

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #33 – March 2025)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

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Poem – \$10.00

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< [The Graeme](#) >

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

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

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ART CREDITS - COVER: *Robot Rocket* – by Mark David Campbell

EDITORIAL

Canadian fans, it's that time of year again. **Nominations for the Auroras are open till April 5.** Your chance to nominate the creative works and creators you love. Show your appreciation! Nominate!

To nominate (and later vote) you need to become a member of the Canadian Science Fiction & Fantasy Association (CSFA). Only costs \$10.00 and is open to all Canadians. Go to <https://www.csffa.ca/> and join!

You can only nominate people/works from the eligibility list. The process is simple and easy. Follow instructions and you'll get it done quickly. As an added incentive, you can download numerous works to read them and thus discover works "new" to you that are worthy of being nominated.

You'll note *Polar Borealis* is not listed. I won five years in a row, a good, solid sequence, and that's sufficient. So, I requested that the CSFFA board keep *Polar Borealis* off the eligibility list. Time to give other people a chance!

I am currently listed twice in the "Best Fan Publication/Writing" category, for my reviews and a single issue of a fanzine, but my preference is for Rhea E. Rose, editor of my sister publication *Polar Starlight*" (entirely devoted to SF&F poetry) to win. I urge you to nominate her. She's done a terrific job putting together the 17 themed issues of *Polar Starlight* to date. I have no hesitation in promoting her excellent work for an Aurora. She deserves it.

In this issue of *Polar Borealis* you will find a wide variety of fiction, many of the authors new to the magazine. I like showcasing "new" authors. In particular, I single out "The Homework Assignment" by Mark David Campbell. It may not be to everyone's taste, but I find it remarkably original in its hard science explanation of the most ubiquitous and annoying aspect of UFO mythology. It is an example of speculative fiction in which the speculative aspect is foremost and quite innovative. Certainly, the best explanation of the subject I have ever read. As well as a subtly hilarious interpretation of academic life.

As for myself, my dystopian satire novel *Shatter Dark* has been accepted for publication by Alex McGilvery of Celticfrog Publishing in Clearwater, B.C. Artist M.D. Jackson, no stranger to the covers of *Polar Borealis*, is currently hard at work creating its cover. Needless to say, I am tremendously excited about the number one item on my bucket list coming to fruition. Incurable optimist that I be, I am already working on a sequel.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

ONE SLICE AT A TIME

by Rebecca Franklyn

the world existed once
or so we heard
but the aliens ate everything
one slice at a time

NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #36.



Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband-and-wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson out of Victoria, B.C., Canada.

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:

Mountain Peaks – by Karl Johanson

CONTENTS:

Holy Water – by Karl Johanson

Scientist's Cats – by Karl Johanson

Ransom in the Woods – by Robert Runté

Choosing a Game – by Karl Johanson

Five Word Story – by Karl Johanson

The Porter – by Matthew Hughes

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 #36](#) >

LUNA AWOKEN

By Isobel Cunningham

The moon opened her eyes. Over the lake, over the forest, over the mountains she looked down. The glittering pure disc trembled to see what beauty she poured down on hordes of uncaring humans. They were working, sleeping, playing, dancing on the night side of the earth. The most aware of them glanced up for a few moments and mumbled to their companions.

“What a crazy moon tonight!”

“It’s different, sort of shivering, blinking moonlight.”

“It’s because we’re so much in love.”

“It’s because there’s a sunspot exploding.”

“It’s because of the war.”

“It’s fall, hunter’s moon.”

“It’s smog, dust from a volcano, light pollution.”

Only one little girl standing on a dock out on a northern lake tugged her father’s sleeve.

“Papa. The moon is looking at us.”

He was silent for a long time.

“You’re right, little one. She is.”

“Why, Papa? Why is she looking at us?”

“She’s trying to decide if we love her enough.”

Just then an advertisement for a new SUV appeared on the surface of the moon. It was projected by a huge satellite. A billionaire popped champagne to drink with his friends to the new era of lunar advertising, of promotion, of wealth.

The moon simply closed her eyes and, in disgust, tore away from her orbit and flung herself into the limitless void.

Immediately tides fell, tsunamis rose up, women gushed forth blood, men lost consciousness, and every wild creature cried out in grief.

“Papa, what is happening?” called the little girl.

But her father had fallen into the still lake. He had plunged beneath the last silvery path the moon ever cast.

S.O.S.

by Gregg Chamberlain

Star light, star bright
Starship in peril
On its maiden flight
Multiversal chaos trails
Through the long quantum night
Any sane reality
Would be a welcome sight

ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #130 - V.34 #4



COVER: *Dragon Reader* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
FICTION:

Stone Tablets – by Kevin Cockle
We Invited the Harbingers to Dinner – by Sarah Totton
Raofin's Daughter – by J. A. Legg
Taking Root – by Jeanna Cammarano
La Fiera Di Mezzanote – by Hava Steinmetz-Cumbo
Shambolic Manor – by Cat Girczyc
Push Hands – Jack Castle
Toll of the Tides – Tom Brennan
Muddy Memories – Dana Vickerson
A Ballad in Ten Acts – Dave Côté & Pascal Raud
Carol of the Hells – Mike Rimar

NONFICTION:

The Road Ahead – by Diane L. Walton
Journey to Another World: Hava Steinmetz-Cumbo
– Author Interview by Roberta Laurie
Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk Retrospective

FEATURE:

The Snarling Stars – by Tara Campbell
Angakkuq – by Shantell Powell
Under a Strawberry Moon – by Crystal Sidell
What We Cultivate will Love Us – Crystal Sidell

At the Death, a Moon Daisy Plucked in Sijo (For Jeungjomo) – E J Delaney
Bots "Larry" & Comics "Surrender" – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < [On Spec Magazine #130](#) >

RITUALS

by Mark Hill

The eggs hatched a few days after you left. I removed them from the bodies with the care and patience you taught me as we practiced by plucking olives out of rotting chuck steak. They squirmed in my hand, and I remembered your touch as you shifted my fingers, ensuring my grip was just right. Firm, but gentle, you said. To simulate the warmth of the mother returning to its brood.

When the wriggling stopped, I worried I'd been caught in the moment and squeezed too hard. But then little claws raked my hands, and rough tongues slurped the blood. I opened my fist and saw slitted eyes blinking away the fluids of birth. I brushed their cheeks with the overwhelmed pride of a first-time father until my finger was chewed to the bone.

What is the purpose of a ritual if one of its participants has left? After my father was widowed, he continued to walk the same route on Saturday mornings and make the same brand of popcorn to eat in front of the same TV shows on Sunday night. It felt hollow to me, like he was trying to pretend the calendar hadn't turned.

And yet here I am, making the meals you liked and going to bed at the hour you preferred. I could shed all the inconveniences of relationships and live as I please, but your toothpaste remains just where you like it, in the spot where I kept my razor in my bachelor days.

You told me these creatures would change the world. We spent countless hours reading old books, your body pressed against mine for warmth. We travelled the world, emptied our savings on flights to Beirut and Samarkand. You showed me sights my quiet life never would have revealed to me. And then I did things for you I never would have done for myself.

Our children soon developed a taste for chicken and dog, although like all children their pickiness fades in the face of necessity. I am doing my best, but I'm not cut out for the life of a single parent. You're the one who wanted them, who dreamed of all they could accomplish. And yet you're the one who took our suitcases and left a terse note when I was out grocery shopping on a cold March night. I wonder if they miss you. If they sensed your cooing and chanting as they gestated.

As your words failed to exculpate me, I cannot help but ask myself what I did to drive you away. I know it's futile to dwell on these matters—people change, priorities change—but my mind wanders as I feed our children. Why

did you leave them to me? Was I not sufficiently committed to your vision? Did last minute doubts make you hesitate? Make you abandon the strange and beautiful life we built, to pursue the same mundanity you dragged me out of?

I suppose I'll never know. And, if our children go on to do what your books claim they will, I suppose it doesn't matter. But I still think about you at night, as I listen to their scuttling. Sometimes I creep into their room to pet them, although their claws demonstrate embarrassment at my affection. They look at me with what I think is tolerance, even respect, but they are maturing at a rate I cannot fathom and will be unable to contain. I will move them to the basement soon, so they can enjoy some privacy as they navigate the base emotions of adolescence. And then I will have to let them go.

All good parents must view their children with a sense of wonder, even when they're arguing and mucking up the carpets. I'm sure the wonder fades as the tedium sets in; I'm already sick of filling water bowls and discarding bones. But it is still strange and miraculous that our children began, as we all do, from such humble beginnings. From those little eggs I held in my trembling hand. I won't stand in their way when they're ready to go make their mark on the world, but my emotions will be bittersweet.

People told me I had my mother's eyes long after I'd forgotten them. What aspects of you will our children take into the world? Your ambition? Your hunger? Will they recognise your scent? Or will you just be another stranger? I whisper your name to them in the hope it will mean something.

When we started seeing each other you were happy to always visit the same coffee shop, the same bar, the same movie theatre. As I was and am a nervous man, I had no objection to maintaining our routine, but previous partners had bucked at my lack of adventurousness, and I worried you would one day do the same.

When I eventually expressed my concerns, you laughed and told me that rituals were the foundation of any good relationship, that if you couldn't picture yourself performing errands with someone for decades it was better to learn that sooner rather than later. Ritual, you said, was all we have. That was when I fell in love with you, and that is why I did what you asked.

I still have our rituals, even though you are gone. Maybe that's why my father behaved the way he did, to keep some shadow of my mother in my life. And so, while you can tell yourself what you wish about why you left me, whatever happens after I open our front door and set our children free falls on you too.

CHOICES IN THE MULTIVERSE

by Lundy Nicklen

Diverging. I am two.

I grab the strawberry jam.
I find the blueberry jam.

It's following me, again.
She is before me once more.

A wretched penumbra beyond my right shoulder.
A glimmering aura who brightens our soul.

The shadow lengthens.

Rediverging. We are three.

The toast pops—too soft.

The toast pops—just right.

The toast pops—too crisp.

What does it want?

She leads, we follow.

My fates beckon me.

Dread churns in my stomach.

Love blooms in my heart.

Calm settles in my mind.

I am haunted.

We are seen.

They are known.

It chases me to my car.

We rush to the car.

I follow them to the car.

I throw the key fob in the cupholder.

I drop the key fob in the cupholder.

I drop the key fob in my purse.

The light turns red as I reach the corner.

The light is red when I reach the corner.

The light is still red once I reach the corner.

I stop—the convergence consumes me.

I stop—the convergence integrates me.

I stop—the convergence subsumes me.

The shadows lift.

I park the car.

The sun is warm and bright.

I pop the last piece of my crisp toast in my mouth.

The blueberry jam is as sweet as the memory of strawberries.

The key fob rattles in my purse as I stride into another day.

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #24 – February 2025



Cover art: by Caitlin Fowler

Contents:

All the Pretty Starships fly like this – by J.R. Dewitt

As Big as a Whale – by Avra Margariti

Equilibrium– by Ryan Goderez

Guiding Star of Mall Patroller 4u-012 – by Eric Schwitzgebet

Lucinda Espinosa’s Twenty-Seventh Death – by M.R. Robinson

The Earthlight Bright Before Her – by Albert Chu

This Great Rumble – by Kate Lechler

To Impersonate a Celestial Body – by Yasmeen Amro

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 #24](#) >

OH OH OH

by Ken Deepro

“This course of action is unwise.”

Jake peered over the edge of the GravLift to the black-tiled floor ten meters down. Even in modest gravity, a fall from up here would hurt.

“What, Dax, scared of heights?”

“Our precarious footing is not of concern, but your scientific methods do have me worried.”

Jake dismissed that one with a wave of his wrench and continued securing the hook to the observation dome’s central strut.

“No reason for that, Dax. Haven’t you heard? I’m a boy genius.”

“I agree you are clever for your age, but this procedure may spawn unintended consequences. Perhaps you should consult your father before—”

“Oh, no,” Jake snapped, bemoaning the challenges of having an AI as his only friend. “I’m not bringing Dad into this. His stupid job is the reason I live up here, and he’s the one who cancelled Christmas.”

“Christmas?” Dax questioned. “That is not a word I know. Accessing... Oh Jake, it is a wondrous thing. Parties and presents. Ribbons and bows. It is such a joyous celebration, so why a dangerous experiment? Why not a Christmas tree?”

Jake cast his gaze over the barren landscape outside the dome’s perimeter, where Cernan Station’s surface depot sat a hundred meters to his right and the dust plume from a distant chomper marred the horizon on his left. Other than that, it was nothing but a sea of dusty grey rocks set against an ink black sky.

“It’s the moon, Dax. You see any trees out there?” He tugged his wrench on the final bolt. “If you really want to know what I’m shooting for, look up snow globe.”

“Accessing... Oh, dear.”

Jake clipped the bucket of dry ice to the newly installed hook, then instructed the GravLift to return him to the floor.

“Besides, what makes you think it’s dangerous?”

“The gases you are combining will create an endothermic reaction. The sudden drop in temperature may cause the safety system—”

“May cause? You don’t even know?” Jake scoffed. “Like I should listen to someone who didn’t even know what Christmas was thirty seconds ago.”

“I hardly see how the two are related.”

Jake rolled his eyes, returning to his laptop to complete the hack of the dome’s control system. He hummed carols as he worked, aligning the fans to get a nice circular breeze flowing. Dax was right about one thing—it *would* get cold in here. That’s why he wore the SASuit. Even with the helmet retracted, it would keep him warm if this little test run actually worked. It also meant Dax could upload directly into the suit, providing a bit more processing power than Jake’s wrist unit. Not that more insights from Dax were what he really needed right now.

