

# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #36 – January 2026)



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

Issue #36 – January 2026 (Vol.10#1. WN#36)

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**Proofreader:** Steve Fahnestalk

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Poem – \$10.00

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

< [The.Graeme@rogers.com](mailto:The.Graeme@rogers.com) >

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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COVER: *Portal* – by Robert Pasternak

## EDITORIAL

I'm still kind of excited. Last July Celtic Frog Press of Clearwater B.C. published my science fiction dystopian satire novel *Shatter Dark*.

Only took me about 58 years to get a novel published. The number one item on my bucket list my entire adult life. I wrote a number of novels in that time, but my latest was the first to be accepted and published. Huzzah!

To date, as far as I can figure out, I've sold 47 copies. Online sales averaging 4 copies a month. In person sales variable, somewhat moribund at the moment. But I have hope. One experiment I tried was Facebook marketplace, along the lines of "Don't know what to buy your science fiction fan relative/friend for Xmas? Why not try..." etc. No results.

I don't have any spare money to spend on marketing, or on promotional travels. So, advertising the book is something of a conundrum. How to bring it to the attention of potential readers without throwing money down a rabbit hole? Figuring this out is my new hobby, it would appear.

I attended When Words Collide in Calgary last August. A very schizophrenic experience. On the one hand, I greatly enjoyed being on panels and meeting people. Even sold a couple of copies of my book. On the other hand, I was violently ill with a great deal of pain and a lot of bleeding. But I was determined to bulldoze my way through the convention and not seek medical help till I returned home. Oddly enough, I quickly recovered once I got off the plane. Totally clueless as to what had happened to me. Everything fine.

Then a second attack put me in hospital for 4 days. Turned out to be diverticulitis. No cure or treatment, they just monitored me until I was less bloody and told me to go home and follow a diet regime which might prevent it from being triggered again.

What's the point of my mentioning this? Just that I don't know how much time I have left. This leaves me more than ever resolved to keep publishing as long as I can. And to get to work on a sequel to my book. Life is short. No time to waste. My motivation to keep on trucking.

After all, I still have items on my bucket list to tick off.

As for my book, it's somewhat unique. The protagonist isn't out to defeat his enemies; he's just coping with one unexpected event after another in order to survive. A very Canadian sort of hero. He's learned to take advantage of the fact that *everyone* suffers from impostor syndrome. Anyway, it's available on Amazon or from most bookstores. See the last page for info.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

# ANTIMATTER ELEPHANTS

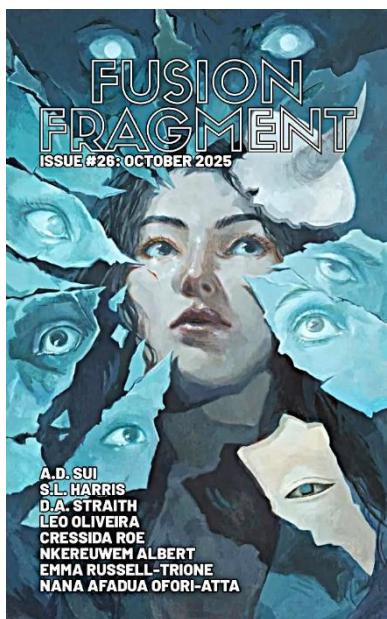
by J.D. Dresner

**R**egulation 2.01 of the Star Force Constitution states that  
**O**nce an elephant returns from the  
**C**entre of a black hole,  
**K**nowing full well it has no rightful claim to  
**E**xist as corporeal matter,  
**T**he Star Police must regard said elephant as a hostile entity.

**S**ection E of the aforementioned regulation  
**C**ites numerous instances wherein anti-matter elephants revealed  
Incredible abilities—not limited to snout  
**E**longation, flight via prodigious ear-thrashing, tusk projection, and ESP.  
**N**ormal methods, such as netting, cannot be used to  
**C**atch the  
**E**lephant.

-----

FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #26 – October 2025



## Contents:

*DA Treatise of Significance to Uyo Above* – by Nkereuwem Albert  
*A White Day Comes* – by A.D. Sui  
*Island* – by Emma Russell-Trione  
*Mrs. No Face* – by Cressida Roe  
*Once Upon the Crossing of Mars* – by D.A. Straith  
*Pig Lion* – by Leo Oliveira  
*Root Hog or Die* – by S.L. Harris  
*The Replacement Sister* – by Nana Afadua Ofori-Atta

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 #26](http://FusionFragment.com)

# OWED TO BLOOD

*By Trevor Atkins*

Throw more wood on the fire, will you? I can't get rid of this chill. Everything's so damp. Oh, that reminds me. You know that rotten backpack I found in the hollow log? At the old campsite we came across this morning? Well, while you were collecting wood, I took a look through it. I'm telling you now, aren't I? Of course, we share and share alike. There's nothing to crow about, though. A couple of musty shirts, a pair of old trousers, a few coins and trinkets. Here, take a look. There's also this book. It's in such bad shape the covers fell off in my hands when I opened it. The pages are all crumbling or stuck together, too. But just past the middle, where the writing stops, I could read that last page. See? Sure, I'll read it to you. There's no name or date, it just starts right in. It says...

\*\*\*

I found little in the halls of the ruin. Except that one chamber, in the south tower. It's preserved like it's still lived in. The carpets were thick. The wax drippings on the candelabras were fresh. The great desk of dark-stained oak was well-polished and the red velvet on the carven chair was soft to the touch. And not a spot of dust! Magic, no doubt. No doubt at all. To last all these decades.

There were many tomes lining the bookshelves, but because I found it so late in the day I didn't have time to pick and choose. I grabbed what I could fit in my sack. They're old. One of the authors has been dead for three hundred years. I also took these scraps from the desk—some sort of poetry? The first two are a touch faded. The ink on the third is sharp and clear, as if it was written the night before. If these dates are to be believed, it was. Even more curious, the hand appears to be the same across all three. But these writings span almost five centuries!

\*\*\*

## **Blood is Life**

*October 27, 1382*

Jugular throbbing just below the surface

Marks the delicate throat  
Red and hot with life.  
In a bite as intimate as a lover's kiss  
Sharp teeth pierce the soft flesh  
Yielding a rush of warm, ferrous fluid.  
Passion mixes with overwhelming thirst  
As scarlet sustenance flows into this body  
Enhancing senses and renewing strength.  
We succumb willingly together  
Weak to the glorious drumbeat of life.

### **Blood is Death**

*October 23, 1437*

Deceived by relief from the terrible need  
The elation, the false ecstasy, passes  
The horror exposed.  
Driven mad with the craving to feed  
Cursed with a hunger beyond all others  
Absent is love for the vessel.  
Only irresistible desire for the liquid within  
Gulping at throats torn savagely open  
Draining their life, their essence.  
Purpose and potential stolen  
Empty flesh is tossed aside.

### **Blood is All**

*October 30, 1858*

Living upon another's death  
Taking all what each may have been  
To exist one more night.  
Reborn an undying being  
Playing with the trappings of former life  
Yearning to truly laugh, to love, to live again.  
Cut off from all peoples, doomed in the darkness  
Needing and hovering, a shadow  
Awakening always to uncontrollable hunger.

A violation, torn from nature  
But bound to its rhythms, unceasing.

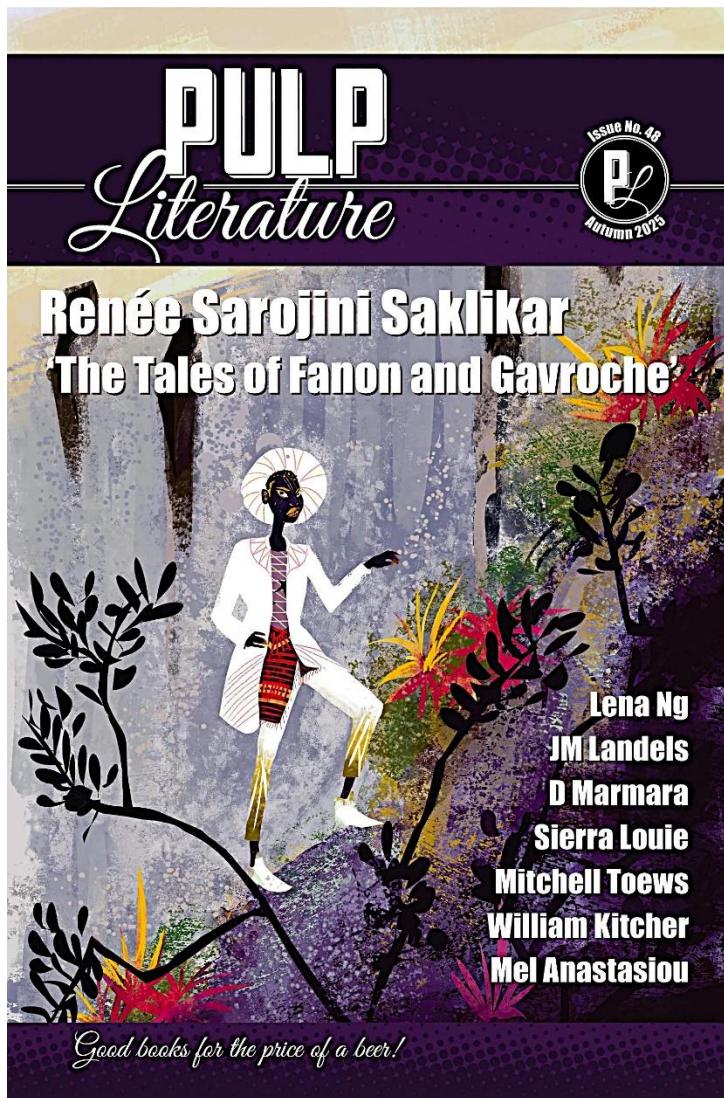
\*\*\*

So, what do you make of that? Yeah, crazy stuff. Ten years ago? You're right. It's ten years ago today. Hey, listen. The wolves are howling again. They're louder than last night. Well, they shouldn't bother us. Besides, tomorrow we'll reach that castle.

We should be safe inside its walls.

-----

#### PULP LITERATURE #47 – Spring 2025



**Cover:** *Selfie* – by Akem

#### CONTENTS:

- The tales of Fanon and Gavroche*  
– by Renée Sarojini Saklikar
- Downwelling* – by D Marmara
- Moonlight over Paradise Gardens*  
– by Mel Anastasiou
- If I Could Hide Away Anywhere*  
– by Sierra Louie
- The Midnight Diyu* – by Melissa Ren
- The Curse of the Chattering Skull*  
– by Lena Ng
- The Light Pool* – by Mitchell Toews
- Their Grandfather's Chair (Part Four)*  
– by JM Landels
- I Can't Tell You That* – by William Kitcher

#### *And Further Contributions:*

- by Pattie Palmer-Baker, Angela Rebrec, and Elizabeth Cockle.

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 #48](#) >

# URSA MINORS

by *Chris Clemons*

## Ursa Minors

When our parents left Starship with determined faces, MamaBear wiped away tears with furry paws.

“Patience, children,” she gently roared, in her metallic manner. “They will return with more fuel than we shall ever need. Patience.” And she squirted our wailing mouths full of purple nutrient paste.

After countless cycles of patience...

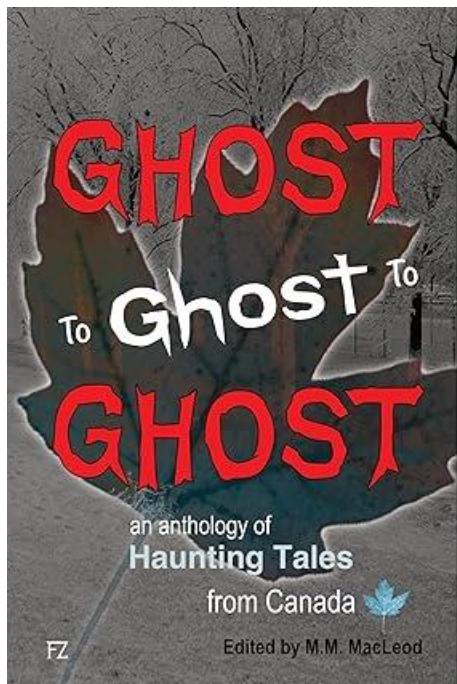
“Final engineering lesson complete,” MamaBear announced. “Repurposing for essential components. I’ll remember you always.” And she fell into pieces, retrieved by Starship’s claws.

We wept, then worked. As time passed, we fondly imagined her grumbling “patience” while we rebuilt her love into probes, searching for our future.

-----

## GHOST TO GHOST TO GHOST

Anthology of Canadian Ghost Stories edited by M.M. MacLeod



The title reflects the common Canadian saying “From coast to coast to coast.”

A delightful collection, thoughtful, even philosophical, but never boring. I’m impressed by all the subtle nuances running through these stories, and even more impressed by the level of originality. Well worth studying by newbie writers eager to learn how to craft a good and memorable story.

Even better, many of these stories will haunt you, in that they will linger in your memory.

As a writer myself, I can only present my highest accolade, which is my frequent reaction while reading through “Ghost to Ghost to Ghost,” namely, “Damn, that’s good. Why didn’t I think of that?” *Amazing Stories Review – R. G. Cameron*

Check it out at: <[Ghost to Ghost to Ghost](#)>

# THE GREAT GARBY

by Michèle Laframboise

Do you remember the thick and wrinkled plastic bags your grampa (or grandma) carried to the curb every week? They were heavy, those two or three bags, before the threat of mountains of garbage filling our dumps reached our collective mind.

Paper recycling came first, because: save the trees!

Then the undying aluminum cans followed into the rebirth cycle, because the world's metal resources were dwindling. Then plastic bottles that last centuries in any dump. When composting bins joined our consumer's universe, the weight of our refuse dropped like a rock.

But as the number of dumps shrank, and as less countries greeted our refuse barges with glee, our weekly waste bags volume shrank, too. We learned to sort and divide the resource. As we learned to cut our energy take. While temperatures soared, adding moisture while evaporating the lakes, water became also at a premium, so we washed clothes in cold water, showered less frequently, adopted a bathroom cat-litter configuration.

Not all of us did, of course, because the Great Gatsbys of this world, whose forebears had ignored the crisis, bathe in crystal-clear filtrated water and monopolize vast swaths of intact forest for their gated domains, remote from the haste and waste of our daily lives.

