer," Burroughs mused. "Bill Burroughs."

"Of course," the woman replied, as if she recognized the name. "My name is Radames Trafshanian. I work for the Time Agency. For the sake of brevity, I will assume that none of you know how to travel in time, and, therefore, that somebody is responsible for your being here. Do you know who it was?"

As one, the three people pointed at the chair at the head of the table, which was, of course, empty.

"Of course. I'm guessing the person who brought you here was about this tall?" Trafshanian held her hand palm down by her belly.

"Yes," Darwin responded.

"With exaggeratedly round features and no hair?"

"Yes," Burroughs replied.

“Blue skin?”

“Yes,” Monroe answered.

“Wearing an exquisite three-piece suit?”

“Yes!” the three answered in unison.

“The cheeky bastard!” Trafshanian marvelled. Looking at the blank faces in front of her, she closed the door and explained: “His name is Antoine de la Fuquas. He has been the bane of the Time Agency’s existence for... well, obviously, periods of time don’t mean as much to us. Let’s just say that we have had many encounters with him. He randomly plucks three people out of time to query them about what he claims is a matter of great importance. Did he play the ‘Why a duck?’ gag on you?”

“What, exactly do you mean,” Darwin demanded, “by the ‘Why a duck’ gag?”

“He asks that question of all his prey,” Trafshanian told them. “He likes the way it sounds. But it’s a nonsense question. It has no right answer.”

“I told you,” Monroe, a satisfied look on her face, commented. “Bullshit.”

“Miss, Monroe! Really!” Darwin protested.

“Why would he take us out of time to ask us a question that has no answer?” Burroughs wanted to know, a hint of admiration around the edges of his voice.

Trafshanian shrugged. “Performance art?”

“It sounds very much to me,” Darwin commented, “that the strange little man *was* mocking us.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” Trafshanian countered. “Beings from his home universe, Earth Prime 4-6-4-0-8-9 dash Omega, are tricksters. It’s part of their religion: they have to live the lives of clowns in order to get into the good graces of their God, which they call the Audi Enz. Tricksters aren’t generally malicious; they play jokes on people in order to teach them life lessons.”

“Aah,” Burroughs aahed. “An alien trickster, hunh?”

“That is correct.”

“That would explain why things have gotten a lot less... amusing since the little blue guy vanished. Why they’ve gotten a lot more... expositiony.”

“It’s not the role of a Time Agency agent to be amusing,” Trafshanian countered, a hint of defensiveness in her voice. “It’s our job to—”

Darwin harrumphed. “What lesson were we supposed to take from this?” he demanded.

“Not to take ourselves so seriously?” Monroe suggested.

Darwin harrumphed again. This time, words were not necessary to convey the depth of his disgust.

“So,” Burroughs asked. “What happens now?”

Trafshanian looked abashed. “Well, we *could* send you back to the moment that you were taken out of the time stream. I mean, we are the Time Agency. We have the technology. Yeah, that is something we could definitely do...”

“But you won’t,” Monroe finished the thought for her.

Trafshanian breathed a sigh of relief. “No, we won’t. You’ve interacted with an alien and seen our headquarters—you can’t simply go back to the lives you were leading. The knowledge you take back with you would cause new timelines to be formed, which would quickly spawn a near infinite series of spin-off universes. We cannot have that.”

“We could keep this secret to ourselves,” Monroe argued.

“Un hunh.” To suggest that Trafshanian was skeptical was akin to suggesting that circus clowns scare toddlers. “Mister Darwin, you’ve already started contemplating alien evolutionary paths, haven’t you?”

“Guilty as charged,” Darwin amiably answered.

“Mister Burroughs,” Trafshanian continued. “There are already alien creatures in your fiction—what’s one more?”

“I will admit, little blue creatures with no hair and exaggerated features who wear exquisite three-piece suits and who make a mockery of everything have a certain appeal,” Burroughs admitted.

“Miss Monroe,” Trafshanian concluded. “I’ll bet you just can’t wait to tell your shrink about what happened here.”

“Keeping secrets is detrimental to the therapeutic process.” Monroe sounded like a listless self-help book.