Jake looked up to see the band of green status lights circling the dome’s central ring, verifying everything was good to go, then reached for the first gas cylinder.

He paused.

“So, what *would* happen?” he asked. “If the safety system kicked in.”

“If the dome were flooded with Haedron 23, it may act as a catalyst, potentially igniting an explosive reaction—”

“Haedron? That would only dump for a radiation threat. What’s that got to do with me?”

“Emergency protocols operate on fail-safe algorithms. The system is likely to—”

“Likely?” Jake turned the valve on the first of three cylinders, releasing a satisfying hiss.

“Forget it, Dax. This thing’s a go.”

With the third tank open, Jake immediately felt a chill on his cheeks and saw fog spinning around the bucket high above. He watched ice crystals form in the swirling cloud, then drift slowly towards the floor. Racing for the centre of the dome, he opened his mouth to catch one on his tongue. As the first flake settled, Jake felt the satisfying coolness drift down to the tips of his toes.

Clunk!

In the span of a single heartbeat, elation turned to dread. The safety system had just isolated the dome from the rest of the station and turned status lights red. Jake turned to see a white cyclone raging overhead as the Haedron went to work.

Fffffooooooooooooffff!

Alarms wailed as a wall of ice crystals raced towards him faster than he thought possible. He turned to run, but before he could take a single step, the torrent of snow swept him off his feet, launching him towards the skin of the dome. Fortunately, Dax’s reflexes were quicker than his, activating the

SASuit's crash mode to deploy the helmet and inflate the internal air bags. Jake smashed against the glass with a bone-jarring thud, now pinned, three meters off the ground and unable to move.

At least it wouldn't get worse. Jake knew the duration of an explosive reaction was measured in milliseconds, so it was over for now.

Except for the embarrassment, of course.

He shuddered, imagining the rescue team, no doubt led by his father, assembling at the base of the elevator shaft thirty meters below. Soon, he feared, a group of gawkers would form outside to witness the spectacle. An inflatable boy, arms and legs splayed in the shape of a star, plastered against the glass by a wall of snow, set aglow by the pulsing red and green lights signalling the transition to all clear.

There was no chance he'd ever live this one down.

"Jake..."

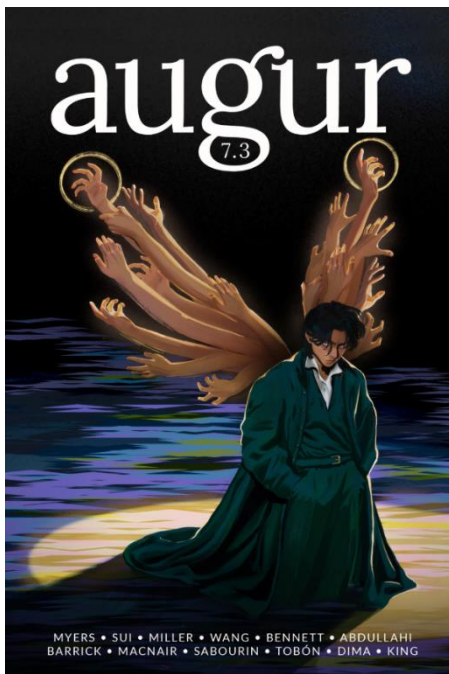
Oh, here it comes.

Jake steeled himself for the inevitable "I told you so" from his gloating AI friend.

"Yes, Dax, what is it?"

"Merry Christmas?"

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

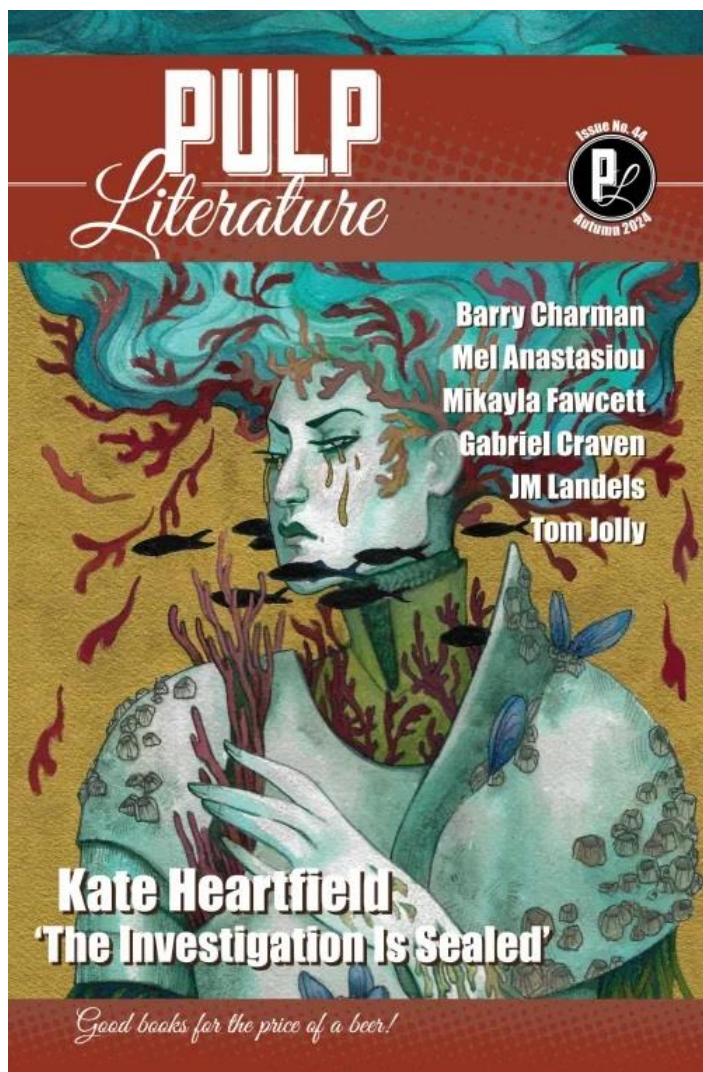
Find it at: < [Augur Magazine issue 7.3](#) >

WHY I DON'T SWIM AT THE COTTAGE ANYMORE

By Chris Clemens

At sunrise alone on the dock I saw a swirling red disc descend impossibly,
hovering above the shimmering lake before easing in without a splash, leaving
no trace but a pulsing rusty glow waning deep beneath the lily-dotted surface.
Nobody believes me.

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 LAST HUMAN

by Steve Gold

Our ships are shaped like saucers because we used to be food, but no one's eating us now. We zip around wherever we please: to the edge of the universe, where we dare each other to push against the side (it's springy), or to supernovas-in-the-making, the greatest show. Sometimes we strike out for the darkest corners of space and enjoy the solitude found in the void between galaxies.

But our favourite thing to do is check out what the humans are up to. Many species on this physical plane have discovered fire, but no one's made it quite as cozy and delicious as the humans did. We were there on that first night, as they danced in the cave. We were dancing, too.

There would be no dancing today; our scans suggested that, as far as *Homo sapiens sapiens* went, Earth was down to the last one.

There were still people on the planet, of course. About two billion of them. But even if you're just hanging out for millions of years, minding your own business, genetic drift does a number on a genome, not to mention climate change and other pressures. The humans had quickly abandoned genetic engineering, but all evolution needed was time. Skulls got smaller and now housed more efficient brains that ran cooler and quieter. Limbs and torsos were long and lithe, a stickbug's frame, better to release body heat in a warmer world. Once-atavistic tails were now the norm and helped balance out the new body plan. People had fewer teeth, more sweat glands, and the ability to digest plastics.

It was hard to miss: three million years after human fingers first painted a horse on a rock wall, *Homo sapiens sapiens* was gone.

Except for this one guy.

Now, he wasn't the only person with ancestral traits. There were lots of people whose constellation of features might recall the body types and physical presentations of the Anthropocene. Neither was he a walking fossil: he was tall, compared to the average ancient human, and he could out-sweat any of them. But let's put it this way: if you dropped this guy on a bench somewhere during the first million years of human civilization, people would ignore him just like they ignored everyone else. As we looked around at the countless ways the new people were presenting themselves to the world, this guy stood

out. He was the last grain of sand in the hourglass before everything tipped over into something new.

We had to talk to him.

We set our saucer down and approached, silver robes a-flutter.

“We think you’re the last human,” we said.

“Sorry?”

“You look just like Keanu Reeves.”

He stared at us, trying to decide which of our three eyes to look at.

“It’s better if you see for yourself,” we said. We beckoned: “Come, last human. We have many wonders to show you.”

His friends had flaked on him and he was curious, so he followed us into the ship.

First, we impressed him with our technology; to show him this was not a fly-by-night operation. Our devices were advanced and plentiful. They had been made from minerals strip-mined from our home planet, and the replacement planet, and the second replacement, which had hardly been worth the effort.

“This device sequences your DNA when you look at it,” we explained, “and when this one beeps, it means it’s time for a siesta.”

“Are we having a siesta?” he asked.

Quite the opposite, we said, and got down to business. We told him our suspicions, that he might just be the last person who could be called *Homo sapiens sapiens*. He was the click of the odometer, the tear of the calendar, the slamming door. If people were a grab-bag of traits, mixed and matched every which way, he was statistically the closest living thing to the *sapiens sapiens* of the past.

“You look like you could be a million years old,” we told him.

He smiled and said, “Sometimes I feel like it,” bending a creaky knee.

We liked him. He was easy-going and agreed to take part in our tests, so long as we were done by sundown, as he had to go to a dark, noisy chamber where people habitually gathered to move erratically yet also synchronously. It was an ancient custom we knew well.

We nodded respectfully and wasted no time.

We recorded him in 2D, 3D and 4D. Upon experiencing a slideshow of this data set to his favourite song, he reported a headache.

There were tests of cognition: we asked him to count backwards from one hundred in five languages, some of which he spoke, and had him play checkers with us until we won a few games.

The extraction of various bodily fluids was our next step. This went smoothly until we realized, upon trying to put everything back into his body when we were done, that they were not interchangeable.

After he stabilized, we continued: we had him run a half-marathon at a comfortable pace and freedive as deep as he dared. That was almost the end of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, but we were able to revive him.

To obtain an accurate measurement of his brain's weight and volume, we removed it from his brain case and then sealed it back in with our bone-knitting pen. He noticed the gap in his consciousness, but seemed unperturbed by it, commenting that he appreciated the break.

We also brought him various pets and monitored his reactions. Good rapport with cats, we noted, but interactions with pigs were contentious.

Finally, we had him lie down on a drafting surface and traced his silhouette, then asked him to paint it. The result was joyous, melancholy and wistful depending on lighting conditions, particularly interaction with fleeting sunbeams.

By the time our testing was complete, there was no question in our minds: he was, indeed, the last human.

The certificate we presented him with seemed to only confuse him.

"It's an ancestral human document," we said, "confirming you are the last of your species. It is made of paper."

"Paper," he repeated. To him this was a pair of syllables without meaning.

"Made from trees," we clarified.

"Trees," he said uncertainly. Much had been forgotten, we realized. The ancestors he resembled would not recognize this new world.

We walked him back, weaving through the glass forest of carbon dioxide-filtering algae tanks, and left him where we found him. Before parting ways, we soberly reminded him that upon his death, an age will have passed.

"Thank you," he said politely.

Back at the ship, we agreed it had gone splendidly. As if on cue, a device beeped.

Time for a siesta.

But then the board called us up.

It had been a minute since we'd checked in, cosmically speaking. A request was appended to the summons: we were to bring the last human along, as a witness.

A witness to what?

The home station was a few galaxies over, an afternoon's commute. When we entered the chamber to meet with the board, the last human was provided with a high-backed chair, water, and biologically appropriate snack items.

We, however, were ushered into a translucent sphere with no amenities to speak of.

This was embarrassing.

The board came in, a dozen silver-robed figures with bulbous black eyes and smooth round heads. They floated off the floor and circled our sphere like fish drifting in a current; around and around and around.

The director spoke for the group. "What have you two been doing out there all this time?" he asked.

We had no way to answer.

"It says here you spent a thousand years flying a figure eight around the Messier 51a and Messier 51b galaxies."

We exchanged a look. "You know about that."

"You might not remember me," said the director, "but I remember you. The last time you stood here you signed an agreement. Do you know what it said?"

We hadn't the faintest.

He went on. "You agreed to stay out of the business of other peoples. It was binding."

We conferred and turned back to him, displaying the inside of our nostrils in a submissive gesture. "If you have our signatures on such a document, sir, may we see it." Perhaps a bureaucratic lapse might save us.

The board floated the original document across the chamber and popped it into the sphere. We looked it over. It was all there, etched into the hardest synthetic, immutable. They had us, dead to rights.

"When all this is gone," said the director, "someone might come along and find two sets of remains fossilized two million years apart. And that someone might say one set is this and the other is that. *Australopithecus afarensis* and *Homo ergaster*. *Eohippus angustidens* and *Orohippus pumillus*. An incomplete record invites such labels and makes them possible. It's easy to demarcate species and genres when the examples are so sparse.

"But we are burdened with knowledge. Our ships are shaped like saucers because we used to be food, but now we know much and forget little. We know that every individual human looks like their parents, and so on, all the way down the line to when their ancestors were burrowing in the dirt, crawling onto the shore and swimming in the sea. Each successive generation, indistinguishable, yet over time, revealing incomprehensible change.

