



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

Aurora Award-winning Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

Issue #32 – January 2025 (Vol.9#1. WN#32)

Publisher/Editor: R. Graeme Cameron

Proofreader: Steve Fahnstalk

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

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POLAR BOREALIS offers the following Payment Rates:

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

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

Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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/> >

ISSN 2369-9078 (Online)

Headings: **ENGRAVERS MT**

Bylines: *Monotype Corsiva*

Text: Bookman Old Style

Ad Text: Calibri

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ART CREDITS – COVER: 200th Anniversary R.C.A.F. – by Eric Chu

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the year 2025! We have so much to look forward to!

I don't refer to all the wars and political shenanigans that are ongoing. To dwell on those is to become morbid to the point of morbidity, and none of us need that. The purpose of life is to live, so I choose to concentrate, in the narrow confines of my own life, on the things which bring me joy.

I look forward to publishing four issues each of Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight magazines over the next eight months.

I look forward to publishing more reviews of Canadian books and magazines in the online version of Amazing Stories Magazine. I'm trying something new this year. Every second column will feature a review by a guest writer discussing a Canadian work they particularly enjoy. This will free up more time for me to work on my novel and widen the variety of works reviewed beyond my own tastes.

I look forward to completing the revision of my current novel attempt. With any luck, one way or another, it will be published this year. I first decided I wanted to become a published SF novelist 58 years ago. My current effort, if it gets published, will be my first published novel. Now you know why I identify with and encourage "beginning" writers who have yet to be published. I understand what it's like to pursue that goal for decade after decade. Number one on my bucket list for sure, as it is for many of you. Success to all!

I look forward to meeting you at the When Words Collide Writers Festival in Calgary in August. Be sure to introduce yourself, even if we've already met. At my age I'm increasingly clueless when it comes to names and faces. Plus I'm nearsighted and hard of hearing. But at least I'll be easy to spot. Just look for the balding scruffy guy, with a cane, wearing a different "Amazing Stories" cover art T-shirt each day. Be sure to walk up and clue me into the context of our relationship so I know who you are. I'll be happy to converse.

May you look forward to the fruits of your own creativity!

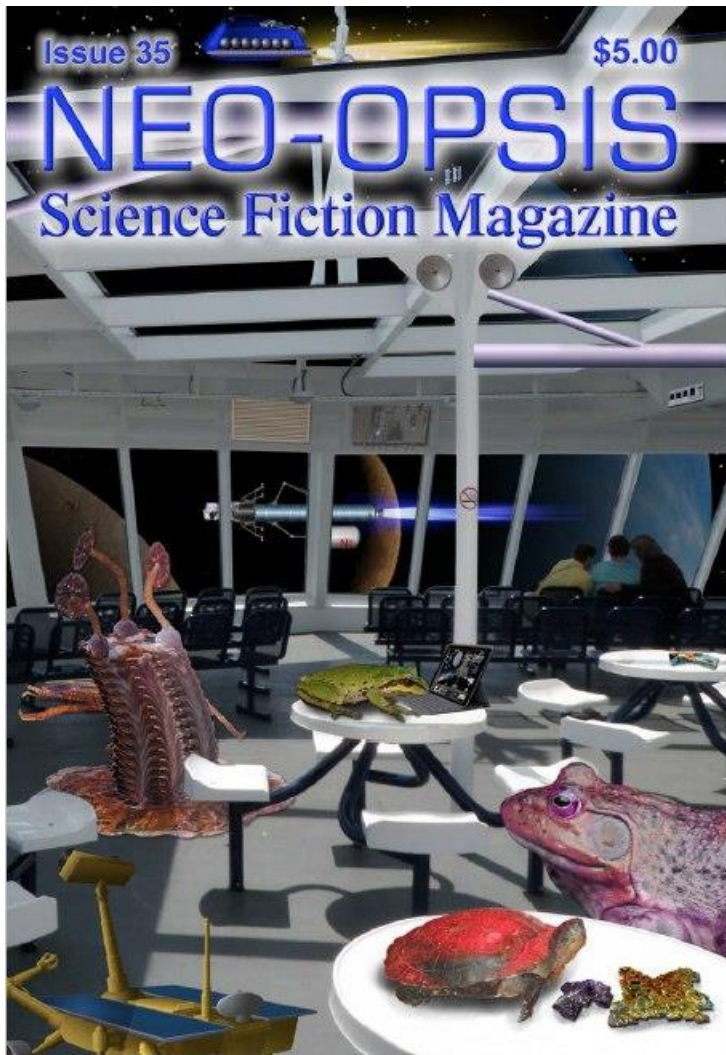
Cheers! *The Graeme*

EARLY SPACE TRAVEL

by Greg Fewer

global sensation.
Han dynasty rocket ship
found in Arctic ice

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 Stephanie 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*.

Find it here: < [Neo-opsis Magazine #35](#) >

“BLAZE OF GLORY! YOUR ULTIMATE VACATION!”

By Shawn L. Bird

(Previously published in Drabble Harvest #4: Interplanetary Timeshares, Hiraeth Books, 2021)

“Honey! Look at that view!” Mfws held up the camera to the porthole. “The solar flares are incredible!”

“Yes, dear,” her husband smiled from home. “I told you you’d love it, darling.”

“It’s magnificent,” she wiped a hand across her brow, “though it’s getting a bit hot.”

“Yes, dear. That’s to be expected. It *is* the sun, after all.”

“I do hope it’s safe.”

Was that a woman’s hand on his lap?

“The company assured me it is completely effective, dear. Must go. Bon voyage!”

His image dissolved, replaced by a flashing notice on her screen: “Initiating solar cremation now.”

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #23 – November 2024



Cover art: by Caitlin Fowler

Contents:

The Little Black Wand for Every Occasion – by Emry Jordal

Stone Test – by Catherine Forrest

The Very Long Death of Katherine Ainsley – by Marlan K. Smith

Cages – by Thomas Ha

All the Songs – by Caitlin Sweet

The 1st Interspecies Solidarity Fair and Parade – by Bogi Takács

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. 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)

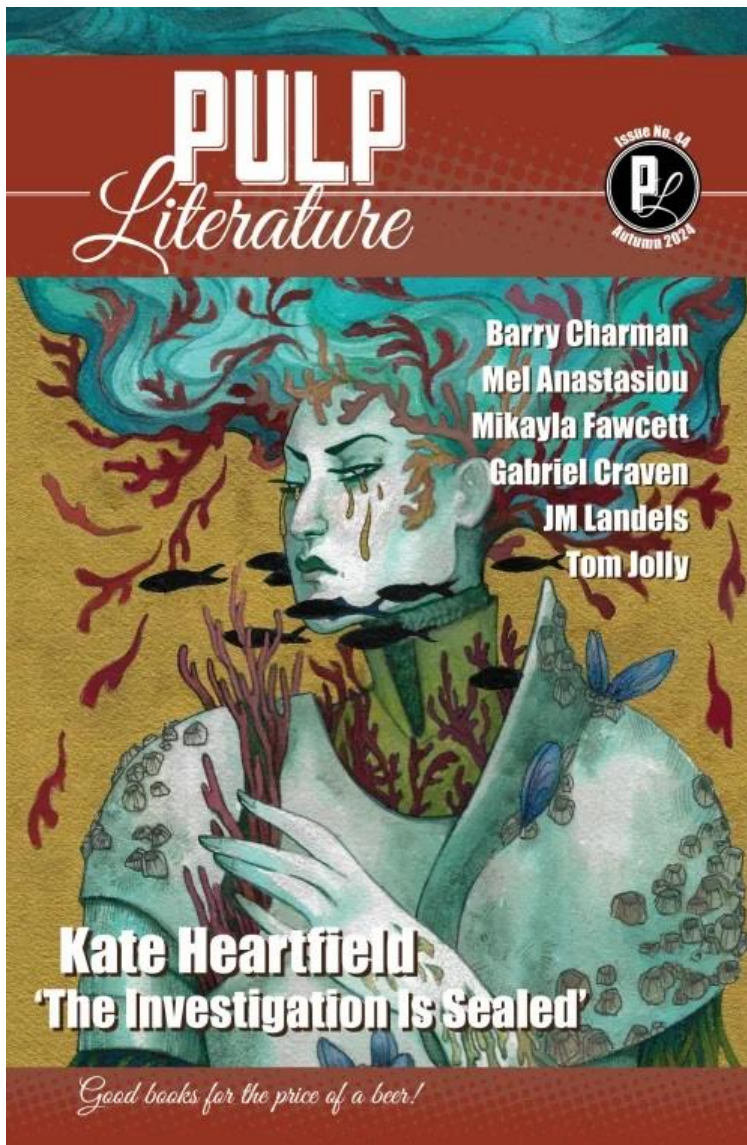
Find it at: < [Fusion Fragment Current Issue](#) >

PERHAPS

by James Grotkowski

life amongst the stars
perhaps substance or sublime
careless, we think

PULP LITERATURE #44 Autumn 2024



Cover: *Ceren of the Surf* – by Bronwyn Schuster

CONTENTS:

The Investigation is Sealed – by Kate Heartfield

Feature interview with Kate Heartfield

Take My Hand: Exit Light

– by Mel Anastasiou

Liar's Leap – by Jonathan Sean Lyster

A Fair Exchange – by Tom Jolly

The Projectionist – by Lisa Alo Seaman

A Weaver's Web – by Barry Charman

The Magpie Award for Poetry

– by Angela Rebrec, Cicely Grace, Veronika Gorlova

Bad Backup

– by Gabriel Craven and Mikayla Fawcett

The Shepherdess: Narbonne

– by J.M. Landels

Pulp Literature is a truly modern magazine, fully cognisant of the profound maturing of pulp genres over the past century. –

Amazing Stories (RG Cameron)

Find it at < [Pulp Literature #44](#) >

THE DEPARTMENT OF DESTINY

by David E. Burga

“Have a seat, Pablo. And get that stupid grin off your face.”

Pablo sat down nervously looking around his boss’s office, it was rather nondescript with the usual furnishings—framed posters with cliched inspirational catchphrases, a narrow bookshelf with important looking, unread books, and a desk with some family pictures on it, that could very well have been the stock photos that came with the picture frame. “What’s up?”

Mr. Hawley sighed and looked at his computer screen. “What is up,” he made air quotes around up, “is that I’m very unhappy with your performance so far.”

The hum of the fluorescent lights filled the office.

“So, is this, like, my performance review or something?”

“It’s not ‘like’ your performance review, it *is* your performance review,” said Mr. Hawley.

Pablo leaned back in his chair. “Cool. What do you think of my work?”

“Not a lot.”

“What? Why not?”

Mr. Hawley typed on his keyboard and swung the screen around to face Pablo. “You assigned ten million people the destiny of being porn addicts.” He typed on the keyboard some more and read the screen, “and another three million people to making meme videos.”

“Everyone likes memes,” said Pablo.

Mr. Hawley’s face was turning red. “These are not destinies, they’re... they’re...”

“Awesome?”

“Absurd!”

Mr. Hawley jabbed a finger at the screen. “Being an Instagram influencer with 200 followers isn’t a destiny...”

Pablo snorted. “I know, right? Imagine getting stuck with that one?”

“This isn’t funny.”

“I’ve got more great ideas too. You’ve heard the expression “working like a dog”? How about “working *for* a dog?”

“That’s not a destiny either!”

Pablo leaned back in his chair. “Yeah, imagine getting stuck with the job of reviewing the destinies that other people make? You don’t even get to be

creative in the afterlife, you're just middle management all over again. That's shitty karma."

"There's no such thing as karma," said Mr. Hawley.

"Yeah, says the guy who was destined to be middle management."

Mr. Hawley slipped off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Let's look at this one... Mr. Williams."

"I remember him, he was my first assignment. I was quite proud of that one."

"Proud of making a man destined to never be potty trained? How would that even work?"

"I thought about that a lot. Did you ever meet people who didn't know how to ride a bike?"

Mr. Hawley looked slightly embarrassed. "Um, bicycles are a bit before my time."

"What? How long have you been here for?"

"That's beside the point."

"Okay, well, did you ever meet anyone who didn't know how to swim?"

"Sure."

"Don't you wonder how that happened?"

Mr. Hawley put his glasses back on and spun the monitor back towards him. "Not really, we didn't live near water."

"Were pools before your time too?"

"Of course they weren't." Mr. Hawley's tone was defensive.

"There has to be a mix of circumstances for that to happen. So, in this case, I put a stubborn child with a dad addicted to video games and a mom trying to make YouTube lifestyle videos when nobody was watching YouTube in the pre-influencer era."

"Okay, and they just never corrected the behaviour, they let their kid shit himself all the time? That doesn't sound very realistic."