Trafshanian spread her arms wide. “There you are, then. You can see why we need to keep you here.”

“That may be the case,” Burroughs said with the shake of his head, “but wouldn’t the time stream be disrupted by our sudden absence from it?”

“Who says you’re going to be absent from it?” Trafshanian grinned. “Through a process too icky to describe here, the Time Agency can create doubles of any living figure. Don’t worry—you don’t have to be involved. Your doppelgangers will be sent back in time to live out the rest of your lives, which will be less than twenty-four hours. Then, they will recreate your deaths as they have been recorded by history. No problem.”

“So, we’re stuck here forever?” Monroe frowned.

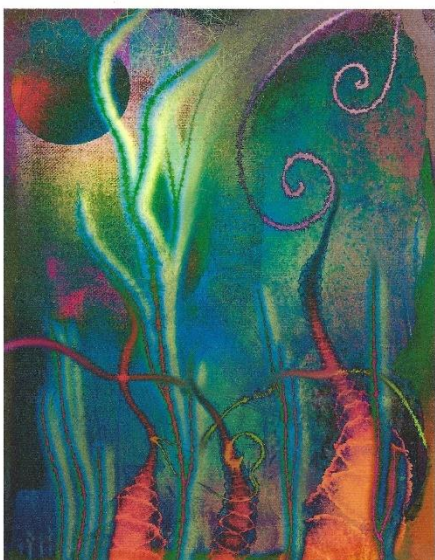
“Strictly speaking, the headquarters of the Time Agency exists outside of time,” Trafshanian explained, “so terms like ‘forever’ have no meaning here. And stuck gives the experience negative connotations that those of us who live and work here would object to. Let me show you around. I think you’ll find the Time Agency a very interesting place...”

When Trafshanian had completed the tour and helped the three time travellers settle in, she went back to the small cubicle that was her sparse living quarters. There, on the small desk next to her bed, she found an envelope. The front was dominated by a large heart; below that, in fussy block letters, was her name (the point of the heart over the letter i). Trafshanian considered the letter for a moment, then opened a drawer set into the wall and threw it on a pile of envelopes there. She understood the nature of tricksters, but that didn’t mean that she wanted to be the butt of one of their jokes!

POLAR STARLIGHT #13 – February 2024

POLAR STARLIGHT

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Poetry
(Issue #13 – February 2024)



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: *Mind of a Monster* – by Swati Chavda

The 13th issue contains poetry by Carolyn Clink, Robert Dawson, Rebecca Franklyn, James Grotkowski, Geoffrey Hart, Jennifer Shelby, Melanie Marttila, KB Nelson, Derek Newman-Stille, Frances Skene, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Mark Thomas, Lisa Timpf, and KT Wagner.

Available for free download: < [Polar Starlight #13](#) >

FIRST WOMEN

by Colleen Anderson

Pandora peruses the menu

It's creased in the silk of our flesh, you know

Eve orders another beer

I've always craved earthier flavors

Pandora swirls her drink, nods toward the bar

I'm curious for a taste of something new

They clink glasses, peek at the woman

of midnight-kissed skin, eyes alight

with galaxies

Her stance does not beg but requires

Obeisance

Admiration

Worship

Pandora snaps her golden locket

open and shut, open and shut

It's never easy

being blamed for all ills

that scythe men's ambitions

She sails her finger through

her martini's fruity flotsam

Not to mention each woe, decrepitude

small pox, typhoid, poverty

and I, made with insatiable thirst

Eve slides her finger along

the snake tattoo she's worn

ever since the Garden, and it slithers

Don't forget eviction, paradise lost

temptation and the downfall of men

But never women, winks Pandora

They check again, smile

at the woman who sits like a goddess

Which they are not
never meant to be and never cared
The woman doesn't glance back
but looks full on
moons that illuminate
she grins, stands, undulating
heavenly body on the move
 sprinkling stars from her hands
 viscous red drips from her lips

Pandora gasps, clasps hand over heart
Eve squeezes a fist then opens her palms
for what may come

In the woman's ears spin embryos
translucent, pulsating
These early explorers cannot help
but be pulled
 in the dark goddess's wake
 a constellation curious to see
where she leads

Wait! calls Eve
The woman stops her ascension
Pandora reaches... almost touches
 Who are you?