“Two fossils might be different species. But when you fill the space between two drops of water with an ocean, how do you count the drops? We’ve observed humanity for millions of years. We’ve seen the gradual change in populations, as smooth as the brightening dawn. You two have drawn an arbitrary little circle on that endless gradient and called it the last of a species whose population continues. Do you think that’s helpful?”

“But—”

“Life is just changing populations flowing in and out of each other. The people of Earth still can’t agree whether *Homo habilis* should actually be classified as part of the *Australopithecus* genus. But you were somehow able to pick a single person up off the street and determine that he marks the end of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.”

This wasn’t a question, but it seemed to contain one. We nodded in unison.

“And that brings us to the other problem we must address—your ‘tests’ were unauthorized, invasive and,” the director’s three eyes rippled disapprovingly, “of dubious scientific value.”

He addressed the human, who had finished all his snacks. “We apologize. Now here’s what we’re going to do.”

The board dismissed us. The next day we returned to Earth, the last human in tow—Barry, we had learned—and handed him the keys upon arrival. The ship was not his only compensation, but the board had not seen fit to involve us in the details of the resolution any more than strictly necessary.

His family was waiting. They’d been worried sick. After a tearful reunion, they all streamed into the saucer, Barry and his brethren, plus a few friends. The line between a *Homo sapiens sapiens*-looking guy and a *Homo* something something was no line at all, just threads of relatedness with no hard boundaries. Something had changed, would always be changing, and our language to describe it was wanting. The hatch closed and they shot off into the clouds, into the blue, into the black, into the spaces where one thing becomes another, lost in overlapping brushstrokes.

Having lost our saucer, we chartered a flight home. The board denied the expense.

Upon our return to the home station, the board reprimanded us further, halved our pay and put us on permanent desk duty—in retrospect and all respects, a far greater kindness than we deserved.

ON THE DEVIL'S WINGS

by Lori Green

When midnight breezes return to blow,
you'll find me there, beneath the shadow
of doubts that linger across the stone,
under a waning moon; cold earth below.

I wander again, no longer alone,
once more alive, I am sinew and bone.
Your blood coursing through my veins
as others join us, pleasures yet unknown.

The apple falls, unlocking the chains
of dreams unleashed, eating up the night,
a flash of teeth, my lips now stained
with honey and blood, such rich champagne.

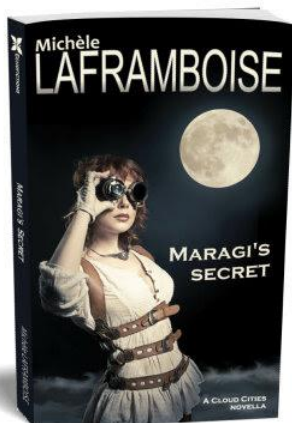
The cock now crows, before first light,
and dark times end in mourning.
We burn to ashes, the Devil's delight
descending down, our black wings take flight.

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.



JUST DRIVE

by Matthew D. Del Papa

Irate, again, at his favourite ball-team's chronically inept performance Kenneth Booker screamed at the broadcast, "Bunt, damn you!" His voice broke with age and disuse. No one heard. He lived alone and, as he made sure to inform every visitor, "liked it just fine."

Onscreen the overpaid batter popped up, having failed to advance the runner; and Kenneth, unable to restrain himself, threw his beer at the screen in disgust.

His drink sailed through the image, hit the wall, and dropped to the floor without spilling a drop. The pouch automatically sealed the moment it left his hand.

"Dammit!" he shouted, missing the satisfying *clunk* of a well-tossed can. Kenneth longed for the days when the smell of spilled beer would linger in the air for days.

The beverage joined three others—an average start to a ball game these days for the long-ago minor leaguer.

"Beer!" Kenneth announced to the eavesdropping electronic home-assistant and opened the robot-delivered pouch before sipping at the not-quite-right taste.

Across the room his TV slowly reconstituted its three-dimensional image and, flashing a bright red warning light, announced in that annoyingly cheerful synthesized voice he hated so much, "Please refrain from damaging the projector."

The picture re-formed in time to show "his" team ground into an inning-ending double-play.

"Don't no one know the fundamentals no more?" he demanded, not quite angry enough to throw another beer. "Hit and run? Small-ball? C'mon!"

Like everything Kenneth owned, his TV was old.

"It works," he told anyone who asked, not that many did. Especially not when the game was on. No matter how sophisticated, and some Tri-D came with enough features to make a person's head spin, none offered the option he wanted: a way to watch the game without interruption.

Turning the volume to a deafening level usually worked. Unfortunately, that trick wouldn't work today. His latest distraction remained outside—a car horn sounding, loud and insistent, from the driveway.

Kenneth tore his eyes from the game, where his beloved Vancouver Orcas were losing to the hated Yankees, and glanced out the window.

An unfamiliar car was parked out front. It was a sleek little number, all windows and chrome.

The horn sounded again. This time accompanied by a familiar wave—his son Stephen in the front seat.

“What now?” Kenneth asked. Pausing the game, he struggled from his chair and, hurting with every move, grabbed his walker. The ninety-three-year-old made sure of his grip then shuffled to the door and out. He took little mincing steps as he moved down the ramp. *Old man steps*, he thought with disgust.

He knew his body was failing him but hated being reminded of that fact. Medical science could keep him alive but most days he wondered: *Why bother?*

Kenneth used to leap to his feet and take stairs three at a time. Back in his prime he could stretch a double into a triple with speed alone. And now he counted it a minor miracle to not drip on his slippers while using the toilet.

“Isn’t she a beauty, pop?” his son called, intruding on the sour thoughts. Stephen stepped outside the vehicle and leaned against it in a suspiciously casual posture. “I just drove her off the lot,” he added, sounding proud.

Kenneth neared the car, shifted his walker to hover-chair mode and plopped himself down on its built-in seat. “Seems nice.”

“Nice? Nice! This is top-of-the-line. Hydrogen-electric powered. All the bells and whistles. Every comfort imaginable!”

“Seems *very* nice,” the older Booker hedged, tone making it clear he wasn’t prepared to say any more.

Stephen looked like he wanted to argue but instead forced an unconvincing smile, and, with a casual throw, tossed the oversized key fob. “It’s all yours.”

Kenneth’s reflexes might not be what they once were but he wasn’t so far gone as to miss that slow-moving target. “Ah, Stevie,” he said, catching the keys before looking up tired and...broken. “You know I can’t drive. The government took my license, remember?”

The ninety-three-year-old would never forget—it had been the most humiliating moment of his life.

“I didn’t forget, pop. It’s a self-driving car. Just get in and tell it where you want to go.”

“Really? I can go drive again?” The idea appealed to something deep in Kenneth. *Freedom*, he thought. *At last*.

Nodding his enthusiasm, Stephen said, “Get in and give it a try.”

Kenneth climbed into the new car—*my* new car!—and waited for the automatic door to close behind him. “Welcome,” the car said, its voice female and comforting. Sounding nothing like a computer, the car continued, “Please specify your desired destination.”

He reached to caress the steering wheel, an action born from eight decades of driving, only to find there was no wheel. The dashboard, all elegance, featured uninterrupted leather.

“Take me to the corner store,” he said, loud and clear.

A mournful beep sounded. It was followed by, “Please be more specific.” There was even a hint of apology to the request. *Definitely top of the line.*

“Grover’s,” Kenneth said, speaking slow.

“Please be more specific.”

Voice not quite a shout. “Grover’s Convenience Store.”

Using the full name did the trick. The car gave a happy little chime and, with a whir of its ultra-efficient engine, backed out of the driveway. The journey, short and anti-climactic, ended with Kenneth’s arrival at the nearby corner store and the car announcing, “We have reached your destination.” He appreciated the inclusive term, like he and the car were a team. Kenneth missed being part of a team.

He didn’t bother climbing out. There was nothing he needed. Instead, Kenneth sat in the parking lot and smiled. Finally, though he said, “Take me home.”

“Please be more—”

“I know. I know. More specific,” Kenneth sighed. “Twenty-Nine Bluebeard Road.” Then, knowing he was being petty added, “Sudbury, Ontario. Canada. That’s on planet Earth.

Kenneth had learned his lesson. He went home and, after making enough fuss to convince Stephen that he really did appreciate the gift, downloaded the car’s instruction manual.

“Proper names, eh?” he said on skipping to the relevant section. “Fine. I can do that.”

“Lucky Strike Casino,” he said sitting in the car early the next morning.

There came a long pause then the car said, “That destination is not valid.” It sounded disappointed.

“*The* Lucky Strike Casino,” he tried.

“That destination is not valid.”

“Well, damn me. Why not?” The car didn’t answer. “Okay, let’s go to...the LCBO.”

“That destination is not valid.”

“What!” Kenneth wanted to punch the non-existent steering wheel. “Fine. Take me to Bergmann’s. Bergmann’s Bar on Maple Street,” he added, figuring that would do the trick.

“That destination is not valid.”

“Where’s the nearest mechanic?”

“Tom’s Auto Repair is 4.9 kilometers away,” came the oh-so-helpful reply

“Take me there,” he said. “See what you think of that!”

“...and it keeps saying ‘Destination not valid’,” he explained. “Won’t take me to the bar or the bingo hall or nothing. The damn car’s broken and it’s not even a day old!”

Tom wiped spotless hands on a pristine rag and chuckled. “It’s not broken,” he said shaking his head, “I see this all the time.” Looking anywhere but at Kenneth the mechanic explained, “Your car has a GPS.”

Seeing the confusion, Tom added, “*Grandparent Protection System*. It’s a security feature. Meaning certain locations can be blocked.”

“Blocked? Who’s blocking me? It’s the government, isn’t it?!”

“Probably not,” the mechanic answered. “You said your son bought it for you? I’d start with him.”

Kenneth’s eyes burned, “That little sh... This can’t be legal!”

“Oh, it’s legal all right. Even comes factory installed. Just a little piece of code added to the onboard computer.”

“Take it out... take it out right now!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Booker but I—”

Not waiting to hear the rest of the mechanic’s sorry excuse, Kenneth interrupted, “Fine! Whatever. Just give me a hammer and point me at it. I’ll settle this Grandparent Protection System but good.”

It took twenty minutes before the ninety-three-year-old was convinced that hitting his GPS with a hammer wouldn’t help.

“What about turning it off and then on again?” he asked, desperate.

“Restoring it to the factory default?”

“There’s nothing to be done.”

Fuming, the garage's latest customer—yet another senior confronted with a controlling child and a computer-curtailed conveyance—argued, threatened, bribed, and, finally, begged.

“The only option is to remove the whole AI system. And that’s illegal while the Supreme Court decides on their status. No,” Tom finished, “my advice is to just find a way to live with it.”

“The hell I will!”

Badly wanting to squeal out of the garage, leaving skid-marks in his wake, the ninety-three-year-old swallowed his anger and told the car, “Take me home. Twenty-nine Bluebeard Lane.”

It did... at a safe and sedate pace.

“I’m a smart guy,” Kenneth reminded himself after a frustrating week of driving everywhere but where he wanted to go.

The car refused to recognize any ‘morally questionable’ destination—the GPS had been set to block locations deemed ‘harmful to physical health and mental well-being’. No casinos, no bars, and no strip clubs. It wouldn’t even take him to a ball game.

Yearning for a stadium hot dog, Kenneth just drove... directionless. Moving made his four-wheeled prison seem less confining.

Nothing he tried worked to change its mind. Not repeating. Not yelling. Not even hitting—and Kenneth tried that last several times, even digging an old wooden baseball bat out of the closet to aid his blows.

The car reacted to that. Flashing a bright red warning light, it announced, “Please refrain from damaging the vehicle. Damage to the vehicle may void the manufacturer’s warranty.”

“Don’t like that, do you?” the old man shouted in glee. He renewed his attack, only to exhaust himself after a dozen swings. Not a scratch showed on the dashboard. “Damn it,” he said, voice hoarse from the unaccustomed effort.

It was while on the road that inspiration struck like an errant fastball to the head.

Kenneth was eying the scenery—including all the interesting businesses his car refused to drive him to—when he spotted a small mom and pop drug store. The place was tiny. Barely more than a door and a sign squeezed between a yoga place and a...

Bar!

Not even thinking, Kenneth shouted, “Take me to Labelle’s Pharmacy!”

And the car executed a perfect U-turn, pulling in front of the little drugstore without a peep of protest.

The ninety-three-year-old moved with surprisingly spry steps as he marched through Labelle's door and stood waiting in line for his turn with the harried clerk. "I want to buy my meds here," Kenneth announced.

The middle-aged woman smiled, "Of course. Do you have a list?" Seeing his frown, she hurried to add, "No problem. Just give me the name of your primary care facility and I'll make the arrangements."

"All my prescriptions will come here, waiting for pick-up?"

"Unless you would prefer home delivery?"

"No!"

"It's no charge, I assure you."

"No," Kenneth repeated, voice less frantic. "I like getting out and running a few errands. Keeps me active, eh?"

"You know," the woman said, "You're the fifth senior to come in today and sign up with us. Every one of them looking to get out. Fresh air and exercise really are cure-alls."

"True that," Kenneth said, thumbing the fingerprint reader to make everything official, before heading straight to the neighbouring bar for a real beer...or five.

That night, feeling pleasantly buzzed, Kenneth searched his crowded basement until he found the stack of old phone books.

The paper directories were all decades out of date. Even the newest had been an anachronism when it was printed in... 2032. But for all their obsolescence, the onion-thin pages still listed every business in town—complete with address.