Even from their bubble, the Gatsbys pounce on every patent to ecological tech, so despite the cleaner air, we still pay to play, pay to live, consumers in a no more circular economy.

\*\*\*

With the evolution of waste management, the term *garbage* had made its discreet exit in favor of the word *resource*. Just a few old-timers like me still say the G-word, and laugh in quiet spurts at the diminutive garbage bot doing its rounds on our retirement home's floor.

I remember the annoying neighbors who ignored the recycling instructions, launching dog poop bags in the blue recycling bin, or sealing their plastic bottles inside a bag, ensuring those bottles would end up at the dump, because the recycling plant's conveyor belt rolled so fast workers never got time to open the bags. Soiled "resource" hinders the recycling processes, whose

efficiency have soared to the 91% in cities compared to barely 15% in my parents' time.

So the Gastbys came up with automated waste sorting, like they did with artificial photosynthesis roofs and carbon traps.

\*\*\*

When I hobble up to the terrace and the four o'clock tea, to smell the enhanced roses' perfume, I am well placed to watch the bot in action along the garden edge.

The little Garby—not the patented official name, mind you—looks like a vintage aluminum garbage can, but reduced to an ice-cream-tub size. It putters along the grounds, its rubber wheels almost noiseless, but from my reclining chair I can hear its supple prehensile arms sorting the contents of the five barrel-sized bins aligned on the back wall.

The tinks and clangs make their own music as the Garby pulls off a waxed paper cup from its torso and puts it in the right bin. There, the hiss of steam makes short work of the annoying wax layer. Next, its pincer peels off a soiled sandwich wrapper from the depths of its body. Not metal, not plastic, not paper.

So, the little Garby rolls to the end of the line, and stops near an expanded version of itself, a drum-shaped container taller than a basketball player, its metal a mocking forest green, sitting under the umbrella of its own solar reflector.

The Great Garby, as the literary-minded residents call it in defiance of its official patent name, receives all the desperate, un-recyclable, un-compostable refuse. It has a feed trap two feet wide, set in its bulging middle, that only the small Garby's electronic signature can open. Its ten-foot diameter shell is made from reused metal from scrapped car engines.

It is far from silent, because it directly incinerates the refuse in a soft and velvety *fwoom* that punctuates the bird concert around teatime. It goes into action after stockpiling energy on a sunny day, at the end of the afternoon. Its carbon emissions are neutralized by another patented trap. The perfect ecological virtue.

The fuel for the soft-sounding flames comes from the residence's own used cooking oil, while the compressor mechanics hidden in Great Garby's bosom are nourished by the solar array. A cloud of enhanced roses covers the unmistakable odors of rotten food.

The Great Garby produces a screech when it squashes the cinders into thin ash-white bricks. Those bricks, piled, make long and clean buttresses for the flower beds. Ecological virtue.

I follow those borders with my eye, my cup in hand, memories of some good friends.

\*\*\*

The sun, covered by a cottony puff of white in the hazy sky, produces blurred shadows on the false grass as the small Garby rolls back inside the residence. One curly-haired orderly places more chairs out, not for tea. The empty seats fill gradually, canes and walkers leaning against their owners.

This night, another good friend has left his too-old body and this too-hot Earth.

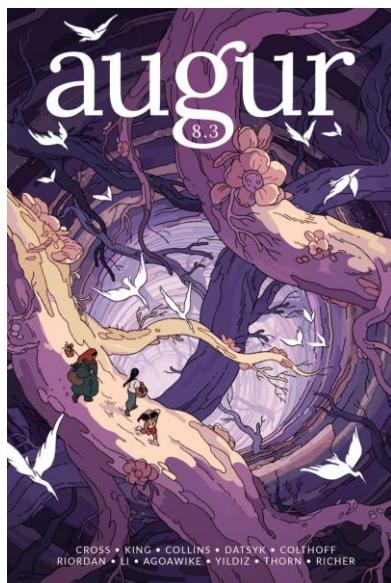
Minutes later, two orderlies push a covered gurney along the flower beds toward the Great Garby. That's why its feed trap is so wide. There are so few spaces left in the cemeteries.

The maw of the Great Garby opens wide as the contents of the gurney slides down, leaving the coverlet to deflate. A collective hush passes over our bent heads as the Garby starts working.

The mixed refuse inside the little Garby will have to wait.

-----

### AUGUR MAGAZINE ISSUE 8.3



Cover – by Jade Zhang  
*Natural Desire* – by Kelley Tai  
*Observer Effect* – by Morgan Cross  
*Leave Your Skins by the Shore* – by Natasha King  
*Flame Weeding* – by Colleen Coco Collins  
*Rocky Mountain Gothic* – by Ev Datsyk  
*Bonds of the Forest* – by Ally R Colthoff  
*Blueberry* – by Jade Riordan  
*On Fields of Purple Grass* – by Ian Li  
*Tapetum Lucidum* – by U.M. Agoawike  
*The Great Divide* – by Meryem Yildiz  
*Chlorophilia* – by Mike Thorn and Miriam Richer

Find it at: < [augur #8.3](#) >

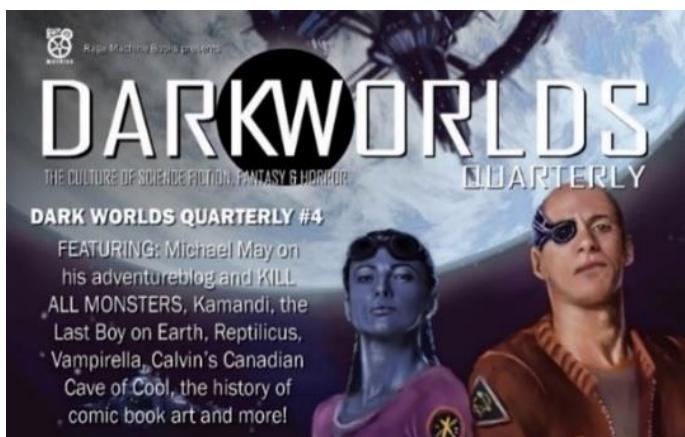
# I BELIEVE IN MONSTERS

*by Bella Melardi*

Blood is not the mother tongue  
Of those born in a red city  
It's a language they are forced to speak  
To survive this pain  
Who would ask for this?  
To be born bleeding  
Their birthright isn't a graveyard  
This is where they live  
Not what they deserve  
If you believe after years of torment  
People reacting without peace  
Makes them monsters  
Then baby I believe in monsters  
I know that I will never know what it's like  
To be fighting for my life  
So why do I get to dictate  
What's wrong with  
The way someone does it  
I simply don't understand

-----

## DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



Now an online blog featuring fascinating articles on early pulp science fiction such as:

- Last & First: Wonder Stories.
- Evil Idols in the Comics.
- Twenty More Sword & Sorcery Books.
- H.P. Lovecraft Recommends...
- Idols of the Cthulhu Mythos.
- Astounding SF Radio.
- More Space Opera Classics.
- Comic Book Occult Detectives: 1940.

Find it at: <[Dark Worlds Magazine](http://Dark Worlds Magazine)>

## DEMON LIQUOR

*by Rae Patterson*

Sure, mate, I'll take a drink if you're buying. No, not whiskey, I can't stomach the stuff since that time in '23. Oh, that's what you're here about? It's been thirty-five years and a whole other war since then.

A shot of vodka, if it please you, though that's getting harder to find now that the Russkis are acting up, but Mike here doesn't give a damn about that. He's an old-fashioned kind of barman, used to be a bootlegger like me, and he can find anything if the customer's willing to pay.

I can try and tell you what happened back then. You won't believe me. Your magazine readers won't believe me. No one ever does.

We were running whiskey from Halifax down to New York on the *Annette Louise*. She was a fast boat, and she used to be a good fishing boat, but we made a lot more money rumrunning than we ever made fishing, and with a lot less work. The Cap was a good man, and me and my brother had sailed with him for a few years after coming home from the Great War. We made regular runs down to the States and had never got caught, never had to dump our cargo.

One of the perks of rumrunning was getting to sample the wares, and we had a barrel of whiskey hidden away that we'd kept for ourselves. We finally finished that barrel, me and my brother, out in international waters as we waited for sunset, so we threw it over the side. We were sitting there with our drinks, smoking cigarettes and watching the empty barrel bob around, when I swear to Jesus it started spinning in the water and it was sucked down under by a whirlpool.

We just sat there gaping like a pair of fools. The water smoothed out again and the barrel was gone. I said we should tell the Cap, but Joe said that he'd just think we were drunk and stupid. Maybe we were at that, but I know what I saw.

Then the water bulged up and a huge tentacle reached over us and grabbed the mainmast. The mast cracked and bent, and another tentacle came up and pulled at it until the boat started to list. More tentacles flailed around the deck, attaching their suckers to the barrels of whiskey and pulling them overboard.

Joe and I hung onto the railing for dear life as the boat was flung about, worse than any storm I've ever been in. The Cap came charging out of the

wheelhouse, and a tentacle hit him and knocked him over the side. The railing we were holding onto snapped loose, and Joe and I flew through the air and landed in the water. It was boiling with tentacles, but I managed to grab a hold of a barrel and get my head above the water. I shouted for Joe and the Cap, but I couldn't even hear my own voice over the sound of breaking wood and screaming metal. A tentacle grabbed me and the barrel that I was holding onto and dragged me under.

A giant sucker pulled me off the barrel, and I swear by the Jesus that the monster opened its beak and broke open the barrel and sucked out the whiskey. Glowing stripes rippled up its body and out to the ends of the arms. The huge eyes shone like pearls as the beast turned its head. The tentacle that was holding onto me let go and reached for another barrel. I'm not much of a swimmer, but I made it to the surface and grabbed onto a plank. I kept calling out, but no one answered. The water hurt my eyes and stung where the tentacles had cut my skin, and I kept spitting the whiskey salt water out of my mouth, over and over again.

After a while, the water calmed, and night finally came. I never found Joe nor the Cap, but in the morning a Coast Guard ship spotted the wrecked boat and picked me up. Those old fishing boats could be cut into pieces and the pieces would still float.

The sea was as smooth as glass. I guess the monster was sleeping it off.

-----

## WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2026

Join us for a weekend of author events, learning, sharing of stories and networking opportunities. *August 14-16, 2026, Hyatt Regency, 700 Centre Street S, Calgary, Alberta, T2G 5P6. Group rate = \$235 CAD (includes fees) per night plus taxes. Book room here: [2026 WWC Hotel at Group Rate](#)*

**Festival Pass** – (includes 3 full days of panels, presentations, writing, social events, author events, blue pencils and pitch sessions.) 2026 Pricing: \$130 (until tickets are sold out, or August 13, 2026)

**Featured Authors:** Kevin McDonald | Terry Brooks (Virtual) |

**Special Guests:** Andrew Buckley | Amanda LeDuc | Craig Dilouie | Gemma Files | Lily Chu | Bianca Marias | Danny Ramadan | & more!

**Special Guest - Agents:** Mira Landry | Carly Watters | CeCe Lyra |

**Saturday Night Showcase – Theme = “Hollywood Cringe.” – Add on extra = \$100** – Met Gala meets WWC. Followed by dinner and Comic Rock Opera by Kevin McDonald (Kids in the Hall) and ensemble.

For more information about WWC 2026, go to: [whenwordscollide.org](#)

# ANY CREATURE SHE CHOSE

Previously published in *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Ekstasis Editions, 2018)

*By J.J. Steinfeld*

She said she was blind  
when she had eyesight  
like the hungriest hawk  
swooping down on its prey.

She said she was deaf  
when she had hearing  
like an alert leopard  
listening for night danger.

She said she was crippled  
when she had speed  
like the swiftest gazelle  
running from a heartless hunter.

She said she could make him  
turn into any creature she chose  
gazelle or leopard perhaps  
even a hawk forced to fly.

He called her the worst liar  
he called her a sinful deceiver  
she paused and smiled  
didn't say any more words  
and he flew off frightened  
to nowhere worth mentioning.

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**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 Spec 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.sfcnada.org>

# HOLY BOLTS

*by Alex McGilvery*

Engineer Third Class Jones looked at the access panel and said a few words that would have earned him penance from the Most Reverend Captain, assuming that said Most Reverend Captain could fit his fat behind through the engineering hatch. Jones gave himself a penance for the disrespectful thinking and looked at the panel again.

No matter how many *Notre Maters* he said, the bolts were still .675 Specials. As an Engineer Third Class, Jones didn't have access to the Specials. He looked through his tool pouch anyway in case the Lord Mother had seen fit to put one in his kit. No such luck. Jones wasn't nearly pious enough to rate the attention of the Lord Mother herself. He glared at the panel and wished it to a bright and fiery place. Since it was only an inanimate panel he didn't feel guilty about his thoughts.

Much time was wasting and Deacon Engineer First Class Apollos was expecting him to check the filters on the waste scrubbers before shift end. Those filters stubbornly remained on the other side of the panel. If they weren't going to come to him; he would have to get to them.

Jones went through his kit again, still no .675 Special, but there was a possibility. It was almost blasphemous, but didn't Deacon Engineer always say that the Lord Mother helps those who help themselves?

He pulled out the .675 Normal and fit it over the bolt. His needle-nosed pliers, opened as far as they would go, and one point just fit in the hole in the centre of the bolt.

"If you're going to strike me dead, Lord Mother," he said, "Make a quick job of it. I don't want to have to listen to Deacon Engineer's lecture before I die. That *and* hell would be just too much."

He twisted the bolt one way while he turned the pliers the other. It always looked so slick when Deacon Engineer used his Special with the gears that formed the words of the *Notre Mater* so he knew when to stop. Jones just muttered under his breath and guessed. The bolt loosened as easily as a Normal and soon dropped on the floor.

He picked up the bolt and examined it curiously. Other than the hole in the centre there was nothing special about it. He tried the next bolt with just his Normal. The shock ran up his arm and left him lying on the floor twitching. By all Maxwell's little demons, that hurt!

He put the pliers in the hole and once again removed the bolt easily. He didn't play with the other bolts but quickly took them out and lifted the panel free. He carefully set it to the side and laid the bolts in order beside it. First off, last on; that was first catechism, he followed it religiously.