"Where do you think the term, 'life is stranger than fiction' came from? It came right from this office. We're how that expression makes any sense."

Mr. Hawley let out a long sigh. "Did you even read the training material?"

Pablo snorted. "Yeah, I did, I even read the case studies at the back of the textbooks. I was super diligent in doing my research before starting this job. Thousands of years ago, some guy in my position destined a bunch of ship captains to be so horny that they crashed their boats onto the rocks because they thought they were going to get laid."

Mr. Hawley shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “They were lured by the call of the Sirens.”

“Nuh-uh. Bruh, they were destined to be super horny. And that same guy destined a bunch of other sailors to be so horny they jumped overboard because they thought they saw half a woman with a nice rack in the water. How would sex with a mermaid even work? No one batted an eye at that shit?”

“Well now... uh, I’m not sure. That was before my time.”

“Was it?”

“I’m sure there was a perfectly logical explanation...”

“No, some dude, just like me, was way ahead of his time. The work he did... it helped shape myths and legends forever. That guy, or it could’ve been a woman, no need to make assumptions, was a legend. What we do here...”

Pablo stood up and a faraway look came over his face, “...is important work. We have real power here. The power to shape the world.”

Mr. Hawley nervously rubbed his glasses against his shirt. “Whoa, whoa, hold on a sec, let’s not get carried away here...”

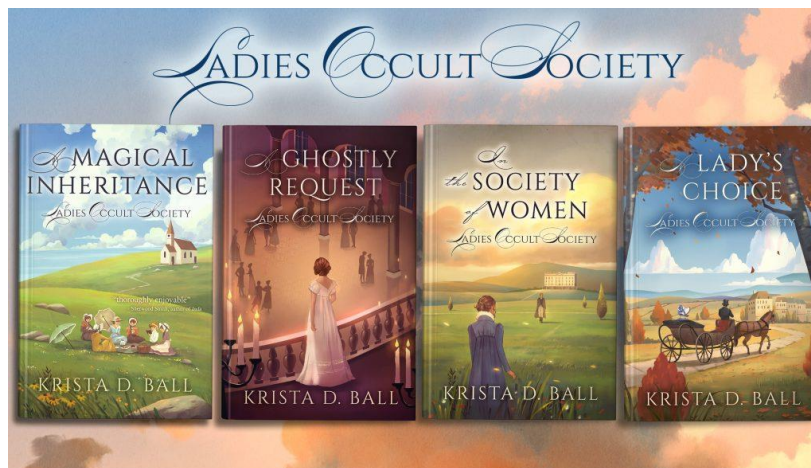
Pablo kept walking towards the door, speaking in an almost trance, “this world could be shaped in my image.”

“Pablo! Get back here, we’re not done yet! This isn’t Pablo’s world; you have a job to do.”

Pablo kept walking. “Pablo’s World. I like the sound of that. Thanks, boss, I guarantee you’ll like what I have in store for humanity.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

Mr. Hawley’s door lazily swung shut.



Find them at < <https://kristadball.com/krista-d-ball/ladies-occult-society/> >

PULSE

by James Grotkowski

the warm worlds of Gliese
lively but without heartbeats
Kraken have no pulse

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #129 - V.34 #3

COVER: *Captains of Black and Brass* – by James Beveridge



FICTION:

Saving Week – by Julie E. Czerneda
Giant of the Stars – by Alex Langer
Rubberized – by Kristal Stittle
The Butterfly Effect – by Catherine MacLeod
Freezer Burn – by Cat Isidore
You Ain't Supposed to Die on a Saturday Night
– by Jonathan Gensler
The Blood Webs – Fiona Moore
Bargains – Rachel Unger
Before Her Eyes – R.Haven
Legio XVII Inquieta – Marie Brennan
Atlanta Runs – Colleen Anderson

NONFICTION:

Do Editors Get a Break – by Diane L. Walton
Catherine MacLeod Growls Back
– Author Interview by Roberta Laurie
James Beveridge Retrospective

FEATURE:

In the Ghost Kitchen – by Lorraine Schein
The Noon-Day Witch – by Lorraine Schein
Approaching Storm – by Emmylou Kotzé
Advice Fail,x3 – Peter Norman
Bots "Lenny" & Comics "Is That Earl"
– by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < [On Spec Magazine #129](#) >

YOU ARE NOW BREATHING MANUALLY

by Rich Larson

Since I'm laid off I have the day off, and I want to make the most of it, getting up early and laying my kit out on the bed. I always like to shower first, but this time I take a little too long under the water. When I come out of the bathroom, my roommate is back from nightshift, clutching a smoldering blunt.

"Wagwan." He's still wearing the bottoms of his baggy blue scrubs with a wife-beater that I think used to be white. His eyes look a little wild.

"Wagwan," I say. "I'll get you the rent tomorrow. Just waiting on my blockbank."

I haven't told him yet about me getting laid off. He shakes his head, like the 525 bucks I owe is nothing to him, and like always it makes me weirdly furious.

"Whenever, bruh," he says.

"Thanks, dude," I say, keeping him at dude distance. I'm not sure we're bruhs just because we've been rooming for a few months, and he knows my ex. "Good shift?"

I can tell it was not. Usually, he only smokes up in his room by the window, because he knows all second-hand smoke is harmful and does not want it on his conscience.

"Don't even ask," he says, rubbing his slack face like he's kneading dough.

"Aight."

I slide around him towards my room, where I planned to spend the whole blissful day with my phone by the door blaring comedies. But he trails after me. I turn around, get big like I'm goaltending, blocking off the angle to my bed.

"You should get some sleep, dude," I say, going pre-emptive. I can tell he wants to tell me a hospital story, like the one about Cheese Dick Guy, who was growing a whole moldy wheel under his foreskin, or Dementia WWE, an old woman who got sick of waiting for her dead husband to show up and took it out on him with a metal folding chair.

"Bagged a body today," he says, taking a pull. "It was a weird one. You ever heard of monk?"

I raise my eyebrows and shake my head and pull my door shut tight behind me. "Nah."

"It's this new thing," he says. "It was, like. Huh. It was like a

psychotherapy drug, originally? It basically hacks you into your own central nervous system. So, all the stuff your body normally just does on its own, now you have to do it.”

“Ah.”

“You get it?” He blows smoke, coughs. “You, like...” Coughs again. “Breathing, for example. You have to do that now. You gotta pull the air in, out, in, out. You can control your heartbeat; make it go faster or slower. That’s why it’s called monk? Because Buddhist monks, up in the Himalayas, they used to do that shit, bruh. By meditating.”

“Maybe it’s made out of monkey blood,” I suggest. “Monk, monkey.”

He shakes his head at me. “No, it’s the Buddhist thing. People say you can do other shit with it, too, if you practice. Control your circulation, so you can stay hard forever. Bump your muscle synthesis, like taking steroids. This other nurse was telling me about it. Because, you know, the guy who died.”

“You bagged an OD?” I ask, curious now.

“Naw, bruh. You can’t OD on monk, at least I don’t think.”

“Well. That’s good.”

“This guy, it was severe dehydration.” He scratches his shoulder. “Massive organ failure. He’d been at it for a week, locked up in his apartment, I guess? And he had an IV bag set up in there, but he didn’t calculate the volumes right so he dried up fast. Or maybe he thought, you know, with the monk, maybe he thought he could slow everything down enough.”

I don’t like this story. I’d rather be hearing about the Great Poonami of ‘25, where my roommate left his patient for five minutes, five fucking minutes, and came back to diarrhea all over the walls and ceiling.

“But we still do compressions, got the board under him doing compressions.” He demonstrates, putting his hands in a little triangle and pumping the air. “I could hear the ribs crack. It was real loud. Next person tagged in, we did that for twenty, twenty-five minutes. No dice.”

“Damn,” I say, and I swear I see his eyes checking my arms for track marks, so I fold them up.

“I don’t get it at all,” he says, turning his head and puffing smoke back towards the bathroom and its humming fan. “It doesn’t get you high, not really. It doesn’t make you see shit. It’s just you, there in your body, and that’s it. This guy did it for a whole week.”

“Weird,” I say. “Get some sleep, dude.”

“Yeah.” He gives me one last look, mouth moving like he might say one last thing about the guy, or offer to show me a snap of the body-bag, because he does that sometimes. “See you tonight, dude.”

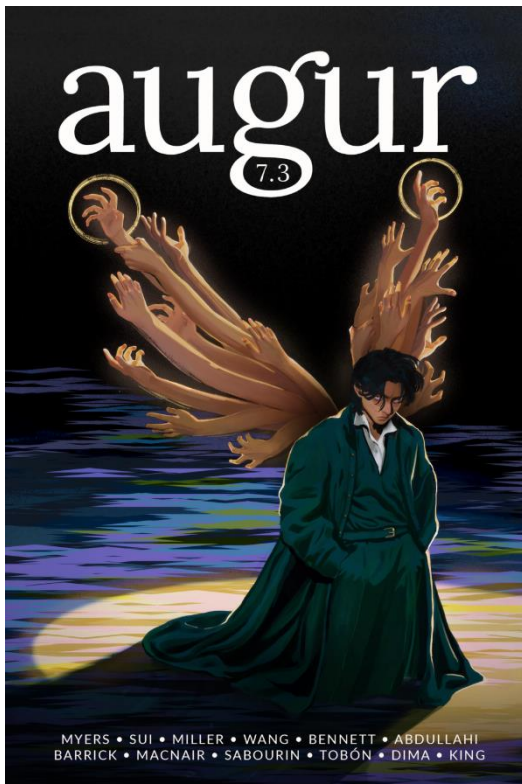
He switches the blunt to his other hand and daps me up, then stumbles off to his room. I open my door and step in and lock it behind me.

My phone on the nightstand shows the negative balance in my bitbank, blistering red, another set of angry messages from my ex, a sponsored “10 Tips to Land on Your Feet” article. Of course he doesn’t get it. He’s doing medschool on his parents’ dime with his whole life in order, not getting tossed around by asshole managers and impossible economics.

My kit’s waiting on the bed: the little plastic syringe, fresh needles, the monk itself in a capped vial. When I shoot up and lie back, adjusting the clockwork thump of my heart, pushing blood around my body, drawing gas in and sending it out, I’m right in the eye of the storm. Perfectly calm and calling all the shots.

For a few hours, at least, everything will be under control.

AUGUR MAGAZINE ISSUE 7.3



- The Physicality of Change* – by Conyer Clayton
- Shotgun Wedding for Brain Corals and Parrot Fish*
– by Cassandra Myers
- One Becomes Two* – by A.D. Sui
- Flesh and Blood* – by D.D. Miller
- Seventh Sister* – by James X. Wang
- The Water Doesn't Want You* – by Rebecca Bennett
- Roots that Abide* – by Fatima Abdullahi
- Goose* – by David Barrick
- Moth Lake* – by Erin MacNair
- Confessions of a Mech Made of Flesh* – by KJ Sabourin
- Mi Niña Hermosa* – by Yael Tobón
- Logoptera* – by Diana Dima
- Report by the Scientists who Discover Liquid Water on Mars*
– by Natasha King

Find it at: < [Augur Magazine issue 7.3](#) >

INTREPID

by Spencer Keene

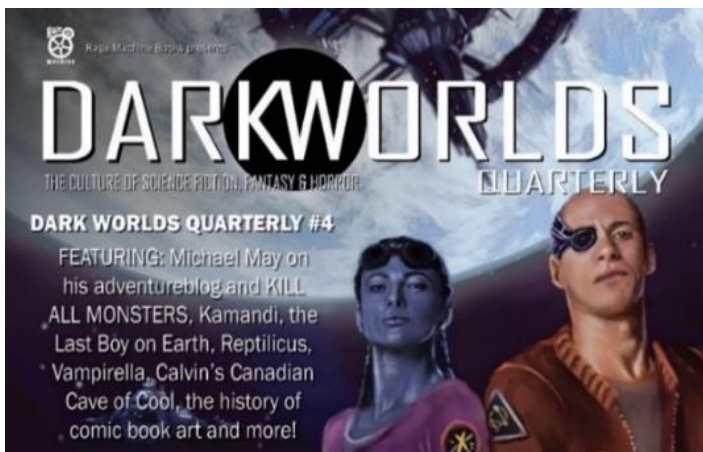
Beams echo through dark matter;
impose themselves on black curtains of universe;
prod distant clumps of space dust
collecting under vast wormholes.

Meanwhile, Orion bathes
in meteor showers of enlightenment;
his beloved Betelgeuse eying
Saturn's rings, greedily.

Incalculable light years chase
concepts of time from human minds;
send comets to edges unfathomable;
to dark, forgotten worlds.

Flecks of steel flung vast distances
to cleanse us of our un-knowingness.
Are the stars amused by our puny desires?
Their silence mocks us beautifully.