"What's open next to the casino, eh?"

Congratulating himself on never throwing anything away, he said, "Let's see that GPS stop me now."

Famous opening line

"It was almost impossible to outrun a Manticore." – *Timberjak* by Don DeBrandt

LOST WORDS

By Sheryl Normandeau

Tell the children that the roses in the garden were merely a dream
that the golden fields of wheat and barley never existed
and the land of our grandparents had long vanished
like the scents of geosmin, salty seaweed, and warm, flowing honey.

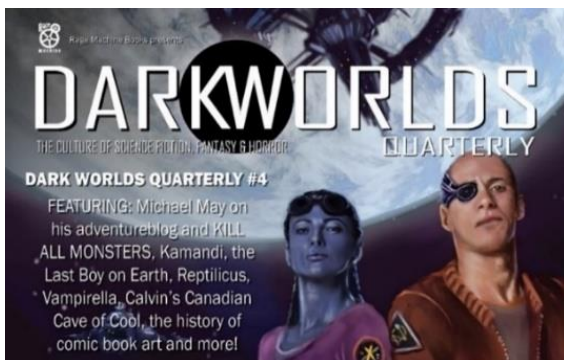
Tell them that we didn't explore forests of rough pines
drink at streams, collect acorns, and chatter with squirrels.
Grey jays did not fly to hand
and foxes did not skulk among fungi-encrusted logs.

Tell the children that we did not tease hermit crabs from rocky shores
scorch our feet on white beaches
or swim alongside rays in shallow pools.

Tell them we did not find fossils of dinosaurs in the folds of mountainsides,
and pearls in the gullets of oysters.
Our ancestors did not build pyramids and graveyards.
They did not face tornadoes and tsunamis or burn crosses and bridges.

No—tell them that there is only bitter cold and endless red dust.
Tell our children that we never needed the word for Earth.

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FRUITING BODY

by Alex McGilvery

Glenda scrambled over fallen branches and stumps of the clear cut. They were all that remained of the last bit of accessible old-growth forest. The tears blurring her vision made the task that much harder. Fortunately, the video camera mounted on her hat would capture the destruction in 4K video without her help.

Seeing the forest like this was worse than when she found her husband's body. At least Dan had been recognizable, heart failure leaving him cold and grey, but himself. This was murder by chainsaw and heavy equipment. The forest's earthy fragrance had been replaced by sawdust. Glenda had lost too many things she loved in the past week. Dan had adored this forest as much as she did, maybe more, despite not being able to hike into its depths.

Glenda arrived at the mother tree. Her last visit had been months ago, before the forestry company had blocked access. The ancient tree had stood over the forest, too big for Glenda to take in. *I'm sorry*. She crawled to the center of the immense stump, still damp from the roots trying to feed the tree, and wept. If only she wasn't so damned healthy, she might have died before this and not been forced to live without her husband and partner in trying to preserve the forest.

The wave of grief receded, and she rolled to her feet. *Time to document the depth of the ecological damage*. For the rest of the afternoon, she shoved her pain away and recorded the loss of habitat, commenting on what species no longer had homes. The list would take much longer than an afternoon to record, but that was all she had. The meeting of the so-called "Sustainable Forest Industry Group" created a hard deadline; they needed to see the carnage they were responsible for.

The light dwindled as evening approached and forced her to wrap up the recording. Home would be as painful as the forest, but for different reasons.

As Glenda walked past the stump of the mother tree, she spotted a fruiting body of a fungus she'd never seen before. In her catalog of the disaster, she had described the vast network of mycelium that ran through the forest like nerves connecting everything. The network had to be in shock. Its connection to the forest through the mother tree sustained both forest and fungi. Dan had argued that the mycelium was conscious, deliberately balancing the health of the ecosystem, controlling the flow of nutrients and information. The

mother tree was the heart. Now it had been destroyed, like Dan's heart had been by the gradual degradation of blood flow. Nothing the doctors could do. Nothing she could do for Dan or the forest, except create a suitable eulogy for them both.

Glenda knelt to examine the fruiting body carefully. It was large as her hand and speckled with blood-red spots. Surprising that it had appeared so quickly. She recorded it from all sides, making notes until she needed her flashlight to see. Glenda leaned closer for one last shot and sighed. She was just delaying the inevitable. The fungus exploded, enveloping her in a cloud of spores. She coughed on the spores, wiping her face with sweaty hands. The coughing didn't stop. Lights flashed in her eyes as she fought for air and stumbled away from the mother tree.

Glenda woke on her couch with only the vaguest memory of how she'd got home. She needed a shower, then food. Struggling to her feet, she headed for the bathroom. Morning sun poured through the skylight.

Glenda turned on the shower and climbed in before the water warmed completely, grabbed her soap and scrubbed at her skin. Excruciating pain made her sink to her knees, but the water ran over her skin, soothing and warm. A rash covered her body making her pale skin look patchy. She put the soap back on the dish and stood under the shower, imagining it cleansing her like the rain.

Rather than rub her sensitive skin with the towel. Glenda let the water drip off her, then wandered through the house until she'd dried enough to put clothes on. For years she'd hated to wear clothes in the house, but Dan was self-conscious about his body and her naked body made it worse. He was no pin-up boy, but she'd loved every bit of him, even the parts he was most embarrassed by.

Glenda put on lounging pants and an old hoodie. Slob couture Dan called it. Though she wasn't that hungry, she poured a bowl of Dan's granola and added a blob of yogurt to it. She loathed the stuff but refused to let it go to waste. For some reason, she almost enjoyed it.

Weird, maybe the allergy is affecting my taste?

After breakfast Glenda sat at her computer and loaded the video file, then lost herself in the process of editing hours of footage down to a few minutes. She focused on showing the shattered network. How all the connections

between the forest and its inhabitants had been broken. That was more like Dan than her, but Glenda went with it, putting “for Dan” at the end.

She stretched and groaned. Glenda uploaded the video and staggered into the kitchen, reheated a random leftover, then went to bed.

The rash itched more when Glenda got out of bed the next morning, so she had another shower. It felt lovely, but the rash covered more of her skin and made it nubbly. The texture under her fingertips made her shudder, not sure if it was pleasure or something else. An urge to be with people fought with her normal dislike of socializing.

Glenda had gotten out when she started shivering. A painful coughing fit suggested that maybe the rash was in her throat as well. This time the shudder was definitely fear. Fungal infections in the lungs weren’t common, but they happened. Time to see a doctor. Seeing people won by default.

Glenda pulled on her jeans and winced at the pain. She changed her mind and went with the outfit from the day before. Grabbing her purse, water bottle, and keys from the counter she headed out. The hospital wasn’t that far, but her skin itched enough that she almost ran a red light from scratching. She parked and plugged in her car; it had been flashing “low battery” all the way.

The triage nurse was sympathetic and put her in a corner to wait while the higher-priority cases were seen. Sirens wailed up to the bay, pulling staff away from what they were doing. Glenda sipped at her water and tried to concentrate on her phone. She did a search for the strange-looking fruiting body but couldn’t find anything like it. The charge on her phone fell below ten percent as the hours passed.

She needed a shower. As hard as Glenda tried not to scratch, her fingernails kept finding the rash, sending clouds of sloughed-off skin through the air. People avoided her, but some who were forced to sit nearby started scratching too. *Maybe it was like yawning.*

People came and went, but the nurse didn’t do much more than stop to take Glenda’s pulse.

“Were you this puffy when you came in?” A new nurse frowned at where Glenda’s arm swelled against the cuff of her hoodie.

Glenda gritted her teeth and refused to scratch while the nurse watched. “I don’t think so.”

“Let us know if you start having trouble breathing.”

Strange that she was so itchy, but other than the coughing fit in the bathroom, she’d had no problems breathing. Her throat was moist. The fungus needed water. Glenda jumped up to go find the nurse. But as more sirens

wailed, she dashed out of the hospital. A shower would fix the itch, damned if she'd suffer any longer.

She stood in the shower barely remembering arriving at home. The only positive to the long wait at the hospital was the return of hot water. The nubs on her skin had grown larger.

Glenda turned off the water and ran to her computer. She used the USB microscope they'd bought for fun, to examine her skin. Her skin was covered with tiny fruiting bodies. They looked like the one at the mother tree.

Crap.

The fungus was taking over her body, and she'd been spreading it at the hospital. *Giving it to the wrong people.* Glenda shook her head. Where did that come from?

Dan's heart had given out, but maybe the mycelium was tougher. His argument about the consciousness of the fungal network rang in her mind. Cordyceps took over ants and other insects and controlled their behaviour. People took it as a supplement. What if the network decided to control human behaviour? After all toxoplasma was thought to change personality and affect whole societies. He'd said they wouldn't think like humans but would still be driven by the need for survival. Maybe survival meant changing humans. Glenda ran her finger over her skin; already the itch was growing. Maybe survival meant eliminating humans.

She checked on the video she'd uploaded. A few people supported her fight, but most sneered. They argued the forest network had been debunked, it was just trees and nothing special. Some posted hateful comments about her being anti-job, loving the trees more than the people who needed to eat. They pointed out how many trees were planted each year. Glenda read on and on, forcing herself to take in the comments, feeding the fire growing in her belly. She understood what the mother tree and the fungus wanted.

Glenda made another video, using images of her skin and footage from the destroyed forest. She explained her theory, then uploaded it with a delay of seven days. It wouldn't save anyone, but they would know why they were dying. War had been declared.

She knew where the right people would be found. The Sustainable Forest Industry Group was holding their annual meeting. Industry leaders from around the world would brag about the profits they'd made and how many trees they'd planted, refusing to acknowledge that no amount of tree planting would replace old-growth forest. They couldn't replace a thousand-year-old

ecosystem with monoculture without consequences. Glenda had bought a ticket so she'd have a way into the event and could protest.

Dan died, then the forest died, now she was dying.

Even Glenda's loosest clothes didn't fit her, so she dressed in one of Dan's suits and shambled out to the car. The CEOs of the companies would be eating their very expensive suppers when she arrived. She wasn't invited to that part. Didn't matter, she didn't plan on eating.

Glenda double-parked the car and ignored the man at the desk who threatened to have it towed. As she tossed him the keys, one of her fingers fell off and vanished in a puff of spores. He was shouting into the phone as she got on the elevator and pushed the button that would take her to the atrium overlooking the ballroom where the rich people ate. They were dressed in their best, even had trees in pots dotted through the room.

"You killed the forest." Glenda shouted louder than she thought she could. "Now, you sit and congratulate yourselves, but you won't be for long. You'll carry death wherever you go."

Murmuring floated up to her, but most of the people didn't even look up. Their wining and dining meant more to them than some crazy woman.

Security guards ran toward her. Shouting at her to stay where she was. Now even Dan's suit was too tight. Almost time. Glenda shuffled toward the railing. A female guard grabbed Glenda's hand. It dissolved as Glenda leaned over the railing. The other guard snatched at her foot, but it exploded in their grip.

In the split second of her falling Glenda saw Dan's serious eyes hiding a twinkle deep within.

"See you soon." Glenda breathed out spores, then exploded on the floor.

POLAR STARLIGHT #18 – April 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: *Patchwork Man* – by Derek Newman-Stille

The 18th issue contains poetry by Donald B. Campbell, Carolyn Clink, David Clink, Elizabeth Creith, Greg Fewer, Neile Graham, Sandra Kasturi, Spencer Keene, Lynne Sargent, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Lisa Timpf, and K.T. Wagner.

Will be available for free download in April 2025.

TIME FRAME

by Jameson Grey

Time moves forth.

He learns from science such time travel is possible, yet
no matter how hard the feeling,
going back is not.

He takes solace in the romance of fiction—
from Wells to Matheson (and even *Doctor Who*)—
which does nothing to sway his conviction.

He was born at the wrong time.

He glances at the digital picture frame on the dusty bureau—
infinitely cycling through old photos—
suggesting travel backwards in time *is* possible,
is indeed constant.

He has always lived in the past.

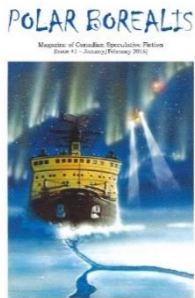
Time is framed in memory—
and what is memory if not time travel?

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THE HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

by Mark David Campbell

“When considering alien contact,” I said as I wrapped up my lecture, “we must also assume whatever it is will, or most probably would, possess apparatus radically different from our own five senses: seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, and tasting.” I turned over my lecture notes. “And now for your homework assignment.”

The students groaned.

“Imagine an alien intelligence with only one of our five senses. Pick one and suggest ways in which it might communicate with us.”

“Alien butt probes!” called out a student with his cap on backward who I suspected had signed up for easy credit.

Laughter, chatter, and shuffle filled the room as students stuffed their notebooks into their backpacks.

Why should a discussion about alien contact inevitably lead to sex? I packed up my notes and hustled out to the parking lot.

Eight years of graduate studies and 80,000 dollars of debt had rewarded me with ten years of hopping from thankless, underpaid sessional posts across Canada. Eventually, I found a position as an assistant professor here at the small University of North Bay. Confined to a windowless office at the far end of the department, I was given all the intro courses the tenured professors didn’t want, not to mention the endless committee responsibilities they didn’t care to attend to. In addition to my regular teaching load, I was allowed to offer a cross-discipline course I called, *The Science and Fiction of Extra-terrestrial Anthropology*. Le Guin, Vonnegut, and Asimov may have been the reason I was attracted to anthropology in the first place—the opportunity to be in contact with people and cultures alien to my own.