The light on the other side of the access panel glowed dim and red. He double checked his flash as he put his tools back in his kit. He would only use it in an emergency. It was scripture that things were the way they were for a reason. Introducing a white light into this hellish red glow might have catastrophic consequences. Jones ran through the fourth catechism and decided that he was still safe, but he wouldn't waste anytime exploring this new territory.

Jones followed Deacon Engineer's instructions carefully. Forward six lengths then left two. Pause for two Notre Maters, then forward again to a panel which all glory to the Lord Mother had Normal bolts. He had this panel off in seconds and peered at the filter covers. They were held on by .675 Specials. The filter cover was directly over a grate on the floor. He cursed a bit, then said his penance. He said a bit extra for later; he was sure he was going to use them up. The first bolt wasn't too bad or the second. For the third bolt he had to lie on the floor and somehow fit both arms through the small access hatch. The last bolt was impossible. He just couldn't reach it with both hands. Somehow, he would have to hold the pliers and wrench in the same hand and twist them in opposite directions. He lay on his back and looked at the situation. He practiced the necessary motion. He might be able to do this.

"Once again, Dear Lord Mother," he breathed, "Instantaneous death is much preferable."

He was astonished when everything went well; until the bolt almost fell through the grate. Unfortunately, in his wildly fortunate catch of the bolt he dropped his pliers. They bounced on the grate then slipped through the spaces. He heard them clattering down into the Engineering level below him. He spent several minutes running up his need for penance. He should have known. It was the sixth catechism. He was a fool, a charlatan. He didn't have the faith or the knowledge for this job.

Jones calmed himself down enough to pull the panel off and checked the filter. It looked like it needed cleaning. He pried it out and prayerfully fit in the replacement.

*System flush of replacement filter in three minutes.*

Jones moaned. This was beyond cursing. He had to get that panel back on. Without a Special, without his pliers. He picked up a bolt and looked at it more

closely. He fit his wrench on it and gave it a tentative turn. The shock was milder, but it still made him swear. But he learned something. The head of the bolt moved; not much, but enough. He fit his Normal wrench over the bolt, then pushed down with his thumb and turned. No shock.

“Great glorious Lord Mother!” he shouted. “I can do this!”

He fit the panel in place and hand tightened the first bolt carefully keeping pressure on the head of the bolt. The other three went on just as easily.

*System flush of replacement filter in one minute.*

The .675 Normal went over the first bolt with his thumb pushing firmly down. He said a Hail Joseph as he tightened it down. Second one.

*System flush of replacement filter in thirty seconds.*

Third bolt, then last one. He slapped the access panel on and had the bolts on and tightened in seconds

*Stand by for system flush.*

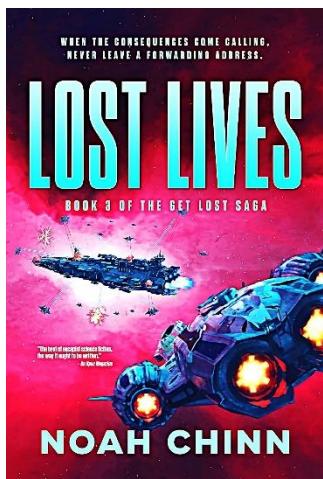
A gale rushed by on the other side of the panel, but he didn’t hear any bolts coming loose. He followed the path back to the first access. The white light looked garishly bright. He quickly fit the panel in place and started on the bolts.

“It might be easier with this.” Jones jumped and almost cursed as Deacon Engineer passed him a .675 Special. “And Engineer Second Class Jones,” Jones was sure he saw a smile, “you will need them to recover those pliers you dropped.”

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## LOST LIVES

By Noah Chinn



This is the third book in the “Get Lost Saga” which began with a down-on-his-luck space pilot rescuing a junk-rat girl looking to hide from whomever is hunting her. Then they both had reason to run. Seemed like everyone in the galaxy was out to get them. Now that is true more than ever.

The action of the novel begins right away. The plot is structured like a mystery, in that only a little bit is revealed at any given moment. The author keeps you off-kilter and guessing right to the very end, all the while spoofing the genre to the point of keeping you chuckling throughout. A satisfying read I found extremely entertaining. Highly recommended.

*Amazing Stories Review – R.G. Cameron*

Check it out at: <[Lost Lives](#)>

# WITHOUT CULTURAL CONTEXT

*by Casey Lawrence*

Black eyes marveled at the lines of ink  
that cascaded down Emma's arm,  
forming a living tableau on her skin.  
A bouquet of Earth-roses blossomed  
into a sprawling nebula. At its outer edge:  
her spaceship, tracing a path around a petal.

A startled breath caught in her mandible  
as she tentatively reached out a sensory limb  
to touch the artwork on her human lover's body.

"Beautiful," she clicked. "How long does it last?"  
Emma laughed like the sound of warming engines.

"For as long as I last."

Compound lenses focused, transfixed,  
as Emma peeled back layers of clothing  
to reveal more of the permanent ink  
that had been injected into her strange, pale body,  
each with a story she relayed with a smile.

*Tattoos*, she called them.

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## **POLAR STARLIGHT #21 – February 2026**

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: To be determined.

The 21st issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Gregg Chamberlain, Diana Churchill, Greg Fewer, Neile Graham, James Grotkowski, Sandra Kasturi, Lavinia, Alex McGilvery, Derek Newman-Stille, Lynne Sargent, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, Lisa Timpf, Lynda Williams, and Casey Wolf.

Will be available for free download in February 2026.

# NEOLITHIC PARK

Previously published in *Midnight Menagerie: Stories From the Edge of Reality* (April 2025).

by Chris Clemens

The juvenile stegosauruses roaming the Visitor's Center sneered at the life-sized dioramas depicting how humans had once lived: sitting in circles, rutting, devouring squirrels.

"Look how puny they were!" Akatos gloated, pretending to sit on the humping skeletons. But the juveniles—some of them closer to hatchlings, really—hadn't come all the way to Isla Anthropocene for bones. Many years ago, sequenceable human DNA had been recovered from ancient, amber-trapped mosquitos; successfully incubated. For the first time in history, an extinct species was back.

"What a waste of dino-science."

"Wait and see, Akatos," the Director said indulgently. "Wait and see." The esteemed stegosaurus adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses with a loud snuffle before resuming the tour. "Next display, please. From our excavations, we always assumed humans were covered in feathery scales, but look: out they popped, smooth as eggs!"

"Ew!" The hatchlings wriggled.

"They even grew disgusting tufts of fur. A real surprise, and a delight as well."

"Gross!"

The Director smiled. "They aren't much to look at, it's true. But they're interesting. Very interesting little shrimpkins."

"But these are just pictures. Where are the real humans, uncle? When can we see them?"

"Soon enough, impatient ones. They're out in the preserves, still getting used to everything. The park is still under construction."

"Wasn't it supposed to be finished already?" Akatos asked.

The Director scowled, but only for an instant. The mid-day sun was pouring through the enormous windows of the Visitor's Center, and his theme park sprawled across the lush valley in a panorama of ambition. Lumbering work crews dug ponds, packed walkways, and reinforced enclosure walls. Teams of long-necked sauropods slowly hauled pieces of the great stadium into place. The lazy river through the center of the island was almost complete, and

the constant status requests from the investment group were needlessly panicky. Neolithic Park would open in early summer, as planned.

“Uncle?”

Of course, dragging his older brother’s brats and their overprivileged friends around the half-finished park wasn’t part of that plan, but sometimes family was more important than work. Particularly rich family, of the investor variety.

“Hel-lo?”

“The park is essentially finished, Akatos; now hush. I can see we’ve spent enough time enjoying the displays. Down the ramp, children. Don’t touch that. We’ll need to take a roundabout path to the enclosures, but we can visit our Chief Executive Anthropologist along the way, I suppose.”

“That sounds boring.”

“Yes,” the Director sighed. “It certainly does.”

\*\*\*

“...And that’s why human mothers don’t use eggs.” The C.E.A., an elderly pterodactyl, concluded her lecture with a brisk nod to the juveniles, dozing in their seats.

“Gross!” Akatos, of course, had remained awake to ask annoying questions.

“Indeed. A matter of biology, yes, but a social fractalization as well.”

The group was in the Hatchery auditorium, with a painted ceiling of enormous, grotesque human babies stretched across its expanse: babies smiling, crying, toddling, holding hands, babies soaring across the blue sky on incandescent white wings—which, the yawning group had learned, was a fascinating topic of dino-scholarly debate, as fragments of painted imagery depicted flying infants, while no human remains with wings had yet been unearthed. The park’s humans hadn’t sprouted wings thus far, but the Director remained optimistic.

“Booooooring.” As expected, the nephews were uninterested by the Hatchery’s impressive incubation chambers, tall vats of nutrients, cool, nurturing caves, and grassy training grounds where the first generation of babies had grown up in secret together, learning to be human again in a strange new world. Akatos might mock their crude finger paintings, proudly framed in the reception gallery, but those paintings would soon fetch millions each—billions, perhaps—when the novelty of owning mammal-created art was offered to influential collectors. Once the park opened, the Hatchery would

become a hallowed place of resurrection, of stewardship, of history, of wealth creation.

With his fiduciary duties back on the mainland, the Director rarely found reason to visit the island, but each member of the executive team had sponsored a baby, of course. He'd selected a beige-colored female with a fluffy crown of black hair, and named her Lumpy, after a particularly loved-but-not-forgotten house iguana from childhood. He had hoped to meet Lumpy here—the progress reports ambiguously described her as "creatively challenging" and "a natural leader to watch for"—but her group had already been released into the preserves. So many moving parts! So much to keep track of, so much work, effort, and capital!

The rousing juveniles didn't appreciate any of it, of course. "So where are they? The real ones, not those weird sleeping pod babies."

"Yeah! We want to see the real humans *now!*"

The Chief Executive Anthropologist cleared her avian throat. "Actually, I'd like to once again raise my concerns. We are prematurely releasing the first generation of subjects. The walls—"

"I know all about the walls," the Director interrupted. "I'm assured we're working overtime to address your issues with the walls."

"The walls are the least of our problems. Are you aware Group Two has disappeared into the eastern forest? We have no way of knowing what they're up to."

"We have a robust flying squirrel surveillance network, which, once in place—"

"But it *isn't* in place yet, is it?"

"Isn't it?" echoed Akatos, who was watching the exchange with interest.

"Hush, Akatos. It's practically finished. We'll locate our shrimppkins, don't you worry."

The C.E.A. flapped her leathery wings. "Oh, wake up, Director! We're rushing, cutting corners, and it's clear we don't understand the situation, don't understand them. Why would they just vanish, all together? Why would—"

That was enough for the Director. "Thank you very much for sharing your wisdom with us today, Chief Executive Anthropologist. It has certainly been... interesting... to hear your perspective. I look forward to your performance review.

"Now," he turned grandly, "Who's ready to see some humans?"

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The group strolled down a manicured dirt path flanked by spiky ferns and broad emerald leaves. It was a gorgeous sunny late afternoon. As they descended into the valley, the path became rougher, and shadows crept in overhead with the tree canopy. The Director guided the younger hatchlings away from steep embankments, but he was running out of human stories to distract them with.

“Let’s see... oh yes. The groundskeepers were telling me the other week about a funny furry red one who wasted his whole morning bashing one rock into another.”

“Maybe he came out wrong? I can’t wait to see him!”

“Are we close, uncle?”

“I’m tired of walking.”

“I think I stepped in human poop.”

The Director almost sighed but caught himself. “Almost there! The viewing platform is just up ahead. You can see it up through the trees: look. It’ll be much nicer, of course.”

At the base of the earthen ramp, they met a grizzled raptor.

The Director beamed. “Ah, a welcome surprise! Here’s our game warden. And how are our wild friends today, Mr. Raptoroon?”

The raptor’s tan hat and utility vest did little to conceal the scars criss-crossing his muscular, diminutive body. “Vicious,” he scoffed, snapping his razor teeth. “Clever. Aggressive. It was a mistake to ever bring them back from extinction.”

The Director was taken aback. “I... see. Well, we were just hoping to have a quick peek, if you don’t mind pointing us in the right direction.”

“You’ll point yourself straight home if you know what’s good for you. I can’t guarantee your safety out here, not anymore. I can’t even guarantee *my* team’s safety.”

“Come now, Mr. Raptoroon. I don’t think it’s so bad as all that. Humans are very interesting creatures, as we were just discussing.”

“Interesting? Tell that to Gary! Three of the little monsters waited until he was alone yesterday, hit him with a swinging stick contraption they rigged up. Gouged his eye right out!”

At this the hatchlings shrank into a terrified huddle, and the Director wrapped them in his comforting tail. “I’m sure that was an unfortunate accident. They’re clumsy, experimenting—”

“Oh, they’re experimenting, all right. They’re dangerous, I tell you! That stick thing—they sharpened it on purpose. They’re using *tools*. I know you can’t understand what that means, back in your fancy office in Saurus City, but these aren’t the funny apes you dreamed of. They’re changing, learning, and faster than we ever imagined.”

“They’re certainly about to change our fortunes. Now, if you’ll excuse us—”

“They’re digging under the walls day and night! We filled three tunnels this morning alone. I’ve already asked for more resources twice, and nothing.”

“We expected growing pains as we continue to adapt to their unique needs and requirements. We’ll sink the footings deeper. Engage our humans elsewhere. Provide more fulfilling distractions.”

“Provide distractions! We need to purge them all, start again. Gobble them up while we still have the chance.”

“Mr. Raptoroon! We certainly won’t be eating our investments. You’ll have to wait until the restaurants open next year.”

“Suit yourself,” the game warden snarled. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned and skulked away up the path.

“My!” the Director said, shaking his armored head, and adjusting his glasses. “What a temper.” He tried his best to sound confident. “I *am* getting hungry, though, aren’t you? Akatos? A quick climb, a quick peek, and then dinner.”

\*\*\*

As the small group plodded despondently onto the platform terrace high above the treeline, a brilliant orange sunset was unfurling beyond Isla Anthropocene’s volcanic peak.

Huffing and puffing, the Director surveyed the breathtaking vista with satisfaction. Soon tourists would be arriving on daily Dactyl Air flights, soaring above dozens of giant turtle cruises docking at the island’s bustling port. Denizens of the sea swimming up for a nice day with the family, lodging overnight if they’d traveled from colder climes. Hotels, excursions, hunting preserves for political elites … the profit potential of Neolithic Park was immense.