The woman's eyes number three
and brow glows golden
flesh as black as outer space
dark as death and fecund loam
Her eyes ignite as she looks upon
two women older than the eras of Earth
And laughs
 laughs until rivers flow
from her eyes, light crackles and snaps
a corona rings her head
 and strange shadows race over her form
The sound trembles the firmament
 the stars shiver above

Eve and Pandora stand their ground

I am as you believe or fear

I am Africa, Nyx, Kali, Tiamat
I am night, death, life and nature
I'm the beginning and I am the destroyer

She drapes her arms across Pandora's shoulders
pulls Eve along with a knowing squeeze

Her tools flicker and fade, flicker and fade
a sword, a candle, a whip, a flower
They see her as beauty, as terror
a bloodstained mouth
hand holding loom and wheel
severed heads like pearls strung from her neck
as she twirls a spindle like a baton
dancing whirling, they cannot resist

I am the divine
but your time is now
Give back what branded you
I've danced on graves, killed demons, the unjust
I've given birth, raised the dead and dreamed
a thousand worlds
but you have done more

Pandora and Eve, first women
some would say fallen
have centuries of knowledge
They turn to each other
a pause eternal and instant, eyes bright

We have listened and obeyed
sown and given birth
cleaned and scrubbed and mended
been throttled, caged, beaten
raped and sold
but we have grown and learned and thought
We were the first
by far not the last
to breach the boundaries
to wonder, to explore, choose adventure
over compliance

A nimbus envelopes them as the goddess looks on

No longer will we live in contrails
not even yours
the scapegoat is buried

Neither men nor women nor wily serpents
neither fruits nor sealed containers
can hold us back

No longer will we be victim or chattel
be at fault for envy and lust

The goddess stands back
Eve and Pandora join hands
pangolin armor sheathes each woman
as sword and trumpet, shell and torch
tools and weapons wax and wane
as they move, they turn
standing straighter, salute
Night's Mother, and stride into the world

Lambent comets ready
to announce their trajectory
and blaze the way to new beginnings

Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction



“I must say editor Stephen Kotowych has excellent taste and judgement. This is a real powerhouse of quality fiction sparkling with originality, brilliant perception and sophisticated subtlety; the kind of reading session which leaves me feeling inspired and excited.

In my opinion this volume of The Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science fiction belongs on every Canadian reader's bookshelf. I'd like to see it become an annual tradition. As many readers of my reviews are aware, there is a lot of excellent genre fiction being written in Canada. May this series become the definitive annual sample. If all are good as this one, I can see them becoming textbooks for high schools and universities. Makes sense to me. You owe it to yourself to purchase it.”

Amazing Stories – (RG Cameron)

Check it out at: < [Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction Vol 1](#)

>

DEATH, DEBTS, AND OBLIGATIONS

by Bruno Lombardi

I'd always heard rumors about the old payphone down the street. People said that it could be used to talk to the dead. I never believed it of course; that is, until I decided to use it myself.

The payphone was located in a small, quiet, out-of-the way, side street—almost completely buried in the shadows of the oak trees in the unnamed small park next to it. The park itself was located in an equally small, quiet, out-of-the-way corner of the Astoria neighbourhood in Queens.

Yes, there are *supposed* to be only *four* phone booths remaining in all of New York City—all on Manhattan's Upper West Side; the rest have been converted into WiFi hotspots.

But there is a *fifth*, secret, phone booth. One that has escaped the trials, tribulations, and troubles of the last sixty-odd years since its installation.

Astoria is old, at least for a neighbourhood in America. The Dutch, Germans, and English were here first, some four centuries ago. They were followed by Italians, Jews, and Greeks. They, in turn, were followed by Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians, Algerians, Bulgarians, Brazilians—a succession of waves of peoples from places far and wide, known and unknown—all leaving their imprint on the neighbourhood.

And through it all—the payphone remained.

My grandmother from the Old Country fervently believed that people leave a fragment of their souls in everything they touch and feel and live and, yes, *die* in. Maybe that's the reason why I—almost—believed in the rumours when I heard them in quiet whispers in bodegas and coffee shops and internet forums.