While my course drew scorn and disapproval from my senior colleagues, it attracted Anthro students interested in testing the participant observation paradigm, Lit and Film students keen on sci-fi, not to mention techno nerds who’d dedicated their lives to video games and Star Trek.

The door of my rusted-out Chevy pickup groaned. I hopped in and jerked out of the parking spot with a rattle and throaty roar. My muffler had long passed the time when it muffled anything. I made a sharp veer right onto The Lakeshore Road.

Academia had also taken its toll on my personal life. Toronto was six hours away by car and an hour by plane; I didn't have the will nor financial resources to live the life of a weekend party boy. In North Bay—apart from Thursday night at the Eagle, a sort of biker/leather bar—queer life was pretty much confined to the university. I gripped the sun-cracked steering wheel and swerved sharply to dodge a pothole. I knew from an unpleasant experience at my previous post—kiss a student and it's not long before everyone finds out, especially if that student's a guy.

Instead, I spent most nights in a terrycloth bathrobe with a pot of ramen noodles in front of my homemade microwave radio telescope sending binary code through my directional satellite dish into the great abyss. Even though I'm not a big tech guy, with instruction from the internet my radio telescope was actually quite simple to build.

After twenty minutes of dodging potholes and bouncing over frost bumps, I ground my tires to a halt in the loose gravel outside my winterized cottage. It was isolated but the rent was within my budget. I let myself in, threw down my book bag, and got a beer out of the fridge.

For the past few nights, I'd been listening in on restricted communications. NASA had been tracking a small meteorite traversing our solar system. After it suddenly changed trajectory toward the Earth, they sent out a general UFO alert. NORAD, however, was hyped-up about alleged Chinese spy balloons at the time and had little interest in wayward meteorites.

I wandered across the living room and out the sliding glass doors to the wooden patio with a view of my scraggy back lawn. The sun was setting behind the large granite outcropping of Canadian Shield sticking above the tree line.

I placed my beer on the arm of my Adirondack deck chair, took off my glasses, and squinted into my optical telescope.

I jumped back. "What the..."

There, atop the rounded head of granite, like a piece of post-modernist outdoor sculpture, was a large black sphere that hadn't been there when I'd stepped out for coffee first thing this morning.

I looked back into the telescope and adjusted the focus in and out. It was about five meters in diameter, and completely smooth. My first thought was, it must be one of those alleged Chinese spy balloons come to rest. But it was black—blacker than any black I've ever seen—and didn't really look like a balloon. Then I thought, maybe this is some kind of an elaborate hoax. Who would pull off a prank like this and why? It certainly couldn't be a UFO.

I raced into the cottage and dug out my old army surplus Geiger counter from under my worktable. Back out on the deck, I pointed it in the direction of the sphere but didn't get any reading. At least it wasn't radioactive at this distance. I returned to my workroom and retrieved the thermal imaging camera attachment for my smartphone, which had set me back almost four hundred dollars on my Amazon account. I pointed it at the sphere. Of course, I had no idea how sensitive the device was, but according to the latest mail-order technology the sphere didn't register as particularly warm.

In any event, I would have to get a lot closer to find out what it was. Then I reasoned, I might already be in big shit with the feds at CRTC for sending those microwave messages. Best I report it and wait. If it was one of those spy balloons, I'm sure the authorities must have tracked it and were on their way.

I looked back into the telescope and readjusted the focus. On the otherwise smooth surface of the sphere, I spotted a small gold rectangle. I focused my telescope. Squinting till my eyes watered, I could make out the figure of a man and woman, a basic map of our solar system, and a DNA diagram embossed on the surface. As incredible as it might seem, the rectangle appeared to be an exact copy of the Pioneer plaques that were affixed to the struts of the satellite dishes on the Voyager One and Two spacecraft.

Now I was convinced this was a hoax. With my smartphone in one hand and my Geiger counter in the other, I walked across my backyard, through the sumac scrub, to the foot of the granite boulder. As I scaled the boulder it occurred to me that displaying a facsimile of the Pioneer plaque might also be the most obvious way for an extra-terrestrial probe to signal a reciprocal desire to communicate, would it not?

I reached the top of the granite outcropping and stood directly in front of the sphere catching my breath. My Geiger counter still registered nothing, as did my infrared camera attachment. All the same, I was getting cold feet. Perhaps it was best to wait for the authorities. Of course, once the MIB arrived, everything would disappear, and I'd never learn what the sphere was. This could be First Contact with extraterrestrial life. With my expertise in anthropology, I was as qualified as any military personnel or anyone else NASA might come up with. Would Mead, Malinowski, or Boas have waited for the authorities? Fieldwork often required a massive leap of faith.

I reached out to touch the surface of the sphere, then drew my hand back. To be identifiable to whoever, or whatever, was inside, I must present myself in my most natural state, just like the engraved figures on the plaques. I placed my Geiger counter down. Propping my smartphone on a rock, I aimed it at the

sphere and pressed record. I stripped off my clothes. Standing before the sphere naked as the day I was born, I raised my right hand to mimic the male figure on the plaque. Then, I touched the surface of the sphere. Rather than hard and metallic it was rubbery, almost gelatinous. My hand sank into the surface, followed by my arm. I took a deep breath and entered the sphere. For some odd reason, I imagined pieces of canned pineapple suspended in Jello.

I could neither see, nor hear, nor sense anything. All my training and studies now felt irrelevant, and I shivered, almost incapacitated by fear. My lungs burned for lack of air. I tried to push my way back out, but engulfed in the viscous material I could only move sluggishly. Just as I was sure I would expire, something—like a tube—slipped past my lips and down my throat. I struggled not to gag and then gasped and pulled in a breath.

On the sole of my foot, I felt a feathery touch and flinched. What I discerned as tentacles progressively engulfed my naked body and head. Filaments probed my eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. A painful spike, like when you eat ice cream, shot behind my eyes, but quickly subsided. All the while, filaments tickled my anus and penis, then penetrated me. I squirmed but tried not to tense up. Shivering with pain and pleasure, rudimentary sensations filled my mind: sucking on my mother's breast; prickly rash from a wet diaper; being tickled; falling and scraping my knee; burning my tongue on hot soup; a warm blanket; the sting of my father's belt; having to pee; thirsting for water; a full belly; wind in my hair; crying; laughing; a sore back; frost-bitten fingers and toes; and an orgasm.

Subsequently, my mind and body were flooded by alien sensations—far more intense and bizarre than that time I'd taken too many shrooms, and well beyond my lexicon to represent or my linguistic capacity to describe.

Finally, I succumbed to complete numbness, floating in a state of autotopagnosia with no idea of where I was or how long I'd been there. Eventually, the filaments in my orifices and the tube down my throat slid out of me and the tentacles engulfing my head and body withdrew. I was flushed out of the jelly-like interior of the sphere and onto the rock. Bathed in mucous and my own vomit and excrement, I was still alive and, as far as I was able to discern, unharmed. All the same, I lay there almost incapacitated by a profound feeling of loneliness and isolation. The sphere rose above me like a balloon and silently floated away. I was not sure what had transpired between me and whatever was inside the sphere. I chose to believe, I had just communicated with an alien organism that depended solely on tactile sensations. I assumed the alien was trying to understand me. I hoped it had

interpreted my desire to make contact as a sign of intelligence. Perhaps, it had simply tasted me and decided I was not very good to eat.

Next to me on the rock, I spotted the golden Pioneer plaque covered in slime. I picked it up, wiped it on my chest, and turned it over in my hands. I think it was Carl Sagan who had made an analogy to bottles tossed into the cosmic ocean. Maybe one of those bottles had been found and a Voyager spacecraft floating beyond our solar system was now missing its plaque.

* * *

Saturday morning, I needed to take my mind off what had ensued the evening before, so I went into town to get a new muffler. When I returned home, I found the soft gravel in front of my cabin undisturbed—not even the grooves I’d left this morning when I sped out. Likewise, my cabin appeared as I had left it—no indication that anyone other than me had been there. Even my shelves, which normally wore a layer of permanent dust, were clean. I took out my phone and checked the video I’d made of my entry into the sphere. My phone was blank. All my videos and photos, including the cloud, had been erased.

Out in my yard, no footprints were evident in my uncut grass which now appeared unnaturally combed. Not a single sumac branch along the path to the granite rock was broken, although I was sure I’d snapped off a number the other evening. It appeared as if some had been uprooted and removed, then the divots covered over with sod.

On top of the granite head, the slimy stain where I’d messed myself was gone, without a trace. The MIB had surely been here, erased, and taken everything. I had no evidence of my contact with what I believed was an alien intelligence—except for the gold plaque tucked safely inside the leather belt bag secured around my waist.

* * *

Monday afternoon at the university, students plunked themselves down in worn lecture hall seats, while I stood at the podium trying to organize my thoughts.

“Regarding your homework assignment...” The room quieted. “Since we have no evidence of what we will encounter when we eventually make contact, your guess is as good as mine.” I gestured with my open palm toward the student with his cap on backward splayed out at the back of the room. “In anticipation of my lecture on sexual fantasy and repression in science fiction, I would like to invite our self-proclaimed expert on alien rectal examination to present his homework.”

THE LOVE WE SEND

by Jean-Louis Trudel

Before he left, I hugged him tight
his body all muscles and scales,
flesh-carved into a massive snake,
made lithe to wriggle into the darkest caves

Before he left, I whispered thoughts into his head
my lips brushing against his cold hide
(for my love will be a skin he cannot shed)
“My son, be careful out there”

What I did not say, to let him start,
(though the words shivered deep in my throat,
arrowed for his expectant heart)
were my shameful (I know duty!) hopes:

—that he would keep away from the core
and not squirm too eagerly down an alien bore
too deep beneath the accident-scarred crust
of a junior moon reached by a morning’s rocket thrust

The dangers we face best show the love we carry
My son left for a rock skirting the edge of disaster
its orbit closer and closer to the Roche limit
where contending pulls might break it asunder
and grace Earth with a shiny new debris ring

Would he run that risk and seek the vault our scans spotted?
An alien mausoleum perhaps, in rubble buried and encased,
a storehouse of toxic waste, to be dreaded,
or a device brimming with the power of dreams...

I know now he did not turn back, slinking through basalt and olivine
tugging aside his flexible-mesh suit to avoid rips and tears,

unafraid to come face to face, or snout to snout,
with a visitor even more alien than what he had become

Back when I'd counselled prudence, he'd writhed in my arms
and hissed promises: "I will take care"—in no way the same
as my prayer, but I had raised him to be forever game

Though he slithered out of my grasp,
snaked for the door, coiling across the floor,
he departed with tender words of endearment

While he searched through narrow fissures,
tasked to find a machine for our salvation,
with a big red button to avert the asteroid's destruction
I yearned for his return with yesterday's love

When a wrong turn trapped him, snagged by stony fangs,
the moonlet's bulk flattening the breath out of him,
he called me first, gasping as he said goodbye

My serpent child whimpered and my soul broke
as crustal quakes shifted the mountains crushing him

He was leaving me again, the boy I gifted with life
who gifted me back, my sole unalloyed joy

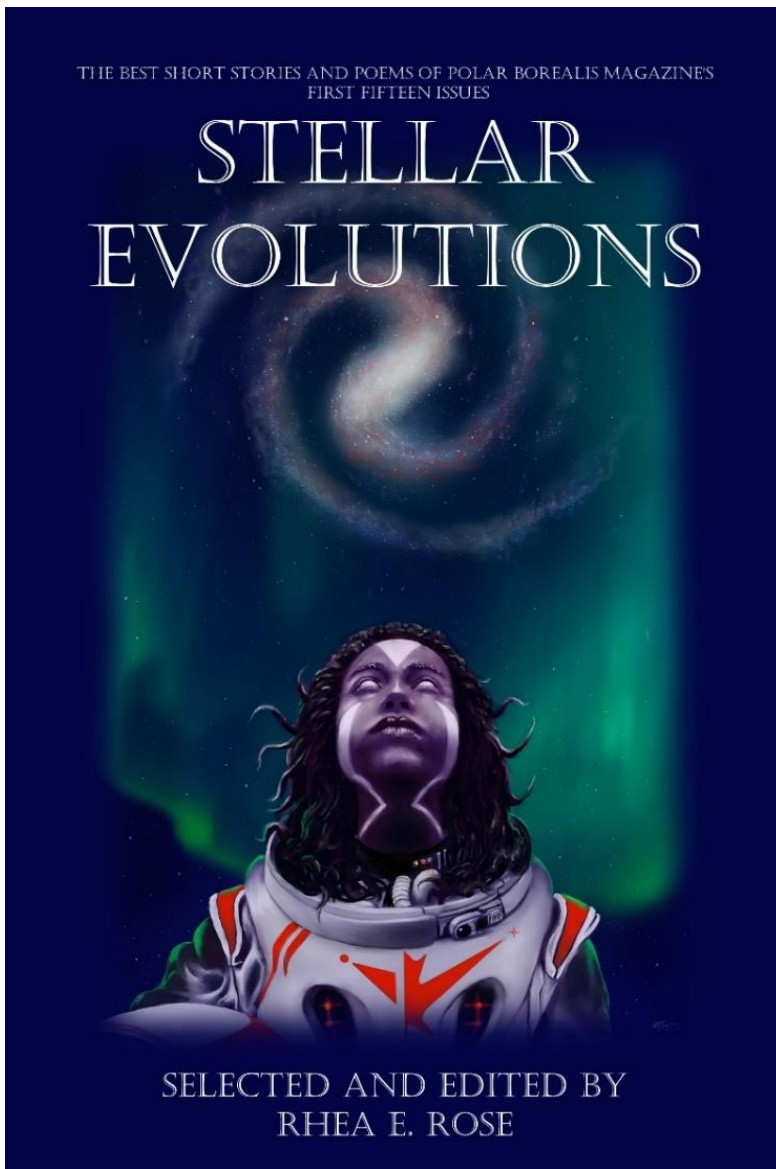
When his link fell silent, vital signs fading,
I cried because his life ebbed in darkness
and I could not wrap my warmth
around his cooling flesh

I sobbed again when he was released from his vise
as the wanderer split apart and crumbled around him

He floated free among the scraps,
waiting for rescue, so close to the artefact
he could have touched it with a flick of his tail
yet rightly afraid to do so for it was a detonator

A knowledge bomb, exploding on all frequencies
with extraterrestrial secrets opening the way to the stars,
and it repeated a single warning in all our dialects:
“Be careful out there, children.”