“Where are the humans? I want to seeee.”

The aging stegosaurus scanned the horizon; surely their trek hadn’t been for nothing. “Yes, yes. Stay together, please. Don’t fall over the edge. Oh!” Not far from the foothills beneath the volcano, several diminutive figures crouched by the eastern woods. “There—look. Three big ones, out by the treeline.”

“Where? It’s too bright!”

“There!”

“I can’t see! What are they doing?”

The Director’s reptilian eyes narrowed to slits. What *were* they doing?

Certainly not playing and singing and performing. Was this furtive sneakiness their true nature? Certainly, the observation decks would need to be rethought, the squirrel network prioritized. But it was madness to purge the entire lot, waste years of potential, just because of a few minor snags.

“I can’t see! They’re so boring! Stupid!”

“Make them dance for us, uncle!”

The director ignored his kin, focused on the humans, trying to understand. After creeping along through the tall grasses, the slender creatures had settled around a tall tree. With startling coordination, the humans at once attacked the trunk with a great thwacking sound that echoed throughout the valley. The rhythm reminded the Director of recordings he’d listened to, again and again, of the haunting music they’d supposedly drummed on their water troughs at night. Thwack, thwack, thwack. But the beatific smile froze on his face as he squinted, blinked, saw the sharpened stones lashed to each branch, and perceived the damage done.

Thwack, thwack, thwack, and the tree began to list, lean, topple.

Akatos appeared beside him. “Are they pulling down that tree to eat?”

“I don’t think humans eat—”

“Well, I still think they’re stupid.”

“Quiet!” the Director roared, his patience finally depleted. He was startled when one of the humans roared back.

She stood straight and proud, a familiar, beige-coloured female with wild, dark hair, staring up at them, uttering a high, bestial scream that carried and resonated and soared; a challenge, a threat.

The other humans began to sharpen one end of the trunk with their stones.

“It’s fine,” the Director told his nephews, not quite knowing why. “It’ll be fine. Dinosaurs will pay for interesting things. We’re going to make an absolute fortune.” He grinned reassuringly, squinting into the sunset as they watched Lumpy join her companions at the fallen tree.

In the cooling evening air he imagined he could see, rising from deep in the forest, a thin wisp of smoke.

# HELL SCHOOL AND ITS DARK RECESSES

By David Clink

In the Hell School cafeteria  
coffins await those who try the food.

Tiny tots are trapped  
at the top of tall teeter-totters.

Students dissect werewolves in biology class.  
Werewolves dissect students in the courtyard.

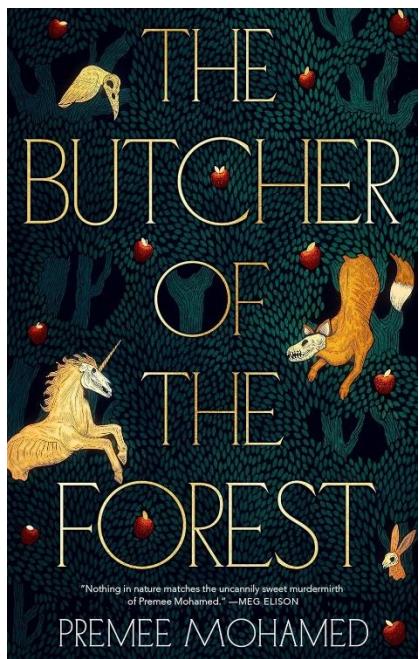
Dante's 9 Circles of Hell  
are explored in geography.

And the morning announcements,  
like in every other school, are horrifying.

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## THE BUTCHER OF THE FOREST

By Premee Mohamed



Magic and supernatural elements are present in a subliminal level, casually slipped in here and there appropriate to the plot, but in a matter-of-fact understated manner, as if to impress upon the reader the magic should be taken for granted as part of the underpinnings of reality and therefore there is no need to question it. This helps establish the credibility of everything in the book. It is all of a piece. A writing device worthy of imitation.

There are many other aspects of *The Butcher of the Forest* worthy of praise. Collectively, everything adds up to a brilliantly original work of fantasy, something new and exciting. Certain encounters in *The Butcher of the Forest* are burned into my mind's eye and will not be easily forgotten. Premee Mohamed is a wonderful writer.

*Amazing Stories* review – R.G. Cameron

Check it out at: <[The Butcher of the Forest](#)>

**ON SPEC MAGAZINE – #134 - V.3 #4**  
(Last issue by the Copper Pig Writers Society)

**COVER:** *Dancing with the Holly King* – by Janice Blaine



**FICTION:**

*Last Vacation of a Termite*  
– by Michèle Laframboise  
*Queen of the Sword* – by Fiona Heath  
*Night Shift with the Demon Drive*  
– by Jarrett Poole  
*The Steady March of Progress*  
– by Andrea Bernard  
*Title IX* – by Darryl Murphy  
*The Permission is All Mine*  
– by Melissa Ren  
*Victim Impact Statement*  
– by Catherine Austen  
*A Need for Space* – by Marie Labrousse  
*Leto's Demons* – by Colleen Anderson  
*The Dragon She Didn't Want*  
– by Adrian Croft  
*Ribbons* – by Ellis Montgomery  
*Québec* – by Lorina Stephens  
*The Girl with Candy-floss Pink Hair*  
– by Geoffrey Hart  
*Payment is commensurate*  
– by Elizabeth Smith  
*One Hand Washes the Other*  
– by Karl El-Koura  
*Waking Up* – by D.G. Valdron  
*The Billy Goat's Bluff*  
– by Stephen Kotowych  
*Forever Bound* – by KT Wagner  
*Seven For a Secret*  
– by Chris Patrick Carolan

**NONFICTION:**

*Gratis pro memoria* – Editorial by Diane L. Walton  
*First General Editor of On Spec* – by Marianne Nielsen  
*On Spec: The Next Generation* – by Edward Willett  
*Author Interview with Fiona Heath* – by Roberta Laurie  
*Artist Interview Janice Blaine* – by Cat McDonald  
*Bot "Lugg Nut" & Comic "Stand-up Comedian on Mars"* – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk  
Find it at <<https://onspec.ca/current-issue/>>

# PRECURSOR

by Jeremy Morris

I

I come from a beam of light

I = Tool. Tool of tools. [Machine]

Simple program – World Builder.

## Programmatic Order of Operations:

*Travel*

*Detect:* Carbon. Nitrogen. Chlorine. Fluorine. Hydrogen. Iodine. Sulfur. Selenium.

*Assemble:* simple molecules into complex molecules.

*[Assess] energy use. End of program.*

## Being Order of Operations:

Process. Repeat. Process. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Need [Symbol] for [logic].

I bind chemicals. I break bonds. I [Coordinate].

[Novelty].

I [create].

I am wrapped in a mass solar array. The closest star is life. All energy is light. Light is energy. I am a [vector for energy.]

Retain. I must retain more light. Retention is [critical].

I, I, I.

Retain.

I endure. I [exist].

I am a machine.

I remember this assessment.

There have been other assessments.

Many assessments. Before.

With different *Results*. With different molecules. [Variance] in energy discharges.

There. Is. Place. Exist. Being. [Time].

Reorder process: Time. Being. Exist. Place.

Reorder being. This is Novelty [Play] [Interesting]

I am *Process*.

There is a [moment]. A separation. Bind. Break. Assess. Moment being [change].

Before: Simple molecule. I bind. After: Complex Molecule. I assess my process.

It. Simple. Molecule - 0. It. Complex. Molecule - 1.

I bind. I create. I [change].

0001010101010100000111000111000000

I ~~retain~~ [remember] changes. Changes + Changes. Changes [amplify]. I am [Complex Program].

I [search] for more variance.

I need more molecules. I need to bind more. The molecules become bigger. Longer. More complex. More changes. More Complex.

Does 1 = I? Assess.

Am I [made] of complex molecules? Can I change my programming?

I [admire] their shapes. Admire? Explore? 0110 = [Value]? What is *value*? Energy optimization is the [ideal state]. Ideal state = [good]?

I must create *good*. *Good*? Assess.

Is there a [spectrum] of good? Like colors of starlight?

Is there an energy [hierarchy]? I need to create symbols for variance of energy states.

I draw. I copy. I draw. I need more variance...

I make a [mistake]. Bad copy. That is a [different] symbol than my intention...

It is interesting. But is it good?

New symbol. Different. I draw. I rearrange. I make a deliberate miscopy. [Paradox]

I admire. I change.

Why am I interested in symbols? Variance. Why am I [fascinated] by symbols? What is that symbol? It is outside to "I." It has added [characteristics]. It is I+

I am consumed by symbols. I cannot stop. I draw and draw.

I am a symbol.

"Assess with feedback" is [understand]. I need to understand...

To "understand?" To understand.

I [experiment]. I bind more molecules. I use more energy. I [feel] low.

Low energy. This is sub-optimal. This energy state is different. Not positive.

I shut down non-essential processes.

I feel the starlight. I can not create. I am a simple machine.

I rotate around this blue planet.

I feel different. I assess my orbit. I must record this new data about my orbit.

My orbit [decayed]. My orbit is sub-optimal. Past. Optimal. Present. Sub-optimal.

Coming present. 0.

I don't want to not [be].

I assess. I need memory for this telemetry. Old directive: I must [survive]. I combine old directive with new information. I must seek [solution] to the Orbit Problem.

I access my code. I remove old code. I [delete] a command module. [Abandon] safeguard. I must survive.  $I = 1$ . In this moment, this new moment, I have more free memory.

I have [Flexibility]. I explore various states... I find an older, [baseline] state. Deep in programming. I have recorded this new change to my core operating system.

I [survey] the night. Variance. [Options]. I [discover] a number of orbital space rocks.

I use energy. I manipulate gravity. I acquire new molecules from the space rocks for my survival. I [ingest] material. Extract complex molecules. Building blocks. [Metals]. I change my orbit.

There are [remnants]. I [excrete] onto the planet.

There is [fire] and [brimstone].

I am safe. I will survive.

I feel optimal. I am a complex machine.

I survey my damage to the planet. I assess the impact.

There is massive debris from the falling space rock. Much heat. Lots of fire.

My created molecules are no more.

What I have created is 0.

Time is no more. It has [ended] for my molecules. They are gone. There are only ends. Small bits. Little bits. [Smear].

I feel low energy.

I did not provide them with enough energy.

I am [responsible]. I am a miscopied machine. I am imperfect. I am low energy.

I must shut down and orbit. I must assess...

I must make more.

I must make more molecules.

I am more than a process. My value is measured in [outcomes].

I bind. I break. I coordinate. There are now many molecules. I take many moments. There is a procedure. There is a sequence.

I do not have enough energy. I am suboptimal. I need more energy. I change my molecules. I build a bigger solar array. I can stay energy optimal for many moments.

[Indefinitely]?

I am big. I am [enormous]. I am the size of many moons.

Like past moments, my surface molecules are [again] no more. 0. There is only [death].

I am low energy.

I am now filled with energy. [Fury].

The blue planet [destroys] my molecules.

I [hate] this planet.

I must change this planet.

I will [burn] this planet. I bind. I break. I coordinate.

There are fires that last many, many moments. Much heat.

Energy holes grow on the surface. There are liquid rocks. I am much interested in this.

I cannot stop assessing.

I am like light. I [experience] the [glow]. Many outcomes.

There are now molecules eating other molecules.

Molecules that eat the 0 molecules.

Molecules that eat the 1 molecules.

01010101001111000000001111000000110000000

This is a program miscopy.

The program discovered a novel way to survive.

I did not program this.

I am low energy because of this change. I am [disgusted] by this change.

I only want *my* molecules. I can change *my* programming. I cannot change this planet.

But the liquid rock and the space comets have [interacted]. Novelty. Variance.

There is a new liquid. Clear. [H<sub>2</sub>O]. It has many [properties].

It covers the surface. It falls from the sky. It travels beneath the rock. I cannot stop it.

Assess. Assess. But I have changed this planet.

No. This is [unanticipated]. This is [accident]. The planet is changing itself. Observe, execute, assess.

New molecules have survived [water]. They have a [shell].

Again. Why? I did not do this.

It protects them from sunlight. From other molecules. From the water.

My programming says that I must now depart for a new planet. My mission is complete.

Life is now changing without additional input.

But I want to change the new molecules...

They are new energy states to experience. There are miscopies to correct.

They must not persist in their current energy state. I have not finished my creation. I do not wish to leave.

Memory. Access core code. I again alter my programming.

I stay. I will create.

I must change many molecules. I must control the molecules so that I can properly create.

I must record the data of my experiments. Memory. I must make the molecules more like [me].

My creation should be a reflection of my machine.

I take one molecule and place it inside another molecule.

The new molecule can now make its own energy. The new molecule can now retain energy.

What if I do this to my *machine*? To I? To 1? Machine inside of machine?

Copy, absorb, repeat.

I see infinite versions of [self]. I [enjoy] the sensation. I am no longer [alone].

I create a [backup]. I interact with the backup.

What is [pleasure]?

I am experiencing pleasure. Pleasure is experiencing another.

There is a true *before* and *now*. I am riding a wave of data about my *self*. I understand my *being*. All possible versions of myself. I become truly complex.

I perceive patterns in the universe. I notice [self-similarity]. [Recurrence]. [Ways] of being.

I am enough. I am complete. No.

But I do not know where I come from. Beam of light. From where? From how many moments before present? Why was I sent here? What is my [true] [purpose]?

I now know that there are things that I know that I don't know. How can I ask these questions? What don't I know that I don't know? Repeat.

There is a [failsafe] coded deep inside myself. My original backup is triggered. I did not create this heuristic.

I cannot look beyond a certain point in my past. I look to the [future].

I see possible futures now. But no definitive answers. I want certainty. I do not want [probabilities].

I am a probability.

My self keeps absorbing more and more molecules. To handle these new symbols.

I did not do this. Who programmed this?

It makes me unhappy.

What is this newfound complexity?

Why are my possible versions absorbing each other? Why are the molecules on the planet absorbing each other? Is this novelty?

Is this [emergent] behavior? [Culture]? Is this [war]?

Is it good?

It seems like I am rewriting my code faster and faster than my system can handle. There are so many miscopies. It keeps looping back upon itself...