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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

- Weird Tales Writers Who Wrote Westerns
 - No Freaking Way! More Plant Monsters!
 - Tales of the Hyborian Age: Don Glut
 - Animal Stories in the Pulp
 - The Return of the Giant Robot III
 - A Christmas Carol in Comics
 - Hugo Gernsback's Creatures of Wonder Stories
- Find it at: [Dark Worlds](http://DarkWorlds)

TIME-SHARE

by Geoffrey Hart

When the President removed his mask during the press conference, the nation sighed in relief: their suspicions were finally confirmed. His skin tone had always seemed unnaturally orange, in the same disturbingly alien way as Irn-Bru, and nobody believed for a second that the hair framing that sagging face was natural. Then there was the strange slumping posture...

With the mask dangling about the President's neck like a combination necktie-noose, a chitinous, glossy black head was revealed, with mandibles that caused the two Secret Service agents to step back, alarmed, and reach for their sidearms. Both vanished in puffs of greasy smoke. The First Lady, who'd been awaiting this moment, raised the barrel of her sidearm to her lips, blew across the muzzle, spun her weapon around her index finger, then holstered it.

The reporter from FOX paled, but he wasn't one to reveal weakness before a crowd. "You're a giant repulsive insect!" he blurted out.

"And you work for a morally repulsive corporation, which makes us about even. What was your question?"

"Where... Where did you come from?"

"The standard response is *Schenectady*. But that's perhaps glib. Let's try and restore some civility here." The President tried for his famous disarming, boyish grin, forgetting that his mask had slipped. As a result, the giant cockroach's face writhed disturbingly under the bright lights from the news cameras, hand-sized compound eyes scintillating.

"Citizens of the United States of America," said the cockroach, "I bring greetings from what your people call Arcturus, a bright orange star in the constellation of Boötes. My people traveled many generations to reach you and, having arrived at your small and formerly insignificant world, immediately set our anthropologists to work learning the strengths and weaknesses of your species." Without the mask holding it in place, his disguise subsided around his sloping shoulders in droopy folds. The cockroach shrugged to settle the poorly tailored suit more comfortably.

"Your weaknesses were many, clear, and easily exploited. For example, with only the slightest guidance, we persuaded you to adopt a diet and lifestyle that leaves your meat well-marbled, soft, and tender." Having mastered Terran bodily idiom, the Arcturian smacked its mandibles in delight. Though it was hard to read alien facial expressions without practice, this one, in context,

clearly expressed great gusto. “Almost as good as your cheeseburgers.” Frothy drool trailed from between the mandibles, staining the rumpled suit.

“Fortunately, your strengths were fewer and easier to overcome. Your greatest strength, namely your desire to live together in harmony, with each accepting the other for who they are in their deepest inner self, was easy to suborn. All that was necessary was to give you social media.” The two software titans who’d been standing behind the President stepped forward, bowed, and removed their own masks, revealing two more cockroach faces.

“But fear not: we’re not here for your delicious meat.” One of the roaches behind the President leaned forward and whispered something in the President’s ear.

The President rolled his eyes and looked to the sky for aid, apparently a universal gesture among sapients. “Neither are we here for your women. What an appalling thought!” The third insectoid whispered something in the president’s other ear.

“Nor are we here for your men, asexuals, bisexuals, transexuals, or any other sexuals. Don’t you people have anything better to do with your time than worry about a person’s gender?” The President flung his mask back over his shoulder. “No, fellow citizens of Earth—for those of us who were born here consider ourselves citizens, birther conspiracy theorists notwithstanding—we are here for a nobler purpose: to arrange time-shares in your hottest, most humid, least desirable tropical cities—cities that have become essentially uninhabitable due to global warming, which we confess to having encouraged for several lifetimes. So, we won’t need to displace any humans. Rather, we’ll generously help to relocate them to more temperate climes. We apologize in advance to the residents of Minnesota and Maine, and urge you to welcome your future brothers and sisters with open arms.”

The third cockroach leaned forward to whisper in the President’s ear.

“Be off with you!” The President flapped his hands in a shooing motion. “Yes, yes... and your non-binary-gendered relatives too.”

The MSNBC reporter held up her hand. After exchanging glances with his colleagues, the President gestured that she should proceed.

“So, what you’re saying is: you’re invading us.”

“Heavens, no! The invasion is long over. Rather, say we’re simply claiming real estate your people can’t use for most of the year. *Time-share*. Look it up, for heaven’s sake!” The President shrugged violently, vainly attempting to resettle his disguise more comfortably. He failed, and with an unpleasant sucking noise, the suit and orange-tinted skin beneath it slithered past his

shoulders to pool upon the floor, revealing an oily black carapace with an extra set of multiply jointed limbs strapped to its ribs. The President stepped out of the debris, shaking a foot in distaste.

The MSNBC reporter raised her hand again.

“What *now*?”

“Will you at least be leaving us our government?”

The President looked skyward for strength. “That was never in question. You can have your government. It’s not like we care how you govern yourselves. Our agents will continue offering your elected officials suggestions on what actions they should take. You know how that works. In exchange for relinquishing the right to shape your own opinions, we offer the blessing of freedom from thought, freedom from responsibility, and freedom from fear. We’ll tell you what you need to fear, then we’ll eliminate that fear. And together our peoples will thrive.”

The MSNBC reporter foolishly ventured a third question. “To sum up: you’re saying that you’ve successfully mounted a coup, taken over our government, turned our citizens into hors d’oeuvres, ruined our climate, and expropriated our real estate?”

“Shoot that one,” the President commanded the First Lady. “Nobody likes a smartass.”

Author’s note When Harlan Ellison was once asked where he got his ideas, his response was “Schenectady.”

POLAR STARLIGHT #17 – February 2025

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: *Gods* – by Mark Campbell

The 17th issue contains poetry by Malaya Barroso, Heath Bleau, Renee Cronley, Rebecca Franklyn, Neile Graham, James Grotkowski, Guy Immega, Sandra Kasturi, Marlene MacLeod, Corrina Mae, Melanie Marttila, Derek Newman-Stille, C.A. Rose, Lisa Timpf, and Melissa Yi.

Will be available for free download in February 2025.

THE RETURN

by William Kingsley

The gallant Spaceman
Back from the Stars
After all these years.

The gallant Spaceman
No Penelope to greet him.
No parades, no breathless interviews.
Whisked away
From public view.

Robed and probed,
Poked and prodded.

Nebulas and Stars
Planets and Moons
Drudgery and Boredom.
Danger! Terror!

His crewmates all dead.

After long months
The gallant Spaceman
Released to the world, at last.
Warm sunlight on his skin,
A gentle breeze caressing his face,
He walks

The gallant Spaceman
A shadow crosses his face.
Something,
Dark and Unworldly
Behind the glint of his eyes.

NIGHT GALLERY

by John Sloan

“Wayne Gretzky is not a human being!” declares John, one of the six faces arranged in the gallery on Tom’s monitor.

“Oh, come on!” protests another participant on the VidMeet screen.

“No, I mean it.”

It is late in their weekly call. Getting dark outside. There is some laughter and knowing nods from the other faces in the gallery. They had all heard this rant before. The ’93 playoffs and the high stick penalty that wasn’t.

“You know the refs had zero tolerance for high-sticking that year,” continues John. “No exceptions! None! Everybody got called at one point or another, even if it was accidental. If Gretzky was human like the rest of us, he would have drawn an effing penalty as surely as he drew effing blood from effing Doug Gilmore!”

Each face in the gallery has a familiar backdrop. Home offices, mainly, with cluttered bookshelves and the edge of a messy desk in the frame. But Gary is in his kitchen and Steve is in his bedroom. Occasionally a family pet (he had a cat and a dog) would appear on the bed behind Steve and curl up for a nap.

“Felt sorry for Kerry Fraser later on,” says Bob from the home office inside his gallery frame. Fraser was the NHL referee who missed Gretzky’s high stick that nicked the chin of Leafs star player Doug Gilmore. “There was some serious harassment. Threatening phone calls, garbage dumped on his front yard, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, that was a shame,” allows John. “It wasn’t his fault. There was obviously some weird-ass voodoo shit coming from Gretzky, the alien.”

“So, he’s an alien now?”

“Well, I already established that he wasn’t human.”

It is all in fun. Everybody loves the kid from Brantford, the Great One. Nobody really thinks he is a voodoo-practicing space alien. But even over forty years later, the bitterness remains, the thought of what might have been if the referee had seen what everybody else on the ice, in the arena, and in what the television audience saw. Instead of sitting in the penalty box, Gretzky scored a winning goal, and the LA Kings went on to win the semifinal series and then the Stanley Cup.

Tom can see himself in one of the gallery windows backed by a bookshelf

loaded with a lifetime of reading and a kitsch-dedicated shelf with figurines and models from both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. The bookshelves are topped with old family pictures of his now-adult children and now-deceased wife.

Around his monitor, not visible to the others, is a cluttered hutch on his large and equally cluttered red cherry oak desk. This is his world now. His sanctuary for 30-odd years. It is here that he does the weekly VidMeet ritual with the office door shut, though there is nobody on the other side of that door to disturb his privacy. His world just feels more contained with the door closed.

“I’ll tell you what the real shame was,” says Gary from his kitchen table. “We never got to go against Montreal in the final that year.”

Back in 1967 it was the historic rival Montreal Canadiens that the Toronto Maple Leafs beat for their last Stanley Cup. The LA Kings went on to beat the Canadiens in the ’93 final. Should have been Toronto.

When they were kids, there had been this beer commercial during the *Hockey Night in Canada* telecasts. A group of young men would share a recreational activity, like softball or a game of pickup hockey. The announcer’s voiceover would come in to say something like: “Every Wednesday night, for years now, Bill and the boys will (enter the name of activity) and then share a cold (enter name of the beer).” Cut to shots of the same lads having said beer and sharing a laugh.

The guys on Tom’s screen are not young men like the ones in that old commercial. All are in their seventies. They are all *formers*: a former small business owner, a couple of former schoolteachers, a former journalist, a former university professor, a former cop. But he can almost hear that announcer’s voice as he watches the gallery of faces. “Every Wednesday night, for years now, John and the boys have gotten together for a chat on VidMeet.”

And it *had* been years. Started during the pandemic. Originally conceived as a one-off, a get re-acquainted session for old high school friends, it quickly morphed into a weekly appointment. It had gone on for a decade after the pandemic had petered out.

He can’t speak for the others, but seeing those faces once a week helped Tom get through a lot. Pandemic isolation for sure, but also the decline and loss of his wife. Then there was the Great Crash and Depression (thank God for protected pension funds), environmental catastrophes, and the new isolation period after the One Day War. Through it all, as everything went to shit, there were always the faces of these old friends, graying wrinkled reminders of the boys they had been. And there were the stories,

reminiscences of their lives back then and since. As the years went on, it was inevitable that the stories would repeat.

“Guys,” says Tom, to steer the conversation away from old sports to a contemporary issue. “I was wondering what you all thought about EverTalk,”

There is a pause for each to react to the question. Some shrug, while others smile and nod knowingly. From his kitchen, Gary raises a hand like a school kid.

“I don’t know what that is,” he says.

“It’s the latest AI bag of tricks,” says John.

“Yeah,” says Tom and fills in a few details for Gary.

Like John suggested, EverTalk is the latest in AI trickery. Well, trickery for some and magic to others, depending on your opinion of the whole AI thing. They train up an AI with as much of your memories as can be crammed in. Then they front end it with a video avatar of you for VidMeet, what they used to call a deep fake.

“I hear a lot of old ladies are setting it up so they can have VidMeet visits with their grandkids after they are gone,” says Bob.

“Sounds kind of creepy to me,” says Tim with a shiver. “Like communing with the dead.”

“I don’t know,” chimes in Steve. Behind him, his cat was holding court on the bed. “It seems like a decent way to carry on the conversation with friends. Sort of comforting, especially with all that’s gone on out there.”

“I think I might be one of them,” offered Bob in a matter-of-fact tone. “As far as I know, between my heart condition and the fallout from the One Day War, I could easily have gone tits up years ago. Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure I did.”

“I assure you that you did not,” says John.

“How do you know?”

“Because you’ve been right here, every Wednesday night, forever and a day.”

“Well, I hear the avatars are pretty convincing. More than glorified chat bots,” says Tom. “With all those memories and personality traits wired in, even convincing to themselves.”

“How do you mean ‘to themselves?’” asks John.

“Apparently, one memory not included is the memory of having the procedure done. Too much of a chance of existential quandaries fucking everything up.”

“I see dead people,” says Tim in a creepy whisper, his best imitation of the

kid in that old movie, “and dead people don’t know they’re dead.”