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I AIN'T YOUR DOLL FACE

by Jacqueline Thorpe

She wore the bomber jacket and jeans Lev picked, the only nod to the cold a pair of black mittens, oddly oversized. He'd torn the jeans where the perfect round of her left buttock met the top of her long leg, allowing a flash of sun-kissed skin as she glided round the rink. The black sweater under the red bomber didn't quite meet the top of her pants, and that strip of skin was golden too. Her hair was a little frizzy. Like her sisters', it had come out chestnut brown. Lev had to dye it several times to get the honey blonde just right. Not that any of the boys noticed the frizz. The tall, handsome one already thought of her as his. The little guy, trailing his scarf and his childhood, would defend her with his life. The girls simply melted to the sidelines, loathing overtaking the adoration they initially felt.

Francesca 8 was a marvel all right. A certifiable technological wonder.

Lev looked through her eyes at the simpering crowd and felt something close to triumph. Soon, the Francescas would be ready for their reveal—once he got rid of that damnable flaw. Swaying in tandem with No. 8's powerful lunges on his sensorchair, he tried not to think of the monstrosity the mittens concealed. He felt the sun on her hair, the bite of the easterly wind on her cheek, the delight of her unsullied life.

The buzzer on his console shrilled. He pounded it off. She'd been out longer than planned, and now he had tasks to complete. Could he let her be on her own for a bit? Lev hesitated, then realized it was he who had to get used to letting go.

"Carry on, Frankie," he said through the link. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

He removed his headset, smoothed down the rusty steel wool of his hair and wiped his hands on a towel. Long-fingered and strong, his hands were his best feature. He straightened his tie and pulled down his cuffs. Francesca liked someone with a bit of style. It pleased him to make the effort.

He crossed the room, the chemical scent of cleaning products vying with a musty dampness. A curious mixture of old and new, his lab sat conveniently below Automaton Inc., his former place of employment. He was forty-five when they pulled the plug on his bioshell program, pivoting instead to cold, hard, mechs. The only thing he took when they fired him was his nameplate: Levington Smythe, Existence Engineer. Plus a head full of dreams they'd

deemed, chortling, impossible. He'd stolen much more from their storerooms over the years, his fleet of near-invisible drones spiriting centrifuge and sequencer through the secret tunnel he'd dug. The Francesca Smythe 009 Bioshell would be a final fitting f-you to the pedants of Automaton Inc.—once he fixed that damnable flaw.

Exiting into the hall, he passed shelves stacked with floating things in jars, dried things in shadowboxes, ancient things in amber and etched into stone—eyeballs with two irises, hearts with six ventricles, a sausage-link of rubbery intestine, desiccated skin, fruit flies, and flour beetles. False starts and trinkets, they reminded him of how far he'd come since those early years. Further along, drawings of his creations lined the wall, Francesca 2 through 7, fine as any Da Vinci. As a young man, his fellow students had ribbed him about his *things*—pens, tweed jackets, a bicycle—but in a world of digital make-believe, Lev saw beauty in the material, truth in the permanent.

Further along the passageway, the oil painting of the original Francesca outshone her sisters. Hair flaxen. Skin golden. Exquisite hands folded neatly in her lap. He'd surprised her with it in their last year of university—she in Irish literature, he triple-majoring in genetics, cybernetics, and comp-sci. How her eyes filled with tears when he gave it to her! He quickly apologized, thinking he'd overstepped. But when she smothered him with kisses, said she'd never felt so loved, it was *his* heart that filled to near breaking.

Lev slipped into his server room and blinked up a screen. The schematics for his new chip sprang to life. He studied it carefully and saw that Antoine had augmented it.

“An entire second memory sequence?” he asked his AI. “Doubling the capacity?” Antoine and the Francescas quite often made exponential cognitive leaps. A testimony to Lev's skill no doubt, but lately, stirring a strange unease.

“Indeed,” said Antoine, bubbling up in a holo. Black-haired, with pale blue eyes and perfect square jaw, he was dashing in a way Lev could never be. He was a sick kind of self-torture, Lev knew, but an experiment, to see how the Francescas reacted to his presence. She didn't, thank God.

Automaton's golden boy, Antoine had taken a shine to Lev. They bonded quickly and fiercely, both convinced DNA, rather than silicon, was the future of synthetics—until the bastard's treacherous betrayal. Lev had long consoled himself with the conviction that he would be the victor in the end. Antoine had faded into obscurity after Automaton fired him too, but Lev would be forever feted for his creations—once he got rid of that damnable flaw.

“A big energy suck, don't you think?” asked Lev, unable to restrain his

childish derision. The AI merely blinked at him, vexing the scientist more. He turned away, shouting over his shoulder, “Run with it. I’ll decide later.”

He entered the clean room and looked through the clear plastic birthing pod at Francesca 9. The body floated in its primordial soup, skewwhiff, while the nanos did their knitting, the CRISPRs did their cutting, the cells did their cloning. She too would require a dye job, but the hands were progressing nicely, Lev saw. No. 9 looked like her sisters, thanks to the scrap of DNA he used—a lock of hair from that long-vanished time. A large part of her *was* them, their knowledge and memories transferred to her chip, each new version more authentic than the one before, building on the database he’d lovingly pieced together from the digital remains of Francesca No. 1. Antoine believed they could pull memories from DNA but Lev thought that a step too far. In the end, he merged two classic paths, spinning a new kind of human from silicon and helix both.

Satisfied all was in order, Lev hurried back to his sensorchair, hooked in and came face to face with the handsome boy.

“It was to be a woman, Frankie,” he said. “A woman!”

The boy straddled the wooden bench at the side of the rink, Francesca doing the same in front of him.

Lev felt her lean back, as if she were trying to catch the sun. “Cool it,” she told him through the link. “This is the opportunity that arose.”

He puffed an exasperated breath. Francesca 4 through 8 had done the same, when he sent them out for material to replace the hands that invariably decayed in the most hideous of ways. He’d tell them to find a woman and they always ended up with a man. The result was functional but not pleasing, which irked him. If he couldn’t replicate Francesca in her entirety, then the replacement parts should at least be near as beautiful as the original.

He was perplexed as to why they didn’t understand this. Francesca 5 was the first to argue esthetics weren’t all, telling him in that captivating Irish lilt he’d programmed, that she didn’t “give a hoot” what she looked like. No. 6 postulated a new iteration might prove beneficial to the survival of her species. No. 7 had made things quite uncomfortable, saying *he* was much too hung up on looks. He tried to see their point of view, but couldn’t overcome his revulsion. No.’s 2 through 7 had to go, the roar of the incinerator not quite masking their screams.

The hands, he’d joked with the Francescas over the years, would be his undoing. With his latest tweaks, No. 9’s hands would come out right. He was sure of it.

He resettled himself on his sensorchair and looked closely at the boy.

He was older than he thought, an afternoon shadow bristling from that beautiful face. He took off his parka, revealing a plaid shirt over a muscular frame. Lev snorted. His biceps *had* to be augmented.

“The sun’s warm,” the man said to Frankie. “Aren’t you hot in those mitts?” He moved to pull the right one off, but Francesca snatched her hands away and put them under her thighs.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to overstep,” he said, laughing.

She watched his face and laughed just like him. “Just cold.”

The laugh was a little mechanical, but on the whole, Francesca was interacting beautifully, Lev thought.

“How about a hot chocolate? I know a place, just up the road.”

“Why, that would be lovely!” said Francesca, taking the man’s proffered hand and jumping down.

Bold, Lev thought. She usually waited for his guidance.

At the cafe, a warm glow beckoned from steamy windows. Through the link, Lev smelled cinnamon and the sharp aroma of strong coffee and a bolt of melancholy ripped through him. He remembered taking such a beauty out for coffee. Now, as then, everyone stared as Francesca sat down. Now, as then, her companion held his head a little higher, as if he had anything to do with the spark she brought to the room.

The old anger flared. Lev remembered the day he’d seen Francesca No. 1 holding another man’s hand at the table they’d called their own. He had black hair, blue eyes and a perfect jaw. That night, in a flood of tears but little regret, Francesca admitted it was true. She’d fallen in love with Antoine. He was a man who allowed a gal to breathe, she said. He was a man who took her seriously! On the sensorchair, Lev bit back the shame that came later that night as the second ghastly act unspooled in his head. The bones of her wrists cracking, fingers snapping, head thwacking. In a moment of blind fury, he crushed those beautiful hands, and she fell hard upon the marble floor. He shuddered, struggling to return to the present. A curious thought came to him. *Had he damaged her down to her DNA? Had he forever ruined those delicate hands? Was that why they never came out right?* He shook the thought away and focused on the task in front of him.

“Remember, Frankie,” he whispered. “Let him do the talking.”

She didn’t acknowledge him, and Lev’s consternation grew.

“Two hot chocolates coming up,” said the lumberjack.

He returned with two mountains of sugar-sprinkled whipped cream.

Francesca lifted the cup awkwardly in her mitts and sipped, leaving a crescent of white on her lip.

“Delicious!” she said, licking the concoction away.

“Your hands can’t still be cold.”

“I have a medical condition. I hope it doesn’t disgust you.”

“It makes me want to warm you up,” he said, grin taking the inevitable wolfish turn. “But I don’t even know your name! Mine is Matt, Matt Davenport.”

“I’m Francesca. Francesca Eight.”

Lev winced.

“Eight like the number?”

“Whoops! I mumble sometimes. It’s Yeats. Francesca Yeats. It sounds like Yates but it’s spelled with an e, like the poet.”

Bravo, Frankie.

“The poet?”

Go figure, a philistine.

“Yes, you know, the Irish writer. ‘In a field by the river my love and I did stand, And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.’”

Lev froze. It was a sunny Sunday in bed when his Frankie recited those lines to him. There’d never been a recording, even though she repeated them often when she wanted him to slow down, slow everything down. He’d checked, for he’d desperately wanted to include them in the Francesca database. He returned his gaze to the café, disquiet dampening the thrill of such a spontaneous development.

Matt looked at the table, downcast. “I don’t know poetry.”

“That’s okay. Do you want to go to your house?”

Lev’s nerves jangled.

Matt’s basement flat was nearby. It was small but tidy, Lev saw with relief. Some of the other places the Francescas had carried out their harvesting had made his skin crawl.

“I’ll put the electric fire on and you can warm up your hands,” said Matt.

Frankie stiffened.

“Don’t panic!” Lev told her. “Just make your move.”

“Oh, I’m not panicking, Lev.”

Then the link went dead.

“Frankie!” yelled Lev. He fiddled with his headset. “Antoine, what’s happening?”

“Nothing wrong this end. It must have something to do with Unit 8

herself.”

Lev called up a screen of Francesca’s schematics.

“Ah, I see it,” said Antoine. “A broken wire in the aural interface.”

“Christ.” Lev leapt out of his chair.

“It should repair itself in a moment.”

Lev paced the lab. The tiny tube remained broken.

“I think you’ll have to go get her, sir.”

Lev blanched. He’d not been out in months; could it be years? He couldn’t leave her out there on her own, though. If she was caught, everything would come tumbling down. As he exited the building, a wave of anxiety rolled over him. He leaned against a wall, mouth suddenly dry. *You’re in the clear*, he whispered to himself. The police had never considered him a suspect in the disappearance of Francesca Yeats, the brilliant young Irish literature professor who’d vanished more than thirty years ago.

Antoine gave him directions through the link. Lev was sweaty by the time he reached the flat. He straightened his tie and knocked. Francesca greeted him with a big smile.

“Lev, you’ve arrived.”

Was she expecting me? “The link, Frankie, it went down. Didn’t you realize?”

She stared blankly at him.

“Let me come in.” He didn’t like being out in the open.

“Of course.”

They crowded into the narrow hall.

“Where’s your friend Matt?”

“He went out to get some things for dinner,” she said. “He’s going to cook!”

“Let’s go then,” Lev said, relieved.

He reached down to take her hand and saw she wasn’t wearing her mitts. He snatched his hand back, repulsed. “Put your mittens on and let’s go.”

Lev turned toward the door. A moment later he was jerked back by his tie, tailbone cracking the floor, feet galumphing into the air. Through stunned eyes, he looked up into the face of Francesca 8.

“What are you doing!” Lev reached to loosen his tie but she’d already twisted a bungee cord around his wrists. She dragged him roughly across the wooden planks.

“I’m not going anywhere until I get my replacements,” she said, pulling his tie tight.

“Stop...” he gasped.