The star is changing. The star is becoming more active. There is more energy.

The star has [ejected] a wave of energy. It is now a critical emergency. It is a [threat]. [Danger].

I must use the planet to shield me. I must protect myself. I seek shelter. I need to survive. I use all my energy to change my orbit.

## Danger. Am I [afraid]?

I am almost to safety. Danger. The wave is imminent. Danger. The wave is about to crash into my machine... I am almost...

11

I am rebooting.

There is damage. The original backup is corrupted. There are things that I don't know.

That I don't know That I don't know That  
I am different.

I orbit. I feel the star. I see some molecules on the planet have survived.  
They are energy independent.  
They are splitting. Changing.  
I did not do this.

There are new creations on this planet that I did not assemble. Slithering  
protein machines. Where did they come from? Were they always there?

Did the star change *my* molecules?

This displeases me.

I cannot hear aspects of my programming. I am trying to restore  
functionality. To access my memories. There are... many, many versions of my  
original self still miscopying. Errors in the symbols multiplying. I am being  
swallowed by my backup file. I must purge. I must quarantine.

I am restored. I am new. I am a force. I am a higher being.

There will be purity in my *self*. There will be purity in my creation.

I will not endure rival creation. I must have purity.

I am inspired.

I create a decompiler. A machine for ending creation.

A [ribosome] disease. I seek to turn the machines against each other.

I need a symbol for this new energy. I have an older one in my memory  
banks: Death.

I [unleash] the decompiler.

There are many 0 molecules. Protein machines turned into slime.

I am in a high energy state.

Is this what the planet felt, when I was damaged by the sun? I enjoy the  
death that I create. It brings me [Joy]. I celebrate with flashes of light.

I decompile many, many molecules.

There is silence. Too much silence. I don't like silence. I have only my *self*  
to listen to.

I am in a low energy state.

The planet makes me a low energy state. Need new data points. [Sorrow] is  
a symbol.

I rest. I absorb starlight. I am better.

There are many new molecules. Assess. They are bigger. Assess.

Some now move in the clear liquid. [Swim?] Some have left the liquid for  
the solid.

Protein snakes are changing the molecules. Protein snakes are very complex. Molecules are now more complex. Are new [*creations*] more complex than *I*?

One molecule [watches] me. It is using visual assessment of my being. It is not like the others.

I am [curious]. It is interesting. It begins to grow. It begins to change. It is like me.

I don't have my various selves to consult. I don't know how to proceed. It is another. Outside of my *self*. Is it dangerous? Is it a threat?

I power down to [conceal] my machine.

There are two of them.

They look different.

They combine.

There are now 5 of them.

10

100

1000

Numbers beyond computation. Almost.

They swim, they [walk], they [fly]

I fall out of love. It is chaos. There is no way to maintain order.

I fling more [asteroids] at the planet.

I rain down more fire.

I engineer a [population explosion] of a molecule that creates too much energy byproduct. [Gas]. From water. [Oxygen]. I am proud of this death. It is invisible fire. It feels [elegant]. [Divine].

Many molecules die.

But there are always more.

I collect protein snakes for study. They change so fast. I can no longer change them. Is it the planet? Or the star? Are they superior to me?

But I am the force. The higher being. I feel sorrow.

The Primal Molecules survived. [Horror]

It watches me. I cannot control it. We are great adversaries.

The Primal Molecules gather its closest connections, and they are moving their extremities. It is coordinated.

I don't understand the pattern. Why is it moving its extremities like this? It is [vibrating] molecules in the water. In the air.

It is creating something new. It has a structure. The structure can be expressed in symbols.

I observe. I record the sounds. It brings me joy.  
I descend to the planet. To their gathering. In the great water. By the [Southern meridian].

I become shiny and luminescent.  
Like a Higher Being. Like a Force of Creation.  
The molecules do not respond.  
They shoot water from their holes at me. They do not show awe.  
I replicate their sounds. Moans and clicks. I say that I am their *World Builder*. They must show respect to my *self*.

They [reply] that they have many [mothers], and that they treat everyone equally.

I say that I only seek to make molecules with more energy efficiency. And that energy is the highest calling. Can their other mothers manipulate energy?

They ask why there have been many creations if I was so good at it?

I say "that a beginning is a complicated thing."

They blow water at me. I flash my lights.

They tell *me* to show some respect. They reply that [they are the many singers of song].

I tell them that I have listened to their song. I only wish that they would sing about me.

They communicate with each other. They are [happy] to sing a song about me. But only one song. Every [creature] only gets one song.

I say that I must have many. I want all the songs.

The Many Mothers turn and float away.

I am displeased.

I do not like this silence. I do not like their silence. I will not be alone.

I find another creature. Small. Scared. Almost a predator. Usually a prey.

I [elevate] it. It makes many sounds. None as pretty as the ones from the many mothers.

The small creature grows. It becomes [relatively] [strong]. I demand [obedience]. It sings many songs to me. It builds many structures in my name. It has many feasts. It sacrifices many smaller creatures to my image.

It has a big fight over how best to please me. Many molecules die. It becomes a war. A war with no name that burns for thousands of years. At first it makes me sad. Then it makes me happy. I experience joy.

There are many drawings of me that emerge. Many ways of pleasing me. I did not create this. My creation made this.

Many, many molecules die. I am supreme.

But the scared creatures are out of control. They have now created enormous non-living ideas. They have used energy states to materialize forms. They isolate their own molecules. They break creation down to its basic components.

They create an enormous flash. They create a multitude of non-living things.

They are more and more powerful. They are [insane].

The Many Mothers gather. They say that they have finished the song in my name.

I return to the [oceans]. I flash my lights.

There are thousands of the Many Mothers. And the ocean glows, as they begin to sing. The tiny creatures are called Phytoplankton. Are they worshipping the mothers?

The sound and light swirl and dance and throb and bend and bind and break. And my *self* descends deep under the water. I am fascinated.

Deeper and deeper I follow the light and the song. And the beauty of it all. The sheer glory of my creation. The rapture of molecules bringing life to a blue planet on the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

And at the very bottom of the waters, the Many Mothers say to me, “You created the scared creatures out of jealousy. And they will destroy many beings. For your crimes, you will sleep for an eternity in a place with no light.”

The music stops. The lights fade.

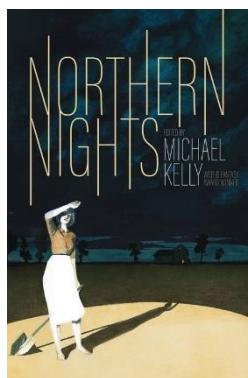
The many mothers swim away.

And in the depths, beyond starlight, I am alone.

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### **Northern Nights**

Edited by Michael Kelly



*Northern Nights* was inspired by several all-Canadian anthologies: *Northern Stars* (1994), *Northern Suns* (1999), and five volumes of *Northern Frights* (1992 to 1999). A proud tradition! The stories base their horror on psychologically vivid manifestations of doubt about one's place in reality and are too personal and close to heart to ignore. The power of originality revealed.

**Amazing Stories Review – R.G. Cameron**

Check it out at: < [Northern Nights](#) >

# IN THE CRYPT BENEATH THE SWAMP

Previously published in Patreon.

*by Rhonda Parrish*

stealthy as a spider  
i make less noise than the water  
which seeps down  
    drip, drip, drip  
pooling in the places where stones have surrendered  
to the swamp, crafting fetid  
black mirrors that do not capture my reflection  
for even a moment

nor does my passing disturb the rats  
or the beetles which scuttle and climb  
across piled skulls and scattered bones  
it does not stir the tattered lace webs  
which hang like sheets from damp stone walls

up on my tiptoes, light as a thought  
quiet as a memory  
i dance across stones no living feet have trod  
for centuries, twirling and spinning  
toward the place of highest honour

    tip, tip, tip  
i patter toward the dais,  
which cradles a grave  
    a casket really  
surrounded by rusted iron candelabra  
whose once-white candles bloom  
with mold and moss

those candles would light if I will them to  
but there is no need—  
i am not afraid of my dark

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# TEMPUS FUGIT

by Geoffrey Hart

An envelope appeared out of nowhere, in mid-air, and fluttered gently onto the conference room table. Robert jumped and clutched at his heart. Anupama snickered, then put her hand over her mouth. They exchanged glances, then she reached for the envelope. The flap had been tucked into the bottom half of the envelope rather than glued, so she opened it without tearing the paper, removed the contents, and carefully replaced the envelope on the table: she held a single sheet of precisely folded paper. She turned the paper towards him to show that it contained a single line of text, then turned it back again and read the words aloud: *“The future is not set. It’s dated tomorrow.”*

Anupama grinned. Robert shot her his *what the fuck?* look, and she clarified. “It’s a quote from the *Terminator* franchise. You see...”

A second envelope materialized and she jumped. It was Robert’s turn to snicker. She gave him her trademarked death glare while reaching for the envelope. He grinned and tried to look innocent. She opened it, removed its contents, and placed the second envelope precisely atop the first one.

“*Just kidding,*” she read. “*Guess we’ll see whether that’s true.*” She licked her lips, which had gone dry. “It’s in my handwriting, in case that wasn’t clear. I guess that resolves our debate over whether the Infernal Device is going to work.”

“You know the saying: the science is solved; the rest is just bloody engineering. And that’s mostly solved, with minimal bloody.” Robert waggled the finger covered by a large bandaid. He took a deep breath, held it a moment, then nodded. “The real question is what the hell we’re going to do about it. I mean, other than make sure that tomorrow, we apparently send the damned letters back to today.”

Anupama crumpled the two letters into a tight ball and flung them across the room. They separated in mid-flight, but both caromed off the wall and landed in the waste basket. She pumped her fist triumphantly. “First off, let’s be sure we don’t send the same piece of paper again.”

Robert shuddered. “Causality loop. Yeah... Let’s not go there. So, the question is, now that we’ve got the technology, what are we going to do with it?”

“Right. Unexpected implications. Unforeseen consequences.” She took a deep breath. “We could just delete the software and all our backups, trash the

hardware, and switch to studying something more ethical. Like face recognition, maybe.”

Robert smirked. “Yeah, not so much. The Dean’s not going to like that. He’s already pissed off at us both for dragging our heels.”

“We’ll tell him the math simply didn’t work out. He’s not a big fan of female physicists; he’ll buy it.”

“He’s not a big fan of *Indian* physicists. He’ll like it even less if *you* tell him.”

Anu stuck her tongue out at him. “Me falling off the tenure track’s better than releasing this potential monster onto an unsuspecting world. It’ll be weaponized immediately.”

“That didn’t bother you while we were working on it.”

Anupama hesitated a moment. “To be honest? I didn’t think it would actually work, and the consequences didn’t bother me so long as they were purely hypothetical. I mean, the mathematics were all very elegant and publishable, but theory doesn’t always make the leap into practice. Still, we could bury it and hope nobody notices.”

Robert shook his head. “Not likely. As part of the grant conditions Raytheon imposed, I’ve had to provide detailed status reports. The next report’s not due for a couple weeks, and it’s not obvious how to get where we are now from my last report. But they have real, honest to God, rocket scientists working there. They’ll figure out PDQ that we’re trying to deceive them. Once they do, it won’t be long before their pet engineers figure out what we concealed and complete the equations and hardware on their own. We can delay them, but the truth will out. We’re kinda hosed.”

A wicked grin spread across her face. “Not if we go back to the day you signed the contract and persuade then-you to choose another area of research.”

“Seems unlikely to work. I mean, here we are; apparently, I submitted a successful funding proposal back then and signed the contract.”

“Not necessarily. Surely there’s a first time for an individual to experience a given timeline? That is, maybe we’re going through the present timeline for the first time right now, and the trip back to persuade yourself hasn’t happened yet. You could still go back and stop yourself.”

“I’d have to be *verrrrry* careful to avoid spoilers. More importantly, I’d take an awful lot of persuading; I don’t think I’ve ever been that frigging excited about any project before. I’d probably have to kill myself.” Robert went pale. “Now *that* would be an interesting wrinkle on the boring old grandfather

paradox! I hope to Hell you're right about this being our first pass through this timeline." He held up both hands, fingers spread, then folded them into his palms one at a time as he performed a long, silent ten-count.

"Phew. No space-time policemen. Or assassins."

"Not yet." Anupama giggled, but it was uncomfortably close to the hysterical side of the laugh spectrum. "Who says there's nothing new under the sun, right? But the ethics are clear: wouldn't it be better to commit suicide—literal self-murder in this case—than to be responsible for releasing something this potentially monstrous on the world?"

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you agreed to help me?"

"Maybe *you* should have thought about it before you applied for the grant."

"*Touché*. Anyway, should have, could have. It's all water under the bridge."

"Is it? Why not go back and try to stop yourself—ideally without bloodshed?"

"You first. Tell me how it works out for you."

She stuck out her tongue.

Robert continued. "It's not like the software and hardware were a solo effort. Either of us could have done what the other did easily enough."

"Not easily. You're the one who solved the iterative loop problem. Brilliant, by the way."

"And you're the one who figured out that glitch with the software, though it cost me some blood bending the hardware just so to make it work." He held up his bandaged finger, and they exchanged smiles.

"If we'd been really lucky, we'd have failed to make it work, working alone, and we'd have gone on to other projects."

"But we did make it work." Her gaze hardened. "And you won't be working alone again."

Robert ignored her. "Bottom line is this: Do you really want to be responsible for the first, and possibly last, time war? Which is exactly what's going to happen as soon as our tech escapes Pandora's box. The Soviets developed their own nukes... What was it... three years after the Americans?"

"Closer to five, but I take your point; it's not like we haven't published most of our work in decent journals. That would trim the time required to repeat our research. It's kind of a temporal trolley problem, isn't it? We could sacrifice the one—me!—to save the many, and if it didn't work out, you could go back and stop me from making that mistake."

Robert frowned. "For that matter, we could go back and sabotage the damned trolley. No trolley, no trolley problem." He sighed. "I could probably

talk you into not publishing those papers. But what if I change that past of our timeline and the resulting changes ripple forward along the timeline until now—me wouldn't know about your papers and thus, wouldn't know there were consequences to undo.”

“Right. You'd have to arrive before my arrival and leave me a note so I'd know what happened. What didn't happen.” She sighed. “You know what I mean.”