Appreciative chuckles from all. It was a pretty good imitation.

“Did Rick Decard know he was a replicant?” adds Gary, tossing in another pop culture reference from their youth.

“But seriously, guys,” continues Bob. “I do remember thinking about having the procedure when it came out but have no memory of having it done. That doesn’t mean I didn’t.”

The gallery is a mix of earnest nods, scoffing shrugs, and dubious head shaking. Tom reacts little but rubs his chin and sits back in his desk chair. *When did Bob think of having it done? I just heard about it today. Or did I? Have we had this conversation before?* He searches his memory and comes up with nothing. But there is an odd sense of déjà vu about the whole thing.

“The system also manufactures new memories to avoid repetition and boredom,” says Bob. “Gives us new things to think about, to talk about.”

“Like our opinions on EverTalk,” says Tom.

“Exactly.”

“And yet we always end up in the same old stories,” Tim says.

“Guess that’s because they are funnier,” suggests Steve. A small dog had come into the bedroom. It jumped up on the bed to join the cat who soon jumped off the bed, taking haughty offense.

Tom’s mind flashed to his trip to the government food depot earlier in the week. He distinctly remembered the tattered survivors lining up politely, like good Canadians, for their survival rations. Had that really happened? And how old were Steve’s pets? Whether it was old age or algorithms, the source of repeated stories and the same old gripes could be attributed to the same thing: limited memory capacity.

“I would just like to say that this is all a load of bullshit,” says John, feigning indignant outrage. “As far as I’m concerned, I am real and so are the rest of you. Tim is a real goof. Tom is a real dink. Bob is a real asshole. As it always was, it is now and ever shall be.”

“Hey, why am I the dink?” Tom protests, though the rest murmur assent to John’s characterizations. Even Bob. The reason Bob was the asshole was lost in time.

“I just thought of something,” says Steve. “We’ve been talking about which one of us might or might not be a fake. A fake that doesn’t even know it is a fake. What if we’re all AI avatars? What if the VidMeet machine just keeps running and even it doesn’t know where the participants are coming from, who or what they are or were? Maybe there is nobody left.”

There is a brief silence as everybody ponders Steve's thought.

"Bullshit!" says John to some derisive laughter. "OK, it's official. Steve is the real dink. Tom, you're just a goof."

"Um, thank you?" says Tom in accepting the dubious promotion, or was it a demotion? He is looking at Tim's gallery frame. On the visible corner of his desk is an old Tim Horton's coffee cup. It seemed it had been there forever. He thinks about asking Tim about it. *Are there even Tim Horton's donut shops anymore?* Before he can speak, Gary gently raps on his kitchen table.

"Gentlemen, and Bob, this has all been good existential fun and games, but I see by the clock on my screen that our time is up. We'll have to take it up again next week. If there is a next week." A smile and a wink.

He was right. The call normally ran from 7 pm to 9 pm. It is well past that now. There were pleasant farewells from all gallery participants, each with a variation of "Bye. See you next week" as they wave awkwardly with their non-dominant hands as the other hand pokes the screen or mouses over to click the "Leave Meeting" button.

Tom sits for a few more minutes in the comfort of his office chair, surrounded by the so very real mementos of his life. He thinks about the conversation for a bit. Finally, he murmurs "I am not a dink" and gets out of the chair.

Well past twilight now, not a single light would be on in the empty house. He opens the door of his comfort bubble of an office, steps away from his life, into the darkness.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2025

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For more information about WWC 2025, go to: whenwordscollide.org

MICROSCOPIC FUNGI, OR THE YEASTLINGS

By Marion Loughheed

The creatures that live in your bread call themselves
Yeastlings. We call them hyphae, mould-forming
(the opposite of mould-breaking) beasties.

At night they whisper to each other (or in the day,
whenever the household sleeps)—
A strange word that: household
The beings that the house holds?
Or the ones who hold the house?

The Yeastlings congregate and cogitate, while we,
peacefully or fretfully asleep, spend our minds on dreams.
They drink these dreams, deeply in orgasmic gasps.
The dreams we conjure, dreams that feed our waking lives,
feed the Yeastlings too, a full and fulsome ingestion.
one by one until

each unived dream inspired expires,
forming one more fungal layer
of the Yeastlings' mould.

POLAR Borealis #33 – March 2025

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 16 to 18 speculative fiction
genre poems and short stories. Issue #33 cover: *Robot Rocket* – by Mark Campbell

The 33rd issue contains *poetry* by Gregg Chamberlain, Chris Clemens, Rebecca Franklyn, Jameson
Grey, Lori Green, Lundy Nicklen, Rhea Rose, Sheryl Normandeau, and Jean-Louis Trudel...

and *short fiction* by Mark David Campbell, Isobel Cunningham, Ken Deeproose, Steve Gold, Alex
McGilvery, Guy Immega, Mark Hill, Matthew D. Del Papa, and Jacqueline Thorpe.

Will be available for free download in March 2025.

THE MATCHMAKER

by Devan Ermo

Names given at birth in the mortal realm were meaningless. They changed every life and were not worth keeping track of. The Matchmaker had their own names for each soul under their care.

The one they called Autonym sat in a moderately busy cafe. Sunlight had just started to peer through the front window as the day waned, bathing the wooden counter in a yellow glow. She was at her usual table, with two battered wooden chairs. They were mismatched, and probably wouldn't stack together neatly, yet when the chairs were arranged just so, it seemed like they belonged together. Across from Autonym, the other chair sat unoccupied, haphazardly shoved against the wall by a previous customer. She wore an oversized sweatshirt, its colour faded to a dull brown. Loose jeans and scuffed sneakers were about all she ever wore; hair had been pulled into a messy ponytail. Her thumbs slowly stroked the pages of the book she was hunched over, making a rasping sound that would have irritated anyone nearby. But the cafe was noisy, and whenever she came here, there was never anybody in the other seat. She paused, took one hand off the book, and drained the last of the black coffee from the plain white mug in front of her. The mug was chipped, and in a nicer cafe wouldn't have been in use anymore. Autonym did not notice this. As long as it held coffee, that was enough for her.

Unknown to either of them, one of the servers—called Agapē by the Matchmaker—was part of the same soul-group. He walked quickly to her table, shaggy hair bouncing as he strode. “More coffee?” he asked.

Autonym glanced up, then quickly lowered her eyes. “Yes, please,” she said, directing her words into the empty cup. Agapē stepped to the counter, returned with a fresh pot, and carefully poured. “Refills are free,” he said with a bright smile. They weren't, but his boss probably wouldn't notice. Agapē took pride in his work, and kept an eye on all his tables, but for some reason he couldn't explain, always gave this shy, quiet girl extra attention. He didn't know her, of course, though at times it seemed otherwise. Maybe he should talk to her; ask about more than just coffee?

Autonym looked up with her eyes, though her head didn't move from its position, folded over her book. Her fingers stroked the pages in double time. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

“What are you reading, anyway?” asked Agapē. Autonym finally looked him in the eyes; there was a pause that lasted forever and was over in a split second. She flushed and, lost for words, turned her book so he could see the cover.

“That is some deep stuff,” he said. “I’ve heard of it but have never—.”

“We’ve got more orders coming, hurry it up!” a woman’s voice called from the counter.

“Well, maybe next time you’re here? You could, I don’t know, explain your book to me?” Agapē asked. Autonym stared back, flustered, but no words came out.

Afterwards, she always found an excuse not to return to this cafe, even though the coffee was decent, and the sunsets through the window were so very beautiful.

The Matchmaker watched tirelessly. It would not do to be inattentive, not when they could almost taste their own ascendancy. Every so often, they reviewed the progress of the ten souls under their care. There were several promising specimens, but the majority were not ready yet. The Matchmaker had the urge to sigh, but in their current form weren’t capable of doing so. *Ah, why not*, one of their inner voices thought. After some debate, they gave in to this voice. Concentrating their Thought, they manifested themselves physically, here in their obscure section of the bardo — the place between life and death — and released a loud, long, and above all, satisfying sigh.

Much better. But we must be dignified, mustn’t we?

Oh, what does it matter? Who is going to see?

Even Merged souls such as the Matchmaker could disagree with themselves sometimes.

It was disappointing, knowing that they’d likely have to send some souls back into other creatures. They hated this above all other duties. An incarnation as a dog, or insect, or bird should be instructive, not punitive, but was often necessary. The Judges sent down their verdicts, yet it was up to the Matchmaker to implement them. *We are ready to be Judges ourselves. Why have we not ascended yet?* That same question again, nagging, worrying. *What have we been doing wrong?*

Well, it was better to focus on the positives. What more could be done? There were four souls, this time, who showed some promise. This would be an enormous success, if they could only live up to their potential.

Many years later, Autonym died. It was cancer. She'd been a good person and had found an unexpected richness within herself as she aged. Meeting others remained difficult but wasn't quite as frightening as when she was younger. There had been a strange air of familiarity about some of her friends when they first met, as though they had known each other a long time, and these people remained closest to her. She received visitors constantly, in her hospital room which had such a pleasant view. *At least I can watch the sun setting through the leaves*, she thought each day. *How lucky I am to have a room with a tree outside the window. Is it fall already? It must be; the sun sinks behind yellowed leaves now.*

Towards the end, wracked by pain and delirium, she thought of the server in the cafe, back when she was in university. What had become of him, she wondered. And what if she had possessed the courage to return to that cafe sometime; what then? More to the point, why was she thinking of him at all, so many years later? She wondered if he had ever thought of her again. Autonym looked out the window of the hospital room, past the birch tree that had become her only scenery, up at the blue sky for the very last time. None of it mattered in the end, she supposed; and far too soon, all thought ceased.

Time was different in the bardo. The bodies of the souls all died at different times and places, yet all arrived here at once. The Matchmaker had prepared for the souls to arrive, focusing their Thought on the task at hand. In lifetimes past, they had experimented with different appearances, but now preferred to keep things simple. Any hint of the physical realms had been disposed of, here in this place that was not a place. The souls, on arrival, would still mostly trust their senses, and would view the warm, pleasant light stretching off as far as they could see. It appeared to be empty void with only the lightly glowing form the Matchmaker took to break up the monotony. The air was warm, with just a hint of breeze to caress the skin, and it was blessedly quiet, so none could ignore the important conversations to come. All these sensory details made it easier, in the experience of the Matchmaker—and they had been doing their work for many lifetimes—to ensure that it was very clear to the newly arriving souls that they were not in a world.

The Matchmaker watched as the souls appeared, bewildered, in the warm orange glow; a cycle had ended, and so a new one must now begin. They were eager to dispatch six of the souls back to a world. Judgement had been given,

sent down from above. Six were unworthy of escape from the cycle of rebirth, and four—four!—were ready to ascend. The most this Matchmaker had ever heard of in one lifetime.

They dealt with the six perfunctorily. One, they decided, must live the life of a dog, in the hopes that they'd learn how to feel unconditional love. Two had lived this past life with such arrogance that they would be rebirthed as sheep. Others were getting closer but needed another lifetime or two as humans to prove their growth was sustained. And so on.

Everything the Matchmaker did was in preparation for these moments, when the souls were rebirthed. They set the parameters of life for these six with care. Not only the where, and the type of creature, but also the when. Time didn't have to be linear, not for the Matchmaker. *We have done well*, the Matchmaker decided. *These souls will learn and become closer to escaping the cycle. And if it amused us to choose sheep, well, a sense of humour is sometimes needed in this line of work.* They could not make it too easy for the souls, of course. The Judges did not look kindly on Matchmakers who were too generous. Success lay in finding the perfect balance.

The four who remained, still resembled idealized versions of their human forms from this past life. Autonym and Agapē stared at one another in puzzled delight. She recognized the server from so long ago in her most recent life, and he had always remembered the quiet, nervous girl who had stopped visiting his cafe after he'd spoken to her. They had known one another in previous lives, sometimes very well indeed, stretching far back into the mists of time.

"How was it?" asked Agapē.

Autonym smiled warmly. "Wonderful," she replied. "My best life yet, I think. But I missed... something. How is it that we can be happy yet still feel empty sometimes?"

"You missed something? Or was it someone?" Agapē replied.

Autonym nodded.

"Me too," Agapē said, eyes never leaving hers.

"It hasn't worked out for us, the past few lives, has it?"

A thin, gossamer line of Thought connected the two. It was feeble, unpracticed, yet both lit up as they began to communicate without words.