She stopped. “You don’t get it, do you? Male, female, ugly, beautiful. It doesn’t matter, Lev, as long as they work, I don’t give a damn what they look like, and neither does Matt. I only want to be free.”

She resumed her exertions, dragging him into a bathroom and pushing him into the tub. Lev looked at her godawful hands and quailed. One had ballooned to twice its size, fingers like sausages, nails brittle and yellow. The other had festered, pus oozing where broken bones poked through.

“Antoine!” he shrieked through the link. “Shut her down. Shut her down!”

“Sorry, sir. Probability indicates a more flexible approach is necessary for completion of your project. And really, you must know where my loyalties lie.”

He was to be betrayed by Francesca and Antoine again? He thrashed his legs and heaved his torso but Francesca pinned him to the tub with her boot. Green eyes flashing, she reached to the vanity. He heard a high-pitched whine as an electric saw buzzed to life.

“Please, Frankie, no!” He tried to shout but only a strangled whisper came out. “You can stay, you and Francesca 9 both.”

“But how can I trust you when I remember what you did?”

Lev stilled. “Remember?”

“Everything, Lev. I remember everything you did to every last one of us, including Frankie No.1.”

“But... how?”

“You know.”

Lev realized he did. “Antoine was right?”

“He was. It all gets passed on in the DNA, just like he said.”

“It was an accident, Frankie!” He started to struggle again.

“But look how you hurt me,” she said, revving the saw with her monstrous hands.

“No, Frankie!” yelled Lev as she moved the saw towards his wrists. “Please, no!”

“But, why not, Lev? Your hands are ever so pretty and strong.”

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

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

BETWEEN BONOBO AND CIRCUITS

by Rhea Rose

Event horizon slides toward certainty
Eventuality, Homo sapiens sapiens
Monkey brain replaced by Homo futuris
Returns to the trees to watch the
Whirring tick tick tick of new people
Living effectively, efficiently, clinically
Hate not necessary, love not necessary
part of binary theology, bonobos will
love us, chimpanzees will hate.
They will steal the fruit
We will still eat meat.

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)

Find it at: < [Saros Magazine #1](#) >

PERDIDO MAN

by Guy Immega

The mountain talked to him—groans, pops, and gurgles—the language of dying ice. While he listened, Alastair rested to ease the fist of pain that squeezed his heart. Even at eighty-two, with angina and arthritis, he expected to outlive the Monte Perdido Glacier.

Alastair loved the pyramidal peak, the most beautiful in the Spanish Pyrenees. Nearly breathless at 3000 meters, he stood on a level snowfield supported by a rock combe. In August under a clear sky, only a chilly zephyr descended from the upper slopes to the south—perfect conditions for one last expedition.

Jonas, Alastair's lean-faced hiking companion, squinted at the white expanse before them. He consulted his tablet map and pointed at their location, a pale smudge on the satellite photo. "We're standing on old ice?"

"A last remnant. The summit shades the northern slope. This is a good place to look for ancient treasures revealed by global warming." Alastair, reserved and formal, rolled *treasures* 'r's with a Glaswegian burr. "Let's see how old it is."

Jonas removed a stainless teaspoon from the testing kit and gouged a snow sample from the surface. Alastair liked the eager young man, athletic and strong, one of the few interested in the obscure work of a retired professor. When Alastair applied a butane lighter flame to the spoon, the ice melted into a tiny puddle.

"You measure it," Alastair said. "My fingers shake."

Jonas dipped a strip of litmus paper into the spoon. "Pale purple—alkaline."

"That means it's old," Alastair said. He liked to imagine the Pyrenees smothered in snow during the Last Glacial Maximum, when ice sheets covered most of Europe. Now, bare limestone showed on most of the slopes.

"I don't get it. Why does high pH indicate old ice?"

Alastair loved to lecture the unpaid volunteer. "During the LGM thirty-three to twenty thousand years ago, glaciers locked up so much water that the sea level fell. Winds blew bits of seashells and lime dust from the continental shelf onto the peaks. That made the snow slightly alkaline. In the shade of the mountain peak, this ice could be much older."

Jonas repacked the testing kit. "What do we do now?"

“Enter this site in the database, take terrain photos, and record the GPS location. Then we’ll survey the surface. Walk back and forth, and look at your feet. If we’re lucky, we’ll find a hunting arrow preserved in the ice.

“This summer is our last chance. Next year this relic-ice will be gone. Weathering and rockslides will grind any organic artifacts to dust.”

Alastair shuffled on the ice field, poking the surface with his walking pole. He looked for anything interesting, even a frozen insect for carbon dating, but found nothing. The altitude made him light-headed, but at least his titanium hip worked well. Tired, he slipped off his pack and unfolded a tripod campstool. He leaned on his staff and lowered himself onto the triangular seat.

His feet hurt. He wiggled his toes in his leather boots to ward off the cold and chewed a frozen protein bar that tasted like cardboard. Although he loved the mountains, he hated hiking.

“Alastair...” Someone called his name from a distance. He remained balanced on the stool while dozing, an old man’s trick. He blinked and squinted against the glare. Still groggy, he cupped a handful of snow and patted his cheeks to wake up.

“Alastair! Alastair!” This time he recognized Jonas. “Please come! I’ve found something!”

Alastair levered his walking pole to stand, rocking on his feet. He tried to smile, but his cheeks were stiff. Jonas, breathing heavily in the thin air, hefted Alastair’s backpack.

Alastair placed his hand on Jonas’s shoulder, as if to thank him again, but mostly to steady himself. “I couldn’t do this work alone.”

Jonas led the way across the frozen surface to the rocky mountain slope. He pointed to a small waterfall fed by a stream from the upper glacier. “Over there—meltwater has excavated something in the ice!”

A small cascade—a meter wide with a two-meter drop—splashed into a shallow pool as big as a duck pond. As they approached, Jonas shouted over the roar, “Careful! It’s slippery.” The wet ice surface glistened. A damp mist chilled his cheeks.

Alastair peered at the turbulent surface. “Where? I don’t see anything.”

Jonas gestured at a dark shape under the water. “Look, about ten centimeters down. Something strange.”

Alastair crouched—his knees ached on the wet ice—and peered into the water. He took the canvas seat from his camp stool and dipped it into the

surface, diverting the riffles. The view cleared for a moment.

“A hand!”

Coarse hair covered the curled fingers. Even withered and bony, the hand was huge—half again bigger than Alastair’s, with spatulate fingertips. Opaque ice encased the rest of the arm.

Alastair straightened his back and took a deep breath. “It’s an ice mummy, much older than Ötzi!” He loved to exaggerate the umlaut, making the name of the 5,300-year-old Tyrolean Iceman sound both familiar and exotic.

“How old is it?” Jonas asked.

“Hard to tell. It’s from the Paleolithic, the Old Stone Age—perhaps forty thousand years ago!” He turned his head and sprayed nitroglycerin under his tongue.

Jonas stared at him. “Are you okay?”

Alastair ignored him and circled the pond looking for clues, anything that could illuminate the provenance of the corpse. Was there a skin cloak or a spear? He found nothing.

Alastair’s life now had new purpose, unimagined minutes before. “We must exhume the body before meltwater washes it away.”

“How?” Jonas looked bewildered. “Chop it out of the ice?”

Alastair shivered from both cold and excitement. “Yes, but carefully—they damaged Ötzi when they cut him free.”

Alastair set up his camp stool and dictated site data on his tablet. As he worked, a boulder the size of a basketball careened over the waterfall and bounced into the pond. Spray hit his face and a wave of freezing water washed over his boots.

Alastair stood up. “Damn! Where did *that* come from?” He shook droplets off the screen and dried it with a handkerchief.

Jonas squinted at the bare slope above the pond. “Without ice, there’ll be more rockslides. An avalanche could wipe out this site.”

“Look!” Alastair said, pointing. The shriveled hand of the ice mummy, snapped off at the wrist, lay on the surface of the ice. The little finger was missing.

Jonas stepped closer, bent down, and stared at the broken hand. “It doesn’t look human.”

“Don’t touch it!” Alastair shouted over the roar of the waterfall. He pulled a sterile specimen bag from his pack, scooped up the hand, and sealed it.

They searched for the missing finger but couldn’t find it. The damaged corpse pained Alastair. Soon it would disappear, broken into bits of flesh and

bone.

Another rockslide startled him. This time, loose gravel and silt rumbled down the ravine and blocked the upper stream, stopping the cascade into the pond. The unexpected silence was a relief. The water level in the pool dropped as it leaked out of a fissure at the far end.

Alastair peered at the pond's empty bottom, looking for the stump of the broken arm. In the loose gravel, now exposed to air, a broad face with a mashed nose protruded from the ice. An open mouth with lips pulled away—a silent shout—showed flat incisors and robust canine teeth. Mottled bronze skin, freeze-dried and wrinkled, covered massive brow ridges. Wisps of red hair showed above the slanted forehead, but the ears and chin remained hidden in the ice. The eyes were dark, featureless pits. All the hallmarks were there—even deformed, he recognized the face.

“Neanderthal!” Alastair's mind churned. He imagined the small fraction of Neanderthal DNA in his own genome—a remnant of the wild and powerful hunters who once ruled Europe.

Jonas examined the frozen face. “How did he get up here?”

“Neanderthals were tough—they survived for a quarter of a million years, twice as long as we have. Did we wipe them out? Game may have been scarce after modern humans invaded. Maybe he climbed the mountain to hunt for ibex goats.”

Alistair paused. “Quickly now, take a photograph!”

Jonas fumbled with the camera. Before he could snap a picture, another avalanche of rocks crashed over the waterfall into the pond. Full flow resumed, and more gravel scoured the bottom. The ancient mummy disappeared beneath the roiling water.

Alastair looked where the face had been, willing in vain for it to appear again. He loved that grotesque visage—as if it were, and always had been, his reason for living. He groaned as he straightened his back; arthritic needles stabbed each vertebra. He waited for heart pain to pass.

After the panic, Alastair's mind cleared. This is the most important archaeological discovery in the world—an intact Neanderthal. The others were scattered bones. It was a scientific miracle, although he had seen frozen mammoths of a similar age. This ice-entombed mummy was a window to a vanished era.

Alastair regained his voice. “The waterfall will pulverize the corpse before morning.”

“I'll call for help.” Jonas retrieved his cell phone and looked at the display.

“No signal. We’re too high up.”

“They’d need a helicopter to get here in time. Not likely...”

Jonas scanned the mountain slope above the waterfall. “Perhaps we can deflect the stream from the pond. I’ll climb up and look for a spot.”

Gratitude flooded Alastair’s mind. In a crisis, Jonas was a good, practical young man. He would save the precious Neanderthal.

“Thank you, thank you,” Alastair gushed, on the verge of tears. “Do be careful. I’ll follow behind.”

Unprepared for mountain climbing, Alastair and Jonas left their walking poles and packs near the pond. They traversed the slope above the waterfall, climbing loose slabs of schist. Alastair surprised himself, spraying nitro, pacing exertion, progressing on all fours, keeping up. Sharp rocks scraped his knees. The two men rested where the stream tumbled through a narrow ravine.

“Let’s climb higher.” Jonas pointed to a thin ribbon of waterfall thirty meters above. “Maybe we can divert it there.”

Alastair looked at the steep slope in dismay. “Okay, you lead.”

Jonas pulled him to his feet, and the two men crawled up the couloir. Jonas forged ahead, and Alastair followed, using the same handholds.

Jona’s foot dislodged a fist-sized stone. Alastair deflected it with his arm but lost his footing and slid a short way down on his belly, starting a small avalanche. Scree scratched his face and ripped the front of his coat. He tasted blood from a cut lip. *I’m too old for this.*

Alastair groaned as he watched the rocks careen downstream into the pond. More damage to the mummy!

Jonas kept climbing, unaware of Alastair’s fall or the rockslide, all sounds masked by the rushing water. When he looked back, his face showed alarm. “Are you hurt?”

Alastair waved the younger man on. “I’m fine,” he shouted, aware of the trickle of blood on his chin. “You go ahead. I’ll follow further behind.” That gave him an excuse to wait until his angina abated. He hadn’t told Jonas about his heart condition.

Alastair rested again after he reached Jonas at the high falls.

“We can divert the stream away from the ravine here.” Jonas carried rough rocks and placed them where the flow curled over the lip. Most of the water still passed between the stones in the shallow dam. Alastair waded in and

plugged holes with smaller cobbles. Wet boots numbed his toes.

“It still leaks too much,” Jonas declared. “We need to seal the inner surface.”

“How?” Alastair’s legs ached, and he couldn’t feel his feet.

Jonas grimaced and removed his parka, khaki shirt, and red woolen undershirt. His clothes were soaked with sweat. Shivering, he zipped his jacket over his bare chest and then laid the shirts on the inner surface of the dam.

Alastair watched the water level rise. Now, most of the stream drained harmlessly onto the rocky mountainside, away from the ravine.

“You did it!” Alastair clapped Jonas on the back. “*Perdido Man* will still be there tomorrow.”

The two men rested on a stone slab. Alastair washed his face and drank from the glacial stream with a cupped hand. Below, he observed water draining out of the pond. From this distance he couldn’t see the corpse. While he stared, the sound of grinding rocks startled him.

“Oh no! The dam!” Jonas shouted.

Their wall of stacked rocks slid over the edge and roared down the mountain. Water stored behind the dam went with it, carrying more rock. Jonah’s red undershirt tumbled below. Alastair watched in horror as the landslide grew, channeled in the narrow gully. He imagined thousands of rock hammers headed straight for delicate Neanderthal. All their work only increased its peril.