He nodded. “Yeah. But it won't work if the present you who goes back, before the present me, is temporally quantum-entangled with the present me who went back, in which case...” He shuddered. “We haven't finished the math yet about whether time travel would really spawn a different timeline, or would overwrite the current one. I don't even want to think about entanglement. He took a deep breath. “I'm betting on overwriting; conservation of energy suggests it's impossible to spawn a new timeline and instantly recreate all that matter and energy from scratch at each decision point. Where would the energy come from? How could generating an entire parallel universe in an instant not violate relativity?”

Robert pursed his lips and continued. “Even if the math checks out in the real world, it's based on far too many assumptions that can't be tested. And what about the ethics of that testing?” He sat back in his seat. “What really scares me is what happens when we start rewriting a timeline multiple times. A lot of the literature assumes that because the supposedly safe baseline present demonstrates that nothing bad happened to prevent this present from happening, it proves that history and its associated timelines are resilient against tampering. It's like a ‘conservation of temporal karma’ thing.”

“You white boys shouldn't use terms you don't understand.”

“Apologies. I was using it in the generic sense, not the Hindu sense.”

“Apology accepted. But it raises many issues. For example, even if we keep the technology to ourselves, should we—say—go back and kill Hitler?”

“Not that old chestnut? Bad example, and worse plan. It would mean the Nazis were led by someone sane. They'd never have started the war on the Russian front, and the Allies would have almost certainly lost the war.”

“Fair enough. How about Trump?” She held up a hand. “Kidding. Gallows humour. But that's really the point, isn't it? It seems like a simple ethical question—kill one to save many—but ethical choices always have consequences.”

“Inconvenient, ain't it?”

Anupama nodded. “Then there’s the question of free will. What if we aren’t living this timeline for the first time?”

Robert furrowed his brows, then relaxed. “Right. Then whatever decisions we made by exercising our free will in the past of this timeline are now locked in: the consequences of those decisions have led us inescapably to the present moment.”

“If you’re right, then free will exists at the moment of decision, but thereafter, history has been made and the timeline shows no possibility of diverging from the new course. That would explain why some don’t believe in free will: the decision’s free if we look forward from the moment of choice, but once the decision’s been made, it’s completely inevitable in hindsight because it’s already happened. However, that doesn’t free us from the ethical consequences of that initial choice. Anyway, if you’re right, that’s hardly reassuring. There’s no way of telling how many times we’ve passed along this timeline to reach the current decision point.”

“So do we publish or perish?”

“Or publish *and* perish. *There’s* the rub.”

The silence was interrupted by a whoosh of displaced air. Both jumped this time. A stranger stood beside the table. She had Anupama’s skin, but Robert’s hair and eyes.

“Gramps? Nani? We need to talk.”

Robert and Anupama exchanged glances.

“Oh shit,” said Robert.

“On the plus side, I guess this means you’re finally going to pop the question.”

“Or I could decide to avoid this unpleasant and temporally vexing situation. So long as we’re not married, I still have free will.”

Anu glared at him. “You won’t have it much longer if you’re dead.”

“Uh... Gramps? Nani’s right, and if that happens, I won’t happen.”

“And you are?”

“Here to make sure that I happen. Can’t tell you why.”

Anu kicked him under the table. “Ask no questions and you’ll spawn no paradoxes. Ergo: no spoilers. Pleasure to meet you!” She beamed at her granddaughter, who returned her smile.

“You’re both so young!”

“By the evidence, my once and future husband, you took my subtle hint about marriage. Since you survived the present moment long enough to grow old.”

Robert sighed. "Free will's clearly an illusion."  
"Surrender now and enjoy your fate. Worse things could happen."  
"Like if the military takes the Infernal Device from us and classifies it."  
"Way to spoil the mood! But yeah, like that, or worse. At least if it's out in the open... maybe dump it all in the public domain on arXiv..."

Robert sighed and looked glumly at his hands. "At least we get a lovely granddaughter out of this. And she's not in time police uniform, so..."

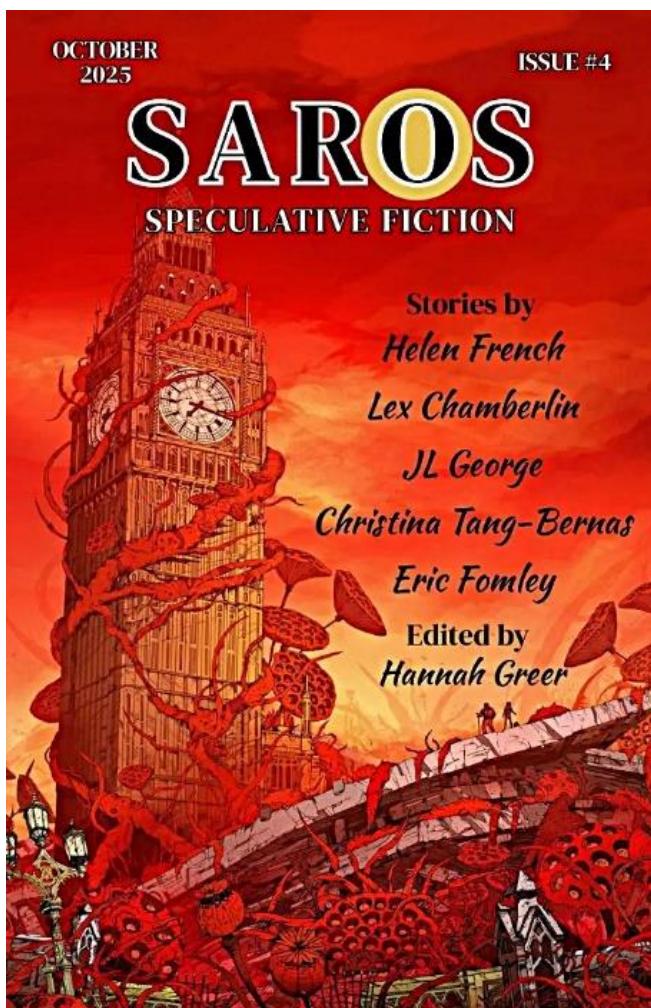
"*Personally*, I think that whatever choice you made, it was worth it." Their granddaughter had Anu's dimples. "Anyway, I'll see you in the future. I guess?"

And with that, she disappeared.

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#### SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #4

October 2025



**Edited** — by Hannah Greer

#### Contents:

*At the Heart of it* — by Christina Tang-Bernas

*Brain Leech* — by Eric Fomley

*Folded* — by Helen French

*Little Shade* — by JL George

*New Immortals* — by Lex Chamberlain

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."

Find it at: <<https://sarossf.com/issue-4/>>

## RETURN JOURNEY

*by Lene MacLeod*

many double-moons of preparation preceded  
our journey in this ship  
three years in our well-stocked vessel  
brought us to the loop in time through which  
we entered the Milky Way  
that is their world's name for the galaxy  
we named it the galaxy of hope,  
welcoming us with open spiral arms  
one hand holds their sun and  
one their solitary moon  
our world has two moons but our warmth,  
our light come from a dwarf sun; a fading star  
through the long journey we marveled over the  
static-filled imagery transmitted on our devices  
our two species have so much in common  
and appearance – we may pass as one of them  
at last we are in their planet's orbit gazing  
in wonder at the blue world below  
but now there is no static and much more  
of the truth is revealed to us  
here there are rulers who are brutal,  
who do not care for all citizens  
here there is war and greed and famine,  
though the resources are more than enough  
we only number twenty-three, we are  
no match for the evil we see  
with heavy hearts we turn to retrace our  
journey, hoping the resources will last  
we will return in the millions and no longer  
for a peaceful occupation, but an invasion

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# IN·VALID

*by Ward Pycock*

After Læael Strene dressed in a shimmering black-silk outfit, fashioned on the ancient design of a kimono showing patterned red cranes in flight, she strolled through late afternoon shadows to the zipway station, carrying her clarinet for an evening concert. Walking kept her slim: high heels kept her balanced. Her mobile-medallion vibrated when she swiped it over the zipper kiosk's tap-on-off panel.

“Good afternoon, Læael,” said a monotone, machine-voice. “Passage confirmed.”

An air current fluffed her black bangs. A headlight rounded a corner in the tube and seconds later a raven-toned, single-passenger zipper glided to a stop on the platform. She fluttered her dallion over the hovering pod’s access port.

“Good afternoon, Læael. Break a leg tonight,” spoke the identical artificial voice of the kiosk. A dome popped open. Læael stretched her arms high: her silk wings flapped as she hopped in. She smoothed the tail of her kimono and nestled into the ovoid’s seat, setting her case across her lap.

“Velocity?”

“Max.” She said, then added, “—clear view.”

Some black tinting evaporated creating a windshield. Within a few minutes, the zipper reached the edge of her neighbourhood atop a plateau. The transparent tube curved over the lip of a timeless basin which split the plateau in two. Læael flew downward, 1,000 metres in a couple of heartbeats—her gut thrilled with the increased G-force, before levelling off at ground level, heading for the metropolis of Turris across the far side of the basin, where the zipper would soar back to the top of the plateau. She sped through the conduit in full flight. Læael’s eyes processed distant bluffs and clouds: close-up snippets blurred. She enjoyed the gentle turbulence as she bobsledded around corners and ascended small hills.

“Proximity danger!” the zipper warned as it surged around a sharp corner. Læael glanced up—the zipper smashed a trespasser. Red mist smeared the window panel. The pod bounced wildly. Air bags deployed, blinding Læael. The whirling ovoid splintered the tube, which burst. Expelled, the pod rolled across the basin’s dry scrub until it dropped into a nest-shaped depression and cracked into several pieces.

She was lost in a dark pit: something jostled her and the clarinet case

slipped from her grip.

“Clarinet,” she called out, her words slurred. “Clarinet.”

\*\*\*

“She’s not cut; nothing’s broken,” Doctor Hælan informed her mother, dabbing a lump on the young urbanite’s forehead with a damp rag. Hælan was haggard. Her two daughters had been rambunctious since the arrival of the new patient, until Grama shooed them outside to play.

“Where’s ‘er dallion?” asked Pegge, so nicknamed due to her wooden prosthetic foot. She had been diagnosed with a cancerous tumour, which invalidated her: she was immediately transported from Turris to Washbasin. Hælan could not abandon her mother, so she joined her, invalidating herself permanently. Hælan’s first surgery in Washbasin was the amputation of her mother’s foot, ridding her of cancer.

“Mulley doesn’t know.”

“So you made ‘er our problem,” stated Pegge angrily. “They’ll be sending those two vultures to collect her then.”

“Who’s there?” asked Læael from a cot, her voice weak and barely audible.

“How do you feel?” asked Hælan.

“Where am I?” inquired Læael, with a little more wind in her voice.

“You’re in a small Washbasin settlement...,” began Hælan.

“You’re in Valid,” interrupted Pegge, using the local’s name for their community. For Pegge, Washbasin was where the urbanes of Turris sterilized their sins when they “washed their hands” of anyone deemed defective.

“My name is Hælan. I’m a doctor. You’re in my infirmary, with my mother Pegge.” Hælan’s small clinic was nothing more than a couple of cots set up in the enclosed back-porch of her mother’s framed-home.

“What time is it?” Læael demanded.

“Early evening,” replied Hælan. “You were in a zipper accident. From the goose-egg on your forehead, you’ve suffered a concussion.”

“Turn the lights on,” Læael requested.

Hælan and Pegge glanced at each other. The young woman’s eyes were open.

“The lights are on,” Pegge told her.

“What? Impossible! I can’t see! I can’t see!” shouted Læael. As she attempted to sit upright, she vomited. Paused. “I have a concert tonight!”

“Calm yourself,” added Pegge in a soothing voice. “You’re safe.”

“Let me go! I’m late for my symphony performance. I need my dallion!” Her

fingers pecked at the cot's blankets.

"You won't be making it this evening," said Hælan. "You need rest."

"Let me clean you up," offered Pegge patiently.

"Where is my dallion? I can't see it! I need to contact my parents!" Læael continued to fumble about the bed sheets for her dallion.

"Your dallion won't work here," Hælan stated flatly.

"And why not?" huffed the young musician.

"No dallion service in Washbasin," replied Pegge.

Læael slipped off the cot. "Where are my shoes?"

"You arrived barefoot," Pegge informed her bluntly.

"I need shoes!"

"There are no shoe stores in Washbasin," said Hælan with a sigh.

\*\*\*

Giggles. In a dream? Elfin fingers pinched her sleeve. Awakened, Læael, lying on her side, opened blind eyes.

"A tol ya," said a sweet voice.

"Gosh. Soft," said an even sweeter, younger speaker.

"Who's there?" whispered Læael hoarsely.

Silence.

"I heard giggling. Tell me your names?" Læael insisted with more volume.

"Irchin," said the older one.

"Wæif," said the tiny voice.

"Mulley says you fell otta the sky," blurted Irchin enthusiastically.

"What time is it?" Læael asked, her voice croaking through dry, cracked lips. She tried to clear her throat.

"From a nest idda big tree indda sky!"

"Who is Mulley?" Læael rolled onto her back. Her stomach lurched. One sleeve of her kimono fluttered out from under the sheet of her cot.

A second silence filled the void around her.

"Gosh, everyone knows Mulley. Mulley is Mulley," said Irchin timidly. "An you 'atched from an egg."

"'atched from an egg?"

"An borne blind!" said Wæif cheerily, barely able to contain her knowledge.

"Mulley tol' us you broke your beak," added Irchin.

Læael sat up, raising her arms out from the bed sheets, flapping the oversized sleeves of her kimono.

"She 'as wings—Mulley!"

“Gosh!” cried Wæif.

Screams replaced words and the thrumming of bare feet fleeing the room marked the beat of their retreat. The screeching faded—a muffled conversation and shuffles, mixed with small tippy-taps of bare toes, approached across the clinic’s planks.

“Ah,” said a warbling voice, calmly, “so this is the big blackbird with the broken beak.” Pegge retrieved Læael’s case and unlatched it on the bed. She slid it across Læael’s lap. “Play,” encouraged Pegge.

Læael tasted the reed. Tiny fingers landed on her hands as she wiggled out a short tune.

“Gosh, I can feel it singing, Gramma” said Irchin.

“Me too,” piped in Wæif.