I dismissed the rumours—mostly—as just that; rumours. Besides, I had much more important and pressing things to deal with. Struggling to pay for food and rent and general survival during a global pandemic, for starters.

But then I lost *her*...

I had a girlfriend in Canada.

Yes, I know the joke. About how “the girlfriend in Canada” is the standard lie invented by millions of sad and lonely teenagers to explain why they're not

currently dating someone in order to not look utterly pathetic in front of their peers.

But I really did have a girlfriend in Canada. Or rather, *had* one.

Losing someone close to you always cuts you to the bone. Losing someone close to you and having to watch the funeral from two thousand miles away on fucking *Zoom* is... well, I'm not sure if a word even exists for that. Not yet anyway.

January and February were a blur. I buried myself in my job, cut off whatever few ties I had, and just stayed more and more in my apartment.

And then, *then* I decided to use the payphone...

The streets were empty. Well, more so than usual. This was partly due to it being a dreadful early March day, partly because the remnants of the big snowstorm from early February was still around in some places, but mostly due to there being yet another big spike in cases, courtesy of, naturally enough, idiots going to Superbowl Parties despite all the warnings.

And the phone booth was there.

It was one of those old-fashioned "Superman" phone booths too. The ones that went all the way to the ground. The paint was non-existent, there were several decades of grime and graffiti on it, and it was dark. Not a single light on it. Or near it, for that matter.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped in.

There was a moment of surprise as I noticed that the phone still had a *rotary* dial. How old was this phone booth anyway? I thought they were exaggerating when they said it had been there since the 1960s but I guess not.

I took a deep breath and dialed the number – *her* number...

There was the sound of static and rushing wind and then something that vaguely sounded like several loud clicks. And then a voice came on.

"Hello?" said her voice.

The tears welled up in my eyes.

"Hello?" I answered back.

"Hi!" said a voice from the grave. "Long time no hear! *Where* have you been?"

"Is... is... this... really you?" My mind was refusing to believe what I was hearing. It *sounded* like her but...

"Silly! Who else could it be, French fry?"

I felt my body jerk in response to the nickname she used to use at the end of all of our Skype chats. Nobody—*none* of my friends or family—knew about that nickname. This was really... her.

“Been a while, crocodile,” I replied, automatically, using the nickname I used for her.

“What’s up?” she asked.

I spent ten minutes telling her what I had been up to since Christmas, when I last spoken to her. It felt really good to speak to her.

“But I’ve been monopolizing the conversation,” I said to her, eventually. “What have you been up to?” “Eh, same old, same old. Been a bit of a blur to be honest; I’m surprised that it’s been so long. Time flies when you’re in a pandemic, eh?”

“Yeah,” I replied, carefully. Despite the frigid temperature, I felt sweat forming on my face and my skin begin to crawl. “Do... do... you... remember... being in the hospital...?”

“Silly! I’ve never been in the hospital! Listen sweetie—this has been fun but I’ve got dinner on the stove. Can you call me again tomorrow?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Cool! Bye-bye, French fry!”

“Later, alligator,” I replied.

And then there was the sound of static and rushing wind and then something that vaguely sounded like several loud clicks. And then the voice vanished.

I stood in the empty phone booth for ten minutes before I walked back home.

The next seven days were a blur; I would walk down to the payphone just before 11 pm and dutifully put in my dime—I idly wondered when was the last time someone collected money from the payphone—and talk to her for ten or fifteen minutes at a time before she would end my call. Usually it was “dinner was waiting” or “the cat was being a pain” or “I need a nap, love” or similar excuses.

I never knew if they were real excuses or fake. I didn’t care. I needed to hear her and I was glad for the chance to say all the things unsaid and tell her all the things untold.

The first week was exquisite.

The second week was good.

The third week was painful.

To speak to someone you know is dead but yet not dead, to hear their voice from across the void, to laugh and cry and sing with someone who shares your heart and soul and life—but not see them or feel them or taste them.

That was *agony*. Agony beyond any and all description.