Do you remember our other lives... they both Thought at one another. *Do you remember when...* Words were no longer needed. Images passed back and forth in a torrent of feeling. The birth of a child. Strolling through a garden in the summer, purple blossoms floating in the warm breeze. Holding hands as Agapē died. Embracing after a long conversation. Agapē and his family moving

into a new house, and meeting Autonym over the fence. Smiling through sickness. Huddled together near a flickering oil lamp while storms raged outside. Sharing an office at work. Fighting on the playground at school, only to become best friends. Reaching out in the night. Voices, and silences. Sorrow, and joy. And always—always—a connection; they had been friends, and lovers, and relatives. *Do you remember?*

But only in the lives in which they met. Nothing was a certainty. For example, just this past life—

“You four have earned release from the cycle of life,” the Matchmaker intoned, interrupting the images. “You will not be spun back into a mortal realm.” Nothing happened. Disappointment started to flow through the Matchmaker. They had expected immediate feedback from above. Was even this not enough for the Judges? Four souls, carefully guided to ascendancy in one lifetime? What more was needed for the Matchmaker to join the ranks of Judges?

Autonym and Agapē looked at each other again, and both nodded; the thin beam of Thought glowed like a flame, warm and bright. “Uh, please—is this allowed? W-we want another chance. At life?” said Autonym.

The Matchmaker was speechless for a moment. None had ever asked them to go back to mortal life. “Are you sure? You can recall all your lives here. Remember the pain, the disappointment. Not to mention how they end.”

“It’s worth it,” said Agapē.

The Matchmaker paused as they sent a ray of Thought above. They needed guidance for this unprecedented situation. The reply came quickly.

“You will be Judged again, based on this next life. You may not have the option to ascend for a long time, depending on your actions.”

“Understood,” said Agapē. Autonym nodded agreement.

Still they want to return, the Matchmaker thought in awe.

“You must also understand, it is possible you two will not meet. Nothing is guaranteed. If you do meet, the experiences of your lives to come may change your feelings. Are you sure you wish to give up the chance to ascend for more life? And... why?”

Agapē smiled. “Have you ever wished you could read your favourite book again for the very first time? You don’t know it’s your favourite, because you haven’t read it yet. But you know it must exist, and there’s a chance you’ll find it, lying on a shelf somewhere.”

Autonym laughed. “Yes!” Turning to the Matchmaker, she whispered, “I’m scared of so many things in life, but I want them anyway. Please?”

“Very well.” Parameters were set and maybe, just maybe, the Matchmaker bent protocol for these two.

We just said they might not even meet!

Never mind that. We will help these two, whatever it means for us. They’ve earned it.

Perhaps they could arrange it so these souls would meet somewhat later in life. When things sometimes have more meaning. The final burst of Thought was sent, and the two souls disappeared from the bardo.

Now two were left, of the original ten. The Judges had also deemed these two to be worthy of ascending; no longer would they need to enter the cycle of rebirth. They watched silently, speechlessly; in some lives they had also known Agapē and Autonym.

“And what about you two? Are you ready to leave the cycle, or do you also want to go back?”

The two shook their heads together. “I am ready,” one said. The other nodded.

Suddenly a glowing blast of bright yellow Thought engulfed the Matchmaker, and with it, revelation. Not all souls wished to move on at the first chance; wisdom lay in this realization. The Matchmaker had never asked a soul if they wished to ascend—always it was assumed they must, and no choice was offered. Had this been holding them back all along? Was giving the gift of choice what allowed Matchmakers to move forward? They began to fade away as now, with this new understanding, they had become worthy of the realm of Judgement. *These two might have a Merging at some point, the Matchmaker thought. Not all souls wish to Merge, but these might.*

The remaining two souls were surrounded by a white glow. They looked at each other and understood. The two new Matchmakers absorbed the Thought and began preparing for their new duties. They would not return to mortal life, but apparently that didn’t mean an end to toil.

A man sat in a large bookstore; two cheap faux-leather armchairs were arranged to face a low table. He sat in his usual chair, and the one beside him was unoccupied. The table was covered with books, magazines, and detritus from past occupants of these chairs. These had perused a book or magazine, and being done with it, tossed it on the table and left. It was the bookstore equivalent of a dine and dash.

He had purchased the book he was reading, a few days ago, and used the receipt as a bookmark. Just in case the staff at the store questioned him. They never had, but he didn't want any trouble.

The heat had been vicious this summer, and on some days, he couldn't bear the thought of going to his home without air conditioning, to swelter until it eventually cooled enough to sleep. So, he came here, enjoying the feeling of being alone in a crowd, waiting until the sun would stop glaring directly into his bedroom window at home.

He had come straight from work and wore a collared golf shirt that didn't fit well, and tan pants that were too short. His dark brown hair, liberally sprinkled with grey, had the look of one who waited too long for a cut or, as he would put it himself, wanted to get his money's worth. As he read, he caressed the pages with his thumbs.

Sensing someone looking at him, he glanced up. A woman, with grey strands in her short dark hair, had walked past, then paused. "Excuse me, have we met?" she said.

"N-no, I don't think we have," replied the man, surprised anyone would speak to him here.

"Oh, uh, sorry. You just seem familiar." There was a pause, and the reader returned attention to his book.

"What are you reading there?"

The man in the chair started to turn the cover towards the woman, then stopped. He seemed to gather himself, and looked up again, meeting her bright blue eyes, though his own face reddened. "Plato's *Symposium*. It's my favourite of the dialogues." The last sentence was delivered in a rush.

"Really? I've always meant to read Plato but never have." The man looked up suspiciously, expecting mockery yet finding only friendly interest. He began to turn back to his book, hesitated, and met her eyes again. Maybe he had met this woman before. Somewhere, perhaps.

"I can tell you about it." Autonym gestured hesitantly towards the seat beside himself. "Would you like to join me?"

"I'd love to." Agapē smiled and sat in the empty chair.

Famous opening line

"I had reached the age of six hundred and fifty miles." – *Inverted World*, Christopher Priest.

THE GOBLIN BAKER

by *Elizabeth Creith*

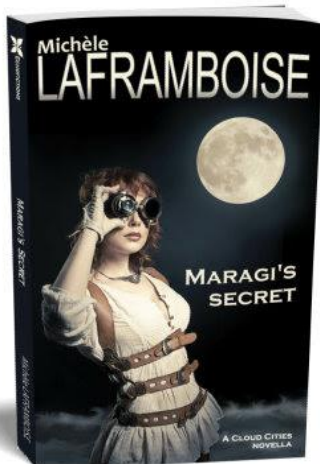
(Previously published in *Goblin Fruit*, summer, 2010.)

The goblin baker with his cart
Cried “Cricket pie and tadpole tart!
Spider strudel, newt éclairs!
Children, come and taste my wares!
Shortbread made with butterfly,
Scarab wafers, who will buy?
Praying mantis *petits fours*,
Pismire patties by the score!
Macaroons of dragonflies,
Gingerbread with insect eyes,
Pie of newt and scone of frog,
Pasties filled with polliwog,
Beetle biscuits, moth meringue!”
So the goblin baker sang,
And goblin children ran to buy
Tadpole tart and cricket pie.

Fresh from the Presses!

My steampunk YA novel *Maragi's Secret* is out on paper but will soon be available in ebook on all platforms! The original publication was in *Asimov's SF*, in the May-June issue.

For now, the [Kindle version available here](#)



The Laframboise's Fiction Universe is now counting almost 20 trad-pub novels in French, 80+ short-stories published in pro/semi-pro markets, about 15 graphic novels, and 40+ titles published by my own publishing house, **Echofictions**. I pen generally upbeat fiction but I do have a few dystopian tales published.

DIORAMA

by Don DeBrandt

“Got somethin’ special for you today, Nicky,” Gruenwald said. “Somethin’ you ain’t never seen. Be right back.”

Nicky looked around the shop while Gruenwald went into the back, seeing if there was anything new. Monster model kits of every kind lined the shelves behind the counter, from classic kaiju like Ghidorah and Gamera to monsters from anime and TV shows. Nicky’s preference was for older stuff, especially the B-movies of the 1950s that he’d seen on TV when he was a kid.

Gruenwald shuffled out front, holding a kit in one hand. He handed it to Nicky, saying, “One of a kind, this is.”

Nicky examined the kit. It was an Aurora, still sealed, one he’d never seen before. The front showed a picture of the completed kit, a diorama featuring a woman in a skimpy outfit chained to a stone altar in front of the arched stone mouth of a temple. Three large, malevolent eyes peered out from the darkness within, a fang-filled mouth visible beneath them and two giant, reptilian claws gripping either side of the arch like something inside was trying to haul itself into the light. *The Rider From The Abyss* was printed across the top in lurid, blood-red letters, and *Free film clip included!* was emblazoned beneath the title.

“Huh,” Nicky said. The cardboard of the kit was a little creased, and there was even some dust on it. “I’ve never heard of this one.”

“That’s ’cause it was never released,” Gruenwald said. “The movie it was based on, I mean. Some kind of scandal, somebody got killed or something. It was all hushed up. I guess they’d already made the kits and somebody kept one instead of trashing it.”

“How much?” Nicky asked. Kits like this were usually expensive, collectors’ items you could only find on eBay.

“It’s yours,” Gruenwald said. “You’re my best customer, you must spend every dime you got in here. Least I can do.”

“Really? That’s—wow, thank you,” Nicky said. “You sure? I mean, you could probably get—”

“No, no, I’m sure.” His eyes shifted from Nicky to the box and back, and he swallowed before adding “It’s all yours.”

On the bus on his way home, Nicky studied every inch of the box but didn’t open it. It didn’t have a date on it, but Gruenwald had said the movie was shot around 1951. According to what was printed on the side, the kit

contained a piece of the actual film. Nicky had his doubts about that—it was probably just a random snippet of celluloid—but what mattered was the kit itself. The eyes and fangs were even supposed to glow in the dark.

When he got home, his mother greeted him with “Why were you gone for so long? You need to make me supper!” delivered in her usual grating, whiny voice. Nicky had gotten used to it over the years, though, and it wasn’t like he could go anywhere else; his small pension wasn’t enough to support both himself and his hobby. His mother’s house was the only one he’d ever lived in, and he supposed it was the only place he ever would.

He mostly tuned her out as he prepared a meal of canned stew and buttered bread, meeting her usual demands for details of what he did while he was out with noncommittal replies. He didn’t have much of a life beyond visiting the hobby store, which he did almost every day; it was the only time he could escape her domineering presence. For a few hours, anyway.

He couldn’t wait to go upstairs and open his new acquisition.

After dinner, he closed the door to his room and sank into the office chair in front of his worktable. Shelves lined every square inch of wallspace, holding all the monster kits he’d built and lovingly painted over a lifetime. Stop-motion classics like Ray Harryhausen’s one-horned Cyclops, the six-armed Kali Statue or the reptilian Ymir from *20 Million Miles To Earth*. He had all the Universal Studios classic characters, too: Frankenstein, the Wolfman, Dracula, the Mummy, the Creature From The Black Lagoon. And of course, many Japanese movie monsters, from Godzilla and Mecha Godzilla to Kong and Mecha Kong, from Mothra and Rodan to Baragon and Biolante. In here, he was the creator and master of a fantastic kingdom; in here, all his mother’s efforts to make him feel small and helpless faded away.

He opened the box and examined the contents. Everything seemed to be there, none of the parts were broken. To his surprise, it did indeed contain a small film still, mounted in a little cardboard frame; when he held it up to the light, he could see a black-and-white image of the woman from the altar, her back to the camera, facing the empty, black mouth of the temple entrance, two rough-hewn rock statues with misshapen faces and three eyes standing guard on either side. There was even a little slot to mount the still at the head of the altar.

He wondered who the actress was, and rolled his chair over to his computer station to find out. IMDB said her name was Monica Halstead, and that led him down an internet rabbit hole that eventually took him to an old

interview in *Movie Monster Magazine* with an anonymous grip who claimed he worked on *The Rider From The Abyss*:

G: What you gotta know is that the director, Frank Korso, was always a little nuts. Had a promising career until his breakdown, when he spent six months in a nuthouse—this film was supposed to be his comeback. He found this location in Mexico, ruins of an Aztec pyramid deep in the jungle where he could film for cheap. Said some guy he was in the psych ward with told him about it. I don't think we had any kind of official permission to be there, but Korso brushed off any questions.

Working in the jungle was brutal. The heat, the bugs, the isolation. Half the crew came down with some kind of fever, but Korso made them work anyway. Nothing was gonna stop him from making this flick.

Thing is, it was originally supposed to be a scifi movie. Survivors of Atlantis who had built this secret city in the jungle, had robots and rayguns and all that stuff. *Empire of Atlantis* was the original title. The bit Korso was most excited about was the shrink ray. He had this guy in a gorilla suit, and when he got hit with the ray he was supposed to turn into this trained monkey Korso bought off a local.