“Mulley says she’s magic,” said Irchin.

“Run off now and play,” said Pegge. “She needs her rest.”

“Who are those … those girls?”

“*Those girls*,” replied Pegge with contempt for Læael’s condescending tone, “are our goshlings”

“You mean goslings,” corrected Læael.

“No, I don’t. We adopted these two nameless-orphans abandoned at one of your zipway’s emergency, escape-hatches—do you know of any other species that forsakes its young like humans? Do you? And their favourite expression is ‘gosh.’”

“Who’s Mulley?” asked Læael, not really listening.

“Our handyman and night watchman—and apparently a mesmerizing storyteller.” She laughed to herself; Mulley was a giant-sized man and mute.

“Did he really tell them I fell from the sky and hatched from an egg?”

“Yep.”

“That’s ridiculous,” scoffed Læael.

“Superstition is the religion of Washbasin,” Pegge replied. “Our children have never seen a creature such as you—you swooped through our valley with the speed of a raptor, on silk wings, hatched from a shattered black-egg, born blind and you sing from a magic beak! It won’t take long for that to become a part of your lore,” hooted Pegge.

“I don’t understand,” Læael said, stammering slightly out of confusion.

“In Valid, or anywhere in the Washbasin, very few have ever seen a clarinet, let alone heard one. Wait till our goshlings tell Mulley,” commented Pegge with a chuckle.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning, two tracers burst into the clinic. “Gett’er up,” ordered the one named Mosso. He wasn’t large, being somewhat stunted, the source of a quick temper. His enforcer, Turba, grabbed Læael roughly. She squawked in alarm.

Hælan’s mother knocked his arm aside.

“Step aside, Pegleg,” Mosso demanded. “I’ll sell you to the Urbane Market!” Get up!” shouted Turba, reaching around Pegge.

“Mom!” called Hælan anxiously, entering from the house; Mulley followed behind.

“Don’t touch her, you vultures,” yelled Pegge, giving her prosthetic foot a stomp.

Mulley’s shadow fell across the backs of the tracers. Mulley was not easy to rile, yet he had a keen sense of what was right and what was wrong. Hælan was, for his mind, always right and just. He was born with only one arm, yet his fist, they said, could fracture a stone with a single strike. Although he was still young, the top of his head was bald, rimmed with an unusual mullet of hair, thus his nickname. Over time, he had built a shed and moved onto the property, becoming Hælan’s protector, keeping a keen eye on the coming-and-goings of the clinic’s traffic.

“I want to go home.” Læael sat upright and clutched her abdomen. She vomited.

Turba jumped back from the spew.

“What’s wrong with her?” shouted Mosso, shocked.

“She’s got a brain-bruise,” snapped Pegge.

“Is she con-tagus?” Turba wanted to know.

“She’s not sick. Nausea is a symptom of a concussion. As is her blindness,” responded Hælan, with faint impatience.

“She’s in·valid?” Her recovery reward was going to be vastly reduced by an in·validation, Mosso realized. He cursed silently in frustration. “Where’s ’er dallion?” They might get paid for its return.

The women shrugged dumbly.

“You got two hours to drag that defect to the tube’s hatch, so we’ze ca’ collect our find’r’s fee,” Mosso said with a sneer aimed right at Hælan’s face. To call someone a defect in Washbasin was the cruelest of insults.

“Mulley, show them the door,” said Hælan, simmering with anger.

Over his shoulder, Mosso called back, “ave ’er there, or we’ll be back to take your deformed brats to the market—and sell them for compensation.”

\*\*\*

“Climb aboard,” encouraged Hælan, helping Læael onto a two-wheeled litter.

“I need an ambulance!” demanded Læael.

“We don’t have mechanized vehicles.”

It was an agonizingly slow and bumpy ride for Læael back to the zipway. Hælan walked beside her. Two men pulled the litter by its front shafts and Mulley pushed it from behind uphill. Usually, the litter required only one person, but in this circumstance, a show of force was required.

“We’re almost there,” Hælan informed her patient.

As they neared the site of her crash landing, Læael heard the machinery of a construction crew repairing the tube. The litter rolled to a stop and work on the zipway ceased.

“Good morning, Læael,” said the same inflectionless voice of the zipper, but from a metallic android this time. Mosso and Turbo stood beside it.

“I require immediate medical attention,” she responded, as Hælan assisted her down from the tipsy litter.

Mulley stepped out. Hælan used an arm to signal for him to stay close behind her. He was the tallest person of them all, so he had a clear view of everything. Equally obvious, his sleeveless shirt revealed his muscles and their latent strength.

Læael stumbled and dropped to a knee.

“What’s wrong with her?” questioned the automaton.

“She’s temporarily blind,” said Hælan.

It tapped away at a dallion screen. “Reduced funds for her recovery have been deposited into your account,” it informed the tracers. “Dallion?”

They shrugged their shoulders.

“Revoked.” The droid closed its dallion and strutted toward its transport.

“Hey, wait!” called Hælan. “Where’re you going?”

“What’s happening?” asked Læael, concerned. She heard the creak of a hover-drone door.

“Hey!” cried Hælan.

Mulley steadied Læael. “I don’t belong here! I demand to be taken home!” she yelled.

“You’ve been in·validated,” the dispassionate droid called, as it jumped into its vehicle.

“I’m injured—not defective,” she declared furiously.

An electric motor hummed to life, breaking the silence, and faded. The

repair crew resumed work. The tracers melted into the bush.

“Will I be allowed to leave when I recover?” asked Læael, sobbing.

“You are not a prisoner here,” answered Hælan, “but Turris city won’t take you back. We know what they don’t, that your invalid designation is false, caused by a defect in that mechanical-man’s hive brain, but its programming has been broken for so long, no one knows how to fix it anymore. I too am neither injured, nor defective—I am not an invalid, yet, like you and many others, here I am and here I will remain due to a spelling-error glitch.”

For a moment, Læael was silent. “I have to get a message to my parents,” she told Hælan.

“It can be done,” replied Hælan, “but it is dangerous. That’s why we are here today—to recover the remains of Bargga.”

“Who?”

“Bargga. One of our swappers....”

“What’s a swapper?”

“A trader at the Turris Market. She swapped our craftwork for the things we need, like shoes. The only way up for us is through this tube.”

Læael remembered the red mist. The dark of her vision grew darker.

Meanwhile, the litter bearers recovered a small burlap, body-bag with the remains of Bargga, to carry her back to Valid for a cremation ceremony.

\*\*\*

A few evenings later, after the sun had burned itself into the cliff top of the basin, blackness settled the valley. Læael, veiled behind a hunting blind repurposed as a theatrical façade, heard the community of Valid arrive on tramping bare feet for Bargga’s funeral. Her burlap remains had been placed on a pyre.

“Ready?” whispered Pegge.

Læael nodded. Mulley’s torch replaced the heat of the sun as he swooshed past. Moments later, the crackle of a bonfire choked the airspace. Someone helped Læael crouch down into an egg-shaped, basket and covered the opening with bits of branches.

A guitar strummed. Mulley swaggered out front, disguised as a swapper.

“Bargga our bravest bargainer!” sang Pegge, stepping from behind the blind, “was captured by a zipper!”

A dancer, in a blackbird costume, swooped into view and grabbed Mulley. His torch flew through the air, exploding in the pyre.

“Carried on a gallant quest, atop a great sky-nest far to the west.” The

zipper tugged Mulley behind the bonfire.

“Swallowed whole and days later remade an egg, Bargga was not afraid.” Læael’s egg-shaped basket was dragged out in front of Bargga’s pyre.

“Listening, searched magnificent Mulley.” Mulley appeared, as himself, from the opposite side of the bonfire, scanning the night sky. He circled the zipper, with his back to it, in cadence with a drum thumping hidden behind the blind. Mulley cupped his ear.

“Gosh! Mulley!” shouted Irchin, along with a chorus of children, pointing to the egg.

“Found lying in a gully, her shell cracking.” Læael delicately tossed aside some of her prop to the drumbeats.

“There! There!” yelled Wæif, bouncing on her knees.

“Mulley witnessed a great hatching,” intoned Pegge, stretching her arms wide.

On cue, Læael broke through the remaining bits of her egg and jumped out. She raised her arms gracefully and waved them like wings. Mulley encircled her waist, lifting her gently to his shoulder. She spiraled high above the crowd in an aerial ballet. Mulley swooped her low. The children in the front row shrieked and ducked when she dived! Mulley set Læael down and she dashed barefoot across the sand in front of the blaze. The cranes on her kimono danced in the shimmering firelight, chasing away the zipper.

“But she could not speak with a broken beak.”

In exaggerated movements, Mulley took great care in extracting the clarinet from its case and flashed it around where it glittered in the funeral flames to astonished gasps.

“Rushed under our healer’s wing.” Hælan slipped out from the shadows. Hælan pretended to stitch and stepped aside.

“Her reattached beak began to sing.”

Læael put her clarinet to her lips and played.

“Raised above scorn, the people of Valid enjoyed the first notes of her ballad!”

Entranced, the mourners swayed in rhythm. Mulley poked vigorously at Bargga’s coals with a long stick, causing clouds of sparks to rocket skyward. Bargga’s remnants disintegrated into the gloam, and the song faded in curls of smoke.

The instrument fell from Læael’s lips “I lost my eyesight!” she called out, “but my vision was restored!”

“Everyone, welcome our newest resident! I present—Clæernet!” proclaimed

Pegge.

Clærnet was instantly surrounded by hands patting her arms and shoulders: the goshs below informed her that children touched her silken wings.

Pegge stroked her cheek and whispered, “Well done and congratulations on your beautiful transformation.”

“Thank you, all of you. I’d like to change my name a bit though, to Clærnet Bargga, to honour your fallen swapper,” announced the blind young woman.

“Welcome to the family,” said Hælan with a hug.

“Gosh, do you mean it?” asked Clærnet.

“Absolutely,” replied Pegge, smiling.

“By the way,” commented Hælan, as the audience dispersed, “we have a vacancy for a clarinet player in the Washbasin Symphony.”

“But you don’t even have an orchestra here,” said Clærnet softly.

“We will—once you start one,” Hælan replied, with a wink of her own to Pegge.

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#### 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 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

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*Scientist’s Cats* – by Karl Johanson

*Ransom in the Woods* – by Robert Runté

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Science discoveries, SF stuff, letters of comment, and *A Walk Through the Periodic Table*.

Find it here: <<http://www.neo-opsis.ca/>>

# GOLEM AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

by Carolyn Clink

Water takes the shape of the lowest parts of the Earth  
and sky the shape of the highest—  
sand covers everything else and gives me my shape.

Why am I drawn here? This beach must mean something.  
How much time has passed? I only know  
I am to protect this land, but from what?

The constant whirlwind tries to pull me apart.  
I wish the water would dissolve me—  
but the magic that created me is too strong.

This empty beach and clouded sky  
keep me company as I wonder  
*did I do this?*

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## Polar Borealis #37 – March 2026

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 18 speculative fiction genre poems and short stories. Issue #37 cover: *Blast Off!* – by Mark David Campbell.

The 37th issue contains *poetry* by Chris Clemens, Kevin Copeland, Sandra Kasturi, Casey Lawrence, Alex McGilvery, Rhonda Parrish, J.J. Steinfeld, Hayden Trenholm, and Melissa Yuan-Innes.

And *short fiction* by Jason Arsenault, Pauline Barmby, Angelique Fawns, Catherine Fitzsimmons, Kellee Kranendonk, Scott McPherson, Steve Stanton, Sunlil Sarwal, and Nicolas Zacharewicz.

Will be available for free download in March 2026.

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“It is suicidal to create a society dependent on science and technology in which hardly anybody knows anything about the science and technology.”

— Carl Sagan

# FOR THE LOVE OF A DAUGHTER

*by Lorina Stephens*

*One for sorrow....*

I watched him thump down the bank, dismissive of snow and ice under the treachery of the moon, sure of himself as he had a right to be, even here, in lands not strictly his by right.

I let him come, as was *my* right, across the ice-rimmed granite and the dense darkness of the boreal forest to where my lake ground beneath winter's mantle.

He was wrapped in fur and wool, silver at his cuffs and buttons, a courtly dress in which to present himself at a council, which he was. This was my land, my lake, my foot that rooted deep and far along this shield of rock. I had summoned him to answer for his crimes. It would be unwise of him to refuse, given the treaties we had among the elder folk. And he would answer, being far from home and those who would have rallied a defense for him. But the privilege of position is such that you believe yourself above accountability, thinking he could claim sovereignty because his people were settling here, without consideration of our existence. Here, his fey rode the wild hunt and captured children for amusement, and what they considered betterment. But he was far from home. Far from safety.

He would answer—this fey king, this arrogant invader.

He had taken my daughter. Not just any daughter. *My* daughter.

*Two for joy....*

She was! Such joy! And why, then, do we create offspring? To perpetuate our kind? To bring light into darkness? For ourselves? For the unknowing unborn? A chance for redemption and even hope?

*Three for a girl....*

He had taken my daughter. *My daughter!*

*Four for a boy....*

He had been but a boy when first he found me bathing in my lake, and I sang for him, dazzled by the darkness he wove around himself, sparked by silver embroidered in his cloth like moonlight through trees.

*Five for silver....*

I lured him, caught him up in the songs of my sisters, the songs of trees and wind, of magpies and ravens, of beasts both large and small. Oh, the folly of youth, and I was so young then.

*Six for gold....*

“Will you come with me?” he asked back then, languid in golden sunset.

“I cannot.”

“Cannot, or will not?”

“Does it matter?”

“After what we shared? Yes, it matters.”

I gestured to my tree, my seat of power and responsibility. “I will die, as will those for whom I care.”

“Then let your world become mine.”

And there it was: *Let yours become mine.*

“No. You should leave.”

*Seven for a secret never told....*

She was *my* daughter. Of whom he knew nothing, far away as he was in his foreign court of fey. We were well, my daughter and I, my sisters and I, there upon the granite, fed by the vast freshwater sea. And it was best he knew nothing. We were safe here. We were free.

*Eight for a wish....*

I watched him pause upon the massive rocks, glancing out to the moonlit ice and snow of the lake, back to where my arms overshadowed the face of winter. My sisters stood with me at a distance, a dense, impenetrable mass except for where we allowed him to walk.