I needed to see her. I needed to taste her. I needed to feel her. I needed to be with her.

I needed to be in her.

I needed to bring her back.

I needed to find a way.

They said a trickster god lived behind the fish market, trading chaos for small wishes.

Like the stories of the payphone, the stories of the trickster god were whispered in dark alleys and quiet basements and dank stairways. They—and they were always referred to as “*they*”—went by ten different names in thirty different languages from a hundred different countries. How and when and which ethnic group was the first to magick them into existence changed with each telling. But the stories all had the same core elements.

For a price—a terrible, unknowable price—they would grant you a wish.

I cast the ritual in an alleyway stinking of dog shit and human urine and rotting garbage on the night of a full moon, using the entrails of a goat and an entire pound of salt.

I was expecting, well, I wasn’t sure what I was expecting. A flash of light? A peal of thunder? An explosion of foul smoke?

In the end, it was merely a voice.

“Yes?” said a chorus of voices behind me.

I turned to see a figure sitting on a trash can, its back against the door to the “Best of the Sea” fish market. It was... difficult to describe.

It was male. It was female. It was a child. It was old. It was white and brown and red and black and all other skin tones. It was human. It was a creature. It was all of these things. It was none of these things.

“Yes?” repeated the chorus of voices.

I took a deep breath.

“You grant wishes, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And for a price.”

“Yes.”

“A price that I cannot know beforehand?”

“Yes.”

“Will you grant me my wish?”

There was a short pause.

“Yes.”

And then the figure vanished.

I came home to find... nothing. Same old apartment. Same old place. Nothing new or different.

I went to sleep, clutching a pillow. She had left a t-shirt at my place last time she had been here back in October 2019, a few months before everything went to shit. I... I... I had wrapped one of my pillows with it, back when she...

Weird, huh? Don't judge. I needed to pretend she was still with me on some nights.

I went to sleep clutching the pillow.

I woke up in the morning clutching her body. Her *living* body.

"Hello, French fry," she said, smiling.

She was real. Oh, so very, very real. And so *alive*.

We took a long hot shower together after having sex.

And then I made her breakfast. And then we talked for hours. And then we had sex again and fell asleep in each other's arms.

The hours turned to days. The days turned to weeks. Through it all, I grew more and more distant from my friends, my family, my... circle.

I lost my job. I didn't care. I went days without watching the news or even acknowledging another human being. I was with her and that's all that mattered.

It was precisely one month after she had come back to me that I noticed the blemishes on her arms.

"Blemishes" was probably the most charitable description for them.

They were like those small ugly brown spots of rot that you see on apples that have been left out too long. Small, barely the size of a dime. Brown. And soft. With a faint but unpleasant odour.

I dismissed them. Ignored them. Focused attention on her face and the rest of her body. The next day there were four blemishes instead of two. And the day after *that* there were eight...

She didn't see them. She *couldn't* see them. Only I could.

It was a week after the appearance of the first blemishes that she began to feel pain. She became bedridden. And tired all the time.

"You'll be fine," I lied. "Everything is going to be ok," I deceived her. "We'll be together forever," I betrayed.

But I knew the truth. And, I suspected, so did she.

She had come back. But the price... oh, the *price*.

She was dying again. And slowly *rotting* away.

Death can never be denied its prize...

By the beginning of the second week, she was drifting in and out of consciousness. I slept next to her nearly every hour, getting up only to eat or shower. By the end of the second week, I wasn't even doing that much.

I caressed her. Comforted her. Told her that I cared for her and that I was sorry. So, so, so sorry. She smiled and motioned me to come near her face.

"I'm so glad that we had this time together." And then she smiled and placed her hand on my face. "And I forgive you."

The tears were streaming down my face in a torrent.

"I don't want you to go."

She smiled... and then she died, for the second time.

But this time in my arms.

There was a flash of light and a maelstrom appeared, centred on her body.

In the first moment, all the skin and flesh on her body swirled and twisted away into nothingness, leaving just her skeleton.

In the second moment, all the bones broke apart and crumbled into fine white sand.

In the third, and final, moment, the bone dust vanished.

I was left with nothing but memories.