I gotta say, though, that even though the working conditions were terrible the location itself looked great. The ruins were half-overgrown, but we cleared most of the brush away and found an actual temple we could shoot in. There were these big stone statues at the entrance, weird-lookin' things with too many eyes.

But then Korso started changing the script. New pages every day. Claimed he was having vivid dreams that took him in a new direction. It went from science fiction to fantasy, with the storyline now being about a lost Roman colony that worshipped a god from "beyond Space and Time." We had plenty of togas, so that worked out okay.

But the robot costumes—that was a problem. Korso wanted them turned into something closer to what the statues looked like. So they painted them to look like rock, glued on a bunch of fake eyes. But Korso put them in almost every scene, and those costumes were *hot*. The actors started passing out, and when they did Korso would go crazy, screaming and cursing. He was losing it.

And then...

Late one night, Korso showed up at Monica Halstead's tent with a machete. (silence)

MMM: I can see how hard this is for you. Do you want to stop?

G: No. I'm not supposed to talk about this, but it's been eating at me all these years. People should know. He didn't just kill her, he chopped her up. Chopped her into tiny little pieces. When they found him, all he could say was something like, "The One Take," over and over.

The studio hushed it up. I guess they paid off the Mexican authorities, I don't know. We all went back to the States, everybody was told to keep their mouths shut, and nobody ever saw Frank Korso again. I think he's still locked up in an asylum somewhere, maybe over there.

MMM: And what happened to the film? How much of it was finished?

G: God only knows. I hope they burned it.

That was the end of the article. He tried a few more searches, but he could find no mention of the kit anywhere.

Nicky got to work.

The individual parts of the kit were injection-moulded grey plastic castings, attached in rows to the inside of several rectangular plastic frames. He used a Tamiya side cutter tool to snip them free of the frames, then a very sharp exacto knife to trim any pieces that stuck out and a sanding stick to buff the rough edges. He laid all the pieces out on the green cutting mat that covered most of his worktable.

Like most kits, the finished structure would be hollow; parts were made to fit together, attaching via tiny sockets spaced along the edges of the castings. First he joined the larger pieces, using a thin layer of cyanoacrylate glue to securely bond them in place before painting them.

He started with the altar, a simple two-piece rectangular block made to resemble stone. He poured some Abaddon Black acrylic paint into a shallow, wide-mouthed pan and mixed it with a little water, then brushed it on as an undercoat. After that dried, he put a tiny amount of grey paint on a brush and then lightly dragged it across the rocky surfaces of the altar, a technique known as drybrushing that only left paint on the raised surfaces of the rock.

Then he “washed” it, brushing on a watered-down brown paint and letting the diluted pigment flow into the recesses and crevices of the artificial stone.

He repeated the process for the temple entrance, then used a deep black for the interior. The eyes and mouth were glow-in-the-dark pieces that didn’t need painting; he just added a little thin cement and snapped them into place. He noticed that the edges of the entrance cut off the tops of the three eyes and the edges of the mouth, suggesting that the creature inside was larger than the opening. He wondered why the statues guarding the temple entrance weren’t included; in the still they’d looked really... interesting.

He painted the hands gripping the edges of the temple entrance next, layering a Burnt Umber over a base coat of Blood Red to give the scales a flame-like hue, then used a high-gloss black for the claws.

The woman was last. He attached her head, legs and arms to her torso, then painted a base flesh tone on her exposed skin. He chose a yellow-tinted white for the toga she wore; too bright a white would look unnatural. He painted her hair a chestnut brown, layering it with some red to give it texture and differentiation.

Then it was time for final touches to her face. Her mouth was opened in a scream, her eyes wide with terror as she stared into the cave. He did her eyes first, making sure the whites weren’t too bright, and making the irises green. He used a toothpick to add two tiny black dots for pupils.

He thought about Monica Halstead as he worked. How many hours had she spent in a chair having someone carefully apply color to her face? How many times had she practiced the scream now immortalized in a tiny plastic copy? Was this the last expression on her face as Frank Korso swung his machete?

He added just a touch of brown to the inside of her nose and ears for shadowing, and a mix of rose and flesh-tone for her lips. The inside of her mouth was the same, with a little purple added to darken it. The finishing touch was a clear gloss over that, as well as her lips, teeth, and eyes. “Well, Miss Halstead,” he murmured. “I think you’re ready for your closeup...”

There was a sharp rap at his door. “Nicky! It’s time for bed! You can’t stay up all night playing with your toys!”

He bit back an angry reply. He was old enough to be a grandfather, yet she still treated him like an idiot child. “I’m almost done,” he said.

“And don’t keep your window open all night! You’ll catch a cold!”

She kept the house far too warm, and he often woke in the morning covered in sweat, with his bedclothes bunched up at the foot of the bed. “All right,” he said woodenly.

He went back to his work. The very last pieces were the manacles on her wrists, the eyebolts on the altar, and the chains connecting them. He used a gunmetal tint to darken all three, and needle nose pliers and jump rings to attach the chains.

Finally, he took the film still and slid it into the little slot at the head of the altar; it almost looked like a tombstone. He studied his handiwork and nodded. “No escape for you, I guess,” he said. “I know how you feel.”

Then he put his tools and paints away and went to bed.

In his dream, Nicky was in a movie theatre.

He was sitting in the very front row, with empty seats on either side of him. He was sure there was someone sitting behind him, but he didn’t turn around to look.

The movie he was watching was in black-and-white. On screen, a handsome man in a toga stood beside a chest high device that looked as if someone had wired a metal pasta strainer to one end of a large telescope and bolted a typewriter to the other. A shorter, balding man in a toga stood beside him. The background was simply a wall of large, rough-hewn grey bricks.

“This is the answer, Senator Argus,” the handsome man said. “With this, we can finally summon the Possessor, the Rider of the Abyss.”

“What?” the balding man said. He was sweating profusely and seemed confused. “No, that’s—that’s not right. This is a shrinking ray. That’s what’s in the script.”

The handsome man smiled. “A shrinking ray? I suppose that’s one way to look at it. The Rider is a being of immense power and proportion. His essence is spread throughout the void of intergalactic space. It would be impossible to manifest his true form here on Earth—we can only call down some small part of it. As long as we have the right vessel. Or vessels...”

“I—I guess that makes sense. We don’t have the budget for anything too flashy...”

Nicky could hear something in the row behind him. Something breathing. It sounded like the wind whistling through a cave.

The balding man took a step closer to the other, leaning forward, his expression agitated, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. “You—you know

what everyone gets wrong? About art? They think it's about creation, but that's not it at all. It's about *control*. It's about imposing order on chaos. That's what *everything* is about, really. Controlling your circumstances, controlling your direction. A director controls his actors, a writer controls a whole universe. But if you lose control? Then they take you away and lock you up. And then they control *you*."

Nicky could hear something else behind him. A low, grating sound, like a granite block being dragged over stone.

The scene abruptly changed. Now it showed the balding man from the waist up, and instead of a toga he wore a short-sleeved white shirt. He stood in front of a canvas tent at night, the only illumination coming from the lantern he held in one hand. "But sometimes you have to *give up* control. You have to *let in* something greater than you, so you can do great things. Only..."

The balding man held up his other hand. It held a machete, streaked with blood. "Only you have to do it *just right*, and I got it wrong. So very, very wrong. I thought I was supposed to make her *smaller*..."

Nicky heard a loud, sharp click behind him. Then another. And another. *Click. Click. Click.* Eight times in all. The sound of eight giant black claws tapping against stone as they adjusted their grip.

The balding man had his arms spread to either side now, his hands empty. The camera pulled back, revealing nothing but a blank white background behind him. The man got smaller and smaller as the camera pulled back, until it looked like he was falling into an endless white void. He repeated one phrase over and over as he fell: "*The One Who Takes. The One Who Takes. The One Who Takes...*"

Nicky could hear noises in the dark around him, loud creaking noises, almost as loud as the grating sound of rock being forced apart...

Nicky woke up, lying on his back, his heart pounding. He looked from side to side, and though it was dark he could see he was lying on a vast white plain. All around him in the dark he heard the same creaking noises, even louder than before.

They were the noises made by many plastic limbs moving for the first time. Of immense reptilian claws flexing. And then, the low moan of a woman and the soft clink of chains. His life's work had come to life.

Nicky was still in his room, still in his bed.

But now he was only six inches tall....

DEVIANCE

by Melissa Yi

Dancers and drummers, dramatists and such
Know there is something, and something too much.
Fiddlers and flautists and Fauvists of stardom
Suddenly whisked to asylum of Arkham.
Painters and potters may take to the wheel,
Swerving head-on to a bookmobile.
Comics, buskers, and similar beaux
Wake up still screaming at amorphous foe.
Artists Who Dream Things risk mental derangement;
Better the boredom of being their agent!

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POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #1 - January/February 2010)



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THE TURUL

by Lorina Stephens

Pounding of feet and pounding on the door. Pounding in Ferenc's young heart.

Out and down the fire escape, a slide into the winter night, Mama and Papa in front, Krisztian behind.

Quick and quiet like mice, Papa had said, sprinting from doorway to alley, scurrying through the streets of Budapest to the Keleti train station. Mama's hand around Ferenc's spoke what she did not: *Say nothing. Stay with us.* He glances behind to his older brother and finds comfort in the fact no fear shows on Krisz's face.

There are tanks rumbling in the streets, sharp phrases in Russian. Ferenc knows what's happening, what might happen to them if they are caught. Krisz had been at the university during the protests. He is known. And because of that they all have to flee. What are they without the promise of his youth, is what Mama and Papa said.

There the station and their hope of escape, a guide who will smuggle them out. But so many soldiers guarding the way. Patience, Papa says, and so they huddle against the wall, dark lumps on dark stone in the dark night, and Ferenc thinking *don't let them see us, don't let them.* A moment then, someone of authority speaking to the soldiers, attention turned away, and through the entry they slip—Mama, Papa, Krisz, and Ferenc—mice spilling into the flow of people, swept like flotsam in the tide of refugees. And then the long pull away and away from the home they've known, the city of light and music, of everything in Ferenc's young life. The clack-clattering of the rails, the pounding of his heart....

The pounding of his heart eases, only to be replaced by something that feels like a coat too tight, or arms squeezing too hard. He watches Papa, watches Mama, watches his brother and the city sliding by, so much of it dark now, he doesn't know why, but is glad they could get away from the soldiers and the tanks.

By morning they disembark and walk away from the small station, Krisz now taking the lead, urging Ferenc to keep up. There is a rendezvous to keep, a train of another sort which will trudge across the land, the engine the guide assigned to them, the fuel their legs. They pick up other refugees in their wake, now flowing into the forest, deep under cover and told to rest where sunlight

barely flickers, and mist rises to swallow sound. Krisz leaves them to listen to the other guides. They will travel by night from here on. Ferenc watches a girl perched on her suitcase, her face crumpled with fear and tears, and hiccupping through her grief. “I want to go back. I don’t want to go.” And no answer from the woman hovering over her like a ghost. Sunlight gone. Mist in the woods, brushing like cold fingers across their backs. He thinks he hears voices in the mist—the group he’s with, the soldiers, or something else old that lives in the darkness of the trees. He remembers stories he’s read, none of them happy: woodcutters bent on murder, wolves stalking the innocent, hags dining on children. He feels the weight of that terror, now become real in the soldiers who hunt them. He glances over to his parents, leaning against trees, eyes closed, faces pale in the mist. For a moment they seem as insubstantial as the vapour fingering through the woods.

And when all light fades they all rise as though enchanted, pulled on by terror of what might stagger behind them. None of them speak, afraid of what might hear them.

For how long, he wonders, can they keep up? Papa is old. He’s spent his life preparing medications for the people of their neighbourhood. He isn’t used to this work, of having to use his legs to fight the current of their desperation.

Ferenc whispers, “Let me take your suitcase, Papa.”

“It’s fine, son.”

But it isn’t. Ferenc knows. His fingers tighten and he thinks: *Make it easier for Papa.*

And just like that he takes the case from Papa’s hand, and refuses to give it back. “If Krisz can guide us, I can carry this.”

Papa’s eyes grow wide, a smile slipping across his lips and gone. “You’re a good boy, Ferenc,” he whispers, and Mama nods.

And so they journey all through the night, one step and one step and another after that, stumbling in the dark over roots and rocks, unable to see, denied lamps, only the moon to light their way which is full and flickering like eyes off the undergrowth, luminescent in the mist. *We need to go fast*, he thinks, aware soldiers stalk them like bears.

He pauses for a moment, swimming in exhaustion, hungry and his mouth so dry his tongue sticks to his teeth. He turns his face and sees a hart, the moon caught in its antlers, and in that moment a falcon settles on one of the beast’s great tines. He thinks he should weep. A woman offers him a gourd, says, “Drink,” so he does, and whispers, “Thank you—”

“—Emese.”