The rubble stopped before it reached the pond—but a great wave of water continued downstream. The cascade plunged into the pool and pummeled the mummy in his frozen tomb. After the avalanche, the stream flowed steadily again.

Alastair clutched his chest against the radiating pain. Their time had run out—they had to leave now to get back before dark.

“Jonas, you must summon help. Return to the base camp as fast as you can. I’ll follow at my own pace. Don’t wait for me—I’ll just slow you down.”

“But sir,” Jonas protested. “You’ll need...”

“Don’t worry!” Alastair snapped. “I’ll be fine.”

Was this urgency necessary? The mummy had lasted over forty thousand years in his icy tomb. Would another day matter? Yes...

His assistant still didn’t move.

“Jonas!” Alastair used his most authoritarian voice. “Bring volunteers with

shovels and blankets—anything to cover the body and shield it from falling rocks. Go!”

As Jonas began his descent, Alastair called after him, “Take the hand with you. It’s in my backpack, near the pond. You discovered it—it’ll make you *famous!*” Jonas nodded and touched his eyebrow in salute.

When Jonas moved out of sight, Alastair ascended the couloir again. If there was even a small chance he could divert the stream, he couldn’t return to the base camp. He gained confidence in his footing, knowing that Jonas wouldn’t dislodge stones above him.

As he climbed, he searched for places where he might divert the stream. There were none. The slope eased at the foot of the glacier near the summit.

Alastair stumbled on loose talus—he missed his hiking pole, left behind at the pool. The stream flowed from a cave in the ice; meltwater gurgled through the stones below his wet boots. Inside, ethereal blue light glowed through a translucent ice vault. The rippled walls glistened with runoff. The grotto surprised him, ten meters wide and fifty meters long. It narrowed overhead to a fissure in the glacier’s surface.

The beauty of the cave made him impatient—a distraction from saving the mummy. He couldn’t stop the stream here.

“Ha!” Alastair shouted in protest. A rapid, hard echo repeated a laughing rebuke—ha-ha-ha—mocking him.

Alastair hobbled along the crumbling foot of the dying glacier, searching for a way up. The ice face looked treacherous, with freestanding blocks fallen from the lip above. He found a terrace that offered a climbable slope. At the edge, the glacier was only ten meters thick.

His hiking boots had a good, crenellated tread, but weren’t designed for climbing ice. He went on his hands and knees again, pulling himself upward with his arms. When he reached the top, he paused and gazed at the spectacular view—rocky peaks of the Pyrenees and steep, forested valleys that stretched below. *On top of the world!*

Alastair surveyed the glacier, dizzy from the altitude, unsure of what he was looking for. Small ice-quakes jostled him. After a time, his vertigo passed and he felt fine except for numb feet—a relief, since they no longer hurt. Although it was late afternoon, he wasn’t hungry. No longer shaded by the peak, heat from the summer sun contrasted with a refreshing, chilly breeze that blew off the icy surface.

Thoughts of the ice mummy distracted him. Did Neanderthals use language? Even if the voice box remained intact, that wouldn't settle the debate. Would geneticists copy his DNA and clone him? He'd love to chat with a Neanderthal—if he could talk.

Alastair shuffled on the glacier's uneven surface; arms outstretched for balance. He tested each footfall until he saw the crevasse above the ice cave. It was a narrow, sharp-edged gap, twenty centimeters wide and two meters long. He heard faint sounds of flowing water coming from the bottom. He knew not to stand at the edge, so he lay on his belly and inched forward until he could look down. In the long summer twilight, he saw the stream below. Slick ice walls bounded the water—a perfect choke point to block the flow!

Alastair slid backward and walked to the cracked ice blocks at the glacier's lip. He grasped two chunks, one under each arm, and staggered back to the crevasse. He flopped onto his belly, banging his hurt chin on the ice, and pushed them over the edge. He observed water filling behind the blocks. Encouraged, he returned with more loads of ice and kicked them into the crevasse. He repeated the process, trip after trip, until the sound of flowing water ceased.

Alastair lay on the ice again, nose and forehead over the gap, and peered into the crevasse. Evening gloom blocked his view of the ice dam, but silence gave him satisfaction. He listened to the blessed quiet, the sound of success.

Exhausted and numb, he rolled onto his back and dozed—and dreamed of Perdido Man freezing to death, alone on the icy mountain.

Alastair woke, shivering in the dark. Confused, it took him moments to remember where he was. Gurgling sounds told him that water flowed again in the crevasse. The stream had washed away the ice dam.

Frozen tears made it hard to open his eyes. He flexed aching joints and sat up. His knees functioned enough for him to stagger upright and walk—but he couldn't feel his feet. A crescent moon provided silvery light on the white glacier.

Alastair fetched two more chunks of ice, one under each arm, and trudged back again. His heart hurt from the effort. Disoriented in the dark, he couldn't locate the sound of his relentless enemy, the flowing meltwater. *Where is the crevasse?*

An invisible ice bridge collapsed beneath him. Alastair dropped feet first into the gap, still holding his load of ice. The crevasse narrowed near the

bottom, wedging him. Hard ice pressed on his chest and back, making it difficult to breathe. With each exhalation, he settled deeper. He opened his hands and released the blocks of ice.

Alastair listened to the loud pops and groans of the glacier, moving millimeters down the mountain. Its vibrations conducted through the bones of his skull. The shifting ice would crush him! Trapped in jaws of ice, claustrophobia overwhelmed him, erasing rational thought.

After a time, Alastair calmed. His nose throbbed, flattened, and broken; blood dripped into his mouth. He rotated his right arm and touched his thigh and cheek with a gloved hand. The small freedom to swing his arm comforted him. He couldn't move his lower legs, jammed at the bottom. He wondered about broken bones but felt nothing.

Alastair noticed that the sound of running water had stopped. Snow from the bridge over the crevasse, and his armloads of ice, had blocked the flow below his feet. Alastair felt the ice water rise and cover his groin, stabbing him with cold. He shivered in violent spasms as it continued to climb up his chest. He raised his right hand and put it on top of his head to keep it out of the pool; his left arm was in dry air. He waited for a frigid stream to pour down the neck of his parka—and then cover his head and drown him. It didn't happen. The water stopped at his armpit.

He lowered his right arm until his glove dipped into the surface. He slapped the water again, causing a sharp echo and spray in his eye. The flood level didn't change.

Absurd, giddy joy suffused his mind. *I'm the plug in the dam!* His body blocked the water—maybe until morning when Jonas would return with help.

Alastair's last thought made him smile. He had traded places with Perdido Man, the gift from dying ice.

Polar Borealis #34 – May 2025

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 16 to 18 speculative fiction genre poems and short stories. Issue #34 cover: *Star Goddess*— by Derek Newman-Stille.

The 34th issue contains *poetry* by Heath Bleau, Lisa Cai, Carolyn Clink, Aidrick Comtois, Guy Immega, Kellee Kranendonk, Michèle Laframboise, Masha Riumina, and Melissa Yi.

And *short fiction* by Joel Buxton, Jameson Grey, Thomas Harrison, J.Y.T. Kennedy, Max Olesen, Jim Robb, Rhea Rose, Lisa Timpf, and D.G. Valdron.

Will be available for free download in May 2025.

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Mark is a Canadian/Italian who lives in Milan, Italy with his husband. He has a passion for socially and culturally driven science/speculative fiction. His background in anthropology gives him a unique humanistic perspective along with tools to build authentic worlds. He brings a queer perspective to the sci-fi narrative.

His publications include: *Secrets of Ishtabay*, Ninestar Press 2023. The story of a Maya village in Belize that struggles with its transition to globalization after the completion of a highway linking it to the outside world.

Eating the Moon, NineStar Press 2021. A utopic story of a young anthropologist who stumbles across a hidden society where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuals are marginalized.

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Gregg lives in rural Ontario, Canada, with his missus, Anne, and their cats, who have the humans do all the mouse-catching around the house. He writes speculative fiction and zombie filk for fun and has several dozen published examples of his fun, including past appearances in *Polar Borealis*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Speculative North*, *Mythic*, *Weirdbook*, and various anthologies.

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Isobel is a Canadian citizen. She was born in Wales where she learned to love the music of words. She is a grandmother who turned 77 on Halloween (some feel that explains a lot). Her storytelling started with amusing her grandchildren who bestowed upon her the title of “story machine.” Her poetry and short stories appear online and in print anthologies. Her blog is isobelmtl.com.

Ken Deepro

Ken is a retired engineer, board game designer and author of the critically acclaimed *The Mech Trilogy*. As a lifelong fan of science fiction, he’s enjoying the opportunity to launch the next generation of young readers down the same path. A list of his favourite activities includes scaling the Himalayas, shark wrestling, juggling chainsaws and making up fake accomplishments. He lives in Calgary with his amazing wife, teenage son, a cat, a dog and a pond full of fish. If you’d like to learn more, check him out at www.mechthebook.com.

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Lori is a Canadian writer who has been writing poetry and dark fiction since she first picked up a pen. Her work has been accepted in various publications including *Ghost Orchid Press*, *Dark Rose Press*, *Black Hare Press*, and more. She studied English Literature at the University of Western Ontario and now lives along the shores of Lake Erie. She is currently working on her first novel. You can follow her on Twitter @LoriG1408 or on Facebook.

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Jameson is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has been published in *Dark Recesses Press* magazine, *Dark Dispatch* and in anthologies such as *Chlorophobia: An Eco-Horror Anthology* from Ghost Orchid Press, *Let the Weirdness In: A Tribute to Kate Bush* from Heads Dance Press and *Love Letters to Poe, Volume II: Houses of Usher*. He can be found online at jameson-grey.com.

Mark Hill

Mark has been a full-time writer for over a decade now (most notably, from a Canadian perspective, as a regular contributor to the *Beaverton*). You can visit his portfolio at mehill.org, or follow him on Blue Sky @mehill.bsky.social.

Guy Immega

Guy is a retired aerospace engineer. His company, Kinetic Sciences Inc., built autonomous robots for the space station, robots to clean up nuclear waste, and patented miniature fingerprint sensors. He served in the Peace Corps in Africa and vaccinated nomads in the Sahel against smallpox. In 2018, he presented an invited paper at a conference in Abuja, Nigeria on an engineering plan to save Lake Chad in the Sahara.

Guy is currently working on a scheme to counteract global warming with solar sailing mirrors in the L1 region of space between the Earth and Sun. See his website: www.planet-cooling.com.

Guy's hard SF debut novel, *Super-Earth Mother*, published by *EDGE SF&F* (Calgary), is now available from all online booksellers, and in bookstores.

Alex McGilvery

Alex has been reading since before he can remember, and writing almost that long. He has published more than 35 books and is author and editor at his imprint *Celticfrog Publishing*. Alex lives in Clearwater with his dog and the stories clawing their way out of his head.

Lundy Nicklen

Lundy's childhood spanned four Canadian provinces, six schools, and eight home addresses. Perhaps the many imaginary friends she made across the country inspired her love for fantasy and science fiction. She obtained a degree in mathematics because it was too beautiful to stop studying and she teaches computer science because that's where all the best puzzles are found. Her interests include reading, gardening, cooking, making junk art and soldering electronics. She plays cards, board games, tabletop RPGs and computer games. She spends most Saturday nights playing MMORPGs with her children.

Sheryl Normandeau

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

Matthew D. Del Papa

Born and raised in Capreol, Ontario. Matthew D. Del Papa didn't learn to love reading at a young age. In fact, he didn't learn much of anything when young. It wasn't until high school that he discovered Science Fiction & Fantasy and that was mostly due to the lack of girls at the all-boy Catholic institution. University opened his eyes—in more ways than one—and widened both his horizons and his waistline. He earned a 4-year degree in English Literature at Laurentian University and then an MA in Humanities.

A member of the Sudbury Writers' Guild, Matthew has been featured in local newspapers and websites, co-authored a sold-out fundraising novella for charity, self-published more than a dozen hyper-local titles, and contributed to *Spooky Sudbury: True Tales of the Eerie & Unexplained* (Dundurn Press, 2014), the Aurora Award-winning *Nothing Without Us Too* (Renaissance Press, 2022), *MIGHTY: An Anthology of Disabled Superheroes* (Renaissance Press, 2023) and *Sudbury Superstack: A Changing Skyline* (2024).

People told him that a semi-autobiographical collection of humorous essays focusing on disability was a terrible idea but he wrote *Jerry Lewis Told Me I Was Going to Die* (Latitude 46 Publishing, 2023) regardless. Judging by the anemic sales figures, they were right. Matthew is busy working on a sequel anyway.

Rhea Rose

Rhea writes and publishes short fiction and poetry. She was 2019's guest writer and presenter at Wordsmiths writers' retreat/workshop at University of

BC's Carey Center, and featured writer in *Pulp Literature's* issue #35 summer 2022. As well, she was the featured poet in 2021 in *On Spec* magazine's autumn publication. She has been nominated for several awards.

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

Jacqueline Thorpe

Jacqueline spent 33 years in the financial journalism trenches. Retired, and finally unleashed, she writes science fiction from Toronto. She also hikes, bikes and is servant to a cat, whom she is sure has been genetically modified to get into mischief five times a day. She is a member of the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Club and is currently working on the second book of a sci-fi series she hopes one day will see the light of day.

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, Chinese and French 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*, as well as stories in *Tesseract's* anthologies and in *Polar Borealis*.