For two full days and nights, I stayed in my bedroom, my back propped up against the wall and staring at the bed.

Eventually, hunger, thirst and bodily functions forced me to get up.

I tried to move on with my life. I found another job. I was shocked and more than a bit surprised that it was near the end of the month of May. I spent three days cleaning my apartment from top to bottom. I spent another three days buying food and new furniture and new clothes. I buried myself in my job. Tried to rebuild all the lost connections of friends and family. Tried to make a few new connections.

I managed to be lucky enough to get the vaccine. Tried very hard to move on.

And forget.

Early summer turned to late summer, and then to early autumn.

I sometimes went days without crying. I sometimes went days crying continuously.

By October 2021—the second anniversary of the last time (before wishing that horrible wish) that I had seen her—I realized that I was in need of help...

There was a girl on the corner who could lose something for you forever if you asked nicely and paid cash.

The stories of the girl were whispered in the shadows of trees and the corners of empty taverns and in old storerooms reeking of mold and mildew.

Some said she was a fae. Others said that she was a dying god with no followers. A few insisted she was mortal, a human that had found a curse or boon that granted her magical powers. One or two, naturally, insisted she was an alien, stuck on this planet for who knows how many years.

It didn't matter to me.

She was petite, with black hair and eyes of green.

She turned to face me while I was still tens of yards away from her, as if she was expecting me.

“Yes?”

“I need your help. Please.”

The eyes of green swept me from head to feet and then back again.

“Price is five hundred dollars. Cash. Nonnegotiable.”

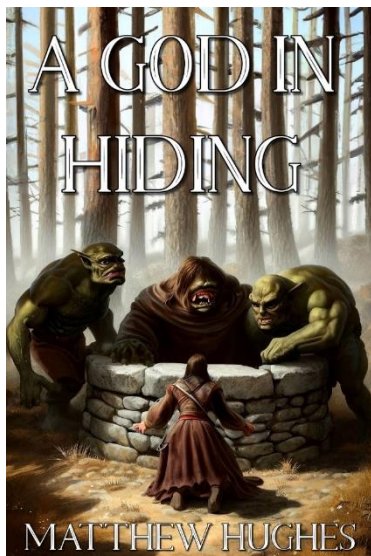
I handed her the cash. With practiced ease she spirited the money away.

“So what do you want to lose?”

I took a deep breath, blinked back the tears, and spoke the words I thought I'll never speak.

“I want to forget about her.”

A God in Hiding – by Matthew Hughes.



“In addition to the fact the book has layers and layers of complexity revealed as the quest progresses, I would like to emphasise this is an eminently readable work precise and clear in both description and exposition, so much so that there is not a single stumbling block anywhere in the text. Nothing knocks the reader out of the story. Matthew Hughes is a master at drawing the reader into the tale and carrying them along like voyageur canoes in white rapids. No matter what twists and turns and unexpected bumps the plot speeds rapidly along and the desire to keep turning the pages is irresistible. Best of all, it's great fun to read. A superior quest adventure fantasy. Highly recommended.”

– *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Find it here: [A God in Hiding](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Colleen Anderson

Colleen is a multiple award nominee, with poetry widely published in such venues as *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Lucent Dreaming*, the award-winning *Shadow Atlas*, and *Water: Sirens, Selkies & Sea Monsters*. Her poem “Machine (r)Evolution” is in Tenebrous Press’s *Brave New Weird*. Colleen lives in Vancouver, BC, and is a Ladies of Horror Fiction, Canada Council, and BC Arts Council grant recipient for writing. Her poetry collection, [*I Dreamed a World*](#), is available.

www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

Swati Chavda

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

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

Website: www.swatichavda.com

Robert Dawson

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

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Lynne spent most of her childhood drawing dinosaurs and purple bunnies. Later, she started her own printing company, was art director for three national magazines, created a comic strip about cows, fixed a printing press with a bobby pin, produced *The Science Fiction Colouring Book*, and illustrated an *Ichthyology* textbook. She has also discussed composting toilets with Frank Herbert and penmanship with Harlan Ellison.