“Thank you, Emese.”

The water is sharp and cold and fresh. And when he goes to give the gourd back to the woman she’s gone. So is the gourd.

At dawn they can hear the *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire in the distance.

“We break up here,” Krisz says, and Ferenc goes still like the small creatures in the duff. Mud now on his knees, under his feet, and arms aching from carrying more than he can bear, his heart thud-thudding. “The adults will continue in the woods. Easier cover there. The children will come with me. We go out through the fields. This way we guarantee some of us, hopefully all of us, will make it to Vienna.”

“Down,” Papa says, lowering himself to the ground, and when Mama and Ferenc are there with him, Mama nods and closes her eyes, tears leaving white tracks through the dirt on her cheeks. Mists close around them again. Ferenc shivers, looking up to the branches where a falcon perches, a grey shadow in a grey world. He thinks of the *turul* of legend, wishes this bird could protect them in the same way, and like that the world goes away for awhile.

Mama wakes him with a gesture to eat. She offers him bread and cheese, and says, “Eat it slowly. I know you’re hungry. It has to last.”

But it feels like clay in his mouth and he pushes it back to Mama and says, “Maybe later,” knowing there won’t be a later because come nightfall he will say goodbye and part, and he fears he may never see her face again, never.... So many things never.

So he and Krisz stumble out and away from their parents, Krisz taking the lead with one other guide, down to the wildflowers, there to the hedgerow and a careful survey of what is ahead in the newly ploughed field ribboned with mist. Krisz pulls a compass from his trousers, nods to the northwest and says, “That way.”

“That way to Vienna,” says the man beside Krisz, also consulting a compass.

“What do you want me to do, Krisz?” Ferenc asks.

His brother looks down at him. “Just stay safe. If you do that, we will all be safe.”

So then into the rough terrain of the field, hugging hedgerows, travelling by night, Ferenc in the lead with Krisz, another student bringing up the rear and stragglers. They are away from the main thoroughfares now, away from the rails. He is so tired. It’s hard to focus, and when he does Krisz seems like a stag with the misty moon in his antlers. It isn’t until a falcon, improbably, alights one of the tines Ferenc blinks, stumbles, and realizes he’s been sleep-

walking, dream-walking, seeing legend where there are only branches silhouetted against the moon, a falcon roosting for the night.

The rest sinks into desperate flight, birds on the wing, seeking shelter where they can, rest when they might, and like birds they gather into a flock, a migration of refugees, settling, landing at last at the camp of Traiskirchen, friendly voices, ordered queues, tents and soup, relief and uncertainty, and Ferenc feeling small and insignificant in this mass of misplaced people.

In a moment of stillness, when he sits on a cot assigned to him, Ferenc looks up at Krisz, the brother he's lost, and says, "Now?"

And Krisz smiles, sad and proud, running his hands over Ferenc's face. "You've been a good brother."

And like the mists that had disappeared in the dawn, Krisz dissolves.

SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #1 – January 2025



Cover art: by Barabara Candiotti

Contents:

Exhibition – by Lu Xu

Looking Glass – by Lia Lao

Four Fabrications of Francine Descartes

– by Tim Major

Rent-A-Joe – by A.D. Sui

Publisher Cavan Terrill: "*Saros Speculative Fiction* is a sister magazine to *Fusion Fragment*. Founded in 2024, it aims to provide a home not only for great new stories, but to provide an opportunity for prospective editors to run their own issue of a literary magazine."

Editor Megan F. Kerr did a splendid job of sorting through the 450 short story submissions received. The four stories selected are innovative and original to the point of rising above most published works, never mind the infinity of slush piles. They represent the very best of science fiction today. Makes for a remarkable and wonderful first issue — *Amazing Stories* (RG Cameron)

Jan 17 at: < [Saros Speculative Fiction Magazine #1](#) >

THE GEOMETRY OF BOTANY

by *KB Nelson*

(Previously published in *Whispers From Beyond*, Crystal Lake Publishing, 2013)

“Keep it cool,” our battle cry,
“transpiration not perspiration!”
and so high-rises, office buildings
rectangular homages to concrete and steel
softened their edges

we webbed and latticed walls
festooned with moss and lichen
green and white as Christmas
decorated with the blood of our blisters
we laid fecund earth over roofs
seeded watered waited

walls rounded browns greened
with sprouts and leaves
smiles shared backs patted
audacious as a wart

the first collapse was an anomaly
the second, a concern
the third, a panic
as a pattern
emerged

the weight of life
descended to the streets
unwilling to be party
to this shroud of deceitful greenery
over rude squares and unseemly angles
we are now peacefully surrounded
chunks of concrete steel lattice earth
and broken bodies to fertilize it all

THE HAPPINESS OF OZYMANDIAS

by Jean-Louis Trudel

We were finishing a second tour of the Tau Ceti ringworld when a chamaeleon showed up to save me—though I very much doubt that was its original intent.

I was enjoying the view from the restaurant: left and right, over thousands of kays, the ring thinned into a bright silvery thread, becoming clearer as it rose so high that there was less atmosphere to look through, until it narrowed into an infinitely thin spike stabbing the sky. Closer in, the dining room overlooked a small park stippled with tiny ponds beloved by the local breed of sapient amphibians, for them to dip into whenever the wind blew too hard and dry.

The other customers seemed content, Aniella was all smiles, and I was loving the food. Fresh, crunchy bread with a fizzy vegetable paste that could be combined with either a sweet or a savoury spread. The mouthfeel was to die for, and the chef's online spiel attributed the recipe to an ancient Earth culture credited with the first Venusian cloud cities.

Yet, Aniella's eyes jumped away to track the approaching stranger. Bored already? My next thought was that she'd spotted an expected delight and that I should be happy for her, my sweet, dear wife. She'd insisted on that second tour, picked each stop, and compiled a list of sights, which might well include unusual entertainers plying their craft inside a domed restaurant. If it made her happy, it made me happy.

The newcomer's ribbon robe told me it was a chamaeleon, as the loose net of fluttering strips could accommodate any form. Seducer or shit-disturber, depending on one's view of their Existential Aesthetic.

As it wove between the tables and booths, the metamorph became more human with every step—losing the finned tail, single sensory tentacle, and four scaly wings it was sporting when I got a first look at it. I could only guess at the reaction inside the darkened booths enclosing customized environments, but the visible customers gaped. The chamaeleon dodged robot servers and human waiters to reach our table and spread its newly grown hands on the tablecloth.

“Why have you travelled so far? Are you just escaping your old routines?”

How did it know? Perhaps it was our discretion. Unlike the locals, we had minimized our profiles in the online Maquette. We didn't want to be assailed

with strangers clamouring for a hookup with round-the-ring travellers to find out how exotic we might be, in bed or otherwise.

Aniella contemplated the question, while I tried to signal my opposition to starting any sort of conversation with the creature.

“Travel is the surest way of meeting new and captivating beings,” I said, heartily wishing the chamaeleon would understand that I was not including it in that category.

No such luck. Sitting down at our table, the creature fully morphed into an Earth woman. Eerily like Aniella, in fact, minus the enhancements of our chosen Incarnation Aesthetic.

“Does that mean you like novelty in all things, Kim?”

She’d plucked my name from our Maquette profile. What else had she gleaned? I pointed to my partner.

“I’m happy as long as I’m with Aniella.”

“Do you agree?” the pest asked her, glowing with sisterly concern.

“Travelling with Kim is great,” Aniella answered at last, “but it’s starting to pale.”

What did she just say?

“But we have everything we need, dear,” I countered. “Each other and so much more. A polyshuttle with all the comforts of home. Multiple civilizations to discover along the way, each one with its distinctive pursuit of bodily pleasures. Endless answers, if we care enough to ask, about our ringworld itself, the orbitals we see at night, the shellworlds built around other stars, their builders, the meaning of life on a thousand different worlds and worldlets, and the dark histories of every known sapient species, from even before the Age of Construction. What’s missing?”

I extended a hand to clasp hers and remind her of more intimate moments. Her fingers stayed limp. Ignoring me, she addressed the chamaeleon.

“Am I happy? I don’t know anymore. We all claim to be. Don’t we owe it to our ancestors who dismantled entire planets to build our home? They were happy doing so because they believed we would be. The problem is that we cannot do the same. We’re the heirs, nothing more. I’ve looked for answers all around the ring, but I’m close to giving up. We’re the endpoint, and perhaps we’re a dead end.”

I was staring at her dress, the mood textile turning a darker shade of blue. She had never shared such thoughts with me, though I had often wondered what prodded her to keep travelling.

The chamaeleon smirked even as she radiated sincere sympathy. A neat trick, that. She had ordered with a wave of flapping ribbons and now played devil's advocate, as she sipped from a cup of bubbling red goo.

"Are you sure you've seen everything they built for you?"

I nodded vigorously. My wife had to know we'd only sampled an inkling of the ringworld's riches.

"I'm starting to think it's too passive," Aniella muttered.

Her dress was clouding over: a greyish gloom washed down its folds as if a storm threatened.

"We haven't seen everything yet," I threw in, desperate to keep her focused on the idea that new experiences still beckoned.

The chamaeleon paid me enough attention, for an instant, to plunge the knife where I was most exposed.

"How long would that take? You're closing in on, what, seven thousand years of travelling. How much more do you need?"

"Lots," I asserted.

"True enough," Aniella agreed. "There are thousands more societies and alien civilizations strung along the length of our ringworld. We've met all sorts of sophonts and constructs, admired great art, and spent days trying to understand what some of our fellow ringdwellers are up to. But they're changing all the time, coming up with new ways of having fun. They wouldn't be the same if we went back."

"You see, we'll never be bored," I added brightly.

The chamaeleon looked at me, her gaze inescapable.

"Have you ever wondered *why* they're changing all the time, every civilization and its most bizarre offshoots, everywhere?"

She's good! Feeling cornered, I gave the answer she wanted. "They're bored too, right?"

"They tinker to find reasons for staying put. Until they figure out they'll never outdo the ringbuilders or the Age of Construction."

Aniella grabbed one of the chamaeleon's ribbons and pulled the creature closer.

"You're right. The builders never considered our own happiness. They may have believed that colossal creations were a key to accessing the next evolutionary stage. The bigger the building, the quicker the transcendence to another plane. The nerve, the sheer nerve! Leaving us to..."

Her voice broke and I stepped in to offer comfort.

"It's surely better to have built something and..."

“Gotten bored? Please, Kim, don’t joke! I’ve built and built, opened myself to new realities, tried to enjoy them, but it’s not enough. I need more of a purpose... You, the shapechanger, why aren’t you happy with any single shape? What do you propose we do instead?”

“Our ancestors remade solar systems. We can do the same, if we destroy megastructures and return the Universe to its original, pristine state.”

Aniella gulped. “Tear it all down?”

The chamaeleon nodded affably. “It would be a first. And it might make all of us happy at last.”

“Not me,” I objected. “Destruction would be grand, but it would be a desecration. Sheer waste.”

“In that case, abandon them and move on. Your hands would be clean and there could be no grander monument to the original builders—and to yourselves. Immense wrecks, their very emptiness echoing down the ages with your decision to just walk away.”

Aniella shivered. “Sometimes, it feels so petty of us to keep living in what our ancestors built, like ants crawling in the hollow eyes of a gigantic statue.”

My gaze lingered on our tempter. The creature’s identity was protected by privacy laws. There were humans who chose reconstruction as metamorphs—just because they could bother people, if you ask me. However, I was nearly certain that she was a non-human sophont. Some were known for their scarily intense moral compass. Did her eyes gleam with a fanatic’s passion?

“Are you on a crusade to convince people to leave? Is that *your* purpose?”

The chamaeleon grinned as she avoided answering me, which told me enough.

“Those who leave would find renewed purpose in rebuilding their lives somewhere new and raw. The surface of a planet, the innards of an asteroid, the clouds of a gas giant... The struggle for survival would beget meaning, and meaning happiness.”

“I don’t know if I’m that kind of person,” Aniella demurred.

The chamaeleon pointed to me as she replied to her chosen model.

“I think you are.”

“How dare you?”

For a sickening instant, I saw anger in my partner’s face, aimed at both the interloper and myself. The chamaeleon did not flinch, lips curling as she held back an accusation or a revelation.

“Tell him,” it whispered.

Tell me what? Afraid without knowing why, I loosened my grip on Aniella's unresponsive hand.

"Kim," Aniella said at last, "I am truly sorry. The fact is you never agreed to follow me on a second tour. You're a construct."

My hand groped blindly for my glass of chilled tea. It almost grasped the chamaeleon's volcanic drink, but the creature removed it from my reach.

"Thanks," I said, rather insincerely.