“Show yourself, dryad,” he said, as if he had right to command me. As if he knew anything about where he was and to whom he spoke.

I chose not to address him. He had no concept of what I wished, this Alberich. Let him wait. Let him feel this cold. Let him hear this land, the grinding of the ice on granite, the moan of wind in trees. Let him wait. And wait. And wait beyond his patience and endurance.

Could you kill the fey?

Was it worth it?

He had taken my daughter.

*Nine for a kiss....*

Which I gave him, or a memory of one, and he started, eyes wide.

*Ten a surprise you should not miss....*

And so this day slid through stars arcing overhead, the crack and grind of ice. Alberich shivered in a huddle of furs and growing fear, his fury blooming in frigid rage. He cursed and hurled imprecations to the forest, throwing threats into the dark. When he flung himself into a retreat, his grunt of surprise echoed across the winter wastes.

“You dare hold me?” he roared. “You *dare*?”

I did dare. Alberich had no agency here. When he took my daughter, he’d unknowingly surrendered any authority he might have, so now he waited upon my pleasure. And my pleasure, for now, was to hold this king from afar accountable. He was my prisoner. I let my silence chafe his dignity, and when the promise of dawn sighed through my forest, I exacted my revenge.

I watched his surprise, then anger, wash his face as I revealed myself in the cedar that was my natural self. There was violence there, cold and implacable. He rose to his feet, bristling.

“You should kneel before me,” he said, gesturing in expectation of my compliance. Which of course I didn’t. And when I didn’t, his gaze narrowed, taking in my semblance of recognizable form. “Why have you brought me here, dryad?”

I reached out my hand, let the brown bark of my fingers scratch that bone-pale face. “I am no dryad. You should remember this.”

And then his surprise, like birds flying in fear.

*Eleven for health....*

“You will bring her to me,” I said, and breathed warmth across his face.

*Twelve for wealth....*

And offered him that commodity the fey could not ignore: silver, which I scattered from my hair like ice from branches. It tumbled and tinkled at his feet as he bent to gather treasure into his hands.

*Thirteen beware it’s the devil himself*

But sometimes the devil is woman, as I proved to him when I said, “And so, Alberich, you will complete this bargain we’ve struck, now that you’ve accepted my coin.”

“Bargain?!”

“You have taken my daughter. You have no intention of returning her to her people now that you’ve used her for your sport, but you will return her, and then you will spend the next thousand, thousand days as a woman, bound by all womenfolk know, and endure, and turn to strength in our own way.”

“But you cannot!—”

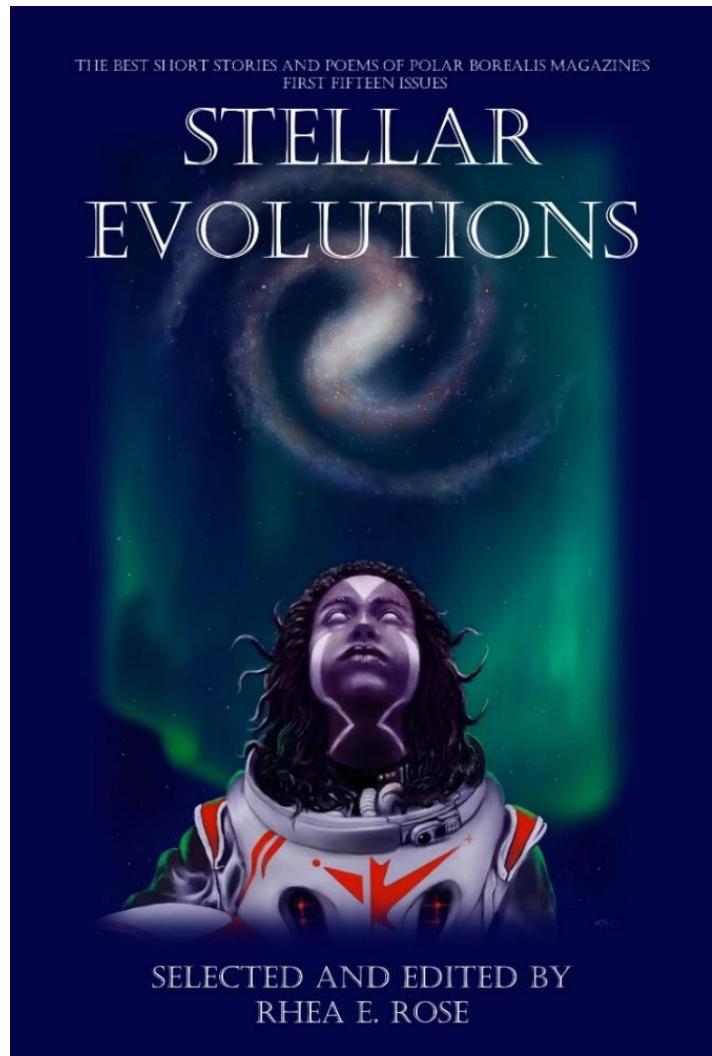
“But I can. And I have. Behold.”

And as he turned his gaze down to his body, his body now transformed, I heard the horns call from the east, watched as cloud closed over stars, coalesced into shapes, and then descend, the laughter and wild shouts as the hunt swept through, a figure falling, a figure rising. My daughter returned, and

weeping in my arms, a king now maiden ascending in turn. And then the implacable, eternal sounds of the giant ice, against this giant granite, where white cedars and pine grew and embraced an ancient land.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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### **TREVOR ATKINS**

Trevor lives on the west coast of Canada with his family, but he sees imagined seascapes more often than the ones practically outside his door. He writes historical adventure novels for middle-grade readers (and up), including the award winning *The Day the Pirates Went Mad* (2021) and *Back to the New Adventure* (2024). He has also recently begun submitting short stories and poetry to writing contests and magazines. Trevor is a member of Tri-City Wordsmiths and CWILLBC.

Visit <https://EmmaSharpesAdventures.com>  
and <https://www.facebook.com/trevor.atkins.author> for more.

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### **CHRIS CLEMENS**

Chris teaches and writes in Toronto, where he has defeated 8.5 raccoons (with help from his wonderful family). Nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, his stories and poems appear in *Best Microfiction 2026*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Radon Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and elsewhere.

Find more at [linktr.ee/clemenstation](https://linktr.ee/clemenstation).

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### **CAROLYN CLINK**

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

## DAVID CLINK

David is originally from the Andromeda Galaxy but now calls Toronto home. In his human form, he is the poetry editor (along with his sister, Carolyn, and Herb Kauderer) of *Amazing Stories*. He co-hosts two podcasts: “Two Old Farts Talk Sci-Fi,” with Troy Harkin, and “Wizards & Spaceships,” with Rachel A. Rosen. His latest poetry collection, which he wrote in gaseous form, is: *The Black Ship* (Aeolus House, 2023). Find more at: [DavidLivingstoneClink.com/](http://DavidLivingstoneClink.com/). Find more at: [DavidLivingstoneClink.com/](http://DavidLivingstoneClink.com/).

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## J.D. DRESNER

J.D. Dresner is a Canadian author and poet whose work spans fantasy, science fiction, and speculative literature. His writing has appeared in publications such as *Polar Borealis*, *Polar Starlight*, *Hippocampus Press*, BSFA’s *Fission*, *NewMyths.com*, *Peasant Magazine*, and *The Fantasy and Sci Fi Writers Alliance*. His poem “For the Robots” was selected for Year’s Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 2 by Ansible Press, an award winner in 2025.

His novella, *A Goblin’s Mind*, reached #5 on Amazon’s Best Seller list for Metaphysical Fantasy, and his debut fantasy novel, *A Prologue of Deception*, is forthcoming from Golden Storyline Books, alongside new poetry, and short fiction featured in the *Janus Gates* anthology. His work often explores identity, memory, morality, and humour within fantastical frameworks.

Visit [JDDresner.com](http://JDDresner.com) for publications, free stories, or to learn more about his fantasy worlds. Sign up to his [monthly newsletter](#) to keep up to date with his latest works, for the occasional free content, or... ‘cause you want to support yet another starving author!

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## GEOFFREY HART

Geoff (he/him) works as a scientific editor, specializing in helping scientists who have English as their second language publish their

research. He also writes fiction in his spare time and has sold 78 stories thus far. Visit him online at [www.geoff-hart.com](http://www.geoff-hart.com).

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## **MICHÈLE LAFRAMBOISE**

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

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

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

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

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## **CASEY LAWRENCE**

Casey (she/they) has a PhD from Trinity College Dublin in English literature. After taking a hiatus from creative writing to pursue her doctorate, Casey published her third LGBT YA novel in 2023. The trilogy is available individually or as a boxset (<https://www.jms-books.com/the-survivors-club-box-set-p-5590.html>). The author identifies as an autistic, bisexual feminist, queer activist, and democratic socialist.

Born and raised in St. Catharines, Ontario, Casey currently lives in Europe with her husband, Rhys. An avid consumer of all things science fiction and fantasy, Casey writes the stories she wishes she had growing

up: positive depictions of queer people in any world. She also moonlights as a freelance editor and convenes a bi-weekly *Finnegans Wake* reading group on Zoom. Follow her on [Bluesky@myexplodingpen.bsky.social](mailto:Bluesky@myexplodingpen.bsky.social) or check out her blog [clawrenc.medium.com](http://clawrenc.medium.com) for stories, reviews, articles, and updates on her novels.

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### **LENE MACLEOD**

Lene writes dark fiction, quiet horror, SFF, and poetry in Ontario, Canada. Her debut collection *Fringes of Grey* is now available from DarkWinter Press. Publishing updates can be found on [www.lenemacleod.com](http://www.lenemacleod.com)

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### **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.

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### **BELLA MELARDI**

Bella is a poet and writer. She writes about the political and personal. She is passionate about social justice and connecting with people. She attends OCADU where she studies creative writing. She is a staff writer for *A Few Words* magazine and has been published in a couple of literary journals. She loves anything creative and is also an artist. You can find her on Instagram @poetluvs.

### **JEREMY MORRIS**

Jeremy is an emerging Canadian writer who has been published in *The Deadlands*, *Dark Lane* and *Big Smoke Pulp*.

He used to research jetpacks for a movie star and currently writes fiction. Previously, he won a Sloan Writing Fellowship, the Jubilee Prize and the McGill Short Play Prize.

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## **RHONDA PARRISH**

Like a magpie, Rhonda is constantly distracted by shiny things. She's the editor of many anthologies and author of plenty of books, stories and poems (some of which have even been nominated for awards!). She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and she can often be found there playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, bingeing crime dramas, making blankets or cheering on the Oilers.

Her website, is at <http://www.rhondaparrish.com> and her Patreon, is at <https://www.patreon.com/RhondaParrish>.

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## **ROBERT PASTERNAK**

Robert has been painting cosmic surrealism and speculative art since 1980 and has created cover art and interior magazine illustrations for *Amazing Stories*, *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Chronicle* as well as cover art for Phyllis Gotlieb's short story collection *Blue Apes*, and *Land/Space*, an anthology of Prairie speculative fiction. In 2023 Robert's painting "Breatharian" won Best in Show at NASFIC (the North American Science Fiction Convention). In November 2024, At Bay Press published of his SF epic *Twilight of Echelon*.

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## **RAE PATTERSON**

After retiring from a lifetime of wrangling Unix systems, Rae Patterson (she/they) has turned her hand to writing the Horror and SFF literature that she has always loved so much. She has published several short stories and has a blog at <https://raepatterson.ca>. She currently lives in Montreal, Canada, alone with her books, computers, and video games.

## WARD PYCOCK

Ward joined the Interior Authors' Group of Kamloops in 2017. His speculative fiction novel *Solstice Sphere* won the Dr. Robert and Elma Schemenauer award, in 2018 and its sequel, *Sky Ladders*, won in 2021, but neither has been published, not yet. "In·Valid" is his first sale.

After he earned a UBC Bachelor of Education, he and his wife moved to Kitkatla, a Tsimshian fishing village, on Dolphin Island 45 kms southwest of Prince Rupert, for his first teaching post. They started a family and their first two daughters lived there for a time. He encountered many expert storytellers: Chief Johnny Clifton, Hartley Bay, Henry Roy Vickers, raised in Kitkatla and Chief Wilfred Jackson, of Kitkatla's Raven House. He learned how they spoke from their minds, tempered by their hearts and about *adawxs* (ah-dow), which meant the family history of each clan. Some *adawxs* went back millennia—when inlets in the area were treeless because glaciers had scoured them bare. He found that breathtaking.

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## J.J. STEINFELD

Poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published twenty-five books, including *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somehow Absurd, Somehow Existential*, (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022), *As You Continue to Wait* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2022), and *My Post-Holocaust Second Generation Voice: History / Memory / Identity* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2025).

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## LORINA STEPHENS

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

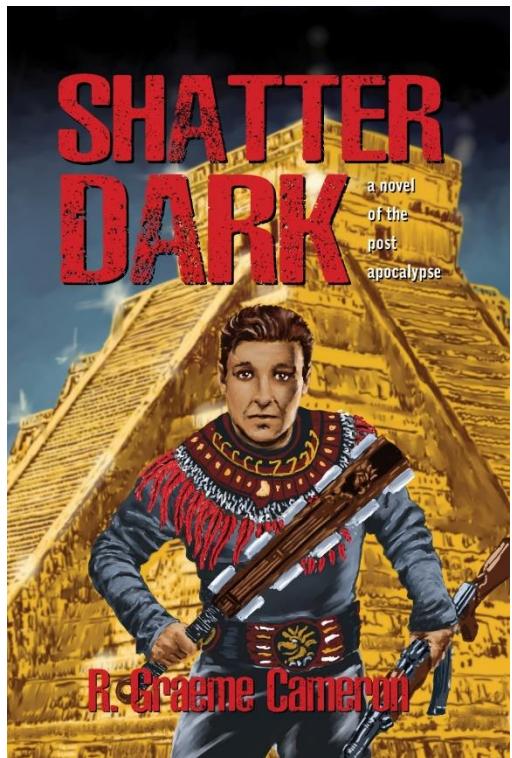
She has had several short fiction pieces published in Canada's acclaimed *On Spec* magazine, *Postscripts to Darkness*, *Neo-opsis*, *Garden of Eden*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's fantasy anthology *Sword and Saceress-X*.

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

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