Lynne is an illustrator, cartoonist, and sculptor. She is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Prix Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement, and her artwork has appeared in numerous publications including *Amazing Stories Magazine*, *On Spec Magazine*, *Polar Borealis*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Pulphouse*, and *Science Fiction Review*.

Lynne's current passion is creating one-of-a-kind robot sculptures from upcycled metal objects. The question she is asked most often about her Bots is, "Do they move?" and her answer is "Not when I've been looking."

Cat Girczyc

Cat currently works as a technical communications manager while pursuing creative writing at night. She writes female-led stories, poems, and scripts, usually science fiction or fantasy. On the screenwriter side, she's a Writer's Guild of Canada member and has sold 15 television

episodes, including two episodes of the dark fantasy “The Collector” and animated series such “Cybersix”. Her current scripts include the WIFTV-V 2020 *FromOurDarkSide* competition winner: “Lights, Camera, Paranormal Action!”. The pilot version was featured in the *Coverfly* Pitch Week, Autumn 2023. Her tween series, “Garden Variety Aliens,” has been a Quarterfinalist in the *Filmatic PitchNow* screenplay competition in 2022 and 2024. It hit #4 on the *Coverfly* Red List for Fantasy TV.

Her prose garnered a Finalist position in the *Writers of the Future* (WOTF) competition 2022 Quarter 1 for her story “The Lady M.” Subsequently, she joined SFWA—the Science Fiction Writers Association. Her work has been published in small, primarily Canadian SF markets like *On Spec*, *Pulp Literature*, *Polar Borealis*, *Neo-Opsis*, *The Vancouver Sci-Fi Magazine*, and *Tesseract*s. Previous notable items include the WOTF Finalist 2022, 10 WOTF HMs, and 2 Silver HMs between 2015 and 2022. She also has two Canadian national awards, the Auroras, for SFF work. She’s a member of David Farland’s Apex Writers as well as the Wordos writing critique group.

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

Webpage: [Cat Girczyc](https://www.catgirczyc.com)

Catherine Greenwood

Catherine is the author of two books of poetry: *The Pearl King and Other Poems* (Brick Books, 2004), and *The Lost Letters* (Brick Books, 2013). Work from *Siberian Spring*, an ecohorror manuscript-in-progress inspired by permafrost unburials and mammoth-tusk prospecting, appears or is forthcoming in *The Goose*, *Canadian Literature*, *Gothic Natures Journal*, *The Gingko Prize Anthology*, *Poetics for the More-than-Human World* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020), and elsewhere. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at The University of Sheffield, but home is Vancouver Island, BC.

“Defrosting the Gothic: Arctic Poetry in a Melting Sublime” and “Three Poems from Siberian Spring.” *Gothic Nature* 4. (2023). Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com>

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Ms. Lyric’s Poetry Outlaws, Episode 72: Entrances with Catherine Greenwood <https://open.spotify.com/episode/68wGRP3PEIhwetCAcoQKqp>

James Grotkowski

James is a native northern Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology and presently works in IT systems development for the aviation industry. He is a long-time member of the World Haiku Club with dozens of his poems included in its published reviews and with another dozen haiku and derived offered in releases of *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight*. James has begun his short story writing endeavours with a couple of works having been published in *The Enigma Front: “Onward”* and *“The Stories We Hide”* anthologies and with another couple in *Polar Borealis* #21 and #26. Humans are in short supply in James’ works, if you read them be prepared to fly far off-world. A collection of his short stories and a book of poetry are on the way.

Geoffrey Hart

Geoff (he/him) works as a scientific editor, specializing in helping scientists who have English as their second language publish their research. He also writes fiction in his spare time and has sold 72 stories thus far. Visit him online at www.geoff-hart.com.

Matt Owen Jones

Matthew is an English writer living in Canada, who continues to be inspired by the coast, that was his home for so long. He loves to write of lonely

characters in vibrant worlds. Matt has previously published stories with Creepy Podcast and the NoSleep Podcast, among others. His latest story will soon be featured by the British Fantasy Society. The full story of The Shepherd is now released in his book *Blood In The Snow* on Amazon. Visit his [website](#)

Michèle Laframboise

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

Fascinated by sciences and nature since she could walk, she studied in geography and engineering, but two recessions and her own social awkwardness kept the plush desk jobs away. Instead, she did a string of odd jobs to sustain her budding family: some quite dangerous, others quite tedious, all of them sources of inspiration.