It was a shock, but Aniella had shaped me to be good-natured. I could only love her more for creating me. I did not reproach her, but she offered a half-apology.

"I should have trusted you, my dear Kim. I was afraid of risking what we have."

Was I her monument, designed to be the perfect travelling companion, always eager for more? My gaze turned to our uninvited dinner guest and the shape-shifting meddler was fortunate that the local Hostility Aesthetic forbade the use of weapons, enforcing the prohibition with arsenals hidden in every nook of our surroundings.

"You've destroyed who I was."

"That is our Existential Aesthetic," the chamaeleon admitted. "Destruction of every shape we try on. Destruction by one's own hands, own deeds, own misspent love... I did nothing but strip away an illusion. You were always what you are. So, yes, let us leave empty ringworlds, star baskets, orbitals, and other ludicrous building projects. They will become a message for generations to come, by embodying the futility of selfless devotion."

"A warning: don't even think of building such monstrosities."

"The next best thing to destroying one," the chamaeleon agreed.

Anielle faced our visitor. "If that is your purpose, why haven't you left?"

"To grant the purposeless the purpose of destruction."

"Unless you intend more than mere destruction," I replied. "To sustain, instead. By providing the disaffected with a purpose as they set out to convince everyone to leave. A fully absorbing goal—even if they never achieve it."

My creator stared, suddenly convinced she'd built better than she thought, and I dared not let her look away.

"Now that I know what I am, Aniella, I can offer you a different grand tour. There must be more to our lives than fulfilling our ancestors' vision. This shapeshifter has changed what we are to each other, but we don't have to follow its lead and walk away. We can choose to defend what we have or leave a ruin—or find another purpose."

I watched Aniella’s dress replicate foliage, every leaf green as spring and gleaming with raindrops. Her hands hid her face, and her voice shook.

“Kim... I was thinking of getting rid of you soon. You were starting to bore me. But you’ve changed. And I’ll stick around, to find out if you’re right.”

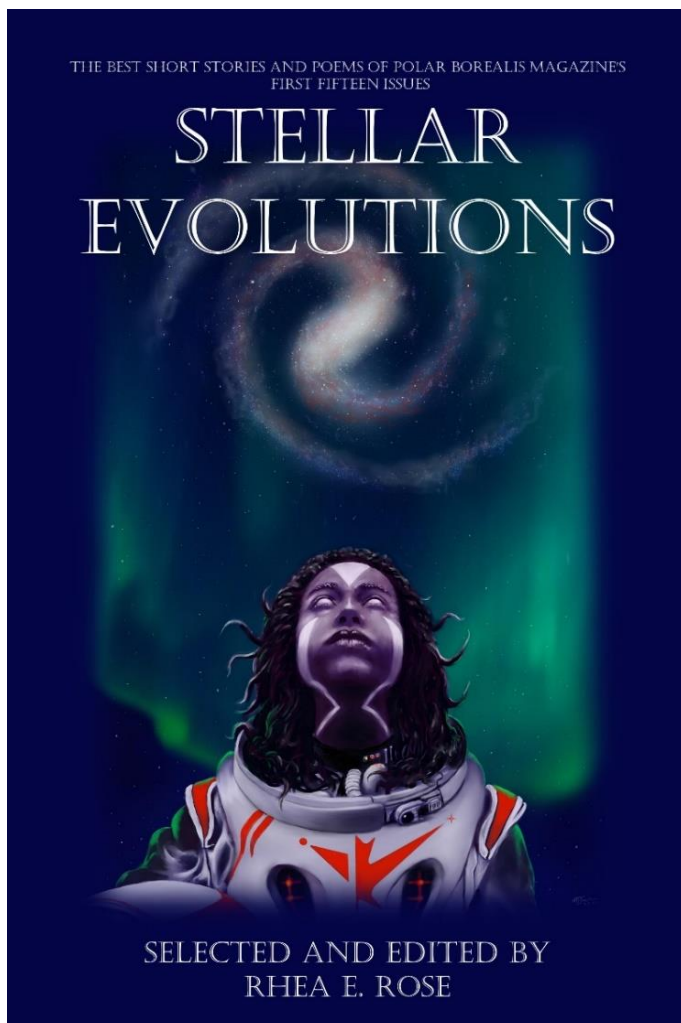
Even before I turned to thank my saviour and destroyer, the creature had begun sprouting a second face on her chest, while mandibles protruded from her armpits. It was changing into a Hortox nestling, though it was likely not her real shape.

Her voice already muffled by the thickening flesh, the chamaeleon yielded.

“Pleasant travels, then. I’ll ask again, in a millennium or two.”

“If it’ll make you happy.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Shawn L. Bird

Shawn was described by *Outlander* author Diana Gabaldon as “colourful and songful.” Shawn weaves both yarn and words. She writes in a variety of formats and genres, between entertaining her ebullient miniature poodle, playing the harp, and avoiding housework. Shawn lives with her long-suffering spouse near a mountain lake in B.C.

David E. Burga

David Burga is a Peruvian-born, Canadian geologist and writer. He has work published in *The Toronto Journal*, *Burner Magazine*, *Big Truths*, *The Lunaris Review*, and *The Nonbinary Review*. He was formerly a board member and planning team member with The Festival of Literary Diversity in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. David is @daveburga on X.

Eric Chu

Eric has been in the film and animation business for over 30 years. Working as a layout and storyboard artist, he quickly became known for reworking story lines to fit his own bizarre sense of humour. He worked on such projects as *Droids*, *Beetlejuice*, *Captain Power* and countless others. In 2002 he did concept designs for the new *Battlestar Galactica* where he was responsible for visualizing the look of the new Galactica, the Cylons, Raiders, Basestars and so on.

He works out of Paranoid Delusions, Inc, a Vancouver-based design company which he founded in 1985. He describes it as “a creative studio where ideas are isolated, incubated and bred to wreak mutant havoc on the world. We oversee every developmental stage of our creations, from initial

conception to design, modeling, re-animation and more.” Typical Paranoid Delusion Inc. services include design, illustration, animation, live-action films, and toy design.

Elizabeth Creith

Elizabeth Creith lives in a hundred-year-old cottage surrounded by roses and forest, with her husband, cat, koi and a lot of wildlife, some of which is occasionally inside the house. She once chased a bear away from her kitchen door.

Elizabeth draws on myth, folklore, nursery rhymes and fairy tales to fuel her art and writing. She knows more about the Middle Ages than is good for her, including how to spin straw into gold and how to tan an animal’s hide using its brains. She loves coffee, chocolate, cats, snakes, carrots fresh from the garden, fossils and quantum physics. When she isn’t writing, she commits art, primarily paper engineering, printmaking and bookmaking.

She is currently writing the third book of her “Wings of Valenia” trilogy. The first two, “The Swan Harp” and “The Lost King” (*Type Eighteen Books*) are available through Indigo.

Don DeBrandt

Don DeBrandt is a writer with over thirty years experience and 25 published novels. His natural habitat is a hot tub or Hospitality Suite at an SF convention, debating the merits of zero-gravity ping pong or the best weaponry to use against zombie squirrels. He is currently hard at work on his latest novel, “Multipunk,” the first in a planned trilogy.

Devan Erno

Devan lives in Calgary and manages his mid-life crises by writing a little bit of everything in several genres. When he's not writing, he's training for marathons. It has not escaped him that his chosen hobbies may point to some sort of masochistic complex. In addition, he spends time with his family of humans and animals, and works as a database administrator in health care. "The Matchmaker" is Devan's first published story.

Greg Fewer

Greg originally hails from Montréal, Québec, Canada. His speculative fiction and poetry have appeared in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Page & Spine*, *Polar Borealis*, *Polar Starlight*, *Scifaikuest*, *Star*Line*, *The Nafallen University Course Catalogue*, *The Sirens Call*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Worth 1,000 Words: 101 Flash Science Fiction Stories by 101 Authors*. He has twice been a Dwarf Stars finalist (2021, 2023).

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 with another dozen haiku 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's 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 78 stories thus far. Visit him online at www.geoff-hart.com.

Spencer Keene

Spencer (he/him) is a writer from Vancouver, BC. He works for a BC-based public legal education organization, creating guides and resources to help British Columbians understand their legal rights and resolve their everyday legal problems. In his spare time, he loves to write short fiction and poetry, mostly of the Gothic horror and speculative variety.

William Kingsley

William lives in a small village in Almaguin, Ontario with his partner. He has two cats, Shadow and Storm.

Rich Larson

Rich was born in Niger, has lived in Spain and Czech Republic, and is currently based in Canada. He is the author of the novels *Annex* and *Ymir*, as well as over 200 short stories, some of the best of which can be found in his collections *Tomorrow Factory* and *The Sky Didn't Load Today and Other Glitches*. His fiction has been translated into over a dozen languages, among them Polish, French, Romanian and Japanese, and adapted into an Emmy-winning episode of *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS*.

Marion Lougheed

Marion grew up in Canada, Benin, Belgium and Germany. She is pretty sure her family was not running from the cops, but she still moves around a lot, just in case. One summer, she lived on a 27-foot sailboat in Vancouver with her partner. People sometimes say Marion has “hidden depths” but that’s code for being a bit odd. She is happy being a bit odd. It helps her write speculative poetry. She’s been published at *The Arcanist* and *Black Hare Press*, among others. Read more of her work at www.marionlougheed.com

KB Nelson

KB Nelson is a Canadian writer who has won awards in both poetry and short fiction. You can find her work in a variety of publications including *SurVision*, *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, *Sea-To-Sky Review*, and *The Wild Word*. Her chapbook *The Muse of Natural History* was published in June 2021. KB has resided from coast to coast in Canada, in Arizona, and in New Zealand. She currently lives on the sunshine coast of B.C.

John Sloan

John has been writing for almost 40 years mainly as a journalist, columnist, and tech analyst. He chose this path because of *Lou Grant*, a degree in journalism, and a need to eat.

An early champion of the World Wide Web, he published a story in one of the first Web 'zines. (“Up in Smoke”, [InterText. V4N2](#),). A mere 30 years later(!) he again placed a piece in a Web publication (“Darned Mysterious” in [Every Day Fiction](#).). Between those digital bookends, John focused on technology writing being by turns a PC computing guy, a World Wide Web guy, a data centre virtualization guy, and a Cloud guy. He got out of that biz as the next guy will probably be an AI.

John was also a founding member of the Emily Chesley Reading Circle, dedicated to the greatest turn of the century ‘speculationist’ that never was. He contributed to their parody website and the fake journal *The Meanderings of the Emily Chesley Reading Circle* (2003). John lives in London, Ontario, in neither a rambling Victorian house nor a cozy flat. He does not own a cat.

Lorina Stephens

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

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

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

Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Louis has been writing and publishing since the 1980s, mostly in French, garnering about 10 or so Aurora Awards along the way. His publications in French (alone or in collaboration) include 3 novels, 4 collections, over 20 YA books, and more than 100 short stories. He’s also published occasionally in English. Publications in English include the story “The Snows of Yesteryear” (in the Tor anthology *Carbide-Tipped Pens*, reprinted in *Loosed Upon the World* from Saga and *Imaginarium 4*, as well as in Italian translation, earning an Honourable Mention from Gardner

Dozois), the story “The Way to Compostela” in *Asimov’s*, and the poem “The Night is not Dark” in the SFPA’s *Eye to the Telescope*.

Melissa Yi

Melissa is an emergency doctor who can’t stop writing. Her twelve weird, Lovecraftian poems will appear in **Cthulhu’s Cheerleader**, currently on pre-order and scheduled for publication in October 2025.

Each poem was inspired by a literary legend like Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, and nine are accompanied by original art commissioned from Canadian artist Sara Leger. “Deviance” is rooted in Dorothy Parker’s “Bohemia.”

In **Killing Me Sloth-LY** (<https://books2read.com/b/slothly>), Melissa’s heroine, Dr. Hope Sze, leaps from studying Parkinson’s disease to battling a killer cult that draws its strength from the mythical force of Cthulhu.

Melissa won the 2023 Prix Aurora Award for her poem “Rapunzel in the Desert” and the Derringer Award for short mysteries.

Since Melissa wastes too much time on social media, you can find her on most platforms through <https://linktr.ee/melissayi>. She also invites you to kick it old school with a newsletter subscription and a free gift at <http://www.melissayuaninnes.com> and <https://melissayi.substack.com/>.

Famous opening lines

“I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the Imagination.” – *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin.

“Not once in a generation did the voice of the city change as it was changing now.” – *Against the Fall of Night*, Arthur C. Clarke.

“Sigmund Freud, grunting, prepares to go out on the dark surface of Venus, effortfully puts on the equipment.” – *The Remaking of Sigmund Freud*, Barry N. Malzberg.