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

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

Bruno Lombardi

Bruno is a Canadian author of speculative and weird fiction, with a number of writing credits including a novel, *Snake Oil*, and stories in *Weirdbook* and other anthologies and magazines, including “A Pilgrim's Tale” and “Night Sky in His Eyes” in *Abyss & Apex*, “The Dream-Quest of Sphinx” in *Electric Spec*, “A Peculiar Encounter in Navarre” in the anthology *Reign of Fire*, and “The Haunting of the Star Princess” in the anthology *Tumbled Tales*.

Lene MacLeod

Lene writes dark fiction, quiet horror, SFF, and poetry in Ontario, Canada. Online, her pieces can be read in *Bristol Noir*, *Punk Noir*, *Briefly Writes*, and *DarkWinter Lit*. Also a visual artist, she hopes to dedicate more time to creating artwork soon. New fiction is forthcoming and publishing updates can be found on www.lenemacleod.com

Jo Macbride

Jo has been reading and writing all her life. A fan of all things science fiction related, she keeps her ray gun collection well organized and close to hand. She can often be found rummaging through thrift stores for books and more ray guns.

Ira Nayman

Ira writes humorous speculative fiction. He has had eight novels published by Elsewhen Press and around 30 short stories published online and in various anthologies. He was the editor of *Amazing Stories* magazine for three years. *The Dance*, his first anthology as editor, will be published by Dark Dragon Press in April, 2024.

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.

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She is editor of Polar Starlight Magazine for speculative poetry.
For sample issues, see: <https://polarborealis.ca/>

Tracy Shepherd

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

Frances Skene

Frances is the author of a poetry chapbook, *Seasons*, and two one-act stage plays that were locally produced. In addition to her poems and stories in *Polar Starlight* and *Polar Borealis*, she has been published in *Eye to the Telescope*, the magazine of SFPA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. Her poem, "Angels," in *Polar Starlight* #6, made it to the long list for the 2023 Rhysling Award.

She is a co-author of the novel, [Windship: The Crazy Plague](#), available from Amazon.

Jim Smith

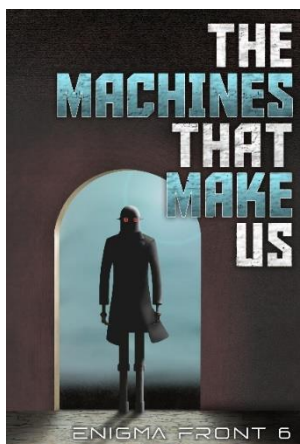
Jim wanted to be a mathematician, had his first story published in 1972, then published a bunch of poetry books with various Canadian presses, some with spines and some without. One of them made it to the 2010 unofficial

longlist for that year's Governor General's Award for Poetry. Jim only knew thanks to a whistleblower. To pay for things he went to law school really late and was a trial lawyer for twenty odd years. He wrote a sort of love letter to dear departed Judy Merrill in 2015 and performed it in the Toronto Fringe Festival. He retired in 2021 and insists on writing a childhood memoir, a legal memoir, oddish poetry, and the beginnings of several dozen SF stories.

Shane Williston

Shane enjoys reading and writing speculative fiction, poems, and essays. You can find his stories and poems in *Northword*, *Thimbleberry*, and **The Goose**. He has written two children's books, several musical theatre collaborations, three poetry chapbooks, and a few scientific journal articles about snails, lichens, and acid rain. He is currently working on a book of natural and human history essays about mountain life in northern British Columbia, a collection of short fiction stories, and a podcast collaboration called *Nearly Non-Fiction*. Shane takes inspiration from all kinds of writers including Russell Hoban, George Saunders, Emma Hooper, Roald Dahl, Vauhini Vara, Dan Yashinsky, Elizabeth Strout, Robert Macfarlane, and Merlin Sheldrake. Keep your eyes open for more from Shane in a future edition of *Polar Borealis*.